

SECTION 5: CHINA'S EVOLVING NORTH KOREA STRATEGY

Key Findings

- China considers the disposition of North Korea to be vital to its national security interests, despite a complicated and often antagonistic history between the two countries. Tense relations between Chinese President and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping and North Korean Chairman of the State Affairs Commission Kim Jong-un shifted into warming ties amid North Korea's broader diplomatic outreach campaign in 2018.
- China supports U.S. and South Korean diplomatic engagement with North Korea, although Beijing is wary of being isolated in the process or losing out if North Korea commits to a full-scale strategic realignment with the United States and South Korea. More immediately, China sees the potential to advance its geopolitical goals on the Korean Peninsula. Those goals include avoiding war or instability in North Korea and, eventually, rolling back the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Beijing sees ending North Korea's nuclear and long-range missile programs as a worthwhile but secondary goal. China is aiming to achieve these goals by advocating for a peace treaty to formally end the Korean War, seeking the suspension of joint U.S.-South Korean military exercises, and pushing for a reduction of U.S. forces in South Korea.
- Beijing will continue efforts to ensure its participation in or influence over the diplomatic process surrounding North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. China will try to shape the negotiating format, terms of an agreement, timing and sequencing for implementation, and whether the North Korea issue is tied to other dimensions of U.S.-China relations.
- China's preparations for contingencies in North Korea indicate that Beijing has the capability to respond forcefully in a crisis to manage refugee flows and lock down the border, seize weapons of mass destruction and associated sites, and occupy territory to gain leverage over the future disposition of the Korean Peninsula. Relations between China's People's Liberation Army and North Korea's military, the Korean People's Army, have been strained for many years. How the Korean People's Army might respond to a Chinese intervention is unknown.
- The United States and China have conducted basic talks for North Korea contingencies during high-level visits and major dialogues, but there is no evidence the U.S. and Chinese theater and combatant commands that would be directly involved have

discussed operational planning for any contingency. It is likely these discussions have not yet delved into the level of detail necessary to avoid miscommunication and unwanted escalation in a crisis. Continuing and expanding those talks could help manage the massive risks associated with a potential crisis in North Korea.

Recommendations

The Commission recommends:

- Congress direct the U.S. Department of the Treasury to provide a report within 180 days on the current state of Chinese enforcement of sanctions on North Korea. A classified annex should provide a list of Chinese financial institutions, businesses, and officials involved in trading with North Korea that could be subject to future sanctions, and should explain the potential broader impacts of sanctioning those entities.

Introduction

China considers the disposition of the Korean Peninsula to be vital to its national security.* In 2017 and 2018, heightened tensions and the potential for conflict between the United States and North Korea over Pyongyang's pursuit of long-range, nuclear-armed missiles stoked Chinese fears about war or instability in North Korea. Pyongyang's provocative actions, combined with North Korea's seeming indifference to Chinese policy preferences, intensified an internal debate in China about whether to continue its longstanding policy of steadfastly supporting North Korea.† The potential for conflict also prompted Beijing to accelerate and expand planning for contingencies. Tensions began to ease when inter-Korean diplomacy around the Olympic Games in South Korea set off a series of summits between North Korea and South Korea, China, and the United States. Still, Beijing continues to plan and prepare for North Korea contingencies should talks fail or other contingencies spark a crisis.

This section explores China's interests in and policy toward North Korea. It examines Beijing's search for approaches that seek first to avoid conflict and instability on the Peninsula, while slowing or rolling back Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program and undermining the U.S.-South Korea alliance where possible. This section also cov-

*During remarks at an economic forum in Russia in May, Chinese Vice President Wang Qishan said North Korea touched on China's "core interests." China's core interests, defined by then Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo in 2010, are "China's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unity." Given that North Korea borders China, upheaval in North Korea could impact China's sovereignty and territorial integrity directly. *Reuters*, "U.S.-North Korea Summit Needed, Chinese VP Wang Says," May 25, 2018; Dai Bingguo, "Stick to the Path of Peaceful Development," *China Daily*, December 13, 2010; Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior—Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor*, November 15, 2010, 1–25.

†Debate among Chinese scholars and officials regarding Beijing's North Korea policy has increased in recent years. The debate centers on the question of whether China should change its policy of steadfast support for North Korea in the face of continued North Korean provocations that risk sparking a war with the United States and a defiant stance toward Chinese policy preferences. The diplomatic process that began in 2018 and related China-North Korea engagement have seemingly put that debate on hold. Charles Clover, "China Gives Academics Free Rein to Debate North Korea," *Financial Times*, January 30, 2018; Zhu Feng, "China's North Korean Liability," *Foreign Affairs*, July 11, 2017; Shen Zhihua, "Looking at the THAAD Problem from the Perspective of the History of China-North Korea Relations," *Shanghai East China Normal University Center for Cold War International History Studies*, March 22, 2017. Translation; Carla P. Freeman, ed., *China and North Korea: Strategic and Policy Perspectives from a Changing China*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

ers China's response to the flurry of diplomacy surrounding North Korea in 2018 and China's plans for responding to a North Korea crisis should the current diplomatic process break down, or should another event result in instability on the Peninsula. In doing so, it draws from the Commission's April 2018 roundtable on China's role in North Korea contingencies, the Commission's May 2018 research trip to Japan and Taiwan, and open source research and analysis.

China's Evolving North Korea Policy

The China-North Korea relationship has oscillated between engagement and estrangement throughout its nearly 70-year history.* This section explores the history of this relationship and how China perceives and pursues its interests regarding North Korea. It then examines the fractious state of Sino-North Korean relations under Chinese President and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping and North Korean State Affairs Commission Chairman Kim Jong-un before early 2018, including the internal policy debate reassessing the strategic value of North Korea and the Kim regime for China. The discussion concludes by showing how Beijing tightened enforcement of sanctions for a time to encourage Pyongyang to embrace diplomacy prior to the recent improvements in the Sino-North Korean relationship.

Foundations of the Relationship

China's longstanding backing of North Korea stems from the two countries' shared interests in countering the United States and its regional allies in East Asia and ensuring the continued existence of North Korea as a state. Robust, if tumultuous, bilateral ties date back to the Korean War (1950–1953), and include the two countries' bilateral Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation, and Mutual Assistance, signed in July 1961.¹ This bilateral treaty has to be renewed every 20 years; it was renewed in 1981 and 2001 and will be up for renewal again in 2021.² At its core, Chinese policy toward the Korean Peninsula seeks to avoid war, instability, and nuclear weapons (i.e., achieve denuclearization).^{†3} As Foreign Minister Wang Yi—who is now also State Councilor—said in February 2016:

Firstly, under no circumstances could the Korean Peninsula be nuclearized, whether the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] or the ROK [Republic of Korea], self-produced or introduced and deployed. Secondly, there is no military solution to the issue. If there is war or turbulence on the Peninsula it is not acceptable for China. Thirdly, China's legitimate national security interests must be effectively maintained and safeguarded.⁴

*For additional background, see the Commission's earlier research on China's relations with North Korea in U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 3, Section 4, "China and North Korea," in *2016 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2016, 437–463.

