

## China's North Korea Policy: Rethink or Recharge?

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Andrew Scobell and Mark Cozad

**ABSTRACT:** There has been much speculation lately about a Chinese “rethink” on North Korea. Beijing has clearly been exasperated with Pyongyang. What is going on with Beijing’s Pyongyang policy? Has there actually been a reassessment of the PRC’s policy toward the DPRK? Is there a military component to this policy, and what do we know about planning by China’s People’s Liberation Army for a Korea contingency? This article answers those questions.

There has been much speculation lately about a Chinese “rethink” on North Korea.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, Beijing’s exasperation with Pyongyang has been palpable. The degree of debate evident in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) over its policy toward the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in recent years is unprecedented and comes on the heels of a series of particularly provocative acts by Pyongyang.<sup>2</sup> Since 2006 these acts include a series of missile tests and nuclear tests each conducted apparently without prior notification or consultation with Beijing. Additionally, strains in bilateral relations were triggered by provocations such as the torpedoing of a Republic of Korea (ROK) Navy corvette, the *Cheonan*, and the shelling of Yeongpyong Island in 2010. Further strains in Beijing-Pyongyang ties followed the death of Kim Jong Il in December 2011, and the elevation of his son Kim Jong Un to the position of DPRK supreme leader. Perhaps the most recent provocation from the PRC perspective was the execution of Kim Jong Un’s uncle, Jang Sung Taek, in December 2013. Jang appears to have been China’s key interlocutor with the current North Korean administration and his death came as a great shock to Beijing. Moreover, it raised new questions about Pyongyang’s policy direction and introduced new uncertainties into the DPRK’s relationship with the PRC.<sup>3</sup>

China, of course, experienced its own leadership transition at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012 and the National People’s Congress in March 2013 with the appointment of a new generation of leaders. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary and PRC President Xi Jinping, while maintaining general continuity with the policies of his predecessor Hu Jintao, has sought to put his own imprimatur on the affairs of state, espousing a “China Dream” and proposing a “new type of great power relationship with the United States.” Do these changes include a revamped North Korea policy?

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1 The research and writing of this article was made possible by funding from the Tang Institute for U.S.-China Relations.

2 See, for example, Paul Letters, “Beijing Rethinks Its North Korea Policy Priorities,” *South China Morning Post*, April 11, 2013; David Mulrooney, “China’s Changing Calculus on North Korea,” *Asia Times Online*, April 29, 2013, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/KOR-01-290413.html>.

3 Andrew Scobell, “A Death in the Family,” *U.S. News and World Report*, January 21, 2014.

Chinese officials appear to be changing the term they use to label the bloody struggle waged on the Korean Peninsula six decades ago. During Vice President Li Yuanchao's visit to North Korea in July 2013 to commemorate the crucible of the China-North Korea alliance, Li purposely used the simple phrase "Korean War" rather than the title that has been used for five decades, the "War to Resist America and Aid Korea."<sup>4</sup> This semantic change may be as much about a public relations effort to improve relations with the United States as it is about signaling a change in the PRC's perceptions of Pyongyang or policy toward North Korea. Beijing appears eager not to antagonize the United States unnecessarily. But China may also intend to signal to North Korea not to take its longtime ally for granted.

In any event, a high level of frustration with North Korea endures and this has manifested itself in a remarkable public airing of anger and outrage by Chinese scholars, analysts, and members of the public. One episode in May 2012 triggered a particularly vitriolic reaction from Chinese "netizens": the kidnapping of twenty-eight Chinese fishermen by North Korean naval vessels. The story unleashed a torrent of anti-DPRK sentiment becoming "one of the hottest trending topics in China's microblogging sites."<sup>5</sup> Although these open displays of deep disaffection with North Korea are genuine, they do not appear to signify a policy shift by Beijing toward Pyongyang.

Indeed, the public airing of ire about China's North Korea problem has yet to translate into a sea change in Beijing's policy towards Pyongyang. Much speculation about Chinese thinking on North Korea is discerned from interviews and conversations with Chinese civilian and military analysts and academics, including Track II dialogues.<sup>6</sup> However, more concrete evidence is not easy to obtain.

What is going on with Beijing's Pyongyang policy? What are China's goals where North Korea is concerned? Has there actually been a reassessment of the PRC's policy toward the DPRK? Is there a military component to this policy, and what we do we know about planning by the China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) for a Korea contingency?

