

Testimony prepared for US-China Economic and Security Review Commission
Hearing on China's policy toward contingencies in North Korea
Dr. Oriana Skylar Mastro
Assistant Professor of Security Studies, Georgetown University
Jeane Kirkpatrick Scholar, American Enterprise Institute

How are the PLA and PAP preparing for a contingency in North Korea? What forces would be available to respond to a contingency, and what might those operations look like in different scenarios? In non-specialist terms, about many forces could China devote to a North Korean contingency, where would they come from, what would they be capable of doing?

If China intervened militarily on the Korean peninsula, the newly formed Northern Theater Command headquartered in Jinan would be in charge of the large ground force needed for any operations, from establishing a buffer zone to conducting more expansive combat operations. Force posture and exercises suggest that China is considering infiltrating North Korea by ground, air or sea, depending on the contingency and the degree to which China decides to intervene. For example, in September 2017, two days after North Korea's fifth nuclear test, land and air force personnel conducted exercises while China's strategic rocket force practiced shooting down incoming missiles over the waters close to North Korea.¹ The People's Armed Police (PAP), of which there are approximately 50,000 in the Northeast provinces, would most likely be in charge of securing the border in the meantime.²

There are three group armies in the Northern Theater Command (the 78th, 79th, and 80th), each with 30,000 to 50,000 troops that have their own Army Aviation Brigades (about 1,000 people) and SOF Brigades (about 2,000 people). These forces could be used in a ground invasion of North Korea, or in more limited contingencies, China could air drop in SOF, for example to secure critical sites, something the Z-10 brigades seem to be training for.³ The Aviation Brigades have a full mix of the transport (Mi-17, Z-8, Z-9) and attack helicopters (Z-10, Z-19) needed for close air support and lift capabilities into North Korea.⁴ If a conflagration were to ensue on the

¹ Kristin Huang, "Chinese Navy Keeps Firm Focus on Northern Shores as North Korean Tensions Rise," *South China Morning Post*, September 7, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2110233/chinese-navy-keeps-firm-focus-northern-shores-north>.

² In 2004, border defense along the North Korean border was transferred to the PLA to improve the border defense infrastructure and practices. In wartime, however, mission control could be transferred. Chang Wanquan, "04 niandi Zhongchao bianfang you gongan yijiao jiefangjun" [The China-NK Border Control Has Been in the Charge of the PLA Instead of the Police Since the End of 2004], *Huanqiu*, January 7, 2009, <http://mil.huanqiu.com/china/2009-01/337575.html>.

³ Correspondence with Dennis Blasko. These numbers are only estimates; they may change with the reorganization. Only the two group armies are actually stationed in provinces bordering North Korea. "Shipai Wuzhi 10 Zhishengjiquan Jilinsheng Shidan Yanlian" [On Recent Live Fire Exercises with the Z-10 in Jilin], *China Military*, June 16, 2017, <http://jl.news.163.com/17/0616/10/CN1VA4AU04118E6J.html>. There is no mention of the purpose of the drill in Jilin, but similar drills conducted in the southern command have been noted to be for low-penetration missions. "Shushao Shashou Wuzhi 10 biandui yanlian chaodikong tufang" [Killer of the Treetops: On Z-10 Formation Drills on Ultra-Low Altitude Defense], *Tencent News*, August 10, 2017, <http://news.qq.com/a/20170810/013677.htm#p=2>.

⁴ Correspondence with Dennis Blasko; Peter Wood, "Strategic Assessment: China's Northern Theatre Command," *The Jamestown Foundation*, May 15, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/strategic-assessment-chinas-northern-theater-command/>. For more on the report, see "Kongjiang bing jun heng kong chushi: Konjun kong jiang bing

Korean peninsula, China could also pull Army Aviation brigades and SOF from Central Theater Command in addition to airborne units assigned to the PLAAF if it needed extra forces.⁵ The fact that Shandong was added to the Northern Theater command during the reorganization suggests that China may also have plans to enter North Korea by sea. Since 2015, the majority of Chinese naval drills have taken place in the Bohai and Yellow Sea off the coast of North Korea and Japan, including three known major exercises in the waters close to North Korea.

