

Striking the Balance: China's Response to a North Korean Contingency

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April 2022

Executive Summary

With significant stressors placed upon North Korea's economy, political stability, humanitarian integrity, and public health, planning for the possibility of a sudden North Korean collapse or contingency is essential. Of similar gravity, however, is the role of a Chinese response to the same scenario. Given China's geopolitical, strategic, and humanitarian interests on and near the Korean Peninsula, China's response to a sudden North Korean contingency situation may have profound effects on the United States' ability and willingness to muster its own response. Just as the nature of the North Korean contingency may incline Washington and its allies to take a certain course of action, Beijing's reaction may also drive Washington and its allies to mount an alternate type of response. As such, understanding exactly how China may respond to a North Korean contingency is nearly as important as understanding the nature of the contingency itself.

This paper will argue that China is very likely to become militarily involved in a North Korean contingency situation, but not in a replay of the 1950 Korean War intervention. Instead, China will intervene just enough to preserve its core interests, refrain from a military confrontation with the US-Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance, and place itself in a position from which it can influence the future of the Korean Peninsula. In addition, this paper will argue that not only is a Chinese intervention likely, but it may also be preferable as a means of achieving some operational goals shared by both the Chinese government and the US-ROK alliance. Therefore, substantial coordination between the two sides prior to and during any contingency situation will have operational advantages and will reduce the possibility of unintended military conflict between the two forces.

Introduction

The advent of a North Korean collapse is a contingency that has occupied the minds of US planners since the 1990s, when the onset of a devastating famine coupled with the death of the longtime leader convinced Washington policymakers that the North Korean state was doomed to collapse eventually.¹ More than 20 years later, concerns regarding the health of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un—

¹ Carpenter, Ted. "North Korea May Be on the Brink of Collapse – or Not." *The Atlantic*. June 23, 2021. <https://www.cato.org/commentary/north-korea-may-be-brink-collapse-or-not>.

together with a worsening domestic crisis brought on by natural disasters, increasing food insecurity, and the COVID-19 pandemic—lead international observers to once again ponder the possibility of a sudden North Korean collapse or contingency situation in the relatively near future.

Whether it be the death of the supreme leader or some type of internal instability, no discussion of North Korean contingencies is complete without consideration of possible Chinese responses. China carried out a major intervention in the Korean War of 1950, but China today faces a very different set of circumstances and, therefore, may respond to a North Korean contingency in a more nuanced manner.

Guided firstly by a brief historical review of the circumstances under which China intervened in a Korean conflict in the past, this paper will then focus on the Chinese military posture and considerations local to the Sino-Korean border, with particular attention paid to Chinese activities during times of heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The examination will then focus on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s core economic, political, societal, geopolitical, and military concerns and how these concerns may affect or constrain China's willingness or ability to react to a North Korean contingency. This analysis will aid in assessing Chinese willingness and ability to enact each response, highlighting the response best matching Chinese capability, and protecting its core interests as the most likely policy choice.

This paper defines a North Korean contingency as any sudden situation in which all of the following are true:

1. The stability of the North Korean regime is compromised, and direct and stable command and control (C2) of North Korea's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) cannot be confirmed.
2. A military intervention by South Korea and the United States is imminent or in progress.
3. Without direct Chinese intervention of some sort, the entire Korean Peninsula will fall under a US-friendly, South Korean administration.

For the purposes of simplicity, this paper does not specify an exact cause for the contingency situation. However, the paper excludes more outlandish or catastrophic causes. While events such as the sudden death of Kim Jong Un or a coup launched by North Korean generals are fair game, other more unlikely events—such as an accidental nuclear detonation within North Korea or a Russian invasion of North Korea—are beyond the scope of this analysis. Such situations more resemble a North Korean catastrophe than a contingency.

Applicable causes are those which enable the above listed conditions to exist and little more. Furthermore, the paper assumes a contingency has arisen due to domestic factors and not overt external forces, as well as that the Korean Peninsula is not in a state of war at the time of the contingency.

Defining “Response”

The first step in discussing a Chinese response to a North Korean contingency is to define the nature of these possible responses. The prospect of a Chinese “intervention,” for example, will most likely elicit comparisons to the 1950 Korean War intervention. However, in practical application, the term “intervention” can apply to an entire spectrum of potential responses—from the benign to the fully confrontational. China’s initial list of options during the 1950 Korean indeed fell upon this spectrum and total inaction was as much an option as full intervention.²

This paper will explore four specific Chinese responses to a contingency situation in North Korea: Minimal Response, Partial Non-confrontational Intervention, Preemptive Intervention, and Full Confrontational Intervention.