We contend that Beijing conducted a thorough policy reassessment toward North Korea a decade ago when faced with the 2002-03 nuclear crisis and China has since redoubled its efforts and pursued a course consistent with previous policy.<sup>7</sup> Beijing's reassessment reaffirmed that critical Chinese interests and goals vis-à-vis North Korea remained unchanged. An examination of the full scope of initiatives China has

4 Xu Fangqing and Yu Xiaodong, "North Korea: The New Normal," *News China*, October 2013, <http://www.newschinamag.com/magazine/the-new-normal>; "Kim Jong Un Meets with Vice President Li Yuanchao," *PRC Foreign Ministry Press Release*, July 26, 2013, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t1062374.shtml>.

5 Keith B. Richburg, "Chinese Public Vents Fury at North Korea Over Seizure of Boats," *The Washington Post*, May 24, 2012, 8.

6 See, for example, Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor: Chinese Views of Economic Reform and Stability in North Korea* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies/United States Institute of Peace, January 3, 2008); and International Crisis Group, *Shades of Red: China's Debate over North Korea* (Asia Report No. 179, November 2, 2009).

7 This is the consensus of a number of respected analysts, but perhaps the best evidence that such a decision was made is the concerted array of initiatives launched by Beijing since that time described by the authors. See, for example, Andrew Scobell, "The View from China," in *Asia at a Tipping Point: Korea, the Rise of China, and the Impact of Leadership Transitions*, ed. Gilbert Rozman (Washington, DC: Korea Economic Institute, 2012), 69-81.

pursued since the early 2000s underscores the extreme seriousness with which Beijing views the Pyongyang situation and highlights the extensive array of resources Chinese leaders allocated to address it. Below we provide context, outline the policy, and then identify the array of components in China's recharged policy initiative with particular attention to military preparation and planning.

### Beijing's Greatest Challenge

Perhaps no foreign policy issue poses a greater challenge for China in the 21st century than North Korea.<sup>8</sup> Relationships with the United States and Japan have each proved to be major tests for China but arguably neither has provided the sustained policy challenge to the same extent as North Korea. The DPRK has proved to be a near constant headache for the PRC since the early 1990s. Unlike relations across the Taiwan Strait with Taipei, which have ameliorated appreciably since 2008, and relations with Washington and Tokyo, the climate of which has tended to fluctuate considerably over time, Beijing's Pyongyang problem has not abated and appears to be chronic.<sup>9</sup> China's unruly neighbor has conducted a series of nuclear tests (October 2006, May 2009, and February 2012) and missile launches (notably July 2006, July 2009, April 2012, and May 2013). Pyongyang's provocations include, the two aforementioned incidents in 2010 (which killed a total of 48 ROK military personnel and 2 civilians), a declaration that Pyongyang would no longer abide by the 1953 armistice agreement and the severing of its hotline to Seoul (March 2013), and blocking South Korean access to Kaesong Industrial Zone (April 2013). For the PRC there has been no respite where the DPRK is concerned.

Like a variety of foreign policy issues in recent years, North Korea threatens to besmirch China's prestige. Beijing has been accused of consorting with unsavory regimes around the world. For example, in the lead up to the 2008 Olympics, China found itself tarred as the bad guy in a humanitarian tragedy in Darfur because of Beijing's association with a Khartoum regime accused of perpetrating atrocities. China craves the reputation of a responsible global citizen and a force for good in the world.<sup>10</sup> However, Pyongyang is not akin to Khartoum in Beijing's eyes. After all, North Korea is not some far off Third World state like Sudan. Rather, it is a radioactive Darfur on the doorstep—a humanitarian disaster and the subject of enormous international attention with a repressive, distasteful dictatorship made all the more complicated because North Korea is a hyper-militarized state armed with ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Instability immediately across the Yalu River directly threatens domestic stability in China's heartland because of the specter of many hundreds of thousands

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8 Scobell, "The View from China," 79.

9 Ibid.

10 See, for example, Yong Deng, *China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

of refugees flooding into Northeast China. As a result, Beijing is ultra-sensitive to any hint of turmoil on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>11</sup>

### **Go Big and Go Strong**

China, the available evidence suggests, has not undertaken a serious reexamination of its relationship with North Korea in recent months or years. Rather, Beijing's rethink on Pyongyang appears to have happened much earlier—a decade ago. While the public debate has been—and continues to be—contentious, senior Chinese leaders remain unshaken over the basic thrust and contours of this policy.

Officially, China pursues a policy of peace, stability, and denuclearization. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Hong Lei told assembled reporters on 8 April 2013 that China remained focused on “unremitting efforts to safeguard peace and stability on the peninsula,” and China seeks to “push forward the denuclearization process.”<sup>12</sup> While Beijing is undoubtedly sincere about desiring a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula, the reality is that denuclearization is a much lower priority than maintaining peace and stability on China's doorstep.