There is some opacity surrounding which forces would be in charge of handling North Korea WMD. China has reportedly created “sanfang” (三方) units (meaning three components—nuclear, biological, and chemical) within its military forces designed to deal with WMD; media reports suggest that the Chinese military has engaged in training and exercises to deal with nuclear contingencies with units participating from across all services in the military.⁶ There are indications that the Army is training to engage in radiation monitoring, contamination inspection, and decontamination.⁷ Also, the Chinese air force, border forces, militia, reserve forces, police, armed police, air defense, civil defense, and other specialized units would all be involved in the broader mission of protection against nuclear contamination.⁸ Once secured, technical experts from outside the PLA, likely from the Chinese Engineering and Physics Institute, the China Institute of Radiation Protection, and the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation, would be invited in to support the mission.⁹ The Strategic Rocket Force would likely provide technical expertise as well, given its missile technology and nuclear weapons knowledge.¹⁰

What interests would China try to advance in a North Korean contingency, and how would Beijing prioritize those interests? What are the tradeoffs China might have to make, i.e., could

budui yi hua gui beibu zhanqu” [The Paratroopers Were Born: Air Force Airborne Troops Placed in Northern Theatre Command,” *EastDay*, May 3, 2017, <http://mil.eastday.com/a/170503192940691.html>]; “Kongjiang bingjun hengkong chushi: kongjun kongjiangbing budui yi huagui beibu zhanqu” [Airborne Army Established Overnight: The Airborne Army of the Airforce Now Belong to Northern], *Wangyi*, May 3, 2017; “Shipai Wuzhi10 Zhishengjiquan Jilinsheng Shidan Yanlian” [On Recent Live Fire Exercises with the Z-10 in Jilin].⁵ Correspondence with Dennis Blasko.

⁶ Including chemical, engineering, transportation, medical, army aviation, naval shipping units, naval patrol units, air monitoring units, and others. The discussion is in the context of nuclear emergency rescue. Hui Lu, *Jundui chuzhi tufa shijian xingdong yanjiu* [A Study of Military Emergency Response Operations] (Beijing: Haichao chubanshe, 2009), 157; “Woguo shouci heshigu yingji yanxi chenggong juxing” [China’s First Nuclear Accident Emergency Exercise Was Successfully Held], *2010 National Industry and Information Conference*, November 10, 2009, <http://www.miit.gov.cn/n11293472/n11293877/n12860691/n12860837/n12861691/12882677.html>.

⁷ “Shen Dun – 2015 guojiaji heyingshi yanxi zai jing juxing” [2015 National-level Nuclear Emergency Exercise Shen Dun Held in Beijing], *National Nuclear Safety Administration*, June 29, 2015, http://nnsa.mep.gov.cn/zhxx_8953/gzdt/201506/t20150629_305352.html.

⁸ Qiao Zhongwei, Wang Jiasheng, and Zou Hao, “Bianjing Weiji Yingji Kongzhi” Emergency Control in a Border Crisis], (Beijing: Junshi Kexue Chubanshe, 2013), 38.

⁹ 中国工程物理研究院, 中国辐射防护研究院, 和航天科技集 in Chinese. Information gleaned from discussions and exhibits at the Center for Excellence in Beijing.

¹⁰ Unfortunately, very little open-source literature has discussed in detail what this role would be. A review of the most authoritative work on Second Artillery doctrine (the predecessor to the strategic rocket force) does not discuss topics relevant to WMD-C3D. Written 13 years ago, this review focuses squarely on China’s strategic deterrent and its call for all nations to work toward nuclear zero, with the United States and Russia taking the lead. There is little consideration of how Chinese capabilities and expertise could be applied elsewhere. *Di’er Paobing Zhanyi Xue* [The Science of Second Artillery Campaigns] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2004), 177-178.

sealing the border to block refugee flows occupy forces needed to secure nuclear or other WMD sites?