Minimal Response

Despite China’s possible incentives for becoming involved in a North Korean contingency situation, historical precedent could also predict a muted response. Though China eventually staged a full intervention into the Korean War, the Chinese Politburo also supported a minimal response as a valid option.³ In a minimal response scenario, China will take steps to control the fallout from a North Korean contingency but it will not become militarily involved in the situation. For example, China may conduct border securement and refugee control operations on the Chinese side of the border and engage in political grandstanding or rhetorical damage control, and perhaps even military posturing. In the end, however, China will avoid direct involvement in the conflict, whether that decision is to preserve the interests of North Korea or its own.

Partial, Non-Confrontational Intervention

In a partial, non-confrontational intervention, China will engage in limited operations to secure specific operational goals, but it will not take a confrontational stance against ROKUS forces.⁴ For example, China may secure North Korea’s key nuclear facilities closest to China while advancing ground forces a limited distance—perhaps 50 kilometers or so—into North Korea to secure both a buffer area between Chinese territory and ROKUS forces and a refugee control zone.⁵ Critically, China’s goal in this scenario is not to preserve the Kim regime or the North Korean state, but to preserve key Chinese interests without provoking conflict with the United States or its allies.

² Xiong, Hao Ming. “Decision Making Theories and China’s Military Intervention in the Korean War.” *Inquiries Journal* 9, no. 11 (2017): <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1707>.

³ Xiong. “Decision Making Theories.” (2017).

⁴ “ROKUS Forces” is a general term referring to ROK and US military units engaged in military operations during a North Korea contingency situation.

⁵ Reynolds, Phil W. “What Happens if North Korea Collapses?” *The Diplomat*. September 3, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/what-happens-if-north-korea-collapses/>.

Preemptive Non-Confrontational Intervention

In a preemptive non-confrontational intervention, China will attempt to gain control over the situation in North Korea by preempting any US-ROK military action. Essentially, China will attempt to fully stabilize the situation within North Korea before ROKUS forces can become involved, leaving China with the greatest amount of influence over the future of North Korea. In this scenario, China's goal is to both avoid conflict with ROKUS forces and either preserve the Kim regime or enable Chinese control over North Korea.

Full Confrontational Intervention

A Full Confrontational Intervention most closely follows historical precedent as the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (PVA) staged such an intervention during the Korean War in 1950. In this scenario, China will take a militarily confrontational stance against advancing ROKUS forces either to protect the Kim regime or to establish its own control over North Korea. Despite the enormous expected costs of such a move, the historical precedent for full confrontational intervention make this reaction worth considering.

Historical Considerations—Chinese Intervention into the Korean War

During the fall and winter of 1950, the PVA crossed the Yalu River into North Korea in preparation for a surprise attack on advancing UN forces. This initial attacking force—consisting of roughly 260,000 men—represented the first wave of what would become a full Chinese intervention into the conflict.⁶ Ultimately, approximately 3 million Chinese troops would see combat in the Korean War, more than any other single belligerent in the conflict.⁷

While there is a common belief that China's intervention into the Korean War was born of a simple desire to defend its neighboring ally from aggression, in reality, China's intervention was the result of a number of specific factors. When the tide of war turned against North Korea, both Joseph Stalin and Kim Il Sung pressured China's Mao Zedong to intervene.⁸ Mao was initially skeptical, but felt compelled to help due to the ideological pressure from the Soviet Union and Mao's 'Special Comradeship' with Kim Il Sung, who also fought against the Japanese during World War II.⁹ In the end, Mao agreed to intervene, but only after securing a pledge of military support from the Soviet Union. This, in addition to the perception that UN forces may also pose a territorial threat to the economically crucial Northeastern region, set the stage for the PVA's intervention.¹⁰

⁶ Crocker, Harry Martin. "Chinese Intervention in the Korean War." *LSU Digital Commons*. 2002. 35. https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/1804/.

⁷ Crocker. "Chinese Intervention in the Korean War." 86.

