

## Why **North Korea** is not, and should not be regarded as, a **‘Failed State’**

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Thousands of miles away from the relative tranquility of the UN Security Council in New York lies a volatile and turbulent nation. A cause of constant international concern, it is a nation that bears all the hallmarks of a “failed state” with its people living under constant fear and fleeing in their thousands. A former colony divided by civil war, its continued procurement of arms and poor human rights record is not only of grave concern to the international community, it threatens to destabilise an entire region.

The state in question is Somalia -- a state that, following the collapse of an authoritarian regime in 1991 and many subsequent humanitarian crises, is yet to produce a central or functioning government.[1]

The DPRK (North Korea), is also regularly referred to as being a “failed state” but it has never collapsed and the government does not even remotely resemble that of a truly collapsed state such as Somalia -- indeed, the absolute power that the government projects in Pyongyang is almost the antithesis of the anarchy that exists in Mogadishu. Despite humanitarian crises, severely limited diplomatic relations with its neighbours and the oppressiveness of the government, the DPRK has nevertheless remained intact.

Yet, regardless of the regime’s seemingly inexplicable ability to avoid disintegration, we continue to treat it as such, based largely on what can objectively only be described as a series of assumptions, founded on little knowledge of the history, politics and culture of the Korean peninsula. This is severely interfering with the West’s ability to engage with North Korea and further stalling an already prolonged conflict.

Whilst the opening description of Somalia could so easily be applied to what many claim to be a “failed state”, it and shares few similarities with the DPRK. Somalia, according to the “Failed States Index”[2] (compiled by US-based research organisation Fund for Peace),[3] is the “world’s most failed state”[4] due to its high score in all twelve of the table’s social, economic and political indicators. The DPRK also ranks fairly highly, sharing nineteenth place with Nigeria, amongst the FSI’s top “most failed states” in the world.

Scoring methods that rely on political indicators are evidently high, most notably Indicator 7 that awards the DPRK 9.9/10 for “resistance of ruling elites to transparency, accountability and political representation”.[5] This score is second only to Somalia itself, which gains an impressive 10/10 in the same group, presumably because its not even clear who the so-called ‘ruling elites’ of Somalia actually are. 

But this same table, rearranged in descending order by its own social indicators, produces dramatically different results. By reorganising the list by “human flight” (the term used to describe, among other things, the “growth of exile communities”[6]), North Korea drops by ninety-nine places, far below the likes of China and India and only ten places ahead of its southern cousin, the Republic of Korea (ROK - South Korea), to become the lowest-ranked, and therefore least “failed” of the initial twenty “top failed states”. It should go without saying why “human flight” is a fundamentally flawed method of measuring to what degree North Korea has “failed”.

India and China, however, are rarely referred to as being failed states, despite scoring so highly on some of the FSI’s most prominent indicators. Contrastingly, such states are instead regularly described as “rising”, “developing” or “counter-balancing”. Indeed, a potential issue with relying on such mechanistic methods to try and quantify what constitutes a “failed state” such as those employed by the FSI is that one is only able to measure the degree of failure in several fairly broad fields that assume a very vague level of universality between all nations.

These league tables of failure, when published out of context with little case-by-case explanation of the decision making process, can

too easily give rise to counter-productive and inaccurate rhetoric or sensationalism. Worse still, by comparing states that are perceived to be failed with those states deemed to be successful, interaction with such a state can easily manifest itself in the form of a misguided nation building approach that suggests such a state is perhaps “lost”, beyond salvation or in desperate need of regime change. [7]

Therefore, by coupling two such diverse states as Somalia and the DPRK under the same “failed state” umbrella, a process of vilification has begun and little headway has been made in understanding the political, economic and social situation of either regime. Clearly, a far more pragmatic method of measuring the failure of a state is required, if the results of such a study are to be helpful in any way.

Firstly, the term “failed state” has been argued to be more explicitly linked to the absolute collapse or disintegration of central government and its functions that would require the “paralysis of governance, a breakdown of law and order, and general banditry and chaos.”[8] — terms which seem somewhat inappropriate for the totalitarian control that Pyongyang exercises over its territory.

Secondly, these indicators imply a level of universality across all states, an assumption that carries with it the shortcomings of modernisation theory and pays little attention to cultural and societal differences; where the lack of political and civil liberties has led to the downfall of many a dictatorship, the DPRK has remained relatively stable. Where economic crises have given rise to mass civil unrest and revolution, the DPRK has managed to recover from some of the harshest economic factors seen in recent history and maintain almost total control over its people.