As previously discussed, the PAP and border security would likely be in charge of securing the border and handling refugees. China has plans to seal the border and conduct border control operations—which may include moving Chinese forces into North Korea—though the Central Politburo Standing Committee will ultimately decide whether to execute such a plan.¹¹ China could also establish refugee camps and controlled areas to separate civilian, military, and political personnel in various locations along the border.¹²

This frees up the PLA to engage in more traditional military operations within North Korea, and China would be driven by a number of concerns. In the short term, nuclear security concerns would compel Chinese forces to intervene early to ensure control of North Korean nuclear facilities. Based on information from the Nuclear Threat Initiative, if China moved 50 kilometers across the border into North Korea, the PLA would control territory containing approximately 44 percent of the North's priority nuclear sites and 22 percent of the priority missile sites. A hundred kilometers in, Chinese forces would control all of the priority nuclear sites and two-thirds of the missile sites. The latter scenario is more likely, as Chinese military officers have articulated explicitly in interviews with me and other American interlocutors that contingency plans are in place for a mission to secure DPRK nuclear weapons and fissile material.

Chinese leaders' priority is to avoid the spread of nuclear contamination. They may hope that the presence of Chinese troops at these facilities would deter the United States, Japan or South Korea from striking North Korean nuclear facilities, would block the North Koreans from using or sabotaging the weapons or would prevent accidents at the facilities.

Beijing would also be concerned by the prospect of a reunified Korea under South Korean control inheriting the North's nuclear capabilities. Chinese scholars have often articulated the fear that following the collapse of the North, its nuclear sites and materials might be seized by the South, with or without the U.S.'s blessing. While this concern may seem farfetched, the idea of going nuclear has gained popularity in South Korea.

In terms of long-term interests, geopolitical considerations create a high and increasing likelihood that Chinese forces will move to seize parts of North Korean territory and nuclear facilities.¹³ Doing so would put China in a better position to shape the postwar outcome to

¹¹ Qiao, Wang, and Zhou, *Bianjing weiji yingji kongzhi*, 170. Securing the border presents a different set of problems than attempting to resettle refugees, however. China has only issued 7,356 Foreigners Permanent cards between 2004 and 2013, compared to U.S. 10 million during the same period. Refugees' status is even more uncertain in Chinese law. See Peter Wood, "Refugees Flee into Yunnan After Renewed Fighting Along the Myanmar Border," *The China Brief*, March 31, 2017.

¹² Ren Hongsheng, "China's Strategy for Refugee and Illegal Immigrants" [Bianjing "Nanmin ji feifa rujing zhe" wenti yu Zhongguo de yingdui celve yanjiu], *Global Review* 9, no. 5 (2017), 60.

¹³ Historically, given the geostrategic importance of the Korean peninsula to Chinese power, influence and security, it has consistently intervened in an attempt to counter other actors' influence there. The Korean War, the 1894-5 Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese incursions in the late 1500s are prime examples. For example, the Ming emperor sent troops to Korea to fight against the Japanese in 1592-98 after the capital was lost. Stephen Turnbull, *The Samurai Invasion of Korea 1592-98* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2008). Then again, during the First Sino-

maximize its chances of realizing its national security and regional power aspirations. First, China fears that even a denuclearized Korea under American influence would pose a threat to China's northeastern border stability and limit China's quest for regional power.¹⁴ Only if the PLA controls territory and North Korean nuclear facilities can Beijing insist that a reunified Korea be denuclearized and devoid of U.S. military personnel.¹⁵ If that outcome seems unlikely, China can push to postpone reunification and put a pro-China North Korean regime back into power. The last thing China wants is North Korean instability, or to absorb the costs of conflict only to be left with a postwar outcome that strengthens the U.S. role in the region.

