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***North Korean Contingency and  
Prospects of China's Military Intervention***

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# **North Korean Contingency and Prospects of China's Military Intervention**

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"China has become and will remain a critical factor in North Korea's future—whether it will survive or collapse, or ... whether it will move from here to there in a ... system-reforming, system-decaying, or system-collapsing trajectory." (Samuel S. Kim)

## **I. Foreword**

A North Korean contingency would mark a historic event that would determine the Northeast Asian regional order and the fate of the Korean peninsula. Neighboring countries, including the United States and China, would enter into an intense struggle to secure their interests on and strengthen influence over the Korean peninsula. Great powers' intervention in a North Korean contingency would decide North Korea's fate, affect the stability and peace of the Korean peninsula, and govern the unification process that follows. Moreover, the interests of the four great powers surrounding the Korean peninsula, particularly those of the United States and China, would clash in the wake of a North Korean contingency. Consequently, the East Asian regional order would be realigned.

The crux of formulating a response to a North Korean contingency is

China's intervention. Tracing back to history, the Han and Sui Dynasties invaded Koguryo, the Tang Dynasty intervened in the unification of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, Mongolia invaded Koryo, the Ming Dynasty intervened in the Imjin War, the Qing Dynasty invaded Chosun, and China intervened in the Korean War. As can be seen, China's military interventions in the Korean peninsula had direct bearings on the fate of the Korean nation. China has traditionally regarded the Korean peninsula as part of its sphere of influence. Modern-day China has geopolitical interests in North Korea, which explains why Beijing has retained its treaty of alliance with Pyongyang since July 1961. Should a contingency break out in North Korea, China would be compelled to intervene, driven by a need to secure certain stakes for its own domestic stability as well as for external security and strategic balance.

What are the prospects of a Chinese military intervention in the case of a North Korean contingency? What is China's strategy vis-à-vis the Korean peninsula, and how would a North Korean contingency affect China's interests? Among the options of independent intervention, the formation of a multinational force (MNF), and UN intervention, which one would China choose? How can we envision a Chinese intervention scenario that combines all these three?

Some argue that China's intervention in a North Korean contingency would be limited. China and North Korea are transitioning from a blood-forged alliance into a relationship between two normal states in the post-Cold War era. Since North Korea's first nuclear test in October 2006, China has viewed North Korea as not only a challenge to the international community but to China. In addition, North Korea does not appear to hold much significance as a "buffer zone," for there is almost no possibility of the United States attacking China by going through North Korea. As North Korea has degenerated into a "strategic problem" undermining China's interests, some in China have claimed that a

North Korean contingency and the ensuing unification of the Korean peninsula would not necessarily be bad for China. Hence, China will likely direct its efforts toward blocking influxes of North Korean refugees along the border in a North Korean contingency, rather than actively intervening as it did in the past.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, China will probably have to intervene in a North Korean contingency in some form. China's dislike for North Korea and assisting North Korea are two separate issues. From China's point of view, it cannot but fear politico-economic repercussions from an unstable North Korea. Furthermore, Beijing will have no choice but to pay close attention to the possible advent of an anti-China or a pro-US regime in a country bordering China. In addition, it will have to consider the possibility of a US-led unification of the Korean peninsula, in which case China would be disadvantaged in a strategic competition in Asia. China will find instability in North Korea, which has historically been part of the Chinese sphere of influence, unpalatable; the possibility of North Korea's integration into another country's sphere of influence will be even more unacceptable. Hence, China will dispatch military forces to North Korea without hesitation if it deems necessary. China will closely cooperate with neighboring countries and the UN, but it will basically attempt to seize the initiative in restoring North Korea's stability. Hence, the core of the discussion should be not whether China would intervene but how it would intervene.

This article shall begin by examining China's strategy toward the Korean peninsula and studying how a contingency in North Korea may impact China's national interest. Next, it will analyze China's objectives of military intervention, its order of priorities, and the possible types of intervention. It

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Scobell, *Projecting Pyongyang: The Future of North Korea's Kim Jong Il Regime* (SSI: Carlisle, 2008), pp. 35–36.

will then offer China's military intervention scenarios. The article shall conclude by weighing the strategic implications a North Korean contingency and a Chinese intervention might have for South Korea's national security.

## **II. China's Korean Peninsula Strategy**

China's strategies toward neighboring nations should be understood in the context of China's strategic competition with great powers.<sup>2</sup> As corroborated by China's intervention in the Korean War in 1950, the Sino-Indian War in 1962, and the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979, China's military interventions in neighboring countries were determined not so much by China's relationships with them but more by China's strategic decisions that took into account its relations with great powers like the United States and the Soviet Union. Likewise, China's post-Cold War strategy toward the Korean peninsula makes up one part of China's strategic rivalries with the United States and Japan. Despite the end of the Cold War and deepening economic interdependence, the remnants of the Cold War lingering in East Asia continue to breed mistrust and create security dilemmas among East Asian countries. Taiwan and the Korean peninsula are potential flash points which can ignite a "powder keg" in East Asia at any moment. The United States continues to check China by maintaining solid alliances and advancing its missile defense (MD) plans, redeploying military forces, and carrying out combined military exercises in Asia.

