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Short Paper

*What are China's Interests in any Intervention to Rebuild and Stabilize North Korea after North Korean Collapse?*

### Introduction

The collapse of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is coming and the major actors involved will need a comprehensive plan. North Korea is a fragile state home to over 25 million people<sup>1</sup>, many of whom have been living under conditions of extreme starvation, poverty, oppression<sup>2</sup>, and brainwashing under the rule of Kim Jong-Un.<sup>3</sup> Without internal reform or international aid, the DPRK will eventually collapse from within. Many academics and policymakers recognize the need to engage in contingency planning now, but the details of how to balance People's Republic of China (PRC) interests in any effort to rebuild and stabilize North Korea remain vague. This paper aims to fill some of those gaps and will consider China's interests in any reconstruction of the DPRK post-collapse.

### Scenario: DPRK Collapse

The North Korean reconstruction scenario this paper addresses, includes the following four assumptions: (1) any intervention takes place after major combat operations, if any, have been completed, (2) Kim Jong-Un is removed from the scene politically, (3) American forces remained south of the 38th parallel and thus no Chinese-American armed engagement occurred, and (4) DPRK nuclear weapons have been secured or destroyed. These theoretical assumptions are made for the purpose of addressing the complexity of reconstruction within the page limit of

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<sup>1</sup>United Nations, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea Country Profile," *United Nations Data*, 2016, [http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Democratic People%27s Republic of Korea](http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Democratic+People%27s+Republic+of+Korea) .

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch, "North Korea Events of 2015 Country Chapter" (New York, NY, 2016), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/north-korea> .

<sup>3</sup>Paul Corner and Jie-Hyun Lim, *The Palgrave Handbook of Mass Dictatorship* (London, UK: Springer Nature, 2016), 74–77.

this assignment and without spending time on questions such as clean up after a DPRK nuclear detonation or Chinese-American war.

Building on to these assumptions, one can add the facts of what a North Korean collapse would entail. The collapse of a weak, but heavily militarized, state would create a power vacuum in an area historically contested by great powers including Russia, China, Japan, the United States, and Korea itself. That vacuum would be filled, but the question is by whom. In addition to power competition, there would be the immediate humanitarian and rule-of-law concerns with how to feed and provide security for a starving and desperate North Korean populace. These concerns include any internally displaced peoples (IDPs) or externally displaced peoples (EDPs) who may have fled their homes during the collapse. Also there is the question of what to do with over 1.2 million DPRK soldiers and reservists<sup>4</sup> and the thousands of civil officials, especially those who committed crimes against humanity. In addition, there are many longer-term concerns such as integrating the DPRK into South Korea's free market system, working to overcome socio-cultural differences, and building new institutions and norms in North Korea that integrates them into South Korea's democratic political system.

### China's National Interests

Into this scenario we must bring China's core national interests and see what impact they would have on any multi-actor effort at North Korean reconstruction. This paper borrows from grand strategist Terry Diebel's book *Foreign Affairs Strategy*, a text commonly regarded as standard on how states tend to formulate their interests. He argues that all states have the following core interests, in order of priority; "Physical Security, Economic Prosperity, Value

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<sup>4</sup> Georgia McCafferty, "Anniversary Parade Provides Rare Glimpse Into North Korea's Military Might," *CNN*, October 10, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/09/asia/north-korea-military-might/> .

Preservation at Home, and Value Projection Overseas.”<sup>5</sup> These core interests are reflected in official Chinese documents, most notably Mao Zedong’s Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence, which were outlined during the early days of the PRC.<sup>6</sup> Those Five Principles were “mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity..., mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit... and peaceful co-existence.”<sup>7</sup> Those principles continue to guide the PRC’s more independent-minded and realist foreign policy and have been referenced by China’s current Foreign Minister Wang Yi as among Beijing’s core national interests.<sup>8</sup>

Another example that China includes Diebel’s four national interests among their own is Beijing’s 2015 Military Strategy White Paper. That document, the PRC’s first and only white paper to-date, discusses the need to protect against war and any form of foreign intervention into China’s domestic affairs.<sup>9</sup> It also speaks of the importance of maintaining a strong economy and social stability.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that, similar to Mao’s Five Principles, value projection overseas is not mentioned, and so for the purposes of this paper greater emphasis is instead placed on the protection of values at home. This is understood to mean the preservation of the Communist Party as the ruling political power. Such an interpretation is in line with both Mao’s Five Principles and Beijing’s recent white paper. Additionally, this view is consistent with Chinese behavior in the modern era and is confirmed by long-time China observers including

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<sup>5</sup> Terry L. Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy: Logic for American Statecraft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 126–134.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, 2016, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/ziliao\\_665539/3602\\_665543/3604\\_665547/t18053.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18053.shtml).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Wang Yi, “Message from the Minister,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, 2016, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/).

