

Fordham International Law Journal

Volume 19, Issue 1

1995

Article 3

The Collapse of Communism and the Future of the Korean Peninsula

Stephen J. Solarz*

*

Copyright ©1995 by the authors. *Fordham International Law Journal* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). <http://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/ilj>

The Collapse of Communism and the Future of the Korean Peninsula

Stephen J. Solarz

Abstract

Initially rent asunder by the fortunes of the Second World War, the division of North and South Korea into two separate countries was solidified by the Korean War. North of the 38th parallel, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea ("DPRK") became a totalitarian dictatorship based on a command economy. South of the 38th parallel, the Republic of Korea evolved into a liberal democracy with a market economy. For much of the last fifty years, these arrangements seemed to be almost as unchangeable and enduring as the Cold War itself. Yet, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent elimination of the rivalry between East and West, strongly suggest that the survival of the communist regime in the North can no longer be taken for granted. Similarly, just as the collapse of communism in East Germany was a necessary condition for the reunification of the two Germanys, the demise of communism in North Korea must now be considered a prerequisite for the reunification of the Korean peninsula. Indeed, if the precise date for the collapse of communism in North Korea cannot be predicted, the terminal status of the regime in Pyongyang can now be assumed. Whether it takes place next year, or in the next century, the days of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are numbered. Yet, if the eventual disintegration of communism in North Korea is certain, the manner of its demise remains uncertain. Based on what happened in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in the Communist world, there are a variety of ways in which the polity in Pyongyang might presumably be undone. An examination of these differing scenarios may shed light on how change in North Korea is likely to come about.

THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM AND THE FUTURE OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA

*Stephen J. Solarz**

If there is any law of international relations it must surely be that the only thing that is truly predictable is the unpredictable. For most of the last half-century, the Cold War and the existence of totalitarian communist regimes seemed to be an immutable political reality. So, too, did the division of Germany, which appeared to be the inescapable consequence of the division of Europe into two hostile and ideologically incompatible camps.

Few anticipated the possibility that the whole edifice of European communism would come crashing down, with barely a shot being fired and that, without exception, all of the Socialist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe would move toward the establishment of parliamentary democracies and market economics. Hardly anyone expected that Germany, which had been torn asunder as a consequence of war, would quickly be reunited in the context of peace.

These developments have important implications for the future of the two Koreas. Initially rent asunder by the fortunes of the Second World War, the division of North and South Korea into two separate countries was solidified by the Korean War. North of the 38th parallel, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea ("DPRK") became a totalitarian dictatorship based on a command economy. South of the 38th parallel, the Republic of Korea evolved into a liberal democracy with a market economy.

For much of the last fifty years, these arrangements seemed to be almost as unchangeable and enduring as the Cold War itself. Yet, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent elimination of the rivalry between East and West, strongly suggest that the survival of the communist regime in the North can no longer be taken for granted. Similarly, just as the collapse of communism in East Germany was a necessary condition for the reunification of the two Germanys, the demise of com-

* President of Solarz Associates, Washington, D.C.; Senior Counsellor with APCO Associates, Washington, D.C; Former Member, Foreign Affairs Committee, U.S. House of Representatives [D-NY], 1974-92.

munism in North Korea must now be considered a prerequisite for the reunification of the Korean peninsula.

Indeed, if the precise date for the collapse of communism in North Korea cannot be predicted, the terminal status of the regime in Pyongyang can now be assumed. Whether it takes place next year, or in the next century, the days of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are numbered. Yet, if the eventual disintegration of communism in North Korea is certain, the manner of its demise remains uncertain.

Based on what happened in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in the Communist world, there are a variety of ways in which the polity in Pyongyang might presumably be undone. An examination of these differing scenarios may shed light on how change in North Korea is likely to come about.

1. The Soviet Scenario

When Mikhail Gorbachev¹ initiated his reform programs of "glasnost" and "perestroika" in the mid-1980's, his intention was not to destroy the Soviet Union but to strengthen it. Recognizing that the USSR was falling behind the West economically, Gorbachev concluded that structural reforms in the economic and political system were necessary if the Soviet Union was to remain a great power. In the process, however, forces were unleashed that generated momentum for even greater and far more fundamental change.