China knows well that the Korean peninsula holds a very important strategic value for defending China's national interest. North Korea, above all, is a strategic buffer zone that is pivotal for China's national security and a shield for deterring a strategic blockade against China. Should a pro-US or anti-

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975–1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 9.

China force absorb or occupy North Korea, that, together with Taiwan, would be a "dagger behind China's back" in China's strategic game with the United States. For this reason, China fears the unification of the Korean peninsula in the current state, particularly unification by a US-friendly South Korea, and its foremost strategic objective is to ward off such unification.<sup>3</sup> In conclusion, China's strategy vis-à-vis the Korean peninsula is to first maintain the North Korean regime; from a longer-term perspective, China wishes to separate South Korea from the United States by expanding its influence on the Korean peninsula and establish a pro-China unified Korea.<sup>4</sup>

Specifically, China's strategy toward the Korean peninsula is as follows:

The first and foremost is to ensure the North Korean regime's survival and maintain the status quo on the Korean peninsula.<sup>5</sup> North Korea has been able to muddle through despite the series of ordeals such as economic difficulties and food and energy shortages because it was able to obtain the minimum amount of aid it needed for survival. If the North Korean situation deteriorates even further and Pyongyang fails to receive adequate outside aid for sustaining its large-scale military, the story will change. A waning ability to support the military translates into a declining ability to retain order in every nook and corner of North Korea and maintain a firm grip on the country. China knows this well and has provided the food, oil, and other forms of economic assistance North Korea needs for survival.

Second, China wishes to prevent a war and stave off a military collision

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<sup>3</sup> John J. Tkacik, Jr., "How the PLA Sees North Korea," Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortzel, eds., *Shaping China's Security Environment: The Role of the People's Liberation Army* (SSI: Carlisle, 2006), pp. 149–150.

<sup>4</sup> David Shambaugh, "China and the Korean Peninsula: Playing for the Long Term," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 2003), pp. 44–45, 53.

<sup>5</sup> Larry M. Wortzel, "PLA 'Joint' Operational Contingencies in South Asia, Central Asia, and Korea," Roy Kamphausen et al., eds., *Beyond the Strait: PLA Missions Other Than Taiwan* (SSI: Carlisle, 2009), pp. 346–352.

on the Korean peninsula. While Beijing prefers to preserve the status quo on the Korean peninsula, it does not rule out the possibility of a sudden change in the North Korean situation. No matter how North Korea changes—even if the regime were to collapse—China believes that in the course of resolving the Korean peninsula issue, it can steer, propped up by its vested rights, the situation in a direction that is favorable for China's national interest. The worst scenario for China would be North Korea's collapse as a result of the ROK-US combined forces' retaliation against North Korea's military provocation or a US military attack, for example a "surgical strike." In this scenario, China would not have room to take the initiative in intervening in North Korea. What is more, it would be compelled to tolerate a pro-US unification of the Korean peninsula, which is what worries China the most.

Third, China hopes to draw out North Korea's reform over the longer run.<sup>6</sup> China cannot be satisfied with ensuring the North Korean regime's survival only, for the insecure status quo of the present alone cannot put China at ease. Hence, China's long-term strategy toward North Korea is to create a better situation by leading out North Korea to reform. China would reinforce its influence over the entire Korean peninsula by cementing North Korea as a buffer zone and bolstering its economic ties with South Korea. What is more, China could occupy an advantageous position for securing its interests in the course of inter-Korean unification.<sup>7</sup>

Fourth, China's goal is to achieve the unification of the Korean peninsula under the terms it wants. What China wants most is the independent unification of the Korean peninsula which excludes intervention by outside forces, namely the United States. China also prefers that North and South

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<sup>6</sup> David Shambaugh, "China and the Korean Peninsula: Playing for the Long Term," p. 48.

<sup>7</sup> Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John S. Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor: Chinese Views of Economic Reform and Stability in North Korea*, United States Institute of Peace Working Paper, CSIS, January 3, 2008, p. 9.

Korea work toward unification gradually, to a certain extent on an equal footing, rather than a sudden unification through absorption led by South Korea. The goal of such unification is ultimately to minimize US influence while maximizing China's influence over a unified Korean peninsula. China's unofficial diplomatic goals toward the Korean peninsula are to separate South Korea from the US-Japan camp and lure it closer to China, and to never permit a pro-US, anti-China unification of the Korean peninsula.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, China wishes to maintain the status quo on the Korean peninsula. Over the long haul, it will work toward a China-friendly unification of the Korean peninsula by drawing out North Korea's reform and bolstering its influence over the Korean peninsula. It is natural for China to fear the possibility of having to put up with a hostile—at least not China-friendly—neighbor across the Yalu River should a contingency occur in North Korea. That would bring back bad memories of Vietnam for China in late of 1970s. This will be the crucial factor defining the objectives and characteristics of China's military intervention in a North Korean contingency.