What is Beijing's thinking concerning the pros and cons of working with the United States and South Korea to secure of WMD sites in North Korea, as well as acting to secure these sites before the United States and South Korea can act? How and where, if at all, would Chinese efforts to secure WMDs interfere with U.S. efforts?

Geography, the vicinity of troops, and potentially lower North Korean resistance to Chinese forces all make it likely that Chinese forces will get to North Korea's nuclear facilities, nearly all of which are located in the northern 100 kilometers of the country, before U.S. troops reach them.¹⁶ In the words of a recent RAND study, "due to its proximity, absence of significant military barriers, existence of more rail lines and roads into China than into South Korea, and the sheer size of its military, China can essentially penetrate as far into North Korea as it chooses."¹⁷ In contrast, it may take weeks or even months for U.S. forces to reach these areas in the context of stability operations.¹⁸

Therefore, it is safe to assume that Chinese troops will be present in North Korea if conflict breaks out, and they may specifically be tasked with securing and occupying the nuclear facilities. The presence of Chinese troops around critical facilities would complicate any U.S./ROK plans to secure and destroy those facilities themselves, including conducting standoff attacks.¹⁹ The presence of China introduces an even greater risk—an attack on nuclear facilities could mean a direct attack against Chinese forces, which could easily escalate to war between the two sides. Moreover, Chinese troops and U.S. troops rushing to the same sites, or U.S. attempts to push Chinese troops out of critical sites, would severely increase the risks of unintentional

Japanese War in 1894, the Qing Empire attempted to modernize its military and fend off Japan's Meiji Restoration. S. C. M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Wu Zhicheng and Hong Jianjun, "Some Personal Thoughts on Peace and Security," *Contemporary International Relations* [Xiandai Guoji Guanxi] 23, no.6 (December 2013), 31-37.

¹⁵ China will also likely be concerned about the demarcation of the national border and access rights to the East China Sea.

¹⁶ There are only two main avenues of approach by land for mechanized units—a wider one along the western coast and a narrower one on the eastern coast—with very difficult terrain in the center of the country and few roads, and little means of lateral communication among units because of the mountains. So a simple north to south ground movement is unlikely. China may move some forces in through those routes, and may supplement them with forces brought in amphibiously as well as airborne units.

¹⁷ Timothy M. Bonds et al., *Strategy-Policy Mismatch: How the U.S. Army Can Help Close Gaps in Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014), 11.

¹⁸ Bruce W. Bennett and Jennifer Lind, "The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements," *International Security* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2011), 84-119.

¹⁹ Timothy Bonds et al., *Research Brief: Closing the Strategy-Policy Gap in Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014).

clashes. In short, if the United States insists on securing the sites itself and not collaborating with China in this mission, the potential risks and costs are very high.

However, this may prove unnecessary. China is largely capable of securing these facilities. In areas where its capabilities are weak, such as in dismantling and rendering safe any weapons or nuclear material found there, Chinese interlocutors have expressed a willingness to coordinate and cooperate with international agencies such as the IAEA to share the burden of dismantlement.²⁰

Another issue is that Beijing may have a narrower standard of nonproliferation than the United States would feel comfortable with. Specifically, China may be focused on sealing off access to China to ensure that people and dangerous materials cannot enter—but may not necessarily put forth the resources necessary to secure the borders and conduct maritime and aerial interdiction to prevent the movement of people and materials of concern out of North Korea as a whole. But China may allow the United States to help with sealing the ports and ensuring no nuclear material, technology or know-how escapes by sea.

What is the state of U.S.-China military talks concerning contingency planning?

