

First Mover Responses to North Korean Instability: The Intervention-Legitimacy Paradox

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North Korea's immediate neighbors, particularly China, perceive a first-mover disadvantage in responding to North Korean instability. This paper seeks to project the path-dependent strategic considerations factoring into intervention in North Korean instability. Making specific reference to the political context and capacity for response on the part of China, the authors evaluate the benefits and costs to a first-mover in five scenarios of instability, including complex humanitarian emergency and collapse of state control, North Korea's lashing out, infighting and protracted struggle, infighting followed by humanitarian crisis, and North Korean nuclear proliferation. The paper concludes with an analysis of the geopolitical context in 2015 and China's evolving strategic interests for the Korean Peninsula.

Keywords: intervention-legitimacy paradox, North Korean instability, Sino-North Korean relations, U.S.-North Korean relations, first-mover disadvantage

Introduction

Kim Jong-un's brutal leadership consolidation efforts and further retreat from even its most enduringly supportive neighbors have casted doubt on the sustainability of the regime and have raised expectations that North Korea may face internal conflict, volatility, or even instability that could affect the viability of the regime. Under Xi Jinping, China has shown a veiled displeasure verging on censure of the young leader. Likewise, Park Geun-hye's Trustpolitik policy has failed to yield sustained inter-Korean dialogue or cooperation. In the event of instability or a political vacuum in North Korea, both China and

South Korea would face a dilemma, which we term the intervention-legitimacy paradox. Namely, the first external actor to intervene in response to instability in North Korea may gain material opportunities to shape events on the ground, but at possible cost to international perceptions of the legitimacy of intervention. The perceived disadvantages incurred by the first actor to intervene or instigate change on the Korean Peninsula will probably reduce the likelihood of a major discontinuity leading to the end of North Korea as a state unless the changes are large, internal in origin, and violent.

This paper seeks to describe the first-mover disadvantage that North Korea's immediate neighbors, and particularly China, will face in responding to North Korean instability. First, the authors describe the factors involved in influencing likely responses by neighboring countries to a North Korean contingency and the political context and capacity for response on the part of China. Next, we trace four likely scenarios of North Korean instability and potential reaction on the part of China. Finally, we conclude with an analysis of the current China-North Korea relationship and Chinese interests on the Korean Peninsula to explain China's perceived constraints on intervening in the North Korean regime.

First-Mover Problem in Regime Change

The further one delves into the specifics of how responses to North Korean instability might unfold, the more clear it becomes that the range of outcomes deriving from such instability is *path dependent*, and will be influenced by a combination of factors, including developments inside North Korea (including the form and extent of North Korean instability or state failure that might possibly lead to Korean unification), the responses of North Korea's neighbors to any internal instability, and the interaction of the neighbors' responses and internal developments inside North Korea. The path-dependent nature of circumstances surrounding North Korean instability means it is necessary to consider a wide range of plausible scenarios. The path toward

a new end state on the Korean Peninsula, including possibilities for unification or perpetuation of Korea's division under two separate states, will be directed by the duration and nature of instability, its causes, and its external effects on North Korea's neighbors, as well as by the prioritization and sequencing of initial responses by both state and non-state actors. Put more explicitly, the consequences of instability in North Korea will be affected by not only South Korea's resources and capacities but also by the timing of contributions and interventions from its partners in the region, namely China and the United States. The point at which each of these state actors become involved is of central importance, and the perceived first-mover disadvantage, wherein the first actor incurs higher costs of "owning" potentially protracted instability in North Korea, has resulted in upholding a status quo of superficial "stability" that may prove to be more deleterious in the long term for all.

Current literature on intervention in cases of failing or failed states tend to be prescriptive, focusing on constructing models for intervention and post-conflict stabilization. Many studies have advocated limited intervention, focus on restoration of state security in order to mitigate multiple potential dangers, including serving as sites for illicit trade and trafficking, tendency toward organized violence, or asylums for terrorist actors and organizations.¹ Other researchers have emphasized the importance of human security and internal safety mechanisms, providing humanitarian assistance recommendations based on the responsibility to protect.² While the debate over whether the North Korean state has already failed continues, the opaque nature of North Korea's leadership and governance capabilities makes discussions of North Korean instability crucial to planning the peninsula's future. The question of who moves first in response to North

1. For example, see Marina Ottaway and Stefan Mair, "States at Risk and Failed States: Putting Security First," Democracy and Rule of Law Project, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, September 2004.

2. See Gareth Evans, "From Humanitarian Intervention to the Responsibility to Protect," *Wisconsin International Law Journal* 24, no. 3 (2006), pp. 702-722.

Korean instability, and how that move will be perceived by the other side and by the international community, will depend in part on the specific circumstances existing in North Korea and the extent to which North Korea's spillover effects have a direct impact on its neighbors.