### **III. North Korean Contingency and China's Interests**

#### **A. North Korean Contingency and Intervention**

A North Korean contingency can be defined as "a state of anarchy that is critical enough to pose a serious security threat to South Korea and neighboring countries." In other words, a North Korean contingency means "a paralysis of the normal operation of the regime and system, in short a state of anarchy" in North Korea. Such turmoil would pose a grave threat not only to South Korea's security but also imperil neighboring states' national interests.

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<sup>8</sup> Denny Roy, "China and the Korean Peninsula: Beijing's Pyongyang Problem and Seoul Hope," *Asia-Pacific Security Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 2004), p. 2.



Naturally, a North Korean contingency would render neighboring states' military intervention inevitable one way or the other.

Possible causes of a North Korean contingency would include power succession, a struggle for power within the leadership, a *coup d'etat*, a civil war, or a popular uprising. Should any one of these events escalate, they may trigger a regime or system collapse, which in turn may develop into a contingency. Of course, a regime or system collapse *per se* will not lead to a contingency. If an alternative group succeeds in taking the reins of power from the incumbent regime and restoring political and social order, it may simply turn out to be a regime change or a system change. If an alternative faction fails to restore order and North Korea tumbles into an uncontrollable state or a state of anarchy, imperiling neighboring countries' interests, it would constitute a contingency.

In this light, the intervention discussed here, particularly military intervention, does not have much to do with the possible causes of a North Korean contingency. Intervention is an outcome of total collapse. Hence, irrespective of the causes of North Korea's collapse, intervention should be discussed only when North Korean society enters an irrecoverable state of anarchy. If the situation escalates to that point, neighboring countries would intervene to protect their national interests, from the vantage point of mass influxes of refugees, humanitarian issues, the security of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and geopolitical rivalry.

The legitimacy of neighboring states' military intervention can be debated from three perspectives. The first is intervention based on the right of self-defense, as stipulated in Article 51 of the UN Charter. Should North Korea fall into a state of anarchy and face problems in managing its WMD, neighboring countries' intervention may be justified. The second is

intervention with humanitarian objectives, as permitted by Chapter 7, Article 42 of the UN Charter. This article allows for the UN's peacekeeping operations (PKO) or individual nations' intervention in case of massacres, a famine, or a civil war in North Korea. The third is intervention upon the request of a country in need. Hence, the UN or individual countries may intervene based on a treaty or upon North Korea's request.

#### B. Impact of North Korean Contingency on Chinese National Interest

A North Korean contingency may bring immense damage to China's national interest, as follows. The first is the possibility of *hepingyanbian*.<sup>9</sup> Cuba and North Korea are both socialist states, but a Cuban collapse and a North Korean collapse will clearly differ in their impact. A contingency in the North will translate into the collapse of the neighboring socialist brother state with which it has a "blood-forged relationship." A manifestation of the limits of a one-party system based on Marx-Leninism, a North Korean contingency may pressure China to embrace Western values, such as democracy and human rights. In addition, it may serve as an opportunity for the Chinese people to explicitly express their disgruntlement with the myriads of socioeconomic problems plaguing China, for example corruption, the gap between the rich and the poor, and unbalanced development. Furthermore, as the two Koreas step closer to unification, the liberal democratic principles of a unified Korea may set off demands in China for democratization and political reform, thus serving as a catalyst for *hepingyanbian*.<sup>10</sup>

Second, a North Korean contingency will have a negative impact on

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<sup>9</sup> *Hepingyanbian* means Western countries' attempt to bring about a communist regime's collapse peacefully, without resorting to the means of war, by disrupting the inside of a communist state.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel S. Kim, "The Making of China's Korea Policy in the Era of Reform," David M. Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978-2000* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 401.

China's economic growth. The Korean peninsula is where great powers' interests crisscross geopolitically. In the course of resolving North Korean issues, China's diplomatic friction with the United States, Japan, Russia, and South Korea will be unavoidable. The worst-case scenario is a possible military clash during operations to secure WMD and stabilize the North Korean region. This would be completely contrary to China's foremost national policy priority of promoting economic development through cooperation with neighboring states. China's sustainable economic growth is a matter of core importance connected to the legitimacy of the Chinese government's rule. The Communist Party of China has hitherto attained recognition for the legitimacy of its one-party rule despite the numerous internal contradictions because it has improved the people's living standards by achieving constant economic growth.<sup>11</sup> A North Korean contingency and an ensuing crisis on the Korean peninsula would strain China's foreign relations and stymie the country's economic growth.

Third, mass influxes of North Korean refugees into Manchuria may trigger social chaos. For example, if approximately 500,000 North Koreans crossed the border, the exodus could be a catalyst for the approximately 2 million ethnic Koreans residing in the three provinces of Northeast China to look for their national identity in Korea rather than China. Speculations that a unified Korea might raise territorial issues with the Chinese government further increase that possibility. Should North Korea's WMD, including its six to eight nuclear weapons, 4,000 tonnes of chemical weapons, and biological weapons, wind up in the hands of ethnic minorities in China, it may fan the flames of their separatist movements.