<sup>9</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “Full Text: China’s Military Strategy” (Beijing, 2015), [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content\\_20820628.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_20820628.htm).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

former Assistant Secretary of State Susan Shirk. In her book, *China: Fragile Superpower*, she explains that the main goal of the PRC leadership, other than to increase China's economic and military power, is similar to other authoritarian states- survival.<sup>11</sup> Therefore Beijing will often have its power and legitimacy amongst the Chinese people as one of its overriding priorities.<sup>12</sup> This includes preventing disruptions to the economy or an appearance of weakness vis-a-vis another great power since those could damage the communist party's legitimacy and foment revolt.<sup>13</sup> Thus China's main interests can be read generally as the physical protection of China's territory, economic prosperity, and domestic communist control and stability.

#### Actors and Leadership in the Intervention

The impact of whom stabilizes North Korea, and how, would shape future regional dynamics, such as the economic strength, or weakness, of a newly united Korea, the direction and size of DPRK refugee flows, and the purpose and size of America's military presence on the peninsula. For these reasons the immediate state actors would be the same ones previously involved in the DPRK denuclearization Six Party talks: South Korea, any remaining rump authority in North Korea, China, America, Japan, and Russia.<sup>14</sup> Also, due to concerns over economic and geopolitical stability and the humanitarian situation, numerous agencies and international organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development, the United Nations, the Red Cross, Oxfam, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations would get involved. In order to avoid chaos, these actors would have to engage in some level of coordination, though the question of how and by whom is not resolved.

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<sup>11</sup> Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4–5.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> International Crisis Group, "North Korea: Beyond the Six-Party Talks" (Brussels, 2016), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/korean-peninsula/north-korea-beyond-six-party-talks> .

The question of leadership is highly contentious, and barring diplomatic agreements, it is likely that the reconstruction coordinator in a given area will be the military that happened to have arrived there first. As laid out in the assumptions, this scenario presumes American forces would stay south of the 38th parallel to avoid conflict with China. Whether China would intervene with its own forces before South Korea is an important consideration. The PRC could invade part or all of North Korea and that concern ought to be worked out ahead of time through back-channel negotiations. The difficulty is China's wariness of accepting a change from the status quo that would be detrimental to their interests. As a rising power with border disputes with many of America's allies, and anger over Washington's Pivot to Asia policy, the PRC would have difficulty accepting promises of American good-will to remain south of the 38th parallel. However, discussion and communication prior to, throughout, and after the collapse and reconstruction efforts is necessary to avoid miscalculation and any wider state-to-state conflict.

Ideally the most interested actor, South Korea, should lead any intervention, but that would depend on what China would.<sup>15</sup> A decision from Beijing to forestall the long unfulfilled dream of Korean unification would scare the PRC's neighbors and invite the ire of South Korea, perhaps resulting in America intensifying its presence on the peninsula. On the other hand, Beijing cannot be sure that a newly united Korea would be friendly or that American troops would be pulled out even since the DPRK would no longer exist. The PRC may decide that the possibility of a unified and hostile Korea is not worth the risk because Washington might continue its alliance with South Korea, leaving its troops closer to the PRC's borders- something that immediately threatens Beijing's physical security and legitimacy as a strong power. Looking at the example of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the PRC may believe that

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<sup>15</sup> Richard C. Bush, "China's Response to Collapse in North Korea" (Washington, D.C., 2014), <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/chinas-response-to-collapse-in-north-korea/> .

America will seize the opportunity of DPRK reconstruction to enhance its encirclement of China, just as Washington did against Russia in Eastern Europe by pulling several former Soviet states into its orbit. Finally, Russia, having experienced such NATO expansion, would also be opposed to a US-aligned unified Korea as it would put American forces closer to its own eastern border.<sup>16</sup> Moscow and Beijing have already aligned further over fear of US encirclement<sup>17</sup> and would likely do so again during any DPRK reconstruction. Thus China's decision to invade, annex, or create a puppet state in the former DPRK cannot be ruled out and must be taken seriously.

### Reconstruction

As mentioned, the requirements of a reconstruction are numerous and challenging. The first issue encountered would be the vast humanitarian demands of over 25 million North Koreans, many of whom would be malnourished and in need of food and medical attention.<sup>18</sup> This would include the economic cost and the thousands of North Koreans near-death in the DPRK's many gulags.<sup>19</sup> Shelter would also be needed for the likely millions of IDPs and any EDPs who either fled over the border or who attempt to return following some level of stabilization.<sup>20</sup> Beijing would not want to have to deal with a sudden influx of refugees who don't speak Chinese into China's industrial northeast, creating strains on local governments and markets, and causing unrest or ethnic strife. Once again the possibility of a PRC invasion comes up. China would likely create a military buffer zone to manage or stop the movement of EDPs or

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<sup>16</sup> John Delury, Chung-in Moon, and Sue Mi Terry, "A Reunified Theory: Should We Welcome the Collapse of North Korea?," *Foreign Affairs*, no. November/December (2014), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2014-10-17/reunified-theory>.