⁸ Kovach, Ciaran. "What Were Mao's Motivations for Intervention in the Korean War?" *Interstate—Journal of International Affairs* 2015/2016, no. 3 (2016): <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1440>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Zhou, Bangning. "Explaining China's Intervention in the Korean War in 1950." *Interstate—Journal of International Affairs* 2014/2015, no. 1 (2015): <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1069>.

China's intervention, therefore, was born of ideological, personal, economic, and national defense factors along with guarantees of military support from allies. When examining Chinese responses to modern North Korean contingencies, it is important to consider whether such factors still exist today.

Local Considerations

Though China's intervention into the Korean War did not occur until October 1950, preparations began far in advance and, in as early as July 1950, China already had 200,000 troops near the border with North Korea. A review of the current local situation at the Sino-Korean border provides insight into Chinese advance planning and preparation for a contingency situation in North Korea.

Rumored Refugee Camp Construction

In the spring and summer of 2017, leaked internal documents from a Chinese state-run telecoms giant indicated that the Chinese government had plans to construct refugee camps along the border with North Korea.¹¹ The camps were intended to stem the flow of North Korean refugees into China in the event of war on the Peninsula and, though no camps were actually constructed, the reported planned locations of the camps were in areas known for high levels of North Korean defections—chiefly along the Chinese border with North Korea's Ryanggang and North Hamgyeong provinces. Combined, these two provinces alone produce around 75 percent of North Korean defectors.¹² Given these factors, China's concern for Chinese border integrity and the flow of refugees in the event of a North Korean contingency is clear.

Northeast Theatre Command Posture and Troop Movements

In China's standard military posture, the Northern Theatre Command (NTC) is home to three General Armies (GA): the 78th, the 79th, and the 26th.¹³ These GAs have an estimated combined strength of 90,000 to 150,000 personnel spread throughout the entire Northeastern region, though only the 78th and 79th GAs are stationed in the provinces that border North Korea.¹⁴ Contrary to popular belief, most of these troops are not on the border with North Korea. In fact, only 12,000 to 18,500 are based within 100 miles of the North Korean border.¹⁵

¹¹ Phillips, Tom. "China building network of refugee camps along border with North Korea." *The Guardian*. December 12, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/12/china-refugee-camps-border-north-korea>.

¹² Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification. *Policy on North Korean Defectors*. 2021. https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/.

¹³ Wood, Peter. "Strategic Assessment: China's Northern Theatre Command." *The Jamestown Foundation*. May 15, 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/strategic-assessment-chinas-northern-theater-command/>.

¹⁴ This figure is achieved by combining the typical troop strength of a Chinese GA. True troop numbers may vary.

¹⁵ Blasko, Dennis. "PLA Ground Forces: Moving Toward a Smaller, More Rapidly Deployable, Modern Combined Arms Force." *RAND Corporation*. CF-182-NSRD. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/conf_proceedings/2008/CF182part2.pdf.

In the spring of 2017, rumors spread of China moving an additional 150,000 to 200,000 troops to the NTC.¹⁶ Such reports were met with denials from the Chinese Ministry of Defense and there is currently no empirical evidence that such troop movements ever occurred at that time or at any time since.¹⁷ Though the purpose of these troops was not clear, Adam Cathcart argues that these troop movements may have been intended to signal a message to North Korea rather than to the US-ROK alliance.¹⁸

J-20 Deployment

There is, however, clearer evidence of Chinese military movement in other aspects. In the fall of 2017, when US-North Korea tensions were at their peak, China announced the operational deployment of the J-20.¹⁹ The J-20 is China's first attempt at a stealth fighter and is currently China's most advanced fighter jet. The news of the deployment curiously lacked the location of the deployment. Later reports indicated that the first J-20 deployment was to the South China Sea.²⁰ This reveals a notable point regarding China's possible preparations for a contingency in North Korea: China chose to deploy its most valuable air asset far away from what would be the area of operations near North Korean contingency—the NTC. Given that the J-20 would be critical in any Chinese war effort against the United States, the lack of a J-20 presence near the NTC may imply that China was not actively planning for a Korean Peninsula conflict in which the J-20 would be crucial.

