



## Policy Brief No. 1

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# State Failure and North Korea

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The connection between failed states and new security threats has given rise to a new strategic task: understanding the problems of failed states and charting plans to respond to their problems. Consequently, research on failed states is on the rise. The ongoing discussion on state failure has made significant contributions both on the theoretical and policy-making fronts. First, based on the assessment that poor and unstable states pose serious security threats in international relations, it defined a failed state as a state that lacks the ability to perform core state functions. The argument that state failure is a process and that it is a relative concept is also quite appropriate. Second, the attempt to evaluate vulnerability quantitatively in order to rank states according to their vulnerability contributed to scientizing research on state failure. Lastly, the segmentation of indicators—aimed at more accurately gauging the degree of vulnerability—advanced theorization endeavors.

Despite these advantages, existing studies do carry certain limits. First, the heavy focus on conceptualizing, selecting the indicators of, and gauging vulnerability resulted in inadequate discussion on the cause of state vulnerability. This delayed the process of theorizing state failure. Second, there are too many indicators for measuring vulnerability, undermining the stringency of analysis. As a result of selecting numerous measurement indicators, indicators on the causes and levels of vulnerability form a confusing mixture, possibly undercutting the process of theorization, which is meant to closely examine the cause and the effect. Third, insufficient usable statistics from failed states, a lack of transparency of statistics made public, and the questionable accuracy of alternate data may possibly raise questions about the quantification of state vulnerability evaluation and its credibility.

The results of vulnerability evaluation are contingent upon the nature of measurement indicators of failed states. A review of studies on failed states shows that a state's failure



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can be gauged in four categories: politics, economy, national security, and social security. Several problems arose in the process of examining North Korea's characteristics as a failed state, premised on the fact that North Korea belongs to a group of failed states. First, evaluations of political vulnerability varied widely, depending on the nature of the indicators used. For example, the indicator on North Korea's political process and the indicator on the level of political satisfaction in North Korea show two contradicting results, thus raising the need for a rigorous distinction analytically between the cause and the effect. Another problem is the distinction between the political and security fields, in short the possibility of an overlap between politics and domestic security and ensuing confusion. This calls for an attempt to distinguish between indicators based on rigorous analytic standards. Third, it is necessary to bear in mind the differences between systems and operations when coming up with indicators for measuring vulnerability by field. One must key in on actual operations and their aspects and achievements, rather than declaratory systems. Fourth, taking into account the uniqueness of the North Korea case can reduce measurement errors when applying the ongoing failed state discourse to it.

Formulating and reviewing indicators that are more relevant to North Korea using measurement indicators from existing research, North Korea was found to be the most vulnerable in the economic field and that social welfare, in turn, was vulnerable as well. North Korea is assessed to perform most strongly in national security and is believed to be maintaining a certain level of stability in the political field as well. While North Korea is categorized as a failed state, one must remember that it shows different levels of vulnerability in different fields. It would be reasonable, then, to classify North Korea as a "failing state." North Korea is a unique example of a failed state because it is not exceedingly vulnerable in every area at present. The exposure of North Korea's vulnerability appears to be limited because Pyongyang is forcibly managing its accomplishments in a situation where its system is functioning normally. Hence, in North Korea's case, potential vulnerability is much more serious than explicit vulnerability. This suggests that North Korea is highly likely to degenerate into a completely failed and collapsed state if there is a tipping point. On the contrary, it also means that North Korea could evolve into a recovering and reconstructing state should it opt for and implement correct policies now, though belatedly.

The governance variable was applied to the North Korea case as a cause of state failure.



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To that end, a government role-centered governance concept was introduced, for failed states have a tendency to attach importance to the government. Governance capability was evaluated from the structure and process dimensions. Political leadership, system, and ideology were viewed as structural variables; the relationships among the supreme leader, the party, the army, and the cabinet were understood as a process of governance. North Korea's governance process is characterized by a few distinctive features. First, the supreme leader's power is excessively strong overall. In a situation where there is no institutional mechanism for keeping the supreme leader's power in check, it is difficult for a governance process that is absolutely reliant on the supreme leader to have a competitive edge. Second, it is highly possible that state goals do not coincide with the demand for public service that the people want. In that case, resource distribution would be distorted, thus aggravating the state's vulnerability. Third, private-sector actors are nonexistent, and fair competition and sufficient checks among state organs are difficult, possibly curtailing North Korea's governance capability.

North Korea watchers need to make further theoretical and policy efforts to understand the level of North Korea's failure and its causes based on the ongoing debate about state failure. Such an attempt would contribute to scientifically evaluating North Korea's past and present and projecting North Korea's future, a matter of foremost interest.