Fourth, a North Korean contingency will only exacerbate China's geopolitical and geostrategic vulnerabilities. The Korean peninsula has

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Hagt, "Debating China's Future," *China Security*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Spring 2008), p. 4.

historically served as a route for invasions of mainland China. Since the 19th century, Czarist Russia, Japan, and the United States have all threatened China's national security via the Korean peninsula.<sup>12</sup> By land, one has direct access to Beijing by crossing Shanhaiguan from North Korea; by sea, one could arrive in Tianjin and Beijing from the Yellow Sea. China's involvement in the Korean War demonstrates well how sensitively China reacts to security threats from the outside. As can be seen, a contingency in North Korea would signal the loss of a strategically key frontline defense zone for China.

China cannot give up its vested interests in and influence over the Korean peninsula, because it should ward off the growing clout of the United States, with which it is locked in a strategic rivalry, in East Asia. Should a contingency in North Korea result in the unification of the Korean peninsula, it would inevitably be a South Korea-led unification. That means China would have a pro-US Korean peninsula as its neighbor, creating unfavorable conditions for China in its strategic competition with the United States. In conclusion, should China turn a blind eye to or passively intervene in a North Korean contingency, it will be forced to bear enormous losses geopolitically and geostrategically.

#### **IV. Objectives and Types of Chinese Military Intervention**

##### **A. Objectives of Intervention and Policy Priorities**

The objectives of China's intervention would be twofold: internally, promoting political and social stability and preventing *hepingyanbian* in China domestically; externally, overcoming strategic vulnerabilities externally.<sup>13</sup> To that end, China would attempt to rebuild an already collapsed North Korea and

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<sup>12</sup> John J. Tkacik, Jr., "How the PLA Sees North Korea," p. 147.

<sup>13</sup> Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John S. Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor*, pp. 14–15.

retain it as an independent state, in the meantime postponing unification as much as possible.<sup>14</sup> The crux of this strategy would ultimately be to forestall the emergence of a pro-US, anti-China regime in North Korea and establish a pro-China, anti-US regime instead.<sup>15</sup>

Purely from Beijing's perspective, China's policy priorities in intervention in a North Korean contingency would be as follows: first, China would need to separate and block off the North Korean region. It would have to block the mass exodus of refugees into China and limit the state of anarchy to North Korea. China would also need to prevent the outflow of WMD and secure the weapons. Second, China would seek to stabilize the North Korean region. It would restore public order and security in North Korea and provide the country with humanitarian assistance. China would contact the North Korean military's heavyweights to regain control of armed forces and seek their cooperation to stabilize North Korean society. Third, Beijing would declare North Korea's independence and attempt to establish a new regime in North Korea. The new regime would have to be composed of a core group of cadres who can promote stability in North Korea; more importantly, the regime would have to be pro-Chinese. Fourth, China would espouse a gradual process of unification. During the process of stabilization in North Korea, it is possible for the United States and South Korea to call for the unification of the Korean peninsula. In response to that, China would express its support for independent and gradual unification. In fact, China would endeavor to encourage pro-China sentiments on a unified Korean peninsula while curbing US influence as much as possible. Fifth, Beijing would seek to validate legitimacy through international cooperation. China could submit resolutions to the UN on the stabilization of and the establishment of a new regime in North Korea, and on gradual unification. In the course of doing so, China would seize the initiative in the

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<sup>14</sup> Paul B. Stares and Joel S. Wit, *Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea*, Council Special Report No. 42, Council on Foreign Relations, January 2009, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> John J. Tkacik, Jr., "How the PLA Sees North Korea," p. 163.

settlement of the situation, citing its vested rights over North Korea as the grounds. What is more, China would attempt to recover its traditional influence over the North Korean region.

Yet, China's policy priorities may conflict with Washington's strategy vis-à-vis the Korean peninsula in case of a contingency in North Korea. Washington's primary concerns in the wake of a North Korean contingency would be to preserve stability and security in North Korea, locate North Korea's WMD and secure the safety of the storage, respond to serious humanitarian threats such as a mass exodus of refugees or famine, cope with political and legal issues arising from the creation of an interim government, and resolve economic threats deriving from the unification of the Korean peninsula. At a glance, US priorities appear similar to China's, but Washington is highly likely to consider North Korea's contingency an opportunity for the unification of the Korean peninsula and push for unification while minimizing the process of unification, as was the case in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>16</sup> Should South Korea refuse to promptly absorb North Korea and delegate the rule of North Korea to surviving forces in the country or otherwise slow down the pace of unification by establishing an interim federal system, it may only aggravate confusion and provide excuses for a civil war in North Korea, like in Afghanistan and Iraq. In sum, China and the United States may have fundamentally different outlooks on the Korean peninsula's unification, with China trying to expand its influence by pressing for gradual unification, and the United States viewing the North Korean contingency as an opportunity for the unification of the Korean peninsula.

## B. Types of Chinese Military's Intervention

### 1. Independent Intervention

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<sup>16</sup> Paul B. Stares and Joel S. Wit, *Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea*, p. 6.