Nuclear & WMD Concerns

In September 2017, North Korea carried out its largest nuclear test. The test registered a 6.3 on the Richter scale, caused tremors within areas of China near the Sino-Korean border, and stoked fears of nuclear contamination.²¹ Given the risk of further destabilization caused by the detonation of nuclear weapons—deliberate or otherwise—on the Korean Peninsula, verifiable securement and dismantling of nuclear weapons will be high on China's list of priorities in a North Korean contingency.²²

This figure is based upon the estimated size of Chinese brigades achieved by dividing the total number of troops in a division by the number of brigades in a division.

¹⁶ Cathcart, Adam. "Tigers in the Haze: Chinese Troops on the Border with north Korea in the "April Crisis." *The Jamestown Foundation, China Brief 17, no. 13* (October 20, 2017). <https://jamestown.org/program/tigers-haze-chinese-troops-border-north-korea-april-crisis/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Yeo, Mike. "China's J-20 stealth fighter jet is in service." *Defense News*. September 28, 2017. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/2017/09/28/chinas-j-20-stealth-fighter-jet-is-in-service/>.

²⁰ "China's SU-35 fighter jets, J-20 stealth jets to maintain airspace safety." *Xinhua*. February 10, 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-02/10/c_136965496.htm.

²¹ Krajick, Kevin. "North Korea's 2017 Bomb Test Set Off Later Earthquakes, New Analysis Finds." *Columbia Climate School*. September 24, 2018. <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2018/09/24/north-koreas-2017-bomb-test-triggered-earthquake-fault-new-analysis-finds/>.

²² Mastro, Oriana. "Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula: Can China's military Help Secure North Korea's Nuclear Weapons?" *International Security* 43, No. 2 (2018). 88.

National Considerations

A national review of China's readiness and willingness to respond to a North Korean contingency reveals several core concerns and interests that will likely guide any Chinese response. These core concerns are military posture and risk of escalation, economic risks, demographic and societal risks, political risks, and geopolitical interests.

Military Posture and Risk

The number of China's total active-duty troops is around 2 million and is steadily decreasing, according to Chinese government statements.²³ This is in comparison to the intervention in 1950, when the first wave of troops totaled 260,000 and total number of Chinese troops involved in the intervention was around 3 million.²⁴ This disparity in available manpower today compared to 1950 represents an enormous military and logistical challenge for the PLA. While China's current posture is sufficient to carry out some military activities in response to a North Korean contingency, it is not sufficient to carry out more major, possibly confrontational operations. A full stabilization of North Korea, for example, may require 400,000 to 500,000 troops, far more than what China has immediately available.²⁵ To make up for this deficit of manpower, China has two main options: the deployment of more active-duty troops to the NTC, or the mobilization of the PLA's reserves. Both options present logistical problems for the PLA and could take weeks to carry out, which is problematic in the event of a sudden North Korean contingency. As a result, a possible Chinese response that only requires the forces immediately available is more likely than one that requires mass mobilization. In the same vein, China will also be keen to avoid a response that invites or provokes war with the United States.²⁶

Economic Risk

The prospect of a North Korean contingency comes at an inopportune time for the Chinese economy. Since 2012, the Chinese economy has steadily decreased in growth rate with each passing year, reaching a low of 6.1% in 2019.²⁷ This is a critical development for the Chinese leadership as the CCP derives much of its domestic legitimacy from strong economic growth.²⁸ Since the outbreak of the

²³ United States Department of Defense. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*. (2020). 63. <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>;

Maizland, Lindsay. "China's Modernizing Military." *Council on Foreign Relations*. February 5, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-modernizing-military>.

²⁴ Crocker. "Chinese Intervention in the Korean War." 35, 86.

²⁵ Barnett, Bruce and Jennifer Lind. "The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements." *International Security* 2, No. 36. (2011). 86.

²⁶ Gao, Charlotte. "Again, China Doesn't Want War With the US." *The Diplomat*. November 20, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/again-china-doesnt-want-war-with-the-us/>.

²⁷ National Bureau of Statistics of China. *National Economy was Generally Stable in 2019 with Main projected Targets for Development Achieved*. January 17, 2020.

²⁸ Leggeri, Alexis "What Happens to the CCP if China's Economic Growth Falters?" *The Diplomat*. October 29, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/what-happens-to-the-ccp-if-chinas-economic-growth-falters/>.

COVID-19 pandemic, China's economic situation has become increasingly tense.²⁹ The slowing of economic growth, therefore, presents a legitimacy challenge for the Chinese leadership.