China has a geostrategic interest in maintaining the status quo of a divided Korean Peninsula and perceives risks in instigating any change in Pyongyang. (Indeed, Beijing is not the only neighbor restrained in its actions and reactions to North Korea; U.S.-ROK alliance policy is mired in defensive exercises designed to prevent conflict and perpetuate the status quo. At the same time, North Korea continues to seek asymmetric advantage through its ongoing nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development.³) But Beijing's estimation of these possible effects has influenced its calculus in intervening or applying too strong a hand to rein in Pyongyang, and it is possible to trace Beijing's reticence to move first in the event of North Korean instability. Beijing's views and prioritization of stability on the Korean Peninsula will influence the process and outcome of the international response to North Korean instability and will influence the consequences resulting from instability. In other words, the factor that may prove decisive in determining the prospects for and shape of a new status quo, or even the possibility of Korean unification, may be who moves first in response to North Korean instability and how others respond to that first move, rather than simply the response to developments in North Korea themselves.

Factors Shaping Neighboring Country Responses to North Korean Instability

Among many circumstances that would influence the consequences of North Korean instability, two factors that are likely have a bearing

3. Van Jackson, "The Korean Peninsula's Status Quo Crisis," *The Diplomat*, May 6, 2015.

on the amount, timing, and origin of resources available as part of the international response are: (1) the timing and pace of the process (more specifically, whether a contingency is gradual or sudden), and (2) the nature of instability in North Korea (such as, whether it results from the North Korean leadership's aggressive actions or it occurs as a result of the failure of the state and loss of political control over the population). These factors will be influenced both by the capacity of the North Korean leadership to address conditions on the ground and the responses of North Korea's neighbors. The responses are, in other words, based on developments within North Korea and the interplay of reactions at the state-level in the region.

North Korean Leadership

Despite the range of possible scenarios and diverse variables, the actor with the most bearing on the process and outcome deriving from North Korean instability would undoubtedly be the North Korean leadership. The critical question is whether the existing North Korean regime or any other internal North Korean contender for power could sufficiently manage change in the face of multiple internal and external challenges to its control. While the North Korean leadership would have limited control over the timing or pace of instability, its actions would have a major bearing on whether instability results primarily from internal factors or external aggression. Internally-driven instability might occur due to institutional weakness and loss of political control that could result in economic and humanitarian crises, while externally-driven instability might occur as a result of North Korean leadership efforts to regain or compensate for loss of control. In either case, it is possible to imagine both rapid and gradual or prolonged declines that would expose the incapacity of the North Korean leadership and lead to deepening crisis and/or instability in North Korea.

A failure of the North Korean leadership might result in chaos that would invite outside intervention to restore order, or it might lead to protracted internal struggle among competitors who assert

control over competing bureaucratic and institutional bases but are unable to consolidate political control. Problems resulting from weakened institutional capacity and obvious state failure in North Korea might include the market-based forms of association and cooperation outside the control of the state. This form of instability will draw a reactive response from North Korea's neighbors, but most likely would fall short of direct intervention as the moment of crisis is not easily apparent, due to difficulties in gathering sufficient intelligence to make an informed decision on whether and how to most effectively respond.

Another possible challenge resulting from loss of political control might include humanitarian challenges that would result in renewed large-scale refugee flows or displacement across national borders. A humanitarian crisis would presumably lend itself to a cooperative response, and in theory should represent an opportunity for active coordination between the United States, China, South Korea, and North Korea's other neighbors and international agencies in an effort to respond effectively to North Korean needs. However, as demonstrated by the Great Famine experience in the mid-1990s and the type of international response, indicators of crisis severity are often opaque and external intervention would likely be limited and restrained to humanitarian-focused efforts to restore conditions of stability.

In addition to institutional incapacity, a second type of trigger for conflict might involve efforts on the part of North Korea's leadership to reestablish or consolidate political control over various internal actors, including the use of externally-focused provocations used to strengthen internal political control. This type of trigger has a high potential for violence (both as a tool for change and as a reaction), and is more likely to play on existing geostrategic divisions among North Korea's neighbors, especially between the United States, South Korea, and Japan on the one hand and China, North Korea, and Russia on the other. A complete breakdown in political control or the emergence of overt rivalry among or within institutions in North Korea could result in a civil conflict, with the possibility that competing factions might appeal to different external actors for material support.

This scenario has the potential to draw larger powers into a proxy competition for influence over North Korea, and poses the greatest danger of broadening into a regional conflict. The biggest challenge is whether competing factions could garner sufficient support from an outside partner (such as China, Russia, or the United States) might be able constitute a viable alternative to the current regime. This is unlikely under present conditions, as evidenced by Kim Jong-un's purges, fear of defection within high-level cadres is high, and the ability of the regime to restrict and quell any possible peripheral counters ensures his leadership and political control.

Neighbors' Leadership: Capacity and Coordination

External reactions to North Korean instability will differ depending on whether it results from an internal loss of ability to govern (i.e., an "implosion") or from a lashing out by North Korea in an attempt to draw attention or reinforce domestic unity by engaging in an external provocation (i.e., an "explosion"). The nature of the process by which North Korean instability unfolds will also influence the character of the international response, including the level of resources and scale of response. China, the United States, and other neighbors of North Korea are likely to bring to bear as part of this process. In addition to the timing, pace, and nature of North Korean instability, three additional factors are relevant in considering the international response to instability in North Korea depending on how it unfolds: capacity, coordination, and political context. It is important to consider the likely responses of neighbors to prospective North Korean instability.