†Some U.S. officials have used a modified version of this formulation in discussing U.S. policy toward North Korea. For example, in September 2017, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told John Dickerson of CBS's *Face the Nation*, "I think it's important to understand the policy of the United States, John, towards North Korea is to deny North Korea possession of a nuclear weapon and the ability to deliver that weapon. Our strategy has been to undertake this peaceful pressure campaign, we call it, enabled by the four no's, the four no's being that we do not seek regime change, we do not seek a regime collapse, we do not seek an accelerated reunification of the peninsula, and we do not seek a reason to send our forces north of the Demilitarized Zone." CBS News, "Transcript: U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on 'Face the Nation,'" September 17, 2017.

President Xi has reportedly emphasized these bottom-line principles directly to then U.S. President Barack Obama and, later, to President Donald Trump.⁵ The strategic underpinning for Beijing's approach is a desire to counter the spread of U.S. power and influence in Northeast Asia.⁶ As Yun Sun of the Stimson Center told the Commission, "China's desired endgame remains to be the shaping and creation of a China-friendly Korean peninsula free or neutral of American influence."⁷

Debating the Future

The Chinese policy debate around North Korea has intensified in recent years in response to the pressures of heightened U.S.-North Korean tensions and the Sino-North Korean rift.* CCP censors widened the scope of acceptable opinions on the issue to support Chinese leaders' search for alternatives, although space for debate is likely to narrow in light of renewed Sino-North Korean engagement.⁸ Differing voices, led primarily by Chinese international relations scholars, have begun to advocate for dialing back Beijing's support for Pyongyang as part of an international pressure campaign to foster negotiations.⁹ Some of these scholars also now advocate for taking part in contingency planning talks with South Korea and the United States to ensure China can secure its interests on the Peninsula in the event of a contingency, while lessening the risk of a wider conflict.¹⁰

The debate relates to assessments about China's regional strategy and North Korea's role in it. Experts fall on both sides of the question of whether North Korea helps or hurts China's power in the region. One argument holds that North Korea provides a strategic rationale for the United States to strengthen regional alliance relationships and bolster its military posture in East Asia (e.g., deploying the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense missile defense system in South Korea).¹¹ As a result, North Korean misbehavior ultimately complicates China's search for regional power and influence. A counterargument says North Korea continues to provide a vital strategic buffer and helps divert the focus of the United States and its allies from balancing China's rise.†¹² In essence, the rogue North Korean regime prevents China from becoming the sole strategic focus of U.S. and allied power in Asia. How Chinese leaders evaluate this larger question could shape Beijing's overall approach toward North Korea.

Sino-North Korean Tensions Prior to March 2018

Under President Xi and Chairman Kim, bilateral relations between China and North Korea had deteriorated significantly in the years

*For a history of China's involvement in North Korean nuclear diplomacy from a Chinese perspective, see Fu Ying, "The Korean Nuclear Issue: Past, Present, and Future—A Chinese Perspective," *Brookings Institution*, May 2017.

†China's *Science of Military Strategy 2013* makes explicit China's view of the tradeoff in defense priorities for Japan, saying, "During the Cold War, Japan's hypothetical enemies were primarily the Soviet Union, North Korea, and China. After the Cold War, Japan's hypothetical enemies were, in order, North Korea, China, and Russia, but the trend toward treating China as its main opponent clearly strengthened. Japan has consistently viewed North Korea as its main real threat, but as China's overall national power rose and the modernized building of its military developed, Japan has become more on guard against China and has intensified its containment [of China]." Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, Military Science Press, 2013, 79. Translation.

leading up to spring 2018. As Paul Haenle, director of the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center at Tsinghua University in Beijing and former director for China on the National Security Council, explains, “Beijing faced a situation in which its relations with the DPRK were at historic lows.”¹³ Pyongyang’s decision to conduct tests and otherwise advance its nuclear and missile programs drove tensions with the United States and defied Chinese admonitions to cease such provocations.¹⁴ *Global Times*, a newspaper owned by the CCP mouthpiece *People’s Daily*, warned North Korea in an editorial that China would not come to Pyongyang’s aid in a war if the North started the conflict.*¹⁵

In November 2017, Beijing took a step to mend ties by sending an envoy, CCP International Liaison Department Minister Song Tao, to North Korea on behalf of President Xi, but Song—seen as President Xi’s emissary—did not meet with Chairman Kim.†¹⁶ In addition, reporting from within North Korea prior to the March 2018 Sino-North Korean thaw noted an increase in anti-Chinese rhetoric in North Korean propaganda, which blamed Beijing for going along with sanctions that caused hardship for citizens in the North.¹⁷ North Korea also undertook provocative tests during high-profile moments for China and for President Xi personally. Pyongyang conducted its sixth nuclear test in September 2017, just before President Xi was set to give a speech to the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) group.¹⁸ In May 2017, North Korea tested an intermediate-range ballistic missile as President Xi hosted a major forum for the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁹

China’s Sanctions Compliance

In context of Sino-North Korean tensions, China agreed to additional sanctions on North Korea through the UN Security Council and, according to on-the-ground reports and officially reported statistics, appeared to be enforcing those sanctions more thoroughly than in the past.²⁰ Those steps resulted in a significant decrease in North Korean exports to China.²¹ Chinese enforcement measures still have holes, including the use of ship-to-ship transfers.²² Additionally, Beijing always leaves some key lifelines in place for North Korea, most notably some oil exports, to avert a complete regime collapse that could result from an economic meltdown.²³ Overall, though, China’s pressure on North Korea increased in material ways from early 2017 to early 2018.

China-North Korea Relations Thaw in 2018

On March 28, Chairman Kim followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather by taking a train to Beijing to meet with China’s leader, in this case President Xi.²⁴ Prior to this meeting, the pair had not met since either leader came to power. President Xi and Chairman Kim met twice more in 2018: May 7–8 in Dalian, in northeast China’s Liaoning Province, prior to the June 12 summit

*China’s stance toward its treaty with North Korea has been purposefully ambiguous for years. This editorial represents only the most recent indicator of Beijing’s policy of maintaining that ambiguity regarding the treaty’s validity. For additional historical background on the treaty, see Chen Jian, “Is Beijing Bound to Defend North Korea during War?” *Wilson Center*, August 21, 2017.