In a North Korean contingency, the chances of further disruptions to the Chinese economy exist and, in theory, the odds of severe disruption to the economy will increase as China's response becomes more confrontational, with all-out warfare with the United States resulting in the most significant economic disruption. For the purposes of maintaining its legitimacy and stability, the Chinese leadership is likely to lean towards responses that do not risk severe economic disruption.

Demographic Risk

Similar to other Northeast Asian countries, China is in the midst of a demographic crisis. Due to its aging population, estimates suggest that China's current population of 1.45 billion may begin to contract before 2025 and decrease by nearly half by 2100.³⁰ In particular, the Chinese working-age population, which made up of 83 percent of the total population in 2020, is expected to fall by 10 percent by 2040.³¹ Chinese casualties in a North Korean contingency, particularly if received on a mass scale, will exacerbate China's demographic crisis and cause societal issues as well. Most of today's Chinese soldiers are the only child of their family due to the long-standing (and now ended) One Child Policy. Chinese society is unlikely to accept mass casualties of this generation.

The severity of societal and demographic repercussions for a Chinese intervention in North Korea increase with a more confrontational response. Therefore, when preparing for a North Korean contingency, China will likely adopt a response that will not result in a great number of Chinese casualties.

Political Risk

One of the most significant differences between the Sino-North Korean relationship of 1950 and the relationship of today is the lack of an amicable rapport between the leaders of the respective nations. Chinese leaders and North Korean leaders simply do not share the same personal or ideological affinity as past leaders, and, according to some experts, the Chinese regard for North Korea in private is contemptuous.³² This is crucial to note as this affinity was one of the central considerations leading

²⁹ Lee, Yen Nee. "China's economy has not recovered 100% from COVID, says former central bank advisor." *CNBC*. June 16 2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/06/16/china-economy-not-100percent-recovered-from-covid-pandemic-ex-pboc-advisor.html>.

³⁰ Woo, Ryan and Kevin Yao. "China demographic crisis looms as population growth slips to slowest ever." *Reuters*. May 10, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-2020-census-shows-slowest-population-growth-since-1-child-policy-2021-05-11/>;

Anderson, Stuart. "China's Population To Drop By Half, Immigration Helps U.S. Labor Force." *Forbes*. September 3, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2020/09/03/chinas-population-to-drop-by-half-immigration-helps-us-labor-force/>;

World Population Review. "China Population 2022 (Live)." <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/china-population>.

³¹ Ezrati, Milton. "Recognize That China Has Huge Demographic Problems." *Forbes*. March 25, 2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/miltonezrati/2021/03/25/recognize-that-china-has-huge-demographic-problems/>.

³² Brown, Kerry. "What Does China Really Think of North Korea?" *The Diplomat*. May 25, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/what-does-china-really-think-of-north-korea/>.

to China's 1950 intervention into the Korean War. The lack of such an affinity, therefore, implies that one of the catalysts for a major Chinese intervention in the past is absent today.

At the same time, the CCP also derives some political legitimacy from painting its style of government as both superior and preferable to that of liberal western democracies and as a counter to the United States.³³ Because of this, China will likely take an action adhering to this perception.

Geopolitical Interests

One of China's most central geopolitical goals is stability in Northeast Asia.³⁴ More specifically, as a grand strategy, the CCP desires stability in the form of a world order that is more accepting of China's system of government. Within this quest for stability, the Korean Peninsula is a central area of interest for China.³⁵ Therefore, when considering options for responses to a North Korean contingency, the Chinese leadership will likely lean towards an option that grants China more influence on the future status quo in Northeast Asia.

China's Core Interests and its Options for Response

Given local and national considerations, the next section will examine China's options for responding to a North Korean contingency and how these options fulfill or impinge upon China's core interests, and whether or not these options are feasible in light of China's current capabilities.

Full Confrontational Intervention

China is unlikely to mount a full confrontational intervention similar to that of 1950. The primary reason for this is the fact that an intervention of this nature would violate most or all of China's core interests.

Perhaps the most significant of these factors is the possibility of war with the United States. Such a war would have adverse effects on China's state of affairs. For one, the Chinese economy stands to suffer greatly from such a conflict, and the severe economic setbacks will impede stable growth.³⁶ War, in fact, poses the greatest threat to the Chinese economy.