Republic of Korea

In most cases, South Korea will be on the frontline to determine what resources are needed. South Korea will also need to gauge whether the government and private sector have a capacity to meet the needs alone or, more likely whether and how to issue international appeals for goods that serve to meet the particular needs arising from North

Korean instability. South Korea's ability to coordinate both internally and with its ally, the United States, and other neighbors will have an influence on how the international humanitarian and political dimensions of the problem are defined.

South Korean studies of North Korean instability response scenarios emphasize the necessity of a whole-of-government response. Alliance planners, meanwhile, have recognized that South Korea will need the United States to play a key role in supporting intervention in any scenario addressing the specific challenges associated with North Korean instability. As Evans Revere points out, the main factor affecting alliance intervention is neither U.S. interest nor South Korean need, but rather North Korea's leadership and potential for opposition.⁴ Here, a whole-of-alliance response will be necessary, and is likely to involve comprehensive coordination and inter-governmental cooperation including among agencies that have not yet had long records of cooperation with each other.

The United States

In the event of a rapidly unfolding situation involving either external or internal violence or conflict, a response would be more likely to involve U.S. military assets. Sudden instability and the intervention of U.S.-ROK joint forces would result in significant change on the peninsula. The U.S.-ROK joint response would seek to (1) restore order and stabilize the security situation in North Korea, and (2) provide the necessary security to launch and/or enable a response focused on humanitarian, development, and reconstruction missions.

Likewise, if North Korean instability is accompanied by lashing out or military violence, the United States, by nature of its alliance

4. Evans Revere, "Korean Reunification and U.S. Interests: Preparing for One Korea." Presentation at "Cooperating for Regional Stability in the Process of Korean Unification: Contingency Preparations with the ROK-U.S. as Anchor," the Third Korea Research Institute for Security-Brookings Joint Conference, January 20, 2015, Seoul, South Korea. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/presentations/2015/01/20-korean-reunification-revere>.

commitments, is likely to be drawn into a larger role as part of a military response to the situation. Such a situation is also the one in which U.S. response is most clearly possible according to international law and by virtue of U.S. alliance commitments. In the event of North Korea violating South Korean or U.S. sovereignty and causing loss of life or property through use of nuclear weapons, the U.S.-ROK alliance may decide to take military defense measures comprising a range of possible goals and targets based on a mutually chosen desired end-states.⁵

If instability in North Korea unfolds in a gradual fashion, accompanied by minimal spillover impact on its neighbors, or shows itself primarily through humanitarian or non-military dimensions, the primary thrust of a response may be more economic, political, and humanitarian. In such cases, the United States would be more likely to support South Korea's direct response while avoiding direct involvement in the process. However, a complex humanitarian emergency in North Korea would complicate the calculus, as a drawn-out emergency may lead to spillover effects into China, thereby making it more likely to induce an early Chinese response. It would be in the United States' interest to coordinate such response with China, perhaps even developing coordinated or joint assistance programs within North Korea.⁶ The size and scope of the U.S. role (and that of other actors including China) is likely to be influenced by the extent to which the character of the response requires military power or stabilization versus economic or humanitarian resources.

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5. Lee Sung-chool, "The ROK-U.S. Joint Political and Military Response to North Korean Armed Provocations," Report of the Korea Chair, Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2011. http://csis.org/files/publication/111006_Lee_ROKUSJointResponse_web.pdf, pp. 12-14.
 6. Scott Snyder, "Instability in North Korea and Its Impact on U.S.-China Relations," In *Managing Instability on China's Periphery*. Paul B. Stares, project director. Center for Preventative Action at the Council on Foreign Relations, September 2011. http://www.cfr.org/thinktank/cpa/asia_security.html.

China

China has several rationales for possible intervention to prop up a regime that is descending toward instability. First, many Chinese analysts see North Korea as a strategic “buffer zone” between it and the U.S.-allied South Korea; North Korea serves as a communist bastion against the westward-sweeping wave of democracy as well as a physical barrier between PLA forces and U.S. military installations in South Korea.⁷ The desire to maintain a buffer zone is further compounded by possible refugee flows. China would be anxious about possible U.S. involvement stemming from the U.S.-ROK alliance.⁸ Additionally, China’s economic ties to North Korea have ensured its survival, and economic collapse would be detrimental to those interests. China provides an estimated 85 percent of North Korea’s imports and may receive 75 percent of North Korea’s exports — though Pyongyang may be very uncomfortable with this dependence, it also has few other options for international trade.⁹

China’s ability to exert influence on the outcome resulting from Korean instability, and on resulting regional political and security arrangements, is likely to grow over time. This is significant because it gives China an incentive to delay Korean unification to the extent possible by economically and politically propping up North Korea as long as possible. Put differently, China has few incentives to be the first mover if change is gradual, but could feel pressure to intervene to forestall impending and widespread instability. Existing strategic mistrust between China and both South Korea and the United States

7. Dick K. Nanto and Mark E. Manyin, “China-North Korea Relations,” Congressional Research Service, December 28, 2010. <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41043.pdf>. See also Lim, 2004.

8. Bruce Bennett, *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse*, RAND Corporation, 2013. http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR331.html, pp. 87-91.