†Song was later granted a meeting during a trip to North Korea following the first Xi-Kim summit. Voice of America, “North Korea’s Kim Meets with Chinese Official in Pyongyang,” April 15, 2018.

between President Trump and Chairman Kim; and June 19–20 in Beijing, ostensibly so President Xi could be briefed by Chairman Kim on the North Korean leader's summit with President Trump in Singapore.²⁵ In September, China sent Li Zhanshu—its third-highest ranking leader and chief legislator—to Pyongyang as President Xi's "special representative" to attend celebrations marking the 70th anniversary of North Korea's founding and present a personal letter from President Xi to Chairman Kim.²⁶

Analysts portrayed the series of Xi-Kim meetings as China's attempt to maintain influence over the diplomatic process surrounding North Korea's nuclear program.²⁷ For its part, North Korea seemed to believe it had gained the upper hand in its relations with South Korea, the United States, and China, and could use an improvement in Sino-North Korean ties to improve its negotiating leverage against Washington and Seoul. In November 2017, Chairman Kim announced that Pyongyang had "finally realized the great historic cause of completing the state nuclear force" and appeared to believe he could engage foreign powers from a position of strength.²⁸ Chinese commentators seemed especially concerned with rebutting the notion that North Korea might chart a more independent foreign policy and weaken China's influence through a full-scale strategic realignment with the United States and South Korea.²⁹ As prominent Chinese historian Shen Zihua told the *New York Times*, "The worst outcome is that the United States, South Korea and North Korea all get together and China gets knocked out."³⁰ Meanwhile, China appeared to be offering its support to help protect North Korea's security—including the Kim regime—as well as assistance in modernizing the North Korean economy while retaining an authoritarian political system.³¹ Statements from Chinese officials framed Beijing's engagement of Pyongyang as a long-term strategic decision rather than a tactical move designed to build leverage in a negotiating process. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs quoted President Xi as saying, "No matter how the international and regional situations change, the firm stance of the CCP and the Chinese government on consolidating and developing the relations with [North Korea] remains unchanged."³²

Chinese Views on U.S.-North Korea Diplomacy

Chinese leaders expressed qualified support for the June 12 summit meeting between President Trump and Chairman Kim, despite Beijing's reservations about being left out of the process.³³ China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs paraphrased President Xi saying the meeting was "an important step in the process of the political settlement of the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue."³⁴ One sign of China's backing—and also of its influence—came when Beijing provided one of three planes that flew Chairman Kim and his accompanying officials to the summit location in Singapore.³⁵ After the summit, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo flew to Beijing to brief Chinese leaders on the summit proceedings and resulting joint statement.³⁶ Chinese officials applauded the summit outcome and claimed the

* China's support for U.S. diplomacy with North Korea has not always been clear to U.S. officials. In late May, when the summit was briefly canceled, President Trump accused Beijing of sabotaging the meeting. Bryan Harris and Charles Clover, "Donald Trump Blames China for Problems with Kim Summit," *Financial Times*, May 23, 2018.

agreement mirrored the “freeze for freeze” plan Beijing had been advocating since March 2017 as a potential compromise.* State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang said China’s role in shaping the summit was “indisputable” and told reporters “the China-proposed ‘suspension for suspension’ initiative has been materialized and now the situation is moving forward.”³⁷

Beyond what President Trump and Chairman Kim agreed to in the joint statement, some additional policy changes and ideas for future shifts announced around the summit align with Chinese policy preferences.³⁸ These include President Trump’s announcement that the United States will suspend major joint military exercises with South Korea, potentially make changes to the size and composition of U.S. forces stationed in South Korea, and begin discussions for a peace treaty to officially end the Korean War.³⁹ China supports the first two options because they contribute to Beijing’s goal of rolling back U.S. military presence in Asia. China supports the latter option—which Beijing calls a “peace mechanism” or a “peace regime”—because it would help undermine the rationale and legal basis for continuing to station U.S. troops in South Korea.⁴⁰

South Korea’s Role in Decreased Tensions on the Peninsula

In 2018, relations between South and North Korea warmed considerably. In a display of unity at the 2018 Olympic Winter Games in Pyeongchang, South Korea, both countries marched under one flag at the opening ceremony and competed together as a unified team in one event.⁴¹ On April 27, 2018, South Korean President Moon Jae-in hosted Chairman Kim for a summit in Panmunjom, a village located along the demilitarized zone between the two Koreas.⁴² At the summit, Kim and Moon signed a three-page agreement dubbed the “Panmunjom Declaration,” in which both sides affirmed the “common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.”⁴³ Building on this momentum, Chairman Kim hosted President Moon for a second inter-Korean summit, this time held in Pyongyang in late September. During the summit, the two leaders produced a second joint statement, titled the “Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018,” which reaffirmed the Panmunjom Declaration’s commitment to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and agreed to additional measures to deepen inter-Korean economic, public health, and environmental cooperation; reduce cross-border military tensions; and expand family reunions and cultural exchanges.⁴⁴

*Then Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi first proposed the “freeze for freeze” proposal in March 2017. The plan is also referred to using variations on the term, including “dual suspension,” “suspension for suspension,” “dual freeze,” and “double suspension.” Then State Councilor Wang defined the plan, saying, “As a first step, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) may suspend its nuclear and missile activities in exchange for the suspension of large-scale U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) military exercises.” U.S. officials have previously rejected the “freeze for freeze” plan on the basis that it equated legitimate allied activities with provocative and unlawful North Korean actions. *Xinhua*, “China Proposes ‘Double Suspension’ to Defuse Korean Peninsula Crisis,” March 8, 2017; United States Mission to the United Nations, *Remarks at an Emergency UN Security Council Briefing on North Korea*, September 4, 2017. <https://usun.state.gov/remarks/7953>; Tarun Chhabra, “A Slushy ‘Freeze-for-Freeze’: The Deal China and North Korea Always Wanted,” *Brookings Institution*, June 12, 2018.

China Tries to Shape the Negotiating Process

China has taken different—and sometimes contradictory—approaches to North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs over the years. Throughout 2016 and 2017, as Chairman Kim conducted nuclear and missile tests at a rapid pace, Beijing sought to deflect U.S. calls to do more to rein in North Korea by arguing the problem was fundamentally a bilateral dispute between the United States and North Korea, who needed to resolve it between themselves.⁴⁵ As Lu Kang, spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said in December 2017, “We hope to see that through direct dialogue and engagement, the United States and North Korea will build mutual trust and create the necessary conditions for eventual settlement of the nuclear issue on the peninsula.”⁴⁶

However, once North Korea began its campaign of diplomatic outreach, Chinese officials started to emphasize their role on the Korean Peninsula. As China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs summarized President Xi’s comments to Secretary of State Pompeo, “China is willing to continue to play an active and constructive role, and work with all parties concerned including the U.S. to promote the process of the political settlement of the Korean Peninsula issue.”⁴⁷ *Global Times* made a more strident argument, saying, “The peninsula situation has multiple stakeholders. Expecting one stakeholder dominating the denuclearization process will cause development in a wrong direction.”⁴⁸ These sentiments channel Beijing’s concerns about being isolated in the process.