One of the main recommendations of my article in the Jan/Feb edition of *Foreign Affairs*, “Why China Won’t Rescue North Korea,” was that “Washington must be willing to take greater risks to improve coordination with China in peacetime.”²¹ Additionally, bilateral consultation and discussion of contingencies are necessary to avoid miscalculation and clashes between U.S.-South Korea coalition forces and Chinese forces in wartime. Also, “sharing intelligence with China and jointly planning and training for contingencies could allow the United States to leverage Chinese involvement to its benefit, especially in the context of securing North Korean nuclear weapons and facilities.”²²

Reporting in 2017 suggested that because of Beijing’s estranged relationship with North Korea and the heightened likelihood of war, China was being more receptive to such activities.²³ In August 2017, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dunford visited Beijing and the Northern Theater Command, which would be in charge during a Korea contingency. There, he discussed potential Korea contingencies with his Chinese counterparts and signed an agreement to improve operational communication, including planning the first China-U.S. Joint Staff Dialogue, to take place three months later.²⁴ Further discussions may have taken place on

²⁰ Author’s interviews in Shanghai and Beijing, summer 2016. In addition to providing expertise and manpower, the IAEA may provide political cover for Beijing to participate in a WMD-E mission in North Korea. IAEA involvement in the accounting process protects the U.S. and South Korea from accusations of malfeasance, etc. The author would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

²¹ Oriana Skylar Mastro, “Why China Won’t Rescue North Korea,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2017-12-12/why-china-wont-rescue-north-korea>.

²² Mastro, “Why China Won’t Rescue North Korea.”

²³ “China Listens to US Contingencies on North Korea,” *Agence France-Presse*, published in *The Guardian*, December 18, 2017, <https://guardian.ng/news/china-listens-to-us-contingencies-on-north-korea/>.

²⁴ Jim Garamone, “Dunford Stresses Diplomacy, Sanctions for North Korea in Talks with Chinese,” *Department of Defense*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1279692/dunford-stresses-diplomacy-sanctions-for-north-korea-in-talks-with-chinese/>.

November 30, 2017, when Major General Shao Yuanming, deputy chief of the Joint Staff Department of China's Central Military Commission, met Lieutenant General Richard Clarke, director for strategic plans and policy of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, though some deny this.^{25 26 27}

In a public speech in December 2017, Rex Tillerson noted, “We have had conversations that if something happened 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. That is our commitment we made to them.”²⁸ Tillerson was also very clear that he wanted “U.S. and Chinese military leaders to develop a plan for the safe disposition of North Korea’s nuclear weapons, were the regime to collapse.”²⁹

While China was more willing to broach the topic of Korean contingencies, it is unlikely that any of these discussions reached the level of operational detail necessary to facilitate U.S. operational planning and prevent miscalculation that could lead to clashes between the two sides during a war. Moreover, with Kim’s visit to Beijing, any opening to discuss potential contingencies on the Korean peninsula and likely responses is rapidly closing. Xi has invested political capital in improving his relationship with Kim, and discussions premised on the demise of the North Korean regime are probably too politically sensitive to risk. This would leave the United States with the option of unilaterally communicating aspects of U.S. contingency plans to reduce the risk of accidental clashes, but this now comes with the greater operational risk that Xi will share information with Kim.

Is there a risk of a North Korean contingency, and its aftermath, sparking a broader U.S.-China conflict on the Peninsula? If so, what could cause a larger war?

Yes, but the likelihood is less than conventionally assumed. The greatest risk is that the United States will attack, inadvertently or not, Chinese forces present on the peninsula, leading to clashes between the two sides. However, China is interested in occupying some North Korean territory primarily to gain leverage at the negotiating table, so troops are likely to stop advancing far short of U.S./ROK troop positions, putting the burden of initiating conflict on the U.S./ROK side. At that point, the U.S. will have to decide whether to engage China militarily or move to negotiations. The latter option would avoid war with China but would also mean conceding at least in part to China’s terms to bring the conflict to a close.