9. Nicholas Eberstadt and Alex Colbin, “Dependencia, North Korean Style,” Asan Institute for International Studies, *Issue Brief* no. 32, November 6, 2014. <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/dependencia-north-korea-style/>.

is a final complicating factor that may influence how various scenarios may unfold. In fact, the gap between Chinese and South Korean interests and potentially contradictory responses to North Korean instability is great enough that it is possible to imagine the two sides responding to each other as much as to developments in North Korea.

Scenarios for Instability

As a means by which to further the discussion above, we might consider China's impact on four general scenarios in order to test the first mover's ability to shape potential outcomes resulting from North Korean instability: (1) complex humanitarian emergency and the collapse of state control; (2) North Korea's lashing out; (3) infighting and protracted struggle for political control; (4) internal struggle followed by humanitarian crisis, and (5) North Korean proliferation.

Humanitarian Emergency

A complex humanitarian emergency could lead to the collapse of the political governing structure, resulting in refugee flows and a need to stabilize internal political order. Problems resulting from a weakening of institutional capacity leading to state failure might include economic and humanitarian challenges and would result in renewed refugee flows or displacement that might spill across national borders. This form of instability would draw a reactive response from North Korea's neighbors, but most likely would fall short of a level necessary to induce direct intervention, at least in its initial stages. A humanitarian crisis is an instability scenario that in theory could lend itself to a cooperative response, and should represent an opportunity for active coordination between the United States, China, and South Korea — and possibly other state, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental actors — in an effort to respond effectively to North Korean needs.

A complex humanitarian emergency has already served as grounds for international intervention in North Korea in the mid-1990s; the

characteristics of that crisis are illustrative because they reveal a slowly unfolding crisis that ultimately did not result in a failure of North Korean political control despite severe internal stresses within the North Korean system. But a humanitarian emergency could also serve as the evidence for a loss of political control inside North Korea and cast sufficient doubt on its ability to govern, in which case a humanitarian crisis could become the framework upon which the international community bases its initial response to North Korean instability. A rapidly unfolding humanitarian crisis in North Korea would be a potentially powerful catalyst for action, but would presumably confine the framework for consideration of intervention to a humanitarian focus rather than directly addressing (forced) regime change. Multilateral intervention would ideally be cooperative, either through stepped up efforts by nongovernmental organizations or possibly involving military logistical elements in support of an operation that would be confined to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) functions. At the same time, any HADR operation might also be used as a pretext for a more intensive intervention to achieve specific political objectives, and such an intervention would be bound to capture the attention of the international community. For this reason, the questions of who responds first, the nature and scope of the response (and particularly whether the intervention involves physical presence in North Korea), and the political response by other parties to humanitarian intervention will have a bearing on the way in which the crisis response unfolds.

A humanitarian crisis accompanied by a political vacuum of leadership in Pyongyang could also become a pretext for early intervention by either China or South Korea in order to stabilize the situation and gain advantage in shaping the end state of the peninsula to their advantage. In such an environment, political control may be uneven and variable depending on the quality and effectiveness of local- or provincial-level authorities to maintain order and procure goods for the local population. A breakdown in coordinated governance and variance in the strength of local officials could also complicate potential plans for intervention from the outside. In areas that

remain stable, foreign intervention could become a source of conflict between the domestic officials and foreign HADR efforts. In areas of instability, there can be conflict between the foreign aid groups who intervene. A complex humanitarian emergency could also become exacerbated by the failing regime's response, which might use externally-targeted aggression to coerce neighboring states to supply food — and therefore bolster the stability of the regime.

In the event of a complex humanitarian emergency accompanied by state failure, China might be motivated to move first, especially if North Korean refugee flows to China trigger an early response. There have been reports that China has planned for an intervention that involves setting up a perimeter inside North Korean territory as a way of stemming refugee flows into China.¹⁰ However, such a course seems risky for China because it would invite strong political condemnation both from two fronts: South Korea, due to its troubled history with occupation and which would be blocked by China for its national goal of unification, and the international community, which views Chinese territorial and maritime border disputes with increasing suspicion. So even though China might have a strong desire to intervene, the intervention-legitimacy paradox would factor into their strategy. It is more likely that Chinese intervention in response to a complex humanitarian emergency would involve enhanced economic measures and moving material inputs into North Korea to stanch the refugee flow, but would stop short of military intervention. The bar inhibiting direct Chinese intervention into North Korea might gradually be lowered in the event of protracted chaos, but would likely come at a cost to China's international reputation and feed fears of Chinese expansionism among its Asian neighbors. Chinese military intervention into the North would likely carry high political costs in South Korea, the region and the international community.

Likewise, if South Korea were to pursue an early military intervention in North Korea to restore order in response to a humanitarian

10. Darcie Draudt, "Outward Migrations Flows in the Event of Regime Collapse: An Interview With Dr. Go Myung-hyun," *Sino-NK*. October 22, 2013.

and political crisis, Chinese analysts have already signaled their view that such an initiative would be contrary to international law and a violation of North Korea's sovereignty as a nation state, regardless of the merits of South Korea's constitutional, political, and historical claim on the North. In this case, legitimacy for South Korean intervention may build over time as the need for intervention becomes vital for regional stability. Protracted instability in the North and a prolonged vacuum in political power might eventually work in South Korea's favor if the international community were to judge that South Korea's jurisdiction over the North might be the best option to restore stability to the peninsula. However, the situation might be reversed and China might enjoy the legitimacy to intervene if North Korean authorities, faced with an irreversible loss of power and seeking their own safety and uncertain regime survival, were to invite Chinese political and military intervention to maintain stability as a result of North Korean leaders' loss of political control.