Full intervention also risks mass casualties and drawing in China's neighbors. Once again, the possibility of war with the United States in a North Korean contingency is the key factor as the Chinese intervention in 1950 resulted in over one million Chinese casualties.³⁷ Worse yet, however, is the possibility that war with the United States may draw in other US allies, such as Japan, Australia, and

³³ Jakhar, Pratik. "At 100, Chinese Communist Party in Renewed Drive for Legitimacy." *The Diplomat*. July 2, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/at-100-chinese-communist-party-in-renewed-drive-for-legitimacy/>.

³⁴ Zhang, Tuosheng. "Maintaining Stability in Northeast Asia." *China Daily*. July 18, 2020. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202007/18/WS5f124ad2a31083481725a673.html>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Gompert, David Astrid Cevallos, and Cristina Garafola. "War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable." *RAND Corporation*. 2016.

³⁷ Crocker. "Chinese Intervention in the Korean War." 81.

possibly other NATO countries. This can easily lead to a spiraling military confrontation that China can neither hope to control nor win.

This response would also present a significant logistical challenge for the PLA. Under ideal circumstances, a force of perhaps 400,000 to 500,000 troops would be necessary to secure a collapsed North Korea.³⁸ This requirement alone greatly exceeds China's standard deployment to the NTC, but this number also does not factor in a military confrontation with the US-ROK alliance or significant North Korean resistance. These aspects of the operation would drastically increase the number of troops needed beyond what the PLA has immediately available.

China could attempt to deploy forces to the NTC, but given China's comparatively small air transport fleet, such a mobilization could take weeks or longer, particularly if hundreds of thousands of troops are involved.³⁹ The same likely holds true for the mobilization of the PLA's reserves.

In addition, a China-US conflict on the Peninsula might make it more difficult for either side to secure North Korea's nuclear facilities, thus endangering China's interest of nuclear safety.

In essence, the likelihood of a full confrontational response is low. The projected economic, societal, military, and geopolitical costs contravene too many of China's core interests, and the military and logistical requirements are far beyond what China can muster within a short period of time. Therefore, a modern repeat of the 1950 Korean War intervention is exceedingly unlikely.

Preemptive Intervention

A preemptive intervention is attractive in that it ideally avoids conflict with ROKUS forces and leaves China, having fully occupied North Korea, with the maximum amount of influence possible on the new status quo. This response, however, is limited by Chinese capabilities. A key requirement in this scenario is to act quickly before ROKUS forces have the chance to become involved. A full occupation of North Korea could require 400,000 to 500,000 troops, beyond what China has available in the NTC.⁴⁰ This troop requirement would force China to deploy additional forces and materials to the NTC, a process that could take weeks. Because of this requirement to mobilize, China will be unable to perform this intervention quickly in the event of a sudden and unexpected contingency in North Korea. Furthermore, in a preemptive intervention, the PLA will likely face the full force of the Korean People's Army (KPA) and stand to take an increased number of casualties, thus contravening the Chinese interest of low casualties and low social and economic disruption. While this response is more plausible for a slow-motion decline in North Korea, it is not practical for a sudden North Korean contingency.

³⁸ Bannett & Lind. "The Collapse of North Korea." 86.

³⁹ Scobell, Andrew, Arthur S. Ding, Phillip C. Saunders, and Scott W. Harold, eds. "The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China." National Defense University Press. 2015. 173.

⁴⁰ Bannett & Lind. "The Collapse of North Korea." 86.

Partial Non-Confrontational Intervention

There are a number of attractive benefits in the partial intervention response. While military casualties would occur, the number should be small enough that significant societal or economic disruption would not. This is in part due to the lack of a confrontation and/or conflict with ROKUS forces. In addition, according to Bruce Bannett and Jennifer Lind, such an operation might require 96,000 to 101,000 troops, which is within reach of China's immediately available troop strength in the NTC.⁴¹ Launching such a response would allow China to avoid the political loss of face associated with failing to respond.

In addition, with a troop presence in North Korea, China will be in a position to shape the new status quo in a way that suits Chinese interests, thus fulfilling the core interest of regional stability.