Indeed, the Chinese public discourse on North Korea of recent years appears to be the manifestation of more relaxed censorship rather than any indicator of policy change. And Beijing's earlier reassessment on Pyongyang did not result in a decision to abandon its most truculent and troublesome neighbor. On the contrary, the reassessment concluded that the PRC had no choice but to redouble its efforts to bolster its DPRK buffer. In short, ten years ago, China decided that North Korea could not be allowed to fail. The decision has meant Beijing has decided to go big and go strong in an all-embracing approach toward Pyongyang to strengthen the regime on its doorstep. This initiative includes diplomatic, economic, and security dimensions.

*Diplomacy.* During the past ten years, North Korea has received two types of diplomatic support from Beijing. First, the PRC has not publicly condemned the DPRK (although there have been some mild tongue lashings) and Beijing has watered down United Nations Security Council resolutions. Second, China has established a multilateral forum with six participants—North Korea, South Korea, China, Russia, Japan, and the United States—to manage the North Korea nuclear issue. In 2003, China launched the Six Party Talks and since then has toiled doggedly to keep them alive. While the talks have been on hiatus since 2007, Beijing has worked tirelessly to resuscitate the dormant multilateral forum and prevent it from collapsing completely. Efforts are currently underway to reconvene a session in the near future. In May 2013, senior North Korean leader Vice Marshal Choe Ryong Hae visited Beijing in what appeared to be an effort to improve China-North Korea relations and signal Pyongyang's readiness to curb its bad behavior. The following

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11 Chinese leaders are most alarmed by the prospect of domestic instability. Beijing also worries about upheaval at its borders which threatens to spill over into China. See Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 3-7 (on Beijing's perspectives on security vulnerabilities) and 126-137 (on China's strategy on the Korean Peninsula).

12 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Regular Press Conference on April 9, 2013,” <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t1030030.shtml>.

month, DPRK Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye Guan—Pyongyang’s point man on the Six Party Talks—traveled to Beijing apparently to signal North Korea’s willingness to reengage in the multilateral forum. A Chinese initiative to restart the Six Party Talks was clearly underway with a visit by PRC Vice President Li Yuanchao to Pyongyang in July and a follow-up trip by Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei—Beijing’s point man on the Six Party Talks—to the DPRK in August.

*Economic.* In the early 2000s, China launched a comprehensive effort to bolster North Korea’s economic fundamentals. Repeated attempts to convince the late Kim Jong Il of the benefits of Pyongyang implementing a “reform and opening” policy during his seven visits to China (between May 2000 and May 2011) came to naught. Nevertheless, Beijing has undertaken concerted endeavors to get North Korea’s economy off life support and revitalize a range of economic sectors through a substantial injection of trade, aid, and investment. But China’s frustration at its lack of success in persuading Pyongyang to adopt Chinese-style economic reforms did not deter Beijing.

China has been North Korea’s top trading partner since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Soviet demise ended the significant subsidies from Moscow and triggered a systemic crisis and economic tailspin in North Korea. During the 1990s, China accounted for approximately a quarter of North Korea’s total trade, but China’s percentage rose to one third by 2003 and climbed even higher thereafter.<sup>13</sup> Today, China accounts for well over half of North Korea’s two-way trade. In both decades North Korea has run a huge trade deficit, and Chinese exports to North Korea have risen at a more rapid rate than North Korea’s exports to China. North Korea’s exports have been overwhelmingly resources such as minerals and marine life.<sup>14</sup> Of course these are only South Korean estimates because actual data is unavailable and smuggling and barter trade along the border is difficult to quantify.

Since the early 2000s, Chinese firms—mainly from neighboring Jilin and Liaoning provinces have invested in North Korea infrastructure, agriculture, mining, and retail sectors. Many of these investments have been encouraged and insured by provincial and national authorities. This trend represents a significant shift from China’s previous focus on solely providing economic assistance. Beijing recognized that Pyongyang will almost certainly never repay loans and that outright aid offers limited leverage and negligible return. Investing in North Korea allows China to benefit from economic opportunities—albeit risky ones. Between 2003 and 2009, Chinese companies reportedly invested a total of US \$98.3 million. This sum is much less than Chinese entrepreneurs invest in other countries on China’s periphery, such as Mongolia, Myanmar, and Vietnam, but it still makes China the second largest investor in North Korea. While South Korea may qualify as the top investor, these funds are solely located in the troubled Kaesong Industrial Complex. In contrast, investments by Chinese companies are spread across North Korea in a range of sectors albeit mostly in extractive (41 percent) and

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13 Scott Snyder, *China’s Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, Security* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2009), Table 5.2, 112.