As long as the quality of instability internal to North Korea is characterized by a vacuum in leadership rather than an internal political competition among factions, the bar for intervention into the North may be higher than commonly realized. The first mover in this scenario may seek an advantage by shaping the reality on the ground especially in a sudden or rapid intervention that also involves military elements. But, such intervention could generate severe costs by generating negative international judgments (legal or political) regarding the legitimacy of the intervention, unless it is clear that such intervention would have been necessary to prevent the breakout of a civil war within North Korea. A gradually evolving, protracted crisis might afford a more conducive environment for military intervention by China (as protector of North Korea's sovereignty) or South Korea (as legitimate claimant to the entire peninsular territory) if the international community were to conclude that such intervention is necessary to prevent a vacuum or civil war (i.e., scenario 3). As long as the spillover effects from North Korean stability are primarily humanitarian, in the form of refugee flows, and do not involve violence, outward attacks, or internal military conflict among factions in the

North, the first responder may gain a geographical advantage but may also lose political legitimacy of the intervention. Moreover, should North Korean instability remain primarily a humanitarian rather than a military security issue, international stalemate is more likely to ensue, especially in a United Nations context, with no unanimous course of action effectively influencing either the political or the humanitarian dimensions of state failure in North Korea.

Rising North Korean Provocations

North Korean internal instability could result in intentional initiation of military conflict. Such provocations could be part of a strategy designed to gain resources from external actors or a means by which to reconsolidate domestic political control. In this scenario, the leadership might seek to compensate for loss of control over the main institutions in North Korea (including the military, public security institutions, or the party), or to stamp out emergent challengers that dare to challenge the state. The leadership might expect externally-focused provocations to face retaliation — in essence, the flailing regime would generate an external threat against which to unify, justifying strengthened internal political controls. A North Korean violent response to its own instability would most likely be sudden and exploit the element of surprise. It is hard to imagine a gradual lashing out by North Korea (although one might argue that current series of limited and sporadic provocations by North Korean leadership on the defensive might be considered a slow lashing out). Essentially, in the event that the Kim family regime were to determine that loss of political control were inevitable, Kim Jong-un's response would most likely involve a military action. Such an offensive attack followed by implosion tracks with a scenario that has been the subject of decades of USFK and ROK Ministry of National Defense planning.

In this case, North Korea would be the first mover in response to its own instability, and the victim of a North Korean strike becomes the respondent on which all eyes will be fixed. In this sense, the regime undercuts its legitimacy through its destabilizing acts. If the

target of a strike by a failing North Korean leadership were Seoul, the U.S.-ROK operational plans in the event of North Korea's offensive military provocations are clear and the response would probably constitute the shortest possible route to Korean unification. Although China might harbor objections, this scenario offers little that China could do in the face of U.S.-ROK retaliation against the North. Chinese authorities have already indicated to the North that Chinese support would not be forthcoming in the event of North Korean-initiated aggression against the South.

A North Korean missile strike on the territory of Japan, however, might pose a particularly difficult policy challenge for the United States involving differing expectations for military intervention between South Korean and Japanese allies. On the one hand, Japan would expect the United States to retaliate decisively against the North based on U.S. security commitments to the defense of Japan; while South Korea might show concern that a U.S. counterstrike would result in escalation of conflict in ways that would inevitably have direct fallout for South Korea.

A complicated but relatively implausible scenario might involve China as the victim of a North Korean strike, in which case China would arguably have a right to respond and a degree of political space in which do so, but may not have a detailed plan for intervention in response to such an action by Pyongyang. The United States and South Korea would certainly seek to increase communication with China to develop a coordinated response to a truly rogue North Korea. Though China may be reticent to force regime change, an aggressive, adversarial, and failing regime equipped with nuclear weapons outweighs any interests in maintaining a buffer zone.

Infighting and Internal Struggle for Control

A complete breakdown in political control or the emergence of overt rivalry between or within institutions in North Korea could result in a civil conflict, with the possibility that competing factions might appeal to different external actors for material support. This scenario

has the potential to draw larger powers into a proxy competition for influence over North Korea, and poses the greatest danger of broadening into a regional conflict. It also raises the greatest risk of drawing first and second responders into a conflictual spiral in which North Korean proxy forces play out conflicting approaches and interests of China on the one hand and a U.S.-backed South Korea on the other.

Because of the current character of the North Korean regime and the absence of organized opposition, the contours for the competing centers for such civil conflict are difficult to predict at this stage. The onset of civil war or a full-scale overt competition for power in North Korea may be unlikely, given that like his father Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un appears to have successfully eviscerated potential alternative centers of power. Despite some uncertainty over the ability of Kim Jong-un to continue Kim family political control following his father's death in December 2011,¹¹ the young leader has apparently consolidated his control through various personnel changes and purges (most notably the execution of his uncle Jang Sung-taek, who some had previously presumed to serve as the regent for Kim Jong-un).¹² If instability in the North is to be accompanied by internal strife or a civil conflict, the onset of instability and competition for power in North Korea is likely to be gradual, murky, and chaotic, as principal contenders struggle behind the scenes to capture resources and institutional alliances necessary to build power in the event of a total collapse and deligitimation of the existing power structure in North Korea.