Going forward, China will likely continue to try to influence the negotiating process. Diplomats from the United States, North Korea, South Korea, and China have mostly focused on building up channels of communication, leaving many of the specifics to be hashed out later below the head-of-state level. One major issue will be the negotiating format for the remainder of the process and whether at some point North Korea’s series of bilateral meetings with the United States, South Korea, and China—and potentially later with Russia and Japan—will formally expand into a multilateral process.

Crafting an Agreement: China will seek an active role in trying to shape the terms of any final agreement and build consensus with the other parties regarding how to expand on and implement the agreement between President Trump and Chairman Kim to “work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”⁴⁹ China says it supports ending North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, but its actions demonstrate that denuclearization is not Beijing’s first concern. At the same time, China seeks a deal that goes further to include scaling back or ending the U.S.-South Korea alliance and, eventually, removing U.S. forces from the Peninsula.⁵⁰ Alternatively, if the parties cannot agree to verifiably ending North Korea’s nuclear and long-range missile programs, China could pursue an agreement that avoids conflict but sacrifices the goal of ending Pyongyang’s nuclear program. Beijing could try to loosen the verification and enforcement standards to allow Pyongyang to retain a latent program in some form, in effect accepting North Korea as a nuclear power.⁵¹

By contrast, U.S. officials have set the goal of “final, fully verified denuclearization” to end North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, sometimes describing that standard as a precondition for a deal rather than a goal for a deal.* U.S. officials have at times broadened the scope of denuclearization to full disarmament that covers all weapons of mass destruction (WMD), including chemical and biological programs.⁵²

Timing and Sequencing for Implementation: Beyond the negotiating terms and format, China’s views about the timeline and sequencing for an agreement will impact whether a comprehensive deal can be reached and successfully implemented. U.S. officials have expressed a preference for speedy steps toward ending North Korea’s nuclear and long-range missile programs, with the bulk of actions from Pyongyang coming up front before sanctions relief, although recent statements suggest the potential for flexibility.⁵³ China has publicly advanced a different approach and sided with North Korea in calling for a “phased and synchronous” approach that would trade reciprocal actions from each side to carry out the agreement in steps.⁵⁴ China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs paraphrased President Xi, saying, “The Korean Peninsula issue is complex and its solution must be a gradual process.”⁵⁵ Fu Ying, vice chair of the National People’s Congress Foreign Affairs Committee, connects the pace of implementing an agreement to the underlying technical and political issues, asking, “When the Americans propose a front-loaded denuclearization, have they thought about how to ‘front-load’ North Korea’s security concern?”⁵⁶

The timeline for cutting sanctions is perhaps the most prominent process issue. Secretary of State Pompeo said in June 2018 China had assured him sanctions “will remain in place until such time as that denuclearization is, in fact, complete,” but there are already some indicators of looser enforcement.⁵⁷ Harmonizing the timeline and sequencing for implementing a comprehensive agreement will be a key priority for negotiators from all parties.

Linkage with Other Issues in U.S.-China Relations: Additionally, in the context of growing frictions with China over issues separate from the Korean Peninsula, Beijing could try to hold out its cooperation with the negotiating process in exchange for concessions on separate issues—a tactic China has employed successfully in the past.⁵⁸ If China approaches the process in that manner, it could hurt the prospects for success.

Potential Chinese Security Guarantee If Talks Fail

The positive momentum that came out of the Trump-Kim Singapore summit might not be enough to propel negotiators to deliver a detailed agreement and implementation plan for the goal identified in the joint statement of “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”⁵⁹ Since the Trump-Kim summit, North Korea

*Trump Administration officials had previously used the phrase “complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization” or CVID. Heather Nauert, *Secretary Pompeo’s Travel to Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and Jakarta*, July 30, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/07/284694.htm>; CBS News, “Transcript: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on ‘Face the Nation,’” May 13, 2018; Joshua Keating, “CVID Is the Most Important Acronym of the Trump-Kim Talks. No One Knows What It Means,” *Slate*, June 11, 2018; U.S. Department of State, *Department Press Briefing*, May 3, 2018; Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea Past and Future*, Ecco, 2012, 247–315.

has taken some actions meant to signal good faith, including repatriating a number of remains that might be U.S. servicemembers killed during the Korean War and starting to dismantle a missile testing stand.⁶⁰ Pyongyang's initial actions, however, have conspicuously avoided any irreversible moves toward denuclearization.⁶¹ In inter-Korean talks, North and South Korean officials have discussed building economic links across their border and signing a peace treaty to officially end the Korean War.⁶² Overall, progress in U.S.-North Korea talks related to nuclear and missile programs have slowed amid recriminations from Pyongyang toward Washington.⁶³ Meanwhile, official exchanges between China and North Korea have continued, while China appears to have eased off sanctions enforcement, despite its promises to keep sanctions intact until North Korea gets rid of its nuclear weapons.⁶⁴ Official statistics are unreliable, but North Korean workers have returned to jobs in northeast China, economic activity and tourism have picked up in border towns, flights in both directions have resumed, and the two countries have conducted high-profile official exchanges to discuss economic development.⁶⁵

If talks break down, the situation could return to the cycle of threats and provocations from North Korea and responses from the United States and its allies that drove tensions in 2017 and early 2018.⁶⁶ If tensions return, one major variable affecting the outcome will be the degree to which China continues to provide tacit or explicit security guarantees for North Korea. Determining whether any such guarantees exist, their relation to the provisions of the bilateral treaty, their terms, and whether North Korea accepts them will pose a major challenge for U.S. intelligence officials and policymakers. Given that Chairman Kim announced in November 2017 that North Korea's nuclear arsenal was complete, Pyongyang could theoretically implement a nuclear and missile test freeze but not relinquish its existing arsenal, and that would increase the likelihood that China would continue to back North Korea's security.⁶⁷ Beijing could argue that since Chairman Kim is no longer engaging in provocative action by testing, "denuclearization" is proceeding in some form.⁶⁸

China's Role in North Korea Contingencies

Despite the ongoing diplomatic process and China's desire to maintain stability and avoid war in North Korea, contingencies Beijing would like to avoid could still occur.* Therefore, Beijing is preparing for a range of possibilities, from maintaining the status quo to preparing for conflict.⁶⁹ This section explains China's interests in contingencies in North Korea. Those interests include managing refugee flows and maintaining border control, securing WMD—including nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons—as well as conventional weapons, and ensuring China's continued geopolitical influence on the Korean Peninsula.⁷⁰

* For more about how Chinese leaders think about managing contingencies, crisis control, and war control, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 2, Section 3, "Hotspots along China's Maritime Periphery," in *2017 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2017, 239–266.