When a cabal of old line leaders, in a last ditch effort to preserve the shards of their own power and the centralized character of the Soviet system, failed to remove Gorbachev through a military coup, the system lost what little legitimacy it still had. It wasn't long before the Communist party was abolished and the Soviet Union was replaced by the Commonwealth of Independent States.

2. The East German Scenario

Following the collapse of Communism in Poland and Hungary, tens of thousands of East Germans began to flee the Ger-

1. Serge Schmemmann, *The Fall of Gorbachev*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 15, 1991, at 1. Mikhail Gorbachev was leader of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics ("USSR") from 1985 until 1991. *Id.*

man Democratic Republic² ("GDR") through Hungary, which no longer maintained an Iron Curtain preventing people from going to the West. In an effort to staunch the flow, the Politburo, under the leadership of Erich Honecker,³ issued a decree prohibiting East Germans from leaving the country. This led to a series of sustained demonstrations in which hundreds of thousands of East Germans took to the streets to call for fundamental political and social change.

Without the support of the Soviet leadership, which felt it could not oppose a movement for reform in the GDR when it was promoting a process of reform in the USSR, the regime felt obligated to give in to the demands for change. Honecker was removed and the Berlin Wall was torn down. Since, however, everyone in East Germany was now free to leave, and the system of one party rule had been totally discredited, the ideological and political justification for the division of Germany no longer existed. It wasn't long before what had previously seemed impossible became inevitable and Germany was formally reunited.

3. The Romanian Scenario

In the wake of the collapse of communism elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the Romanian people were becoming restive as a result of draconian political restrictions and a precipitous decline in the economy. Without fuel to heat their homes in winter and with barely enough food to meet minimal nutritional requirements Romania had become a tinder box of political resentments waiting for a spark to set off a massive conflagration.

The spark came when the dictator, Nicolae Ceaucescu,⁴ was booed at a public rally he had called to demonstrate support for his regime. Unaccustomed to open displays of disaffection at gatherings of the party faithful, Ceaucescu panicked and fled the podium. Carried live on Romanian television, this bizarre episode led the Romanian people to realize that the regime might be vulnerable. It immediately led to a spontaneous series of

2. THE CONCISE COLUMBIA ENCYCLOPEDIA 328 (1983) The German Democratic Republic was informally referred to as East Germany. *Id.*

3. David Childs, *Erich Honecker*, INDEPENDENT, May 30, 1994, at Gazette Page 10. Erich Honecker was a member of the Politburo between 1958 and 1989, and was Chairman between 1976 and 1989. *Id.*

4. Mary Ellen Fischer, *Romania: Up For Grabs*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 28, 1989, at A21. Nicolae Ceaucescu was President of Romania from 1965 until 1989. *Id.*

demonstrations, which the internal security forces tried but were unable to crush. When the military decided to back the people rather than the regime it was only a matter of days before the security forces were overwhelmed, and Romania joined the growing list of East European countries that had abandoned one party rule and a command economy for a multi-party democracy and a market economy.

4. The Polish Scenario

Poland's process of change began in 1980 with the establishment of an independent labor union known as Solidarity. In a matter of months the union had millions of members and began to issue a series of political and economic demands that the Polish authorities were unwilling to meet. Backed by what at that time was still a resolute Soviet regime, President Jaruzelski⁵ decided to crack down by establishing martial law and abolishing Solidarity.

While this desperate maneuver succeeded in temporarily eliminating the growing challenge to the regime, it eventually became clear that without the support of Solidarity, it would not be possible for the government to make the economic reforms necessary to rescue the Polish economy from terminal decay. By 1988, the Government concluded that it had no alternative but to enter into "round table" negotiations with the leadership of Solidarity and other independent elements of civil society in an effort to hammer out an agreement that would permit meaningful reform.

The price demanded by Solidarity and its non-communist negotiating partners was fundamental political reform, including the holding of free and fair multi-party elections. When the government agreed to these demands, it set the stage for the peaceful unraveling of Communist power in Poland. Candidates endorsed by Solidarity won the subsequent parliamentary elections in a landslide, and the Polish Communist party was swept into the dust bin of history.