14 Balázs Szalontai and Changyong Choi, “China’s Controversial Role in North Korea’s Economic Transformation: The Dilemmas of Dependency,” *Asian Survey* 53, no. 2 (March/April 2013): 269–291.

light industry (38 percent) according to one study.<sup>15</sup> China continues to channel investment into North Korea: in August 2012, for example, Beijing announced the establishment of a fund worth almost US \$500 million for Chinese investments south of the Yalu.<sup>16</sup>

Beijing, moreover, has also provided hundreds of millions of US dollars in foreign aid much of it in the form of food grains and petroleum. The size of these shipments increased considerably in 2003, 2004, and 2005 according to available estimates. This aid is reportedly the largest amount China disseminates to any country in the world and is allocated at the highest echelons in Beijing rather than through the normal channels for dispersing development aid in the Ministry of Commerce.<sup>17</sup>

*Military.* China has not disowned or distanced itself from North Korea in the security sphere. The PRC's only formal military alliance is with the DPRK, the "Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" signed in July 1961. The document commits one country to come to the aid of the other if attacked.<sup>18</sup> However, there does not appear to be any real defense coordination mechanism nor do the terms of the treaty ever seem to have been invoked. While Chinese leaders have on multiple occasions stated publicly and privately that Pyongyang cannot assume that Beijing will come to the rescue, the treaty can provide the justification for an intervention if Chinese leaders consider such a step to be necessary. Thus, the security relationship is perhaps best viewed as a "virtual alliance" with considerable ambiguity as to if and when it might be invoked by Beijing.<sup>19</sup>

The alliance may be a virtual one but this does not mean that Beijing does not take it seriously or that the PLA doesn't see it as real. For Chinese civilian and military leaders, this alliance remains relevant and personal. The alliance was sealed in blood during the early 1950s when the so-called Chinese People's Volunteers fought side by side with the Korean People's Army (KPA). Hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers gave their lives in the conflict, and Chinese troops remained in North Korea until 1958.<sup>20</sup> The fact that, despite the sacrifice of blood and treasure by Beijing many decades ago, Pyongyang continues to absorb China's attention, consume Chinese resources, and remain a focal point for PLA contingency planning (see below)—including the prospect of a second military intervention—is galling to China's leaders. But all this pushes Beijing to redouble its efforts. Indeed, it is clear the PLA is increasingly concerned about the prospect of instability on China's periphery and on the Korean Peninsula in particular.

15 For analysis of the investment switch, see Jaewoo Choo, "Mirroring North Korea's Growing Economic Dependence on China: Political Ramification," *Asian Survey* 48, no. 2 (March/April 2008): 364. For details and analysis of the investments themselves, see Drew Thompson, *Silent Partners: Chinese Joint Ventures in North Korea* (Washington, DC: U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS, 2011).

16 Jeremy Page, "China Builds Up Its Links to North Korea," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 7, 2012, 8.

17 Snyder, *China's Rise*, 113-117.

18 The text of the treaty can be found in *Peking Review* 4, no. 28 (1961): 5.

19 Andrew Scobell, *China and North Korea: From Comrades-in-Arms to Allies at Arm's Length* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2004), 19-20.

20 See, for example, Zhang Aiping, chief compiler, *Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun* [China's People's Liberation Army] vol. 1 (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo Chubanshe, 1994), 137. According to this authoritative source, the CPV suffered more than 360,000 combat casualties (including 130,000 wounded), as well as "380,000 noncombat casualties."