In the early stages of a North Korean contingency, China's independent intervention in North Korea will likely be inevitable. If there are signs of a contingency, or if one has already broken out, China would be compelled to intervene on its own to resolve the situation as soon as possible. The quickly deteriorating conditions in North Korea will hardly yield any time for Beijing to work out a solution and act with the UN or other countries concerned, such as the United States. Hence, China will intervene first and take steps to retain the North Korean regime's ability to govern, keep conflicts within the high-level leadership at bay, help the military maintain a grip on its officers and men, ward off a mass influx of North Korean defectors, avoid the collapse of the sociopolitical order in North Korea, and prevent the situation from escalating. Furthermore, the Chinese will attempt to control the nuclear weapons and missiles in North Korea and forestall an accidental war or a local collision. At this point, even if the United States unilaterally intervened in North Korea to gain control of the country's WMD or cited humanitarian reasons for intervention, without any regards for China's intention, or even if it invoked the ROK-US Mutual Defense Treaty on the grounds of security threats and intervened in North Korea, China would still intervene independently.

Independent intervention would be the most apt way for China to reinforce its vested rights and ensure its national interests. Beijing views North Korea as part of its sphere of influence. Accordingly, even if China sought to solve the North Korean contingency through the UN, that does not mean it would participate in a concerted effort to address the North Korean question on an equal footing as other neighboring nations. China's approach is basically not one of common management—it is one of monopolistic management. China would attempt to play a leading role in stabilizing North Korea, even if it comes at the price of tolerating the international community's humanitarian assistance and other forms of intervention owing to China's burden of

independent intervention. Most importantly, the "DPRK-China Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance" concluded on July 10, 1961 will provide a decisive justification for China's lone intervention in North Korea.

Yet, there undeniably are hurdles to China's independent intervention in a North Korean contingency. First, the international community will be sure to oppose. The Korean peninsula does not concern China only—it is where the interests of other neighboring countries, namely South Korea, the United States, and Japan, come together. Hence, China's unilateral intervention may trigger neighboring countries' criticism as well as diplomatic friction and even a military clash. China's strategic relationship with South Korea will deteriorate, and the "China threat theory" will once again rear its head among regional countries. This would be a major blow to the "responsible great power" image that China has built for itself internationally under the motto of peaceful development.

Second, China's ability to conduct stabilization operations is limited. Successful stabilization operations in a hostile environment require 20 soldiers per every 1,000 persons residing in the operating region. The North Korean population is approximately 23 million, meaning China would need to commit up to 460,000 soldiers to stabilization operations in North Korea.<sup>17</sup> That represents one-third of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) ground forces; it is also the size of the Shenyang and Jinan Military Region (MR) forces combined. Prolonged operations will call for extra troops for two or three rotations, which translates into a maximum of 1 million or more additional troops. That would be an onerous burden for China.

Third, the prospects for stabilization operations in North Korea are dim. Stabilization operations in North Korea in effect translate into building a new

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<sup>17</sup> Paul B. Stares and Joel S. Wit, *Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea*, pp. 21–22.



state. In short, even if China were to invest enormous resources over multiple years in maintaining public order, ensuring security, providing humanitarian assistance, building infrastructure, and helping out the new North Korean government, success would not be guaranteed. In this light, being the first to rush into a beleaguered North Korea may be a reckless gamble for China, which lacks the experience in stabilization operations. Should North Korea degenerate into a second Afghanistan, China could suffer a major blow on the domestic political front and economically.

## 2. MNF's Intervention

Since independent intervention will be sure to pose a burden on China, multilateral intervention under the cooperation of the international community, including the United States, will clearly be an alternative. However, certain preconditions will have to be met in order for this option to be viable. First, the UN would have to sanction it. Here, the UN would not be directly intervening in stabilization operations in North Korea but would only grant legitimacy to the creation of an MNF and the MNF's operations in North Korea. Second, China would need to take the lead in carrying out the operations. US hands are tied in Afghanistan as it is. Hence, it would lack the means of actively participating in stabilization operations in North Korea. Under these circumstances, China would attempt to spearhead the operations with the cooperation of South Korea, Russia, and the rest of the international community. Third, China would like to be in charge of stabilization operations in the Pyongyang area. China and other participating countries will divide up North Korea and conduct stabilization operations in the areas for which they are responsible. Here, China would want to take charge of stabilization operations in Pyongyang, which will be home to North Korea's new government.

Even if China were to push for a type of MNF intervention, China would

have no choice but to intervene on its own in the early stages of a North Korean contingency in order to prevent the situation from deteriorating any further. Beijing would use this special status to its advantage and secure its vested interests early on in the course of settling the North Korean contingency. Washington, which is most interested in North Korea's WMD, would be compelled to cooperate with Beijing. While information pertaining to how the North Korean WMD control system has been built, where it is stored, or what one must do to seize control of related materials and technologies remains uncertain, we know for sure that the North Korean military has control of the country's WMD. Thus the North Korean military's cooperation is essential for preventing the North Korean WMD's leak to the outside world and for securing them. Here, China's solidarity with and influence on the North Korean military may prove useful. All in all, China will positively accept US demands related to the obtainment of North Korea's WMD and cooperate with it to that end. In return, China will attempt to accomplish its goals related to the creation of an MNF and stabilization operations.