As part of those efforts to consolidate resources necessary to contend for power, it is possible that contenders might seek economic resources from China or South Korea. How external parties respond to requests for assistance will draw them into support for local proxies,

11. Jonathan Pollack, "Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un: North Korea in Transition," at Brookings Institution website. December 19, 2011. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/12/19-north-korea-pollack>.

12. Ken E. Gause, "North Korean Leadership Dynamics and Decision-Making Under Kim Jong-un: A Second-Year Assessment," Center for Naval Analyses, March 2014. http://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/northkorean_leadership_secondyearassessment.pdf, pp. 4-5.

perhaps primarily as a rear-guard action to prevent a less favorable contender from gaining power in North Korea to the exclusion of one's own interest. Regardless of whether China or South Korea is a first mover in responding to such requests from potential aspirants for power within North Korea, it is likely that there will be two or more contenders. Once any proxy, whether backed by China or South Korea, becomes apparent, other contenders within North Korea will a rush to secure alternative sources of financial support.

A proxy competition for political control as a result of decisions by South Korea and China to provide material support, risks prolonged internal competition for power and may in fact heighten instability, to the cost and detriment of both Chinese and South Korean interests. Moreover, international organizations such as the United Nations would be marginalized; disputing parties, based on various claims of legitimacy to rule, would initially prevent international intervention, and the UN may not be able to help mediate or host negotiations until the political factions have carried out their plans, at which point a stronger leader may be clear.

Following a system breakdown in North Korea, the emergence of a North Korean civil conflict that draws competition among competing proxies externally financed by neighbors with conflicting interests is the worst possible scenario one can imagine developing from North Korean instability. Such a scenario might involve protracted destabilization of the North and would increase the bill for reconstruction of the North, which at least one source estimates at around USD 500 billion.¹³

Internal Struggle Followed By Humanitarian Crisis

A fourth possible scenario would be a combination of scenarios one and three described above. In the event of internal competition for power, competing factions might turn to outside actors for assistance. In the wake of the dissolution of political control, sources for food

13. Agence France-Presse, "South Korea Says Economic Cost of Unification Would Be \$500 Billion," *The Guardian (London)*, November 19, 2014.

and other supplies to the wider population may break down, leading to a humanitarian crisis. Were governments to respond to these appeals with financial aid or supplies to one of competing factions (but not to the point of full-scale military intervention by providing troops), each state may later find themselves in a constrained position in the event a later humanitarian crisis arising around the civil strife.

This scenario, to an extent, is reflective of the situation in North Korea in the period following the Korean War in the 1950s and 1960s. In this case, post-war North Korea under a politically weakened Kim Il-sung faced a competition between two different patrons, the Soviet Union and China, for influence in the post-war reconstruction of North Korea. Seeing its interests best served by a strong socialist brother as an anchor on the peninsula against the incoming U.S. export of democracy below the 38th parallel, Beijing's debt cancellation, aid, factory reconstruction, and technical training supported North Korea's economic stabilization.¹⁴ In the end, Kim Il-sung consolidated power by purging pro-Chinese and pro-Soviet factions who challenged his leadership. (U.S. and UN aid to South Korea performed a similar role, supporting allies in the Asia-Pacific first with defense and then with development support.)

In the current geostrategic climate, the emergence of competing factions within North Korea may play out differently. If neighboring states choose to involve themselves in support for a particular contending faction or power center within North Korea, they might find themselves constrained due to the intervention-legitimacy paradox in response to the outbreak of a subsequent humanitarian crisis. South Korean groups, including not only the state but also civil and political groups, might seek early involvement with one of the rival North Korean factions, possibly as a way to ensure or instigate unification with the South. On the other hand, Washington's main concern

14. Charles K. Armstrong, "The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of North Korea, 1950-1960," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 8, issue 51, no. 2 (2010). http://www.japanfocus.org/-Charles_K_-Armstrong/3460/article.html.

would be commitment to unification and containing any violence to North Korean territory, and division over how to respond could become a source of tension and difference between the United States and South Korea. It would be both unlikely and impolitic for the United States to directly and unilaterally provide aid in the form of arms; indeed, most U.S. policy experts recommend the Washington defer to Seoul on management of change or contest in North Korea.¹⁵ The United States might seek influence, however, by providing resources to South Korea for its activities to support a faction within a destabilized South Korea. In this case, the United States and international organizations such as the UN would have the political space to provide humanitarian assistance to a crisis that develops from infighting. Both the United States and South Korea have sought a deeper level of consultation with China on the need to collaborate in planning for such a scenario, but Beijing has resisted such discussions.¹⁶

China might also have an immediate interest in supporting a pro-Beijing faction and in ensuring the continuity of the North Korean state. China's early intervention might also generate expectations that responsibility to offer solutions for a humanitarian crisis would fall on Beijing's shoulders. Failure to do so would corrode the political strength of the faction it supports, both to a North Korean domestic and to an international audience. Without taking steps to mitigate unrest and migration likely to follow such a humanitarian crisis during a battle for political control, China would face the sort of massive refugee flows it seeks to avoid. As such, in the event of a China-first intervention, China would seek to fortify the Sino-Korean land border in addition to providing food supply.¹⁷ China would be unlikely to

15. For example, see Paul B. Stares and Joel S. Wit, "Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea," *Council Special Report*, no. 42 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, January 2009), pp. 29-30.

16. Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Lind, "The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements," *International Security* 36, no. 6 (2011), p. 87.

17. Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John S. Park, "Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor: Chinese Views of Economic Reform and Stability in North Korea," Working Paper (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies and U.S. Institute for Peace, January 3, 2008), p. 19.

tolerate mass migration into its borders, especially if it is able to influence actors competing for North Korean leadership from within.

South Korea might also seek to preemptively stem potential refugee flows, but such a maneuver might also endanger Seoul's influence in the North following stabilization of a new regime. If China is the first mover in trying to influence the course of events in North Korea, South Korea's options to provide aid to a humanitarian crisis could be shaped by the nature of the China faction — how much it is framed as distant or near to Seoul, and whether it is revolutionary or reactionary within the North Korean context. A China-backed North Korea group might find South Korea a threat, and seek to limit influence from the South. But, if no competing faction were backed by South Korea and a consolidated China-backed North Korean leadership were inclined toward reform, Seoul may have room to send economic support, food aid, or human resources to the North to help address the humanitarian crisis. Were this the case, a North Korea with a China-backed leadership could potentially be secured by China, but have its resources and infrastructure rebuilt by South Korea.

North Korea Proliferation

A fifth scenario that would be a trigger for instability might involve North Korean proliferation associated with a successful terrorist attack involving the use of nuclear materials from North Korea or evidence of the transfer of knowledge that enables emerging actors to become nuclear-capable. In this case, it is highly likely that the United States might resort to the use of force against North Korea both to punish the North and to decapitate the North Korean leadership so as to eliminate the possibility of the North engaging in further proliferation-related activities. The United States would claim that international proliferation laws and norms corroborate its legitimacy in intervening, thereby lessening the effect of the intervention-legitimacy paradox.

The United States has offered numerous pledges and assurances to North Korea that it does not have hostile intent toward the North

during negotiations and seeks to address its denuclearization via “negotiated solutions,” but the United States has also been clear in its commitment to extended deterrence of the North. The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review provides blanket nuclear security assurances to non-nuclear states, which presumably apply universal to every country except North Korea as a *de facto* nuclear state and possibly to Iran.¹⁸ However, in the event that an act of nuclear terrorism were to occur as a result of North Korean proliferation, the United States would likely take its revenge militarily by destabilizing the North Korean regime using military means.

Presumably, such a scenario would be a prelude to rapid Korean unification and would obligate the United States to remain involved in ways that restore stability and reconstruction of the North. It is easy to imagine that despite objections both to U.S. military intervention and to Korean unification, there would be little that China might be able to do to oppose it. In fact, nuclearization and proliferation may be a tipping point for China to consider North Korea as a strategic burden rather than a buffer zone.¹⁹ At the same time, the conduct of such an operation against China’s border state and erstwhile buffer would also have a potentially profound effect on U.S.-China relations, as well as on China’s views of the United States. The question is whether the two great powers can work cooperatively to support and, with Seoul, manage a unification by absorption process.²⁰ How China responds to and manages such a process would more clearly define the contours of its rise as a global power.

This scenario runs the risk of taking the circumstances surrounding Korean unification out of the hands of the Koreans themselves,

18. “Nuclear Posture Review Report,” U.S. Department of Defense, April 2010. <http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20Nuclear%20Posture%20Review%20Report.pdf>.

19. Kim Heungkyu, “From a Buffer Zone to a Strategic Burden: Evolving Sino-North Korea Relations During the Hu Jintao Era,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 22, no. 1 (2010), pp. 57-74.

20. See also Snyder, “Instability in North Korea and Its Impact on U.S.-China Relations.”

even while resulting in the outcome to which they are rhetorically committed. Such a development would have profound influence on the U.S.-Korea alliance, and would likely be a test of the survival of the alliance.

Conclusion: China's Strategic Interests and the 2015 Geopolitical Context

To South Korea, the division of the Korean Peninsula and the existence of the North Korean regime is an obstacle to unification and a source of instability. President Park Geun-hye's Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation, announced in February 2014 and first convened in August 2014, has sought to develop a comprehensive approach to planning for unification.²¹ The committee comprises fifty members with President Park as the committee chair; members come from the civil sector and government, and its subcommittees address issues of foreign policy and security, economics, social and cultural aspects, and politics and law.²² The committee, which has announced it would complete its plan in two to three years,²³ has followed an approach framed by unification by absorption, a method which even within the committee has been contentious.²⁴

Meanwhile, under the Park administration South Korea has courted China, its largest trading partner and who it sees as holding the key to Pyongyang (and by extension, unification). While North Korea has been seen attempting to diversify its own foreign relations, South Korea has secured a public reaffirmation by China of its commitment

21. Chang Jae-soon, "Park to Launch Unification Preparatory Committee," *Yonhap*, February 25, 2014.

22. Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation website. <http://www.pcup.go.kr/main.do>. (Date Accessed June 12, 2015).