## Power Projection . . . around the Periphery

What is unmistakably implicit in the PLA's warfighting scenarios and campaign planning is that if conflict occurs it is expected to flare up close to home.<sup>21</sup> What PLA doctrinal writings call "local wars in conditions of informatization" are anticipated at or just beyond China's borders. Of course, China's armed forces have limited power projection capabilities and it is still unusual for air, naval, or ground units to deploy or be employed out of area. When units do venture farther afield—outside of China's immediate neighborhood or the Asia-Pacific region—the events are marked with great fanfare. The participation of Chinese forces in United Nations peacekeeping missions around the globe (since 1990) and the anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden (since 2008) are cases in point. But a careful examination of recent PLA official publications and exercises reveals a focus on mastering the relatively modest capability to project power within China from one military region to another.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, Chinese leaders appear to think of national security in terms of four concentric circles: the first is a domestic ring, the second consists of a ring proximate to Chinese territory, the third ring is more expansive encompassing China's wider Asia-Pacific neighborhood, and the fourth ring encompasses the rest of the globe.<sup>23</sup> The first two rings are most delicate and tend to consume the majority of CCP leaders' time. The first ring equates to internal security—the territory that Beijing currently administers or claims sovereignty over. Thus, this ring includes not just the restive, sparsely populated western regions of Tibet and Xinjiang but also the densely populated ethnic Han heartland of eastern China, and frontier areas along the border with North Korea which includes an ethnic Korean minority population of more than two million. Beijing is most sensitive in this first ring because it contains its core national security interests.<sup>24</sup> Since at least the mid-2000s, the PLA has worked with local and provincial authorities in frontier areas of the Shenyang Military Region (which encompasses Jilin, Heilongjiang, and Liaoning Provinces) on so-called "border defense building" activities including involved efforts to establish close ties between local communities and military units stationed nearby.<sup>25</sup> The goal is to develop a stable, layered, and tightly organized system of border control and protection all the way down to the grass roots level.

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21 For example, see M. Taylor Fravel, "Securing Borders: China's Doctrine and Force Structure for Frontier Defense," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 130, nos. 4-5 (August-October 2007): 705-737.

22 *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, April 2013), section on "Carrying out scenario-based exercises and drills"; Dennis J. Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 197-199.

23 The rings conception of Chinese security is drawn from Nathan and Scobell, *China's Search for Security*.

24 Other areas include the islands Beijing does not control in the East and South China Seas, including Taiwan, the Senkaku/Diaoyutais, and the Spratlys/Nanshas, which are currently objects of dispute with other claimants. While China has explicitly listed Taiwan as a core interest, Beijing has demurred from officially placing these other islands in the same category.

25 For a fascinating account of this initiative penned by the commander of the Shenyang MR for three years (2004-2007), see Chang Wanquan, "Huimou canyu Dongbe bianfang jianshe de sannian [A Retrospective of three years participating in Northeast border defense building]," *Jiefangjunbao*, January 7, 2009, 8. Of course, General Chang is currently the PRC's Minister of National Defense and concurrently a member of the Central Military Commission.

A second ring of insecurity extends beyond China's actual borders and comprises adjacent peripheral areas to include all neighboring countries and regions—continental or maritime. This area constitutes a band or buffer within which Beijing seeks to maintain stable and sympathetic—or at least neutral—regimes and deny presence or access to the military forces of external powers. North Korea is perhaps the most important of these regimes because of the extreme sensitivity of the Korean Peninsula—its close proximity to China's political and economic heartland and Pyongyang's status as barrier between Beijing and Washington's ally, Seoul, and the ROK-US allied forces south of the Demilitarized Zone. According to General Wang Haidong of the PLA's China Institute for International Strategic Studies, while North Korea's value to China's security is “very different to what it was during the Korean War,” the country still has “special importance to China's national security and must be restored to its status as a strategic buffer.”<sup>26</sup> In the mid-2000s, the PLA took over primary responsibility for border defense duties along the boundary with North Korea. Starting in February 2004, the PLA and KPA reportedly instituted regular border defense conferences with their North Korean counterparts.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the most important point to make here is that, from Beijing's perspective, alarm over a North Korean contingency is fueled in large part by fear of what US response this eventuality might produce or what US action might precipitate.<sup>28</sup> Since North Korea literally is situated on China's doorstep, not only could instability south of the Yalu River radiate northward but also any military actions by the United States and its ROK ally would send major shockwaves reverberating across China's threshold. This sensitive location is directly adjacent to China's political and economic heartland. Indeed, the Chinese have long referred to the relationship between Korea and China as “lips and teeth”—if the Korean “lips” are removed then China's “teeth” get cold and exposed to the harsh elements.

In Beijing's mind the prospect of instability in North Korea means the disintegration of the barrier (i.e., the “lips”) and raises the specter of US and ROK forces operating north of the DMZ. Also alarming for Chinese leaders is the potential for a conflagration on the Korean Peninsula which might escalate horizontally or vertically. Because of these fears, one can logically infer that the PLA is planning for a North Korean contingency. In fact, this planning focus has been the clear message communicated by PLA analysts to the authors in recent years. But which type of contingency is the PLA planning for?

### **Korean Contingencies PLA Style**

As might be expected, PLA operational plans are not readily accessible. But we can draw on a selection of authoritative writings and commentaries by Chinese military specialists on operational matters. These sources can provide important insights about where, how, and against whom the PLA expects to operate. Any PLA operations south

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26 Wang Haidong, “Zhongguo you biyao jian zhanlue wending dai” [China must build strategic buffers], *Huanqiu Shibao on line*, August 27, 2013.