Refugees and Border Control

There are a range of contingencies that could result in refugees massing on China's border with North Korea, which Beijing fears could increase social instability in northeast China.*† The scale of the influx would likely shape the speed and scope of China's reaction.⁷¹ The number of North Koreans flocking toward the border would depend on the specific circumstances of a crisis.‡ For example, a collapse of the Kim regime to the point where the government could no longer provide basic services or maintain order, or the dissolution of North Korea's military, the Korean People's Army (KPA), could result in numerous refugee flows streaming into China. Conversely, more localized unrest might only produce a trickle of fleeing refugees.⁷² China's long border with North Korea would present some operational challenges that Chinese policymakers would need to address during a contingency involving a large-scale flow of refugees. Assessing the magnitude of those challenges requires understanding the specific geographic, operational, humanitarian, and social issues Beijing would have to manage following a crisis.

Geography of the Border

China shares an 840-mile-long border with North Korea—a length equivalent to the straight-line distance between New York City and Jacksonville, Florida.⁷³ By contrast, North Korea's border with South Korea is 147 miles long.⁷⁴ Two Chinese provinces—Liaoning and Jilin—abut the mountainous border region, which is demarcated by two rivers, the Yalu and the Tumen (see Figure 1). The Yalu is both deeper and wider than the Tumen, making the Yalu more difficult to cross, at least until the river freezes over in winter.⁷⁵ However, the Yalu's depth and width do not make the river impossible to cross, and on-the-ground news reports suggest border security guards are a bigger obstacle than the river.⁷⁶ By contrast, the Tu-

*A range of crises in North Korea could generate refugee flows. This section uses the general term "contingencies" to refer to a range of potential scenarios that would cause crisis and instability in North Korea. The term is purposely vague because events could unfold in a number of ways—too many to attempt to predict—but it includes scenarios such as regime collapse, a coup to remove Kim Jong-un, preventive war initiated by an outside power, or a war sparked by North Korean aggression. For an example of Chinese thinking about potential scenarios in North Korea, see Yao Yunzhu, "Three Possible Scenarios for the Korean Peninsula Situation," *World Knowledge*, December 16, 2017, 18–19. Translation.

†The Chinese government takes a hardline approach toward North Korean refugees. China's rationale appears designed to deter North Koreans from attempting to cross the border. According to the U.S. Department of State's *Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2017*, China categorizes fleeing North Koreans as "illegal economic migrants" rather than refugees, and forcibly returns many to North Korea. The Chinese government also declines to provide refugees with legal alternatives to repatriation and prevents the UN High Commissioner for Refugees access to North Koreans who make it over the border. In some cases, Chinese authorities arrest and prosecute Chinese citizens who assist North Korean refugees or facilitate illegal border crossings. The State Department also notes reports that North Korean agents work clandestinely within China to forcibly repatriate North Korean refugees. *Global Times*, "North Koreans Entering into China Illegally Not Refugees: Spokesman," July 24, 2017. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1057848.shtml>; U.S. Department of State, *China (Includes Tibet, Hong Kong, and Macau) 2017 Human Rights Report*, 2017, 41–42, 44–45.

‡Drew Thompson and Carla Freeman have offered three potential scenarios for North Korean refugee flows into China: (1) a "trickle to a flood" where worsening conditions accelerate from a small number of refugees to an outpouring, (2) a "Mariel outpouring" where the North purposely allows or pushes North Koreans to flee into China to relieve pressure on the regime, (3) and a "catastrophic collapse" where state failure in North Korea results in a flood of refugees over the border trying to escape violence and deprivation. Drew Thompson and Carla Freeman, "Flood across the Border: China's Disaster Relief Operations and Potential Response to a North Korean Refugee Crisis," *U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS/The Nixon Center*, April 1, 2009, 17–19.

men River is more easily traversed. It narrows down to points where it is 39 feet wide and less than three feet deep; the long winter in northeastern China means the river is also frozen over for months at a time between November and April.⁷⁷ Fences along some parts of the border, which China reportedly began constructing in 2003, would also present obstacles for refugees in transit.⁷⁸ Fifteen official crossing points exist along the boundary.⁷⁹

Figure 1: China's Border with North Korea



Source: Adapted from Sue-Lin Wong, "The Cold Frontier," *Reuters*, April 12, 2018.

A Potential Buffer Zone in North Korea to Control Refugees

A recurring assessment of Chinese planning for a crisis in North Korea, especially one that includes large numbers of North Koreans attempting to flee into China, is that Beijing would likely act quickly to try to exert control over the situation.⁸⁰ One primary means of doing so would be for Chinese forces to intervene and seize territory to establish a buffer zone inside North Korean territory.⁸¹ If successful, China could manage to contain many of the problems refugees would create within North Korea rather than allowing them to spill over into China.⁸² Chinese forces could set up refugee camps inside the buffer zone and demobilize any North Korean forces within that zone rather than attempting to handle them at the border, although it is unclear whether KPA forces would cooperate.⁸³ Conservative estimates put the size of the buffer zone at 31–62 miles (50–100 kilometers) into North Korea, at a minimum (see Figure 2).⁸⁴

Figure 2: Potential Chinese Buffer Zones in North Korea

Note: These demarcation lines show potential Chinese buffer zones in North Korea. The top line is 31 miles (50 km) from the Sino-North Korean border, the middle line runs north of Pyongyang approximately 84 miles (135 km) from the border, and the bottom line splits the major North Korean cities of Pyongyang and Wonsan about 115 miles (185 km) from the border.

Source: Adapted from Bruce W. Bennett, "Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse," *RAND Corporation*, 2013, 275.

Maintaining Social Stability in Northeast China

Chinese leaders place a premium on domestic social stability.⁸⁵ As such, Chinese policymakers worry about the impact a flood of North Korean refugees could have on border provinces and northeastern China overall.⁸⁶ An influx of North Korean people into China could trigger upheaval in a number of ways.