23. "Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation Announces Plan Will Be Completed in 2-3 Years" (in Korean), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, March 3, 2015.

24. Kim Sung-jae, "Unification by Absorbtion Will Be Disastrous" (in Korean), *JoongAng Ilbo*, March 18, 2015.

to denuclearization.²⁵ Hwang Joon-gook, South Korea's chief delegate of the six-party talks and the director of MOFA's Korean Peninsula Peace Negotiation Center, highlighted "China's special responsibility" and "the constructive role that only China can play" before he visited China to meet his Chinese counterpart Wu Dawei, but China responded by stating that efforts to contain North Korea's threat are a "mutual responsibility" and "constructive effort." A South Korean news article on the exchange concludes that China has denied appeals to enhance their pressure on the North.²⁶

The United States, for its part, has made it clear that North Korea's continued development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles destabilizes the region and threatens the security of neighboring countries. Moreover, U.S. officials have reiterated the commitment to a peninsula reunified under Seoul's leadership. In Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel's words, "We will never accept a permanent division of the Korean Peninsula," underscoring first efforts to sustain peace "through deterrence and a strong allied defense" and maintenance of regional stability as preparation for unification.²⁷ Like South Korea, the United States identifies China as important in North Korea's denuclearization. In May 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry, speaking in Seoul at a press conference with South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Yun Byung-se, said, "With respect to the methodology for boosting sanctions and other things, we (the United States and China) are discussing all of that now. China has obviously an extraordinary leverage."²⁸

25. Scott Snyder and Byun See-won, "China-Korea Relations: Balancing Acts by China and South Korea," *Comparative Connections*, September 2014. http://csis.org/files/publication/1402qchina_korea.pdf.

26. "China Steps Back Again [From its Special Responsibility With North Korea] ... Are They Committed to Solving the Problem?" (in Korean) *Munhwa Ilbo*, May 29, 2015.

27. Daniel R. Russel, Remarks at CSIS Korean Unification Conference, Washington, DC. December 10, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2014/12/234944.htm>.

28. David Brunnstrom and Park Ju-min, "Kerry Says U.S. and China Discuss Further Sanctions On North Korea," Reuters, May 18, 2015.

China has placed denuclearization and stability on the same footing with respect to its priorities for the Korean Peninsula. Some analysts indicate Beijing's attitude toward Pyongyang may be getting colder, based on China's criticism of North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear capabilities, Pyongyang's turn away from Beijing to seek other potential partners, and Kim Jong-un's execution of officials deeply engaged with Chinese economy and politics, such as Jang Sung-taek.²⁹

In spring 2015, Beijing began to show signs of impatience and concern over North Korea's potential to threaten the stability of the region. Chinese nuclear experts in April this year reportedly estimated North Korea's arsenal of nuclear warheads to be up to twenty (similar to U.S. estimates). Reading between these lines, nuclear arms expert Gary Samore explained that the release of these estimates must have been encouraged by the Chinese government. Samore believes this is a way for China to express to the United States its frustration with the stagnated talks on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, Samore believes this is a "sign of some nervousness on the part of China that Kim Jong-un may do something provocative that would hurt China's national interest."³⁰

U.S. officials claim that China has agreed that pressure needs to be part of the multilateral approach to containing Pyongyang.³¹ But a May 2015 statement by Chinese MOFA spokesperson Hong Lei calls once again for resumption of the six-party talks, which Hong says would "secure a big picture called the Korean Peninsula's peace and stability."³² (Complicating China's calculus is U.S.-ROK informal

29. Michael Pilger and Caitlin Campbell, "Diminishing China-North Korea Exchanges: An Assessment," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Research Report, March 23, 2015. <http://www.uscc.gov/Research/diminishing-china-north-korea-exchanges-assessment>, p. 3.

30. "Expert: China's Nuclear Warning May Be Sign of Frustration With U.S.," *Voice of America*, April 27, 2015.

31. "China Agrees To 'Pressure' N. Korea On Nuclear Tests, U.S. Says," *Newsmax*, May 29, 2015.

32. "China Says 'Don't Provoke' On North Korea's Assertion On Nuclear Warhead Miniaturization" (in Korean), *Maeil Business Newspaper*, May 21, 2015.

discussions of introducing the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) weapons system, a U.S. technology that might be introduced as a deterrent to the growing North Korean missile threat.³³ Moreover, China has tried its best to play down fears of North Korea's threat: a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) test by North Korea on May 9 set off speculation regarding its impact on diplomacy with China,³⁴ but Chinese MOFA spokesperson Hua Chunying urged the international community to "react with restraint,"³⁵ a Chinese call to perpetuate the status quo.

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33. Scott Snyder, "South Korea's Self-Defense Needs: Does China Get a Veto?" *Asia Unbound*, CFR.org, February 13, 2015. <http://blogs.cfr.org/asia/2015/02/13/south-koreas-self-defense-needs-does-china-get-a-veto/>.

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