27 Chang Wanquan, “Huimou canyu Dongbe bianfang jianshe de sannian [A Retrospective of three years participating in Northeast border defense building],” *Jiefangjunbao*, January 7, 2009, 8.

28 Scobell, “The View from China,” 72.

of the Yalu River will likely happen suddenly, almost certainly be unilateral, encompass a broad spectrum of missions, and anticipate the real possibility of confrontation with the US military.

### *Suddenly Confronting a More Powerful Adversary*

The precedent of China's decision to intervene in the Korean War in October 1950 remains indelibly etched in many Beijing minds. Furthermore, the calculus behind the move—to prevent US forces from stripping away the “lips”—still resonates six decades later. According to authoritative Chinese military writings, the 21st Century PLA is preparing to face a more powerful adversary with overwhelming air superiority and a size, configuration, and mix of capabilities that could only be the armed forces of one country: the United States. Moreover, the location could only be the Korean Peninsula. In 2005, for example, an article appeared in a technical military journal written by four analysts from the Zhengzhou Air Defense Academy. The team, based in the Jinan Military Region (MR), analyzed the daunting “air threat” posed to a PLA group army from an unidentified adversary in a notional “limited war” fought “along our country's land border.”<sup>29</sup>

Given Beijing's heightened sensitivity to instability across the Yalu and fear of spillover into the Shenyang MR, Chinese intervention could come quickly (and quite possibly faster than any ROK/US intervention). Thus, if North Korea implodes or erupts in civil war, Beijing will probably intervene earlier than either Seoul or Washington.

China will likely have at least some units of its armed forces poised nearby and ready to go promptly. In the mid-1990s, the focus of maneuver exercises in the Shenyang MR shifted from hostilities with Russia to “possible emergencies on the Korean Peninsula,” and training for a North Korean contingency appears to have intensified since the mid-2000s.<sup>30</sup> Then, in December 2013 and January 2014, a series of major exercises occurred in the Shenyang MR in the vicinity of China's border with North Korea, including one in which the number of participating PLA personnel were reported to be as many as 100,000. While the PRC Ministry of National Defense insisted that these were “normal training” events, winter-time drills of this size and scope are highly unusual.<sup>31</sup>

One of the first units to intervene in a North Korean contingency would likely be a light mechanized brigade from the 39th Group Army equipped with wheeled fighting vehicles, but rapid reaction components, including PLA Special Forces, helicopter units, and the PLA Air Force's 15th Airborne Corps (located near Wuhan in the Guangzhou Military Region) would be one of the first formations to arrive.<sup>32</sup> However, full

29 Hao Qiang, Feng Lidong, Gong Xu, Yu Junsha, “Jituanjun fankong xi zhan yi kong zhong weixie pinggu [Evaluation of air threat on group army's anti-air raid campaign], *Xiandai fangyun jishu* [Modern Defense Technology], 33, no. 1 (February 2005): 10-14, 18.

30 “Chinese Armed Forces Responding to Tensions on Korean Peninsula,” *Kanwa Defense Review* no. 106 (August 1, 2013): 34-36.

31 “PLA mobilizes 100,000 troops for N Korean border exercise,” *Want China Times*, January 15, 2014, <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20140115000029&cid=1101>; “Shenyang Drills were ‘Regular Training’ MOD,” *Global Times* January 21, 2014, <http://www.global-times.cn/content/838579.shtml>.

32 Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today*, 84, 104. Each military region has rapid reaction units (RRUs). It is likely that RRUs from other MRs will participate in any North Korean intervention.

mobilization of all the units in the Shenyang MR would probably take weeks and deployment of units from other MRs would take even longer.

Beijing will want to prevent a flood of North Korean refugees into China and seek to cordon off an area south of the Yalu River, and perhaps even establish refugee camps. Beijing will likely also feel a sense of urgency to seize control of North Korean nuclear and chemical sites, especially those in close proximity to the Chinese border. These missions have all been identified as those types China's armed forces should be prepared to execute.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the PLA continues to maintain chemical defense units both in active duty and reserve components. Shenyang is noteworthy as the only one of seven military regions in China to possess both an active duty chemical defense regiment and a reserve one.<sup>34</sup> This dual capacity is probably because of the MR's proximity to North Korea—the most likely location where the PLA will confront chemical weapons.