Yet, even an MNF's military intervention will have its constraints. First, it remains unclear whether Washington would tolerate China's moves to take charge of commanding the MNF. In addition, it is questionable whether the United States and China would negotiate and compromise in style surrounding, *inter alia*, the nature of intervention, the organization of an MNF, and the scope and period of intervention. What is more, while countries concerned may have a shared understanding of the need to prevent North Korean WMD leaks, they may have markedly different opinions about the need for a military operation to obtain the WMD and the means of conducting it. If the clock continues to tick without any useful agreement on these issues, the United States may raise with the UN the danger of North Korea's WMD leaks and move toward solitary intervention in North Korea.

### 3. UN-led Intervention

If China concludes that the North Korean situation has worsened to a point where it can no longer improve, it would seek to settle the contingency through UN intervention, at the expense of undermining China's own vested interests. Of course, even under this scenario, China's independent intervention would be indispensable for dealing with chaos in the early days. Yet, subsequent stabilization operations in North Korea would be carried out under the UN banner, and China would take part in the operations on an equal footing as other participating nations. Beijing would not be able to take the initiative in the course of establishing a new government in North Korea or during the process of the Korean peninsula's unification. As a result, the North Korean situation would likely unfold in a direction that South Korea and the United States find palatable. China would concentrate on cordoning off the border area in order to block mass influxes of North Korean refugees. It would have to respect the international community's decisions on North Korean and Korean peninsula issues.

Certainly, UN-led intervention in a North Korean contingency would be the most equitable and legitimate way to receive recognition. China, however, would not prefer this option, for it would not be able to secure its geopolitical and geostrategic interests this way, for the reasons cited above. Relinquishing its traditional sphere of influence would be undesirable, considering the resurgent China's national power and stature. Considering that China's strategic rivalry with the United States will only intensify in the mid-21st century, it would be premature for Beijing to accept a unified Korea without first putting an end to US-China mistrust and antagonism. By giving up North Korea, China would save the costs it would otherwise have to pour into its neighbor. However, the advent of a powerful US-sponsored liberal democratic nation in a neighboring area will increase the possibility of *hepingyanbian* in

China. In this light, China would probably attempt to take the initiative in tackling the North Korean contingency rather than deferring to the UN an issue that will determine the fate of the Korean peninsula.

In sum, viewed purely from the vantage point of China's national interest, China would like, in decreasing order of preference, independent intervention, MNF intervention led by China, and intervention via the UN. This order, however, coincides with the order of cost and burden China would have to shoulder. In short, from the standpoint of cost and burden, intervention through the UN would be the most favorable for China, followed by MNF intervention and independent intervention. In this light, China would most likely intervene in a North Korean contingency as part of an MNF. Of course, China may intervene in another form depending on the outcome of its negotiations with the United States. If MNF intervention is the optimal plan for China, one can anticipate China to follow these steps: independent intervention in the initial stage → discussions at the UN on the international community's intervention → China-led MNF intervention.

## **V. Scenarios of China's Military Intervention**

### **A. Independent Intervention for Rapid Response in Initial Stage**

If a contingency breaks out in North Korea, China will intervene independently to respond quickly in the early stages and seize the initiative. The Chinese military's primary missions will be blocking the border area, figuring out the whereabouts of North Korea's WMD and securing the weapons, and preventing a decline in the North Korean situation. It will be difficult to determine the number of troops that should be deployed in North Korea at the outset, but China will decide on the size required for maintaining public security and order at least in major North Korean cities, including Pyongyang.

First, China will block off the border area by deploying one to two group armies of the Shenyang MR. At the same time, it will send its rapid response force (RRF) to North Korea. The RRF will be tasked to find the whereabouts of North Korea's WMD and carry out stabilization operations in major urban areas. China will deploy the RRF quickly, in the 24 to 48 hours following the outbreak of a crisis; the RRF will be called upon to clear passageways, neutralize the enemy's combat potential, and seize the core areas.<sup>18</sup> China's RRF is composed of two group armies, nine divisions, three brigades, seven units (regiment- or battalion-level), totaling approximately 200,000 troops. The Chinese RRF is composed of the 43rd, 44th, and 45th Divisions (three divisions) under the 15th Airborne Corps; the First and 164th Brigades (two brigades) of the Marine Corps; the 38th Group Army of the Beijing MR; the 39th Group Army of the Shenyang MR; the First Amphibious Mechanized Infantry Division under the Nanjing MR's First Group Army; the 149th Mechanized Infantry Division under the 13th Group Army of the Chengdu MR; the 124th Amphibious Mechanized Infantry Division under the 42nd Group Army of the Guangzhou MR; the 127th Light Mechanized Infantry Division and the 162nd Motorized Infantry Division under the Jinan MR's 54th Group Army; the 61st Division (13 divisions and one brigade) under the Lanzhou MR's 21st Group Army; and special operations units (seven regiment- or battalion-level), one in each MR and each comprising 1,000 troops.<sup>19</sup>

Of these units, the 15th Airborne Corps, the 38th Group Army of the

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<sup>18</sup> Paul H. B. Godwin, "From Continent to Periphery: PLA Doctrine, Strategy and Capabilities Towards 2000," David Shambaugh and Richard H. Yang, eds., *China's Military in Transition* (New York: Clarendon, 1997), pp. 205–206.