For decades following its formation in 1948, the DPRK was economically more developed and stronger than the South.[9] Whilst the Southern economy did eventually overtake the North’s in the mid 1960s[10], it was not until the 1990s that



the DPRK experienced sharp economic decline, due to (amongst other factors) the disintegration of the USSR and, consequently, the loss of North Korea's biggest trading partner.[11] Debate at the time was (and indeed still is) dominated by questions of how long the DPRK could survive given such sharp economic deterioration as some began to predict the end of the state.[12]

A decade later, we are still yet to see the collapse or demise of the North Korean government but we still talk of Pyongyang's grapple over the nation as being "on the brink". Indeed, more measured opinion would suggest that North Korea's collapse "may be rooted more in hope than in any real strategy."[13]

This seemingly inexplicable resilience to complete collapse is arguably influenced by the DPRK's mysterious and hard-to-define Juche ideology and years of an economy structured around the idea of self-reliance and isolationism. In consciously creating such an autarkic system, the DPRK's economy has, according to some, historically "never idled but always raced",[14] most likely due to former Soviet and Chinese aid -- but largely as a result of an "extraordinary effort to get the [post-war] industrial economy functioning again."[15]

Perhaps it is this intrinsically isolationist lack of international cooperation that earns the DPRK such labels as "rogue" or "failed state". But if the state's own principles of existence for being a state are based on isolationist policies that make economic progress difficult, this does not necessarily go against its own theoretical definitions of what it inherently believes constitutes a state. This would imply that, at least by its own standards, North Korea is not a "failed" state, even if the reality of the situation has proved to differ greatly from the kind of complete self-sufficiency that Juche allegedly promises.

Although recent signs of economic growth have become more evident[16] as aspects of marketisation are tolerated[17] it is no secret that

North Korea has increasingly had to rely on foreign aid since economic decline and famine in the late 1990s.[18] Despite its Public Distribution System (PDS) that rations and distributes food across the country, Pyongyang has in recent years been increasingly unable to independently feed its own people, a situation not helped by far-reaching international sanctions.

A 2010 report by Amnesty International stated that subsequent counterproductive government policies have led to a "systematic failure to provide sufficient resources for basic health care"[19] in the DPRK. The report cited various first hand accounts of North Koreans having no option but to buy medicine on the black market

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as the supplies of hospitals were exhausted.[20] Amnesty International's findings, however, received much criticism from the World Health Organisation (WHO) for being 'un-scientific' as it transpired much of the reports findings were predominantly based on interviews with around 40 North Korean dissidents, some of whom had left the DPRK almost a decade before the report was compiled.[21] Whilst the sad tales of dissidents should not be ignored, basing an entire report on a persecuted diaspora inherently paints a one-sided picture.

A WHO report in the same year produced dramatically contrasting results, claiming that North Korea had on average 32.9 medical doctors for every 10,000 members of the population,[22] well above the regional average of 5.1 per 10,000. [23] The report also suggested that 97% of all births are attended by skilled health personnel -- 48% above than the regional average (although it

should be noted that forced immunisation of infants and the social taboo of female smokers also contributed to higher than average numbers).

Measles immunisation in 1-year-olds stood at 98%, two percent higher than in the USA, where continued social problems arise from a system that fails to guarantee low-income families and individuals free access to basic healthcare, despite the enormous wealth of the state. Concluding the report's findings, WHO Director-General Margaret Chan said the DPRK's healthcare system was "something which most other developing countries would envy." [24]

It is easier, perhaps, to argue that the DPRK was a failing state for a decade of economic decline and famine in the 1990s and the DPRK may well continue to be a failing state as long as it has to continuously rely on foreign aid to feed its own people. However, as long as the state is able to exercise some economic independence (e.g. import a small amount of grain using profit made on industrial output), it will not necessarily contradict the fundamental principles of Juche, the ideology with which it uses to define itself and "the opaque core of North Korean national solipsism." [25]

The post-war nation-building nature of the two Koreas has led the DPRK to preserve and enforce the idea of the state as much as possible. Its very

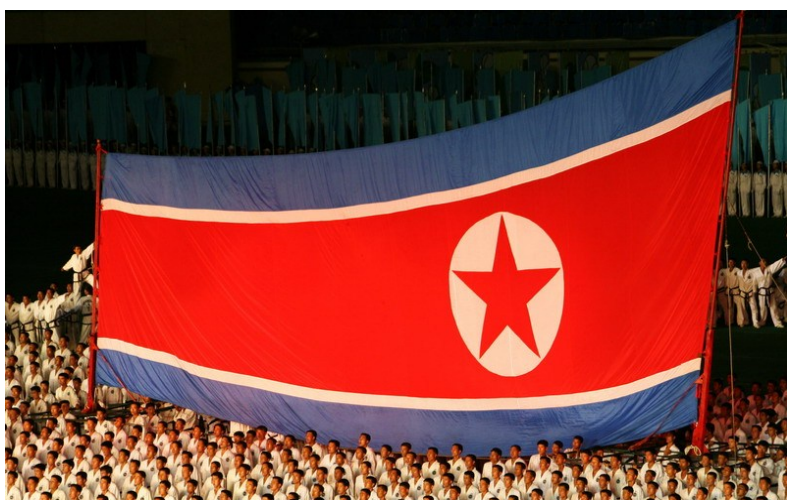
legitimacy relies on the fact it is North, and not South, Korea. Whilst a comparatively closed and secretive society makes compiling valid statistics on North Korea an arduous task, this in turn illustrates the level of government control the DPRK is able to exercise as a political machine which, ironically, is the very capability that ranks North Korea so highly on the Failed States Index.