Chinese urgency will be driven in part by worries over “loose nukes” and in part by a desire to preempt US action. China will assume the United States would be extremely alarmed at the prospect of multiple unsecured suspected weapons of mass destruction sites in North Korea, some quite close to China's border. Beijing's logic is that a nuclear-armed North Korea has prompted enormous US attention so it is highly likely that the real prospect of unsecured WMD will trigger a swift US response. The specter of US troops—even in relatively small numbers—anywhere near the Yalu will be extremely disturbing to Beijing.<sup>35</sup> While there is a very good chance that China will seek a United Nations imprimatur on any intervention in North Korea, this authorization is more likely to be sought after the fact than beforehand.

### Going It Alone

Despite this history of comradeship-in-arms, in the 21st century the KPA and the PLA seem to act like allies at arm's length.<sup>36</sup> That is, there is limited interaction and cooperation combined with a significant amount of mutual suspicion and aloofness. There is a military-to-military relationship but this appears to be extremely modest. The manifestations of the relationship appear largely ceremonial and superficial exchanges of high-level delegations and a small number of KPA officers attending selected PLA professional military education institutions. However, there do not appear to be any field or command post exercises between the militaries of the kind one might expect between real or even nominal

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33 Liu Xiangyang, Xu Sheng, Xiong Kaiping, and Zhong Chunyu, “Feizhanzheng junshi xingdong tanyao [An examination of MOOTW], *Zhongguo junshi kexue* (China Military Science), no. 3 (2008).

34 Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today*, 89-90.

35 Regular author conversations since 2002 with multiple military and civilian analysts in Beijing and Shanghai.

36 Scobell, *China and North Korea*.

alliances.<sup>37</sup> The most routinized and on-going series of bilateral or multilateral field exercises that the PLA conducts are under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with armed forces of member states.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, China's security relationship with North Korea seems strangely dormant.

Because of this condition, it is likely that any intervention by the PLA in North Korea will be unilateral. There may be a veneer of cooperation with the KPA, but there will be nothing approaching the degree of integrated command and control or level of interoperability that exists between US Forces Korea and the Republic of Korea's armed forces. Moreover, one cannot assume there will be any level of cooperation with the KPA in a PLA operation in North Korea. Indeed, it is conceivable that the KPA might oppose Chinese intervention.

### Combat and Noncombat Operations

The range of military operations the PLA will expect to conduct span a wide spectrum from low-intensity combat, high-intensity kinetics to noncombat operations dealing with nontraditional security threats.

For the past decade, the PLA has emphasized an expansive set of noncombat, peacetime operations labeled "military operations other than war" or "MOOTW" [*feizhanzheng junshi xingdong*].<sup>39</sup> Chinese military doctrine has emphasized a set of four undertakings articulated by then CMC Chair Hu Jintao in December 2004. He outlined four so-called New Historic Missions which highlight a wide range of responsibilities for the PLA: defending CCP rule, safeguarding economic development, protecting national interests, and upholding world peace.

The PLA, of course, has not engaged in any significant combat operations since the 1979 border war with Vietnam. Moreover, since the 2008 election of Ma Ying-jeou as president of Taiwan, the likelihood of crisis or conflict in the Taiwan Strait has been extremely low. With high-intensity, large-scale combat a more distant proposition, in recent years the PLA has turned more attention to dealing with an array of nontraditional security threats confronting China. Outside of China, the PLA sent more than 20,000 troops to participate in more than 20 United Nations Peacekeeping or observer missions; dispatched more than 13 rotations of the three ship anti-piracy task force in the Gulf of Aden; and in early 2011 elements of the PLA assisted in extricating more than 35,000 Chinese civilians from Libya in what China's 2012 Defense White Paper called "the largest overseas evacuation" in the history of the PRC.

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37 On China-North Korea mil-mil relations, see Scobell, *China and North Korea*, 8-9. More recent scholarship on the PLA exchanges underscores the absence of robust mil-mil ties between China and North Korea. See Heidi Holz and Kenneth Allen, "Military Exchanges with Chinese Characteristics: The People's Liberation Army Experience with Military Relations," in *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China's Military*, eds. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 429-473. A recent analysis of the PLA multilateral exercises reveals no exercises with the KPA; Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today*, 206-209.

38 Since 2002, China has conducted almost annual military field exercises with assorted SCO member states. These have included not just the PLA and their counterpart armed forces but also the People's Armed Police and their foreign counterparts.

39 See, for example, Andrew Scobell, "Discourse in 3-D: The PLA's Evolving Doctrine, Circa 2009," in *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China's Military*, eds. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 99-134.

