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14. ABSTRACT

The potential for a security failure on the Korean peninsula provides an opportunity for cooperation between China and the United States, and demonstrates the need to prioritize communication architecture between the Combined Forces Command and China's People's Liberation Army's Northern Theatre Command. Commander to Commander communications are necessary to coordinate military intent across the forward lines of troops, managing the potential for escalation. Additionally, intelligence sharing is required to synchronize WMD site containment. Finally, communication will be key to effectively manage refugee operations and mitigate a likely humanitarian disaster. Cooperation between Russia and the US in Syria against ISIS provides a framework for how to develop communications between peer competitors.

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Cooperating with China: Deconflicting Operations During Crisis on the Korean Peninsula



A security crisis on the Korean peninsula is imminent, and the US must establish communications with China to cooperate on the issue, including intelligence sharing. Kim Jong Un concluded 2022 having fired and test-launched 90 ballistic missiles, three times more than any previous year in North Korea's history.¹ In the first three months of 2023, he has already launched 26 projectiles, including intercontinental ballistic missiles.² Administration officials in both US and South Korean presidential offices believe a seventh nuclear test from North Korea is forthcoming.³ Meanwhile, the citizens of North Korea are starving, with a protest and skirmish developing outside the communist party offices.⁴ The line of succession is not clear, with Kim Jon Un taking opportunities to present his ten-year-old daughter at five events in the last three months.⁵ All of these issues show instability and potential for a failed state. However, the potential for a security failure on the Korean peninsula provides an opportunity for cooperation between China and the United States, and demonstrates the need to prioritize communication architecture between the Combined Forces Command and China's People's Liberation Army's Northern Theatre Command. Commander to Commander communications are necessary to coordinate military intent across the forward lines of troops, managing the potential for escalation. Additionally, intelligence sharing is required to synchronize WMD site containment. Finally, communication will be key to effectively manage refugee operations and mitigate a likely humanitarian disaster. Cooperation between Russia and the US in Syria against ISIS provides a framework for how to develop communications between peer competitors.

¹ "North Korea: What Missiles Does It Have?" BBC News. 4 January 2023.

² De Guzman, Chad. "North Korea is Ramping Up Its Missile Tests. How Worried Should We Be?" Time Magazine, 12 APR 2023.

³ Gramer, Robert. "North Korea's Next Nuclear Test is a Matter of 'when,' Not 'if'" Foreign Policy Magazine. 23 November 2022.

⁴ "North Koreans are at a Growing Risk of Starvation." *The Economist*, 21 MAR 2023.

⁵ McKenzie, Jean. "Succession Questions Raised by Presence of Kim's Daughter," *BBC News*, 9 Feb 2023.

NK Threat History and Capabilities

Since the start of the Korean War in 1950, North Korea has been a threat to the United States and regional security. Initially, this was due to a Cold War-supported conventional force, with China and Russia providing funds and training to the North Korean military. From 1953-1991, North Korea invested heavily in offensive capabilities, fielding armor, long range artillery and mechanized forces, creating a capacity to rapidly isolate Seoul through combined arms maneuver.⁶