5. Michael T. Kaufman, *The Importance of General Jaruzelski*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 9, 1984, at 46. General Wojciech Jaruzelski, political and military leader of Poland, became premier and leader of the Polish Communist Party in 1981. *Id.* General Jaruzelski ruled Poland until 1989. John Darnton, *Poland Revisited*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 17, 1993, at A1.

5. The Mongolian Scenario

As the fiscal plight of the Soviet Union began to worsen, its aid to Mongolia was sharply reduced. Since various forms of assistance from the USSR accounted for 50% of the Mongolian GNP, this created something of a crisis in Ulan Bator. Seeing what was happening in both the USSR and the Socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe, the leadership of the Mongolian Communist party concluded that the best way to maintain their independence was to appeal to the West by establishing a parliamentary democracy and a market economy. So it was that the first Communist Government in Asia withered away.

In assessing the applicability of these various scenarios for North Korea, it seems fairly clear that the East German and Polish scenarios are exceedingly unlikely to constitute the basis for the collapse of Communism in the DPRK. Compared to North Korea, the most closed and repressive regime in the world, East Germany and Poland were virtually open societies. Their people had access to information from abroad. Each had far more social and economic contact with the outside world. In both countries, Christian churches provided some basis for independent political activity. In North Korea, by comparison, people have no way of obtaining news from abroad, and the only permitted religion, if religion is what it can be called, is the worship of the Kim dynasty.

For all these reasons it is extremely unlikely that the kind of peaceful but public demands that were the proximate cause of the collapse of communism in East Germany and Poland will develop in North Korea. Even if such a movement began to emerge in North Korea, it is inconceivable that the regime in Pyongyang would permit the kind of sustained demonstrations that eventually brought down the government in East Germany. Furthermore, there is nothing like the Solidarity movement in Poland with which the North Korean Government might enter into negotiations, even if it were inclined to do so, which it clearly isn't.

The Mongolian scenario is equally, if not even more, unlikely. A similar development in North Korea, in which Pyongyang transformed itself overnight into a parliamentary democracy with a market economy, would completely eliminate any rationale for its continued existence as a separate state and, far

from assuring its independence, would guarantee its absorption by South Korea. Unless the North Korean leadership is prepared to voluntarily commit political suicide this is a course of action they cannot be expected to take.

The Romanian scenario, while not likely, cannot be entirely ruled out. Like Romania in the late 1980's, North Korea in the mid-1990's is in the midst of a severe economic decline. There are credible reports that the people do not have enough to eat. Dissatisfaction is presumably rampant. Under these circumstances, spontaneous expressions of discontent are entirely possible.

Given Pyongyang's control of the mass media, however, it is doubtful that news of an anti-government demonstration in one village or city would become known throughout the country, and the stimulus for supportive action elsewhere would thus be denied. Protests could, of course, erupt in the capital. But even if they did, the chances are that the North Korean military, who are the true arbiters of national power, would side with the regime rather than the people and any incipient revolt would be ruthlessly and completely crushed.

The most likely scenario for change in North Korea is the Soviet scenario, in which an effort to promote economic and perhaps even political reform generates a momentum of its own, leading to the eventual unraveling of the regime. Given the dire economic circumstances in which North Korea finds itself, a failure to initiate fundamental reforms could easily result in a Romanian style upheaval by a resentful population that concludes it no longer has anything to lose. So long as Kim Jong II remains the presumptive ruler of North Korea, however, such a reform program must be considered unlikely. The "Dear Leader" derives his legitimacy, after all, primarily from the fact that he is the son of the "Great Leader," and he will surely be reluctant to initiate changes in the political and economic system that could in any way be interpreted as a repudiation of his father's legacy.

North Korea is clearly caught in a political and economic box. If it refuses to change, it runs the real risk of an upheaval from below. Yet, if it begins the process of change, it is likely to find itself eventually undone by a process of reform initiated from above.

If this analysis is accurate, it leads to the depressing conclusion that fundamental change in North Korea, which is almost certainly a necessary condition for the reunification of the peninsula, will probably have to await the passing or replacement of Kim Jong II. Still, as the experience of the last several years demonstrates, history has a tendency to unfold in strange and unexpected ways and no one can preclude the possibility that North Korea, sooner rather than later, will go the way of the other failed communist dinosaurs in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Asia. And that, as the great political theorist William Shakespeare once wrote in another context, "is a consummation devoutly to be wished."