Providing Humanitarian Aid and Disarmament

Significant refugee populations streaming across the Yalu and Tumen rivers would stress the capacity of local governments to address refugee humanitarian needs—including supplying food, water, shelter, and healthcare, and later providing employment and education.⁸⁷ The burden of taking care of the North Korean refugees would be immense and could strain the capacity of the Chinese

state.⁸⁸ As Bruce Bennett, senior defense researcher at the RAND Corporation, notes, “China would be challenged to assemble the building materials, bedding, and related supplies for refugee camps; the food and medicine; and the services, such as medical care, that the refugees would require.”⁸⁹ Providing proper treatment for North Koreans with infectious diseases—including tuberculosis and viral hepatitis—would be critical, lest they contribute to a wider outbreak that spreads beyond the immediate border region.⁹⁰ Although the affected areas could expect to receive supplemental assistance from the national government in Beijing, North Korean refugees would arrive in areas already struggling economically. Starting in the 1990s, China’s northeast became the country’s “rust belt” as the negative effects of shuttered heavy industries cascaded through the economy, and the region continues to struggle.⁹¹

Ensuring Ethnic Balance and Territorial Integrity

Chinese leaders also want to safeguard the ethnic balance in northeastern China.⁹² About two million Chinese citizens throughout the whole country are ethnically Korean, making them the 15th-largest of 56 officially recognized ethnic groups in China.⁹³ About half of those ethnic-Korean Chinese live in Jilin Province, with a high concentration in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture.⁹⁴ A large migration of North Koreans would alter the ethnic makeup of the border provinces. For Chinese leaders, the importance of the ethnic balance matters for reasons beyond ensuring majority-Han influence.⁹⁵ Demographic changes could tip the scales in territorial disputes with the Koreans. For years, China and South Korea have waged a low-level battle over the ethnic composition of historical dynasties that controlled parts of Manchuria, including parts of what are today China and North Korea.⁹⁶ Both countries worry about revanchist claims to territory by the other state, and they fear a North Korean border that suddenly becomes fluid or even nonexistent could change the border demarcation.

Securing Weapons of Mass Destruction

A major contingency in North Korea could leave WMD and associated sites unsecured if the Kim regime collapsed. China could try to secure North Korea’s weapons unilaterally or work with the United States and South Korea to secure those sites and the weapons stored there.⁹⁷ These locations include North Korea’s nuclear test site, the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Facility, which is located only 56 miles from the Chinese border.* Punggye-ri is close enough to China that residents in the city of Yanji in northeastern China felt the tremors from North Korea’s sixth and largest nuclear test in September 2017.⁹⁸ The size of the blast sparked concerns among Chinese scientists that the test site might be compromised and another nuclear test could cause the mountain to collapse, releasing nuclear

*North Korea appeared to demolish the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Facility in late May 2018, prior to President Trump’s June 12 summit with Chairman Kim. North Korea invited journalists to witness the demolition and experts assessed the explosions had done damage to the site. However, questions remain about the totality and permanence of the demolition, and stringent verification measures would be required to make firm conclusions. Siegfried Hecker, “Why Did Kim Jong Un Blow up His Nuclear Test Site?” *Washington Post*, May 30, 2018; Nuclear Threat Initiative, “Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Facility,” December 12, 2017; Yun Sun, “China’s Potential Actions in a North Korean Nuclear Contingency,” *Korea Economic Institute of America*, May 30, 2017.

radiation into the air that could drift into China.⁹⁹ An unattributed commentary on *China Military Online*, a website sponsored by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), called North Korea "very insidious" for choosing Punggye-ri as its nuclear test site, noting, "The place is the farthest point from Pyongyang within the DPRK territory, but near the border of China and DPRK." It went on to detail China's "bottom line" that if "any chance nuclear leakage or pollution incidents happen ... the Chinese PLA will launch attacks [on] DPRK nuclear facilities on its own."¹⁰⁰ The potential for nuclear waste or fallout affecting China has become a prominent theme among Chinese commentators advocating a more hawkish approach to North Korea and stepped-up contingency planning.¹⁰¹ Another nearby site is the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center, which sits about 68 miles from the Chinese border.¹⁰²

Oriana Skylar Mastro, assistant professor of security studies at Georgetown University, used information from the Nuclear Threat Initiative to calculate that if Chinese forces moved 31 miles across the border into North Korea, the PLA could seize approximately 44 percent of the North's priority nuclear sites and 22 percent of its priority missile sites.¹⁰³ If the PLA moved 62 miles into North Korean territory, Chinese forces would control all of the priority nuclear sites and two-thirds of its missile sites.¹⁰⁴ The task of securing nuclear capabilities would go beyond reactor sites, however, to include securing North Korean warheads and delivery vehicles.¹⁰⁵ That mission would pose a challenge because many of the devices are deployed on mobile launchers around the country and stored in a network of tunnels.¹⁰⁶

Securing North Korea's WMD would also require wresting control over Pyongyang's chemical and biological weapons stockpiles.* In total, about 200 North Korean WMD sites exist and would need to be secured if the Kim regime collapsed or was ousted, although China would not necessarily have to secure the sites alone (see Figure 3).¹⁰⁷ Beyond the WMD capabilities, China would likely try to assert control over some of North Korea's conventional weapons, including its conventional ballistic missiles and other highly capable systems.¹⁰⁸ The latter mission would gain increased importance if holdouts from the KPA tried to resist Chinese incursions to secure weapons sites.¹⁰⁹

*A report from the South Korean Ministry of National Defense assessed that North Korea possesses 2,500–5,000 tons of chemical weapons, including the VX nerve agent used to assassinate Kim Jong-un's half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, in the Kuala Lumpur airport in February 2017. North Korea's biological weapons program likely has the capability to produce anthrax and a range of other pathogens. Nuclear Threat Initiative, "North Korea: Chemical Weapons," December 2017; Nuclear Threat Initiative, "North Korea: Biological Weapons," December 2015.

Figure 3: Locations of Known North Korean Nuclear Test, Research, and Main Missile Launch Sites



Note: This map shows North Korea's nuclear test and research sites and its main missile launch sites. In a contingency, China—in addition to the United States and South Korea—would try to secure these sites as well as North Korea's chemical and biological weapons stockpiles.

Source: Adapted from Armin Rosen, "A North Korean Hydrogen-Bomb Test Would Be a Game-Changer," *Business Insider*, January 6, 2016.

Ensuring Influence over the Future Disposition of the Korean Peninsula

Upheaval in North Korea would throw the future status of the Peninsula into question. As noted above, Beijing values North Korea's role as a buffer state and would seek to retain that buffer or otherwise ensure that a Korean Peninsula unified under Seoul's control would not threaten China.¹¹⁰ Chinese leaders could decide to send troops into North Korea to take and hold territory as a strategy to gain influence over the future political orientation of the Peninsula, or decide to expand its goals to include shaping how Korea is governed following an operation initiated with narrower aims, such as managing refugee flows or controlling WMD.¹¹¹ Having troops on the ground would give Chinese leaders something to trade away in long-term status negotiations in return for the United States and South Korea acceding to some Chinese priorities.¹¹² For example, Beijing might propose the removal of U.S. troops from the Peninsula as a condition for allowing full unification.¹¹³ Alternatively, China could annex all or portions of North Korean territory into China or install a puppet regime in North Korea that could continue to play the role of buffer state. For its part, South Korea could also calculate that holding territory will give it more say over who rules in North Korea, prompting the military from each nation to race to seize territory—potentially resulting in a clash between China on one side and South Korea and the United States on the other.¹¹⁴

Chinese Preparations for North Korea Contingencies

China places a high priority on being able to respond effectively to contingencies on its borders, including scenarios that could unfold in North Korea.¹¹⁵ Therefore, Beijing has worked to prepare a whole-of-government response commensurate with the scale and importance of a North Korea scenario.¹¹⁶ Those preparations include roles for China's military, the PLA; China's national paramilitary police force, the People's Armed Police; and provincial and local authorities in border regions.¹¹⁷ This section details the planning and resources those entities have devoted to getting ready for upheaval in North Korea.