<sup>17</sup> Ian Storey, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, and Yusof Ishak Institute, "Russia-China Strategic Alignment: Consequences For Southeast Asian Security- Analysis," *Eurasia Review: A Journal of Analysis and News* 59, no. 2016 (2016): 1, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2016\\_59.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2016_59.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Delury, Moon, and Terry, "A Reunified Theory: Should We Welcome the Collapse of North Korea?"

<sup>19</sup> Chol-hwan Kang and Pierre Rigoulot, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005), vii–xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Bush, "China's Response to Collapse in North Korea."

it occupy part or all of North Korea to keep the DPRK populace where it is.<sup>21</sup> Regardless, China has trained its military for such operations and would be prepared to provide humanitarian aid.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to meeting basic human needs, any intervention would also be tasked with creating and sustaining law and order and deciding what to do with the North Korean military. Given the scale of the crisis, the DPRK army could be disarmed and co-opted to assist in aid distribution since they know the terrain, are already organized, and would be in need a positive role in the new order. The alternative would be to disband them and risk those jobless soldiers becoming insurgents as happened when the US disbanded the Iraqi Army.<sup>23</sup> In addition to co-opting local power structures, lines of cross-communication should be set up between all actors and incoming organizations to improve relief and peacebuilding work.<sup>24</sup> Rule of law is also important for any attempts at achieving some semblance of justice to reduce the probability of killings amongst DPRK civilian victims, collaborators, and oppressors. Additionally, North Korea is very homogenous<sup>25</sup> which may cause some of them to view either the Chinese, or more likely the South Koreans or Americans, as hostile interloctress which would case resistance.

### China as Main Spoiler

The next question of what form economic and political reconstruction would take is one that is not as clear as providing humanitarian relief or basic security.<sup>26</sup> The answer is contingent upon who is leading the reconstruction effort, which, as mentioned previously, would be

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<sup>21</sup> Bruce Bennett, "Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse" (Washington, D.C., 2013), 87–90, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR300/RR331/RAND\\_RR331.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR331/RAND_RR331.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>23</sup> James Pfiffner, "US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army," *Intelligence and National Security* 25, no. 1 (2010): 76–77, [http://pfiffner.gmu.edu/files/pdfs/Articles/CPA Orders, Iraq PDF.pdf](http://pfiffner.gmu.edu/files/pdfs/Articles/CPA%20Orders,%20Iraq%20PDF.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Amelia Branczik, "Humanitarian Aid and Developmental Assistance," *Beyond Intractability*, 2004, <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/humanitarian-aid>.

<sup>25</sup> Index Mundi, "North Korea Demographics Profile 2016," *Index Mundi*, 2016, [http://www.indexmundi.com/north\\_korea/demographics\\_profile.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/north_korea/demographics_profile.html).

<sup>26</sup> Branczik, "Humanitarian Aid and Developmental Assistance."

whichever state has established its military presence first. If China stayed out entirely or invaded only partially, and perhaps withdrew after a while, then South Korea would take the lead with the assistance of the United States. That would result in an attempt at justice and economic and political integration along the lines of a unified Western, South Korean system.

Alternatively, if China maintained control of part or all of the former DPRK the outcome would be very different. The PRC may bar international and foreign organizations from intervening in its area of control. Additionally, China could attempt to bring about some form of justice for the North Koreans but that would be less likely. While doing so may bring a degree of peace and buy-in from oppressed North Koreans, doing so could well threaten Beijing's national interest of maintaining rule and legitimacy at home. This is because any trials or truth commissions would bring up uncomfortable questions about China's own contentious past and the lack of justice from the Mao era or from the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Finally, the creation of any kind of overtly capitalistic economy or, more alarmingly, democratic system of government in North Korea would be another threat to Beijing's legitimacy and domestic control.<sup>27</sup> Without a buffer state next to South Korea, China's leaders would have to worry about a genuinely democratic country closer to its borders whose economic and political system would be an ideological and practical refutation of the PRC's own state capitalist, authoritarian one-party model. If one also considers a united Korea to be more ethnically nationalist, that would also endanger China's concerns with territorial integrity given the historically marginalized 2 million ethnic Koreans living on the Chinese side of the North Korean border.<sup>28</sup> Thus China could decide to intervene fully and annex or create a new puppet state in part or all of the former DPRK.

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<sup>27</sup> Bennett, "Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse," 87–90.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 87–88.

In conclusion, while there are many difficulties in Korean unification, and many that were not addressed in this paper, the biggest issue is how to reconcile Chinese, South Korean, and American interests in any intervention effort. Needless to say the concerns and needs of North Koreans also ought to be taken into account and the degree to which that would be done is a concern in itself. This paper shows the necessity of those three actors coming to an understanding before any DPRK collapse and for them to work together during reconstruction. If such efforts are not undertaken or fail, the specters of interstate conflict, injustice for North Korea, and the continued division of the peninsula will raise their combined ugly heads as China reverts to acting in what it considers its national interests- interests that clash strongly with those of South Korea and America.

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