In addition, PLA and People's Armed Police formations regularly participate in counterterrorism exercises with a variety of countries, notably with the member militaries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Inside China, the PLA has engaged in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, including responding to the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, snowstorms and other natural disasters. According to the 2012 White Paper, hundreds of thousands of uniformed personnel were employed in "emergency rescue and disaster relief activities" during 2008 alone.

The PLA seems to be planning for a range of nonwarfighting contingencies around its periphery. These include protecting the border, stabilizing operations, dealing with refugees, controlling WMD problems, protecting PRC citizens and property, and evacuating non-combatants. Indeed, according to an article coauthored by four officers posted to the headquarters of the Shenyang MR that appeared in a 2008 issue of a prominent PLA journal, military operations other than war include the following: "The defense of land, maritime, and air frontiers, establishing restricted areas, soft battle strikes, military trade and aid, peacekeeping operations, . . . controlling and managing refugees, . . . [dealing with] nuclear, biological, and chemical agents, military control, civil assistance, protecting and evacuating nationals in foreign trouble spots . . . ."<sup>40</sup>

Beijing will almost certainly feel pressure to protect Chinese citizens and economic interests in North Korea in the event of a crisis. Chinese businesses now have significant economic investments in North Korea and there are at least thousands of PRC citizens inside the country at any given time.<sup>41</sup>

Despite attention to MOOTW, the PLA has not neglected combat readiness and is also training for combat. In recent years, senior leaders have been at pains to stress that while the PLA can perform a wide range of "diversified military tasks," its core mission remains preparing to fight "local wars under conditions of informatization." This focus is what former commander-in-chief Hu Jintao and others have urged. The implicit assumption is that such a war would be most likely to occur at points around China's periphery. Almost immediately after being appointed to succeed Hu as chair of the CMC, Xi Jinping has stressed that the PLA's top priority should be "preparing for military struggle."<sup>42</sup> Some have interpreted this statement to mean Xi was deliberately adopting a bellicose stance and chalked this up as yet another indication of a more assertive China. However, this rhetoric actually appears aimed at bolstering support within the military for its new commander-in-chief and ensuring the PLA is prepared to execute its mission in Korea or elsewhere.

## Conclusion

China's previous rethink on North Korea policy occurred ten years ago and turned out to be a recharge. The decision was determined by Beijing's vital interests: preventing domestic insecurity and maintaining

40 Liu Xiangyang et al., "Feizhanzheng junshi xingdong tanyao [An examination of MOOTW], *Zhongguo junshi kexue* (China Military Science), no. 3 (2008), 4.

41 According to statistics from the PRC Ministry of Commerce, there are at least 5,000 Chinese contract workers based in North Korea.

42 For example, see Cary Huang, "Xi Shaping up to be an influential PLA Commander," *South China Morning Post*, August 1, 2013.

a stable buffer at the gateway to China's political and economic heartland. Future Pyongyang provocations are unlikely to change Beijing's buffer strategy. China appears prepared to bolster the North Korean buffer at all costs using every instrument at its disposal—economic (aid, trade, and investment), political (tacitly supporting hereditary succession), diplomatic (refusing to condemn the North publicly for its intransigence or transgressions and pursuing the Six Party Talks), and, if necessary, military (including limited or wholesale intervention to prop up the regime).

Indeed, all indications are that the PLA has been actively planning for a variety of Korean contingencies. While China's armed forces are fully prepared to execute if so ordered, no one in Beijing is eager to send Chinese forces across the Yalu for the second time in sixty years. Unlike 1950, today Beijing has a sizeable tool kit of nonmilitary options at its disposal where Pyongyang is concerned. Chinese leaders would much prefer to manage the problem diplomatically and economically. But this preference does not mean Beijing would hesitate to act militarily if China's vital national security interests were determined to be on the line across the Yalu River.

For successive US administrations, cooperation and coordination with China has been the cornerstone of their initiatives vis-à-vis North Korea. But the above analysis suggests that Washington should alter its expectations of what Beijing would be willing to do. Real, albeit modest, diplomatic and economic coordination has occurred and may continue. But military cooperation or coordination is another story. There has been informal Track II discussion about possible coordination between the US and PRC defense establishments concerning North Korea but the topic is far too sensitive in China to move much beyond the realm of the hypothetical. Despite this reality, persistent volatility on the Korean Peninsula and high costs of miscommunication in a future North Korean crisis require the United States to persevere in a dialog with China.

#### Andrew C. Scobell

Mr. Scobell is Senior Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation. He is the coauthor of *China's Search for Security* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

#### Mark Cozad

Mr. Cozad is a Senior Defense Research Analyst at the RAND Corporation.