One additional factor that will impact China's military planning for North Korea contingencies is the role of the KPA. Cooperation between the PLA and KPA has fallen off since the 1980s.¹¹⁸ Based on a near-complete lack of mentions in public sources—such as Chinese military documents, biennial defense white papers, and military media coverage—it appears the two militaries have not conducted joint training or exercises for decades. Instead, military-to-military contact appears quite limited and mostly takes place through political commissars.¹¹⁹ During a contingency, there is little reason to believe the two militaries would be in full cooperation or have entirely the same goals and objectives in the event of a crisis.¹²⁰ They might even end up in direct opposition in certain scenarios. A breakdown in KPA command and control during a crisis could result in the force fracturing, with some units fighting on while others cooperate or surrender. Whether KPA forces will cooperate with the PLA during a contingency or instead oppose Chinese intervention will constitute a major factor in Beijing's risk assessment for a contingency.

People's Liberation Army

Force Structure and Contingency Planning

The PLA Army, Navy, Air Force, Rocket Force, and Strategic Support Force would all play a role in responding to a contingency emanating from North Korea.* The PLA has officially been in charge of border defense duties along the boundary with North Korea since the mid-2000s.¹²¹ PLA forces assigned to the Northern Theater Command would take the lead in responding to a crisis, with forces from other theater commands tasked to quickly mobilize and reinforce if required.¹²² Three PLA “group armies”—each comprising 45,000–60,000 troops—are in the Northern Theater Command.¹²³ These group armies include artillery, air defense, special operations, army aviation, and combined arms brigades.¹²⁴ The PLA has extensive plans for employing those forces in a crisis.¹²⁵ Analyst interviews with PLA officers and Chinese government-connected academics have confirmed the existence of Chinese contingency plans for North Korea designed to carry out a variety of missions.¹²⁶ These include humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, peacekeeping, securing loose WMD, and environmental cleanup after a nuclear incident.¹²⁷ In May 2014, a document purportedly from the PLA that detailed military plans for responding to a contingency on the border leaked to Japanese news sources, although an official spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied its authenticity.¹²⁸

Reported Mobilization and Exercises

The PLA’s preparations for a North Korea contingency appear to have accelerated during 2017, although fragmentary reporting on such preparations is very difficult to verify independently due to strict media censorship in the area.¹²⁹ In addition, the PLA conducted several military exercises to develop operational skills relevant to a future North Korea contingency. These include naval exercises in the Yellow Sea in August of 2017, cold-weather combat drills in November 2017, Sino-Russian missile defense exercises in December 2017, and naval exercises in the Bohai Sea in December 2017.¹³⁰ Those events practiced broadly applicable military skills, and Beijing claimed they were not aimed at North Korea.¹³¹ The official Chinese stance has been to play down its preparations for a North Korea contingency, presumably to avoid signaling a lack of support for its ostensible North Korean ally. In July 2017, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Lu Kang dismissed reports about preparations for war and said the PLA “has maintained normal combat readiness and training status along the Chinese-North Korean border.”¹³²

**The Science of Military Strategy* discusses “the wars China may face in the future,” including the possibility of “small- to medium-scale, low- to medium-intensity self-defense and counter-attack operation[s],” one type of which are “border blockade and control operational activities triggered by the chaos of war in neighboring countries due to unstable political situations.” Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, Military Science Press, 2013, 126–127. Translation; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Roundtable on China’s Role in North Korea Contingencies*, written testimony of Oriana Skylar Mastro, April 12, 2018, 2.

Figure 4: Chinese Military and People's Armed Police Forces near the Border with North Korea



Source: Adapted from James Griffiths and Serenitie Wang, "Is China Reinforcing Its Border with North Korea?" *CNN*, July 26, 2017; Jamestown Foundation.

People's Armed Police

Following a structural reorganization made in late 2017, People's Armed Police forces are now commanded solely by China's Central Military Commission (CMC) rather than under the dual command authority of the Ministry of Public Security and CMC. This means the CMC has full command over People's Armed Police forces in the case of a border contingency, which it would likely assign directly to the Northern Theater Command.¹³³ The People's Armed Police has long had a significant presence near the China-North Korea border, including at least four border defense regiments. One border defense regiment is located near Dandong in Liaoning Province; two near Tumen, Jilin Province; and one near Linjiang, Jilin Province.¹³⁴ Dandong and Tumen each have major border crossings the People's Armed Police units would secure.¹³⁵ In total, People's Armed Police forces number about 50,000 strong in China's northeastern provinces, representing a small but important fraction of the 660,000-strong force.¹³⁶

Provincial and Local Government Preparations

Provincial and local authorities are also preparing for a North Korea contingency, getting ready to tackle issues ranging from dealing with refugees to managing nuclear fallout. Since the mid-2000s, the PLA has coordinated with provincial and local governments near the border on "border defense building" activities, which include fostering close ties between communities and military units stationed in the region.¹³⁷ According to news reports quoting local government notices, authorities in Jilin Province recently started reinforcing and building out a network of bunkers and underground command posts that can survive air, nuclear, or chemical attacks.¹³⁸ A leaked Chinese government document revealed Jilin provincial

authorities' planning for construction of a series of refugee camps along the border.¹³⁹ Other reports show the formation of local border protection units, classes taught by Party cadres on self-defense, and installation of hundreds of cameras as part of a "second-generation border surveillance system."¹⁴⁰ Additional reports say China also employs drones and patrol cars to monitor the border.¹⁴¹

Authorities are also taking precautions to deal with potential fallout from North Korean nuclear tests. After North Korea's sixth nuclear test in September 2017, Ministry of Environmental Protection officials conducted emergency tests to measure radiation levels (which they found to be normal).¹⁴² In December 2017, a full-page article in the state-run *Jilin Daily* relayed advice from the province's civil air defense office on how to respond to a nuclear explosion or radioactive fallout.¹⁴³

U.S.-China Contingency Talks

The United States, China, and South Korea would all likely undertake military responses to most contingencies in North Korea.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, military action by one of those states could be the cause of a contingency in North Korea.¹⁴⁵ That reality creates a compelling rationale for contingency talks between China and the United States to avoid major miscalculations or misperceptions that could escalate turmoil in North Korea into a major conflict between the world's two most powerful states.¹⁴⁶ As Yun Sun of the Stimson Center argues, "The U.S. and China both have an intrinsic interest in avoiding a conflict and therefore should engage each other to achieve better understanding of and better coordination with each other. In this sense, the contingency dialogue between the U.S. and China is not only necessary but indispensable for the peace and stability of the region."¹⁴⁷ Historically, Chinese leaders have been loath to participate in talks about contingency planning for unrest on the Peninsula.¹⁴⁸ Beijing has been reluctant to be seen as actively planning for the demise of its treaty ally.¹⁴⁹