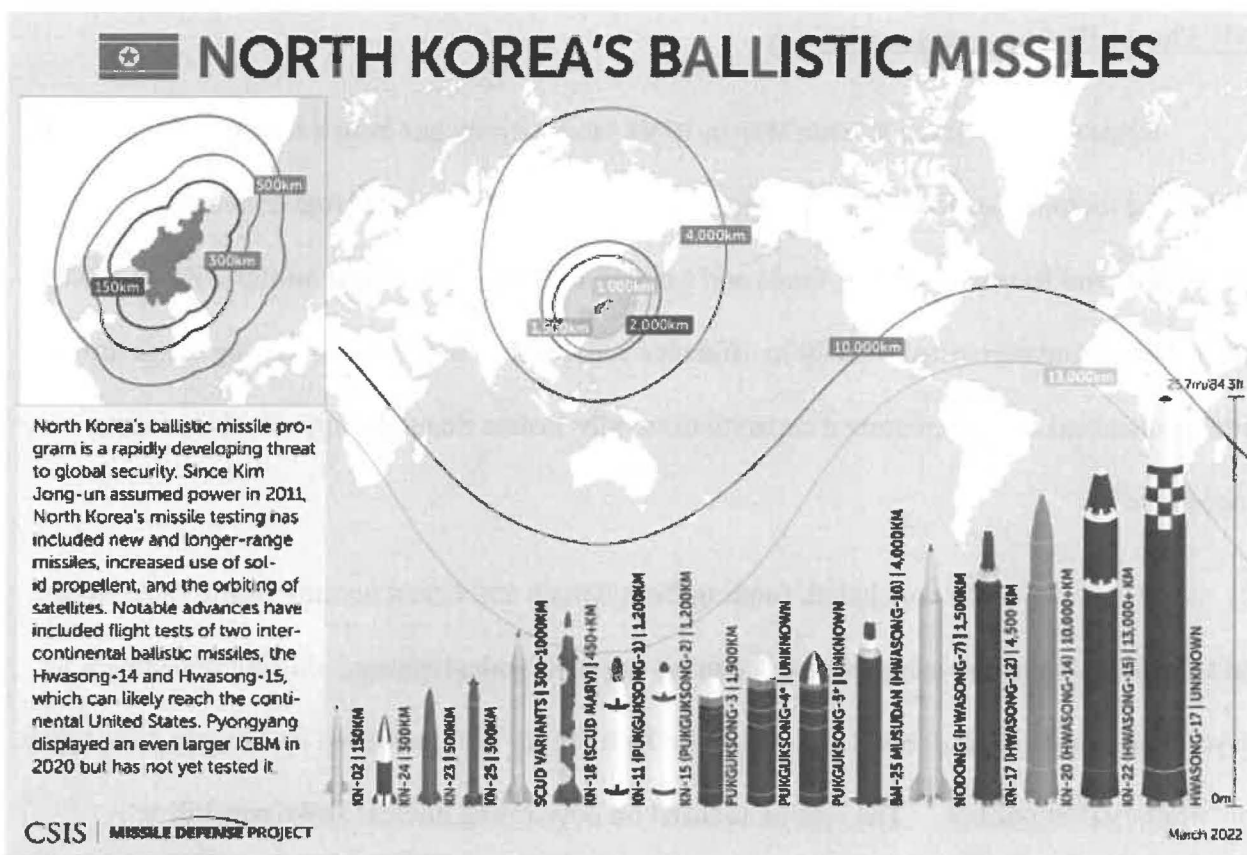
As the Cold War concluded, funding from Russia and China became nearly nonexistent, and North Korea had to adapt from a declining conventional advantage, shifting investment to asymmetric capabilities. This is also when the Kim family first published its Songun philosophy, or "military first politics."⁷ The regime focused on developing nuclear strike capability, specifically with heavy investment in long-range ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. 1993 saw the successful test launches of the No-dong, a scud-variant ballistic missile, and by 1998 North Korea was attempting satellite launches.⁸ Missile testing continued from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il and today with Kim Jong Un. Advances include newer, larger intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching the United States, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, multi-stage rockets and hypersonics.⁹

⁶ *North Korea Military Power: A Growing Regional and Global Threat*, Defense Intelligence Agency, September 2021, pg 3.

⁷ Ibid, pg 4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, pg 5-6.



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Simultaneous with ballistic missile development, North Korea's nuclear program received most of its national investment since Songun. However, the program has existed for over 70 years. The Soviet Union initiated the program with North Korea in 1956, with the construction of the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center completed in 1962.¹¹ For 50 years, North Korea amassed resources of uranium ore and graphite, while constructing yellow-cake factories and nuclear reactors for plutonium production.¹² The United States did not even know about North Korea's nuclear program until 1989.¹³ In 2006, a 0.2 kiloton detonation occurred in North Korea,

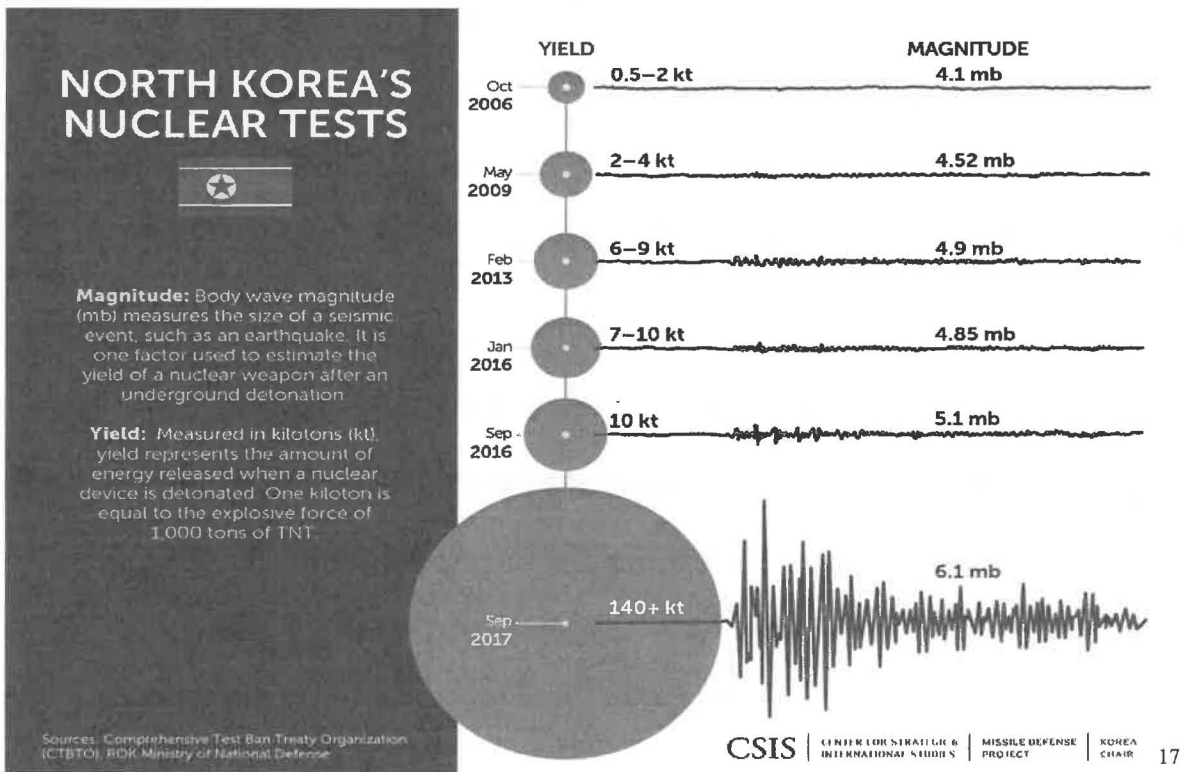
¹⁰ <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/dprk>