By attributing this label to the DPRK, the most that is achieved is the misrepresentation of an inherently complicated situation and, ultimately, the continued vilification of a country of over 23 million people living under a corrupt minority. At worse, such a label discourages the very investment and development that we claim a seemingly "failed" state like the DPRK so desperately requires. We can not accuse the DPRK of being "failed" and at the same time as criticising Pyongyang for not opening up to foreign investment and trade. Nobody invests in failure.

Although the public debate on the DPRK is slowly broadening, it is also becoming more polarised, with sunshine (those in favour of engagement) opposing evil (those taking a harder stance). Rather than citing the success of initiatives such as 10 years of "Sunshine Policy" (햇볕 정책) in the 2000s, media rhetoric is still dominated by discourse that refers to the Axis of Evil and War on Terror.

Academic literature too is often dominated by scholars who pay little attention to the history or culture of the Koreas, frequently taking incidents or outbursts of violence between the two states out of context of a prolonged and deeply complicated conflict. From the Bush Jr. administration to the present day, this has opened up a dangerous playing field that could potentially allow basic misconceptions to encourage the escalation of a more serious conflict.


Until we are able to discuss the DPRK without resorting to labels that are, at worse inaccurate and at best dated, we will continue to paint a



picture of North Korea in our public conscience that fundamentally differs from reality. Whilst the differences may be slight and this negative image is by no means baseless, it is highly one-sided and completely out of sync with the fairness and unbiased standards to which we, in the "free" world proudly hold ourselves accountable.

**Notes:**

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1. "World Factbook: Somalia", Central Intelligence Agency, accessed March 5, 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/so.html>
2. Hereafter referred to as 'FSI'.
3. "Failed States Index Scores 2010," *The Fund for Peace*, accessed March 5, 2011, [http://www.fundforpeace.org/web/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=452&Itemid=900](http://www.fundforpeace.org/web/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=452&Itemid=900).
4. James Traub, "In the Beginning, There Was Somalia," *Foreign Policy*, July 2010, accessed March 5, 2011, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/21/in\\_the\\_beginning\\_there\\_was\\_somalia](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/21/in_the_beginning_there_was_somalia).
5. "Failed States Index Scores 2010," *The Fund for Peace*.
6. "FFP: Failed States Indicators: 4. Chronic and Sustained Human Flight," *The Fund for Peace*, accessed March 5, 2011. [http://www.fundforpeace.org/web/content/fsi/fsi\\_4.htm](http://www.fundforpeace.org/web/content/fsi/fsi_4.htm).
7. Rosa Ehrenreich Brooks, "Failed States, or the State as Failure?" *The University of Chicago Law Review* 72 (2005): 1159-1196.
8. Daniel Thürer, "The 'Failed State' and International Law," *International Review of the Red Cross* 81 (1999): 733-36.
9. Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 424.
10. Michael Breen, *The Koreans: Who They Are, What They Want, Where Their Future Lies* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004), 137.
11. Phillip H. Park, *Self-Reliance or Self-Destruction?: Success and Failure of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's Development Strategy of Self-Reliance 'Juche'* (London: Routledge, 2002), 123.
12. "North Korea's New Message," *The New York Times*, January 1, 1997.
13. David E. Sanger, "North Korea Keeps the World Guessing," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2010.
14. Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun* (1997), 420.
15. Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun* (1997), 421.
16. Andrei Lankov, "Why the Kim Regime Will Falter," *Asia Times Online*, March 11, 2011, accessed March 12, 2011, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/MC11Dg01.html>.
17. Marcus Noland, "Famine and Reform in North Korea," Working Paper 03-05, Institute for International Economics, 2003. <http://www.iie.com/publications/wp/03-5.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2011).
18. Marcus Noland, "Famine and Reform in North Korea," 13.
19. Amnesty International, *The Crumbling State of Health Care in North Korea*, accessed March 13, 2011, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA24/001/2010/en/13a097fc-4bda-4119-aae5-73e0dd446193/asa240012010en.pdf>.
20. Amnesty International, *The Crumbling State of Health Care in North Korea*, 23.
21. "Aid Agencies Row Over North Korea Health Care System," *BBC News*, 16 July, 2010, accessed March 13, 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-10665964>.
22. World Health Organization, *Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Health Profile*, accessed March 13, 2011, <http://www.who.int/gho/countries/prk.pdf>.
23. It should be noted that, oddly, the DPRK is located in the World Health Organisation's South-East Asia region alongside Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, The Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste.
24. "North Korea Has Plenty of Doctors: WHO," *Reuters*, 30 April, 2010, accessed March 13, 2011. 

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/04/30/us-korea-north-idUSTRE63T3TW20100430>.

25. Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun* (1997), 404.

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3 Quarks Daily. "Immersion in Propaganda, Race-Based Nationalism and the Un-figure-outable Vortex of Juche Thought: Colin Marshall Talks to B.R. Myers, Author of 'The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why it Matters'." Accessed March 2, 2011. <http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2010/04/immersion-in-propaganda-racebased-nationalism-and-the-unfigureoutable-vortex-of-juche-thought-colin.html>.