<sup>19</sup> Jane's Information Group, "Army," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment—China and Northeast Asia*, <http://www8.janes.com/>; Cortez A. Cooper III, "Preserving the State: Modernizing and Task-Organizing a 'Hybrid' PLA Ground Force," Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell, eds., *Right-Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2007), pp. 256–257; Chong-pin Lin, "The Military Balance in the Taiwan Straits," David Shambaugh and Richard H. Yang, eds., *China's Military in Transition* (New York: Clarendon, 1997), p. 326.

Beijing MR, the 39th Group Army of the Shenyang MR, and the 127th and the 162nd Divisions under the Jinan MR's 54th Group Army, totaling approximately 150,000 troops, will be deployed to the Korean peninsula first. Assigned to each of the 15th Airborne Corps divisions is an air force transport regiment possessing approximately 30 Il-76 transport aircraft. Hence, the corps can be deployed with the support of these regiments. The Il-76 transport aircraft can each carry 47 tonnes of cargo. Hence, while it may be difficult for the aircraft to transport 10,000 or more division troops and equipment at once, it would at least be able to deploy the main units quickly. The 38th and 39th Group Armies are mechanized. They will thus be deployed to North Korea via overland routes. The 39th Group Army can receive transport support from the Shenyang-based Ninth Army Aviation Regiment's Mi-17 helicopters. The 127th and 162nd Divisions under the Jinan MR's 54th Group Army may move in vehicles or receive transport support from the First Army Aviation Regiment's Mi-17 helicopters in Xinxiang. These two divisions may even be committed to landing operations in North Korea if necessary.

China will attempt to establish an advantageous position for conducting future stabilization operations by first occupying Pyongyang. By making contact with the North Korean party and military's high-ranking officials, Beijing may even seek to formulate a plan for controlling WMD and lay the groundwork for launching a new regime. In this process, Beijing will cooperate closely with the North Koreans to ensure the security of WMD to prevent Washington's independent intervention. What is more, to share the cost, China will work closely with the UN to map out a strategy to deal with the North Korean contingency.

#### B. MNF's Intervention

While China is taking preliminary measures to contain the crisis in

North Korea, the UN may adopt a resolution approving an MNF's intervention. The goals of the Chinese government's stabilization operations will include dividing up North Korea, blocking off mass influxes of North Korean refugees, securing WMD, maintaining public order and offering humanitarian assistance, establishing a new North Korean government, reining in the North Korean military, and promoting political and social stabilization. The crux of China's stabilization operations on the Korean peninsula will be for the Chinese military to carry out operations in the Pyongyang area. Broadly, China will wish to be in charge of western North Korea and Pyongyang and ask the United States and South Korea to take charge in the areas south of Pyongyang and Chongjin and Russia and other members of the international community to launch operations in North Korea's eastern and northeastern areas.

To that end, China will reorganize the RRF units it has already deployed or is deploying as well as the additional units it plans to deploy together into a tentatively named "Volunteer Force for North Korea's Stabilization." The volunteer force will be made up of mostly Shenyang, Jinan, and Beijing MR forces, and China's military intervention will increase depending on the urgency of the situation on the Korean peninsula. The 16th Group Army of the Shenyang MR may be deployed additionally, and if the situation takes a turn for the worse, one group army from the Beijing and Jinan MRs each may be deployed as reinforcements. In sum, China will be deploying between 200,000 to 300,000 troops, including the first 150,000 RRF troops it deploys the first round. Considering the nature and scope of the operational area, however, Beijing will probably dispatch approximately 200,000 troops to North Korea.

### C. Stabilization Operations

China will assemble in the Shenyang MR area all its rotating forces, judging that the stabilization operations in North Korea will take years. China

may commit approximately 200,000 troops—one Shenyang MR group army, one Beijing MR group army, and two Jinan MR group armies—to rotations. Should North Korea's situation come under control quickly, China will focus on providing humanitarian assistance and launching reconstruction projects by dispatching lightly armed units to North Korea. If the crisis escalates, China will first send units capable of carrying out combat missions.

China will attempt to establish a new government in North Korea while conducting MNF missions. By winning the legitimacy of the new regime and lending support to North Korea's economic reform, Beijing will espouse North Korea's independent survival and attempt to turn North Korea into a buffer zone. Basically, China will not endorse a rapid unification of the Korean peninsula, citing the need for independent and peaceful unification as the reason. However, once South Korea is ready to accept China's demands, China will support a South Korea-led unification. China's preconditions, however, may include the scrapping of the ROK-US alliance, the withdrawal of the US Forces Korea (USFK), the demilitarization of a part of the Korea-China border, respect for North Korea-China agreements on territorial issues, and the recognition of China's economic interests in North Korea.

