

It's time to stop trying to predict North Korea's collapse

Choi Sun-sil's collapse theory was rooted in Shamanism, many analyst's predictions are just as shaky

Everyone is interested in the notion that North Korea is on the verge of collapse. The idea has been around a long time, certainly since the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, if not before. Peter Hayes and David F. von Hippel, writing in 2011 [commented](#):

“‘Collapsists’ have been arguing since the end of the Cold War that the DPRK ‘is about to collapse.’ Indeed, one notable expert and colleague, Aidan Foster-Carter, reissued his latest prediction in this vein on November 15, 2009, saying that the DPRK could “[fall at any moment](#),”—a claim no more persuasive than that made by Foster-Carter in 1992.“

Aidan Foster-Carter, in fact, found that with age comes wisdom and in 2015 bravely and disarmingly [wrote](#):

“Enough of this nonsense. “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?” Sound advice, whether or not Keynes actually said it. I resisted right up until 2009, but finally had to admit the force of Bruce Cumings’ jibe at all of us who thought this way: “When does the statute of limitations run out on being systematically wrong?””

The title of Foster-Carter’s essay (on 38 North) was entitled “Obama Comes Out as an NK Collapsist” and he was lamenting that the illusion of Collapsism was informing US policy and specifically that of ‘Strategic Patience.’ If North Korea was about to [collapse](#), the reasoning ran, there was no reason to negotiations.

There is still no shortage of predictions of imminent collapse.

Journalists, especially those not familiar with Korea, are prone to this because it makes a good story and the future cannot be disproved in the present. And by the time the future arrives the media, with its famously short memory, has moved on.

A couple of recent examples: Julian Ryall, writing in April in the respected official German public broadcaster *Deutsche Welle* (now branded by the initials DW), asked: “[Is North Korea finally close to collapse?](#)“. *Deutsche Welle*, incidentally, has a curious Korean echo since it means ‘German Wave.’ Over in the U.S., Jamie Metzler had an article in *The National Interest* in June with the splendidly apocalyptic heading: “[Doomsday: The Coming Collapse of North Korea.](#)”

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE?

People in the military-industrial-security complex, of course, are not left out of this. There is, for instance, General [Walter Sharp](#) former commander of U.S. forces in South Korea, who was reported in May this year saying “there will be instability in North Korea that I believe will lead to the collapse of North Korea much sooner than many of us think.”

Generals, it must be admitted, have a certain dispensation here: lying and deception is part of the job description going back to Homer in one direction and Sun Zi-an another. They are allowed to say things not because they believe them but to achieve a particular effect.

People in the security industry take a different tack, often slipping in words such as ‘possibility’ or ‘contingency’ in case the predictions are not fulfilled before retirement. Thus we have, for instance, Bruce Bennet’s RAND report [Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse.](#)

But few serious and informed commenters outside the security industry are Collapsists these days.

Not (any longer) Foster- Carter. Nor Georgy Toloraya. In [May 2016](#) Toloraya wrote:

“Some commentators in Seoul have concluded that unification is not only desirable but also quickly achievable, as evidenced by indications that the North Korean regime is about to collapse. Though I see no signs of brewing instability as I write this in Pyongyang.”

In November after another visit to Pyongyang, where he observed economic growth and a mood of optimism (which led him reluctantly to conclude that the Byungjin policy was a success, an opinion supported by a recent NK Pro [poll](#)), he opined that ‘[Waiting for the regime collapse is hardly a choice](#)’ for foreign policymakers.

[Andrei Lankov](#) is a bit of an outsider here, predicting in July that “a revolutionary collapse of the Kim family regime still seems to be highly likely.”

THE WASHINGTON CONSENSUS

Where did Obama get his Collapsism from? If not quite from the horse’s mouth then probably from the stable next door: the president of South Korea. That was initially [Lee Myung-bak](#) and then, of course, Park Geun-hye.

Foster-Carter has also taken a swipe at Park Geun-hye’s ‘jackpot’ speech, which was based on the idea that North Korea would collapse and the South would absorb it in one big swallow, with no indigestion to follow. This was in an article in the *Wall Street Journal* early in 2014 entitled “[Jackpot or Crackpot? Park on Reunification](#)”.

Crackpot? How right he was!

It turns out that Park Geun-hye was probably convinced of the imminent collapse of the North by none other than Choi Sun-sil. *Hankyoreh* Washington correspondent [Yi Yong-in](#), has written of his difficulties in trying to explain to U.S. Korean experts what was behind the strange twists and turns

in Park Geun-hye's North Korea policy, and his embarrassment in finding out that the answer was most likely Choi Sun-sil.

“Even after I was assigned to the United States, I was asked by American experts on the Korean Peninsula on several occasions about who in the world was giving advice to Park,” he wrote.

“These experts did not understand why Park was so committed to the idea of North Korean regime collapse.”

FRAGILE MYSTIC

What led Choi Sun-sil to her judgment on North Korea and her advice to the President of South Korea? Was she an avid reader of *NK News*, 38 North, or Yonhap and KCNA? Perhaps.

But more likely she resorted to family skills in the Shamanistic tradition, following in her father's footsteps. Her father, Choi Tae-min, reportedly won Park Geun-hye's confidence after he [predicted the death](#) of her father, Park Chung-hee, although he doesn't appear to have given any details and his warning was sufficiently ambiguous to be subject to all sorts of interpretations after the event.

But that is how the business works if you are to be successful. Choi Tae-min, who was described in a cable from the U.S. embassy as a ‘Rasputin,’ managed to acquire a fortune through his influence over Park Geun-hye and his daughter seems to have followed in his footsteps.

Both have been linked to Shamanism, much to the indignation of real shamans – “[Don't call Choi a shaman, it's a disgrace to shamans](#)” – reported the *Korea Times*. The same paper also posed the question: “[Choi Soon-sil – Shaman or con artist?](#)”.

Whether shaman possess special skills in making predictions is perhaps a matter of personal judgment. Certainly, the [Mexican shaman](#) who predicted in January that Trump would lose the election in November didn't do too well, but maybe Korean shamans are better.

In any case it is curious to think that the [North Korea policy](#) of the United States, the country that did so much to expand the role of science, which put a man on the moon, which has some 16 intelligence agencies and whose [National Security Agency](#) monitors the world's communications, was perhaps ultimately based on the shamanistic divinations of Park Geun-hye's con-woman confidante.