Some U.S. discussions with Chinese interlocutors have taken place. Formats have included both official talks as well as nonofficial Track 1.5 (government officials and outside experts meeting in their unofficial capacities) and Track 2 (unofficial meetings of nongovernment experts) discussions.¹⁵⁰ However, those cautious discussions are not yet believed to include planners or commands involved in the actual plans of either side (e.g., U.S. Forces Korea, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, or the PLA's Northern Theater Command), and likely did not reach the depth and breadth of dialogue that would be needed to effectively plan and coordinate a response for potential unrest or conflict in North Korea.¹⁵¹

Recent U.S.-China Military-to-Military Consultations

Since 2017, Beijing has participated in military-to-military talks with U.S. officials that reportedly included discussions of general potential scenarios on the Korean Peninsula.* In August 2017, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford met in Bei-

* Former U.S. officials and experts previously advocated for such talks with China on North Korea contingency planning. See, for example, Mike Mullen, Sam Nunn, and Adam Mount, "A Sharper Choice on North Korea: Engaging China for a Stable Northeast Asia," *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 2016.

jing with the man who was then his Chinese counterpart, PLA Army General Fang Fenghui—who was previously a member of the CMC and chief of staff of the CMC Joint Staff Department—for talks that included the Korean Peninsula as a topic.* General Dunford then traveled to Shenyang, the capital of Liaoning Province in northeastern China, where he observed a Chinese infantry unit demonstrating tactical combined arms maneuvers.¹⁵² The demonstration took place in the Northern Theater Command's Haicheng Camp, which sits about 120 miles from the North Korean border.¹⁵³ Afterward, General Dunford traveled back to Beijing for a meeting with President Xi.¹⁵⁴ Those meetings resulted in a framework agreement setting up a bilateral joint staff dialogue mechanism meant to increase operational communication between the two militaries' highest-level national joint staffs, aimed at managing crises, preventing miscalculations, and reducing the risk of misunderstandings.¹⁵⁵ Neither of the staffs involved in this dialogue would be directly involved in the planning of force employment for a Korea contingency, but both would give guidance for the employment of force and advise their national command authority on major strategic decisions. The first meeting for that group took place in November 2017 in Washington. Lieutenant General Richard Clarke (the Joint Chiefs' director for strategic plans and policy) and Major General Shao Yuanming (deputy chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department) led the delegations.¹⁵⁶ Korean contingencies are likely to have been one agenda item in that dialogue mechanism. Those meetings constitute a start, but are still only a tentative initial step considering the potential for a crisis on the Peninsula and the likelihood of both sides committing large and complex force deployments to the crisis.

In addition to talking to China behind closed doors, U.S. policymakers have begun to publicly articulate a policy for how the United States would conduct itself during a contingency. Then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson made public statements in December 2017 where he offered details about talks with China, saying,

*We do not seek a reason to send our own military forces north of the demilitarized zone.... We have had conversations that if something happened [on the Korean Peninsula] and we had to go across a line, we have given the Chinese assurances we would go back and retreat back to the south of the 38th parallel when whatever the conditions that caused that to happen [are resolved]. That is our commitment we made to them.*¹⁵⁷

Then Secretary Tillerson's comments constitute the most detailed public declaration of U.S. policy on the issue to date. Overall, very few details about U.S.-Chinese discussions about a North Korea contingency exist in open sources, leaving analysts to speculate on the degree of coordination the two countries could manage in a crisis.

Another unknown is the status of U.S.-China contingency talks since the current period of warming China-North Korea ties began.

* Shortly after the visit, General Fang was purged from his post and later prosecuted for bribery. Charles Clover, "China Puts Senior General on Trial for Bribery," *Financial Times*, January 9, 2018; Bonnie S. Glaser and Collin Norkiewicz, "North Korea and Trade Dominate the Agenda," *Comparative Connections* 19:2 (September 2017): 21–34; Jim Garamone, "Dunford Stresses Diplomacy, Sanctions for North Korea in Talks with Chinese," *DoD News*, August 16, 2017.

Beijing's reengagement with Pyongyang could make Chinese leaders more hesitant to be seen conducting even superficial high-level or preliminary talks about North Korea contingencies. Chinese leaders might fear that holding planning discussions with the United States could undermine North Korea's trust in their treaty with China.

Implications for the United States

The situation in North Korea is unsettled and could develop in three general directions: (1) successful negotiations that produce an agreement to resolve the crisis over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs; (2) a breakdown in talks that results in maintaining the status quo in North Korea; or (3) failed negotiations followed by instability in North Korea, whether due to a war or to pressure that causes Pyongyang to collapse. Regardless of the scenario, China's role will have important implications for the United States.

If talks fail but the status quo continues, China's approach to sanctions on North Korea will be a critical factor in maintaining pressure on Pyongyang. Whether Beijing chooses to return to the tighter sanctions enforcement that likely contributed to bringing Chairman Kim to the negotiating table will have a major influence on the overall success of a renewed "maximum pressure" campaign to squeeze North Korea.¹⁵⁸ If China drops sanctions or simply reverts to providing a relief valve for Chairman Kim through lackluster enforcement, U.S. policymakers could begin to consider a mix of incentives and pressure on Beijing to entice China to strengthen sanctions enforcement to support a "maximum pressure" strategy.¹⁵⁹ However, convincing Beijing to tighten sanctions has historically been a difficult task and will likely continue to be challenging in the aftermath of recent high-profile diplomacy between President Xi and Chairman Kim.¹⁶⁰

In the case of a real contingency requiring the employment of force in North Korea, China is prepared to respond to a crisis by entering North Korea and occupying a buffer zone with or without the cooperation of the Kim regime, while also securing WMD and associated sites. During a crisis, U.S. and South Korean leaders would benefit from well-developed plans for deconfliction to avoid contact with Chinese forces while still securing allied interests.¹⁶¹ Without functioning channels to coordinate a response, the United States, South Korea, and China would be left to conduct extremely high-risk military operations during and after a contingency. Deepening U.S.-China strategic mistrust and Seoul's longtime desire for Korean unification could raise risk levels further, potentially setting the stage for a major conflict over North Korea.¹⁶² Defense Secretary James Mattis has said a war in North Korea would be "catastrophic" and "probably the worst kind of fighting in most people's lifetimes"; a wider conflict between major powers on the Peninsula would likely be even more costly.¹⁶³

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