In my *Foreign Affairs* article, I argued that Chinese military intervention would only be triggered “if the United States seems poised to move its forces north.”³⁰ But given the public face of

²⁵ Zhang Tao, “Joseph Dunford Meets with Shao Yuanming,” *China Military Online*, December 4, 2017, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-12/04/content_7854772.htm.

²⁶ Charles Clover, “US and China Broach Sensitive Topic of N Korea Regime Collapse,” *Financial Times*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/074feca0-e485-11e7-97e2-916d4fbac0da>.

²⁷ Clover, “US and China Broach Sensitive Topic of N Korea Regime Collapse.”

²⁸ Rex W. Tillerson, “On ‘Meeting the Foreign Policy Challenges of 2017 and Beyond’ at the 2017 Atlantic Council-Korea Foundation Forum,” *U.S. Department of State*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/12/276570.htm>.

²⁹ David E. Sanger, “A Tillerson Slip Offers a Peek into Secret Planning on North Korea,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/17/us/politics/tillerson-north-korea-china.html>.

³⁰ Mastro, “Why China Won’t Rescue North Korea.”

improved relations with North Korea, China may become more proactive in its efforts to deter U.S. military action, including threatening to intervene militarily even if the U.S. only launches a limited strike without an accompanying ground operation. Moreover, while the nuclear security and regional power concerns will still drive Chinese behavior, the improved relationship increases the political price to China of abandoning North Korea. Beijing may therefore demand tougher terms to ‘allow’ reunification in the aftermath – terms that might include not only the withdrawal of U.S. troops, as I previously argued, but also the abrogation of the treaty, a degree of sovereignty for the former North Korea, or safe havens for the senior North Korea leadership. In short, China is no longer “wary of a reunified Korea led by Seoul,” but China’s support of this outcome may now come at a higher price.

Are there additional points the Commission should consider when evaluating China’s likely response to North Korean contingency and its implications for the United States and its allies?

The above analysis is based on the current situation, but in many ways China’s North Korea policy is a moving target. Just in the past two months, North Korea sent a delegation to the Pyongchang Olympics, opening a pathway to talks with South Korea and a reduction of tensions in inter-Korean relations.³¹ President Trump announced he would be willing to meet with Kim Jong-Un by the end of May, which would make him the first sitting President to meet with the leader of North Korea.³² Shortly thereafter, President Trump replaced the level-headed National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster with John Bolton, who has called for preventive war against the North Korean regime.³³ Then, in late March, Kim Jung Un made his first trip outside the hermit kingdom since he took power in 2011 to conduct his first ever state visit with China’s Xi Jinping.³⁴ In other words, the situation changes quickly.

The most important takeaway is that China is looking out for its own interests, whether at the negotiating table or on the battlefield, and not those of the United States. Smart policy can mitigate the risks of Chinese involvement and exploit the benefits, but Chinese ‘cooperation’ always comes at a price.

³¹ Choe Sang-Hun, “Top North Korean Official Will Visit South Korea During Olympics,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/world/asia/korea-olympics.html>.

³² Robbie Gramer and Emily Tamkin, “Decades of U.S. Diplomacy with North Korea: A Timeline,” *Foreign Policy*, March 12, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/12/a-timeline-of-u-s-negotiations-talks-with-north-korea-trump-kim-jong-un-pyongyang-nuclear-weapons-diplomacy-asia-security/>.

³³ Editorial board of the *Washington Post*, “John Bolton’s Extremism Could Lead the Country to Catastrophe,” *Washington Post*, March 23, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/john-boltons-extremism-could-lead-the-country-to-catastrophe/2018/03/23/b200c9a8-2ea9-11e8-8ad6-fbc50284fce8_story.html?utm_term=.08df6e034bc2.

³⁴ Steven Lee Myers and Jane Perlez, “Kim Jong-un Met with Xi Jinping in Secret Beijing Visit,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/27/world/asia/kim-jong-un-china-north-korea.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Fasia&action=click&contentCollection=asia®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=6&pgtype=sectionfront.