## **VI. Conclusions**

Deepening globalization in the post-Cold War era has increasingly required international cooperation for comprehensive security. Hence, under the current circumstances, the possibility of China's military intervention in the Korean peninsula may appear unlikely, for China has sought "peace and development" over the past three decades. Hypothesizing a Chinese military intervention may even be deemed anachronistic. Yet, it is a possibility that cannot be ruled out as long as the North Korea-China military alliance exists, as long as the Korean peninsula and Taiwan questions remain unanswered,



and as long as China's strategic competition with the United States persists. In *China's National Defense in 2008*, Beijing for the first time expounded on the importance of "military operations other than war (MOOTW)" and emphasized the need to possess the ability to carry out such operations.<sup>20</sup> While that passage was meant to highlight the importance of reinforcing China's ability to respond to domestic disasters and catastrophes and maintain public order in the face of newly rising transnational threats, it is highly significant in that it may be applied in a time of a North Korean contingency.

The message this research conveys about South Korea's national security is as follows. First, China's intervention in a North Korean contingency may render South Korea-led operations difficult. As a North Korean ally, China has the grounds for proactively intervening in a North Korean crisis, and China will fully take advantage of them to secure its strategic interests. On the other hand, South Korea, being one and the same nation as North Korea, should naturally take the lead in stabilizing North Korea. Realistically, however, Seoul may face limits in winning recognition for its intervention under international law and drawing out Beijing's compromise. Second, US and Chinese interests will clash. The two nations may differ on North Korea's WMD, the specifics of stabilization operations in North Korea, and the unification of the Korean peninsula. As a result, the chasm between the two countries may deepen, or they may strike a deal to their own convenience. Either way, it is possible that South Korea's interests will not be adequately reflected in, and that it will be marginalized from, the process. Third, the Korean peninsula's unification may be delayed. Unless ROK-China, Sino-US, and ROK-US relations fundamentally change, China will work toward recovering and maintaining the status quo even in the aftermath of a North Korean contingency, rather than promoting a change in the status quo of the Korean peninsula.

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<sup>20</sup> The State Council Information Office, *China's National Defense in 2008*, January 2009.

Accordingly, South Korea needs to establish a mid- to long-term national strategy paradigm to prepare for a North Korean contingency. To that end, it must first chart a grand strategy for unification. The South Korean government has hitherto mapped out only gradual and phase-by-phase unification scenarios. South Korea must decide in advance whether Korea's unification should be gradual or immediate in case a contingency occurs in North Korea and the North Korean situation spirals out of control, and it must be prepared. Under the immediate unification scenario, North Korea would become a subject of international dispute, the unification costs would soar, and confusion would engulf North and South Korea. The negative consequences of gradual unification are that neighboring countries may establish a new North Korea and put off unification in line with their own national interests. As overwhelming as this issue may be, Seoul would not be able to map out a sound strategy to cope with a North Korean contingency, which will break out without a warning, unless it engages in some serious thought.

Second, South Korea should make sure that the Korean peninsula is no longer divided according to great powers' interests and that it does not fuel instability in the region. To that end, the international community must reach a consensus on the nature of the new North Korean government. A new government may be established in North Korea to stabilize the country and promote national reconciliation and cooperation between North and South Korea. However, it must be an interim government that promotes the unification of the Korean peninsula, not a government that intends to reverse the clock on the Korean peninsula. Hence, while the new North Korean government may be pro-China, it must not be anti-US. What is more, South Korea must not allow the new North Korean government to fall into China's sphere of influence.

Third, Seoul needs to formulate and manage a road map to prepare for a North Korean contingency. It must be specific, containing details about how a North Korean contingency might unfold, by type and by time slot, how countries concerned might respond in the process, and how South Korea should respond. Such a road map could not be drafted logically, event by event. Hence, it will be like a jigsaw puzzle with numerous missing pieces. Some questions that will remain answered will be what might be China's intention, how North Korea's WMD might be handled, and whether Beijing might allow South Korea and the United States to enter North Korea. Seoul will need to find these missing pieces of the puzzle by engaging in strategic dialogues and academic research with countries concerned.

The repercussions of a North Korean contingency will not be confined to the Korean peninsula—it will indeed mark a historic event that will be powerful enough to restructure the regional order in East Asia. The key actors in the aftermath of a North Korean contingency would be South Korea and two great powers which, unfortunately, would likely intervene with disparate goals, policy priorities, and strategies. If that were to happen, the Korean peninsula issue may not be resolved peacefully due to the great powers' geopolitical rivalry and confrontation. Dialogue and cooperation among interested parties will be more critical now than ever to prepare for a North Korean contingency, which will befall them like "thunder," and for the sake of stability and co-prosperity in East Asia.