However, there is another critical aspect of this scenario: the possibility of cooperation with ROKUS forces. Oriana Mastro explores this possibility particularly in the area of nuclear disposal.⁴² While China is in a better position to quickly secure North Korea's northern nuclear facilities, its ability to safely dismantle and dispose of hazardous materials is lacking. China may opt to secure some of North Korea's facilities and then allow the US to complete the disposal of the materials.⁴³ This arrangement would require prior coordination between Chinese and ROKUS forces, but coordination between the two sides need not be limited to this area alone. Prior coordination could reduce the chance of conflict and ensure the safety of contingency operations.

The US and ROK may find Chinese assistance desirable if facing difficulty in securing all of North Korea's nuclear facilities. For this reason, this response represents a very attractive course of action for the Chinese side. It either fulfills or does not severely affect most Chinese interests and is an option that, in theory, does not require major mobilization of the PLA. Furthermore, this option will leave China in a position to influence the future status quo of the Korean Peninsula. Additionally, cooperation in this scenario is possible and could perhaps be beneficial to all sides involved. Though there are potential downsides for all parties, such as the loss of an ally for China and the continuation of Chinese influence on the Korean Peninsula for the US-ROK alliance, the advantages are such that both sides would likely prefer cooperation over conflict.

Minimal Response

In purely military terms, a minimal response is more than tenable for the PLA. Bannett and Lind estimate that a border stabilization operation would require approximately 24,000 troops—a number well within the standard deployment within the NTC.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the lack of conflict with ROKUS forces or the KPA means that the PLA will likely see few casualties and little economic or societal disruption.

⁴¹ This number is achieved by combining the troop requirements for border security, WMD elimination, and stabilization in North Korea's northernmost sector.

⁴² Mastro. "Conflict and Chaos." 108, 113.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Bannett & Lind. "The Collapse of North Korea." 110.

However, there are also some drawbacks. First, China will face the unfavorable optics of having mounted a negligible response to an attack on an allied country. This will come at a political cost to the CCP which, again, draws at least part of its legitimacy from standing up to the United States. In addition, with no troops in North Korea, China will forfeit most of its influence in the future status quo on the Korean Peninsula, contravening its interest in China-friendly geopolitical stability.

In addition, China risks breaching its interest in nuclear safety. Many of North Korea's nuclear facilities are in the Northern part of the country, closer to China.⁴⁵ If China does not intervene, then ROKUS forces will have to secure the facilities, which due to the terrain and the distances involved, could take weeks to achieve. During that time, North Korean WMDs could be moved, tampered with, sold, or even used.⁴⁶ China, having forces closer to the facilities, could secure the facilities much faster. However, this would require Chinese troops to enter North Korea and thus move into "intervention" territory.

Overall, China stands to lose more than it would gain by mounting a minimal response.

Conclusion

Just as was the case in 1950, the Chinese decision to intervene in a North Korean contingency situation—as well as *how* to intervene in said situation—will depend on careful consideration of Chinese interests and capabilities. In the contemporary example, of the various options that Chinese leaders have available, a partial but non-confrontation intervention provides the best balance of matching Chinese capabilities and contravening few of China's core interests. Furthermore, this option presents the added opportunity for prior coordination and cooperation with ROKUS forces. This cooperation can possibly make up for still-present shortcomings in Chinese capabilities—such as in nuclear dismantlement—and offer further assurances for Chinese core interests—such as avoiding the fear that Chinese and ROKUS forces may clash during the operation. For these reasons and more, planners on both sides should make an effort to coordinate respective actions and responsibilities during a North Korean contingency to the most reasonable extent possible. Such coordination will be most effective if carried out both far in advance of any North Korean contingency.

In the past, China has expressed reluctance to discuss contingency plans regarding North Korea for fear of upsetting its relationship with North Korea. Because of this, any coordination, whether prior or otherwise, should be done as quietly as possible; and US planners should take steps to reassure Chinese counterparts that any such preparations will remain secret. In the end, only substantial coordination between the Chinese and allied sides can ensure that a North Korean contingency situation does not become a catastrophe on the Korean Peninsula, whether that be a catastrophe involving a nuclear accident or the start of the next world war. Committing to prior coordination is in the best interest of both the Chinese leadership and other parties involved.

⁴⁵ "A Satellite View of North Korea's Nuclear Site." *Nikkei Asia*. <https://asia.nikkei.com/static/vdata/north-korea-nuclear/newsgraphics/north-korea-nuclear/>.

⁴⁶ Bannett & Lind. "The Collapse of North Korea." 101.

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