¹¹ Bolton, Derek, "North Korea's Nuclear Program," American Security Project. August 2012.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

believed to be their first nuclear weapons test (Hiroshima was 15 kilotons).¹⁴ North Korea has since conducted five more tests in 2009, 2013, 2016, and 2017.¹⁵ The 2017 nuclear test reached a yield of 140 kilotons.¹⁶ With ballistic missiles that range the continental US and an advancing nuclear weapons program that has already seen 140 kilotons capacity, North Korea has demonstrated itself as a global security threat.



¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Nuclear Dynamics of North East Asia,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

¹⁶ Cha, Victor. “North Korea’s Nuclear Tests,” Center for Strategic and International Studies. 2017.

¹⁷ <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/dprk>

Assumption of Chinese Intervention

The South Korean and American alliance is built around deterring and countering the threat posed by North Korea. At the operational level, this takes the shape of Operational Plan 5015, the Combined Forces Command's military plan for combined joint operations on the peninsula. It has been in place since 2015 and has been in revision since 2021. One of the primary topics for the revision is third-party intervention, or more specifically, how China will intervene.¹⁸ What was once a "will they" has become a "how they" question for planning in the theatre. When speaking to Congress on the matter, Dr. Carla Freeman, Director of the Foreign Policy Institute at John Hopkins relayed the following:

China believes that there are five key threats to its interests from a crisis involving North Korea: First, massive refugee flows into Northeast China; Second, environmental and health damage from North Korean weapons of mass destruction being tested, accidentally used, or attacked; third, a US strike on North Korea's nuclear arsenal or production facilities that escalates into wider conflict; fourth, the use of North Korean weapons of mass destruction against China; and finally, China being excluded from diplomatic solutions to the crisis.¹⁹

Additionally, Dr. Mastro, Center Fellow at Stanford University's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, notes that China and South Korea are the likely victims to suffer the effects of fallout in the case of a nuclear explosion on the Korean peninsula.²⁰ This defines a clear

¹⁸ Yoon, Sukjoon. "How Will the US and South Korea Rewrite Their Operational Plan?" *The Diplomat*, 22 DEC 2021.

¹⁹ US Congress. "United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission." 115th Congress, 2nd Session. Washington, 12 April 2018. Pg 16.

²⁰ Mastro, Oriana Skylar. "Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula," *International Security*, 2018, Vol. 43. Pg 98.

security interest by China to ensure nuclear actions do not occur. Additionally, if the Coalition secures all the North Korean nuclear sites, China is worried about a unified, nuclear Korea allied to the US on their border.²¹ By Chinese logic, it is better to secure WMD sites themselves and guarantee a denuclearized peninsula. This shows that politically, China has identified its national interests at stake in the event of conflict.

To provide the capability to answer political needs, China has been preparing for intervention on the Korean peninsula with the Northern Theater Command and People's Armed Police conducting exercises addressing contingency operations.²² The Northern Theater Command has three Army Groups of 30,000 to 50,000 Soldiers, each with an organic aviation and special operations forces brigades.²³ Additionally, the units have conducted drills in radiation monitoring, contamination inspection, and decontamination.²⁴ This shows a capability to intervene by ground or air in order to secure WMD sites. China maintains 50,000 police in the northern provinces in vicinity of the border with North Korea with capabilities to secure the border, set up refugee camps and manage the buffer.²⁵

Based on national interests and the capabilities established, this paper will assume that China will intervene on the Korean Peninsula to control refugees, seize WMD sites, and create negotiation space with Coalition forces. Instead of being viewed as an obstacle, Chinese intervention on the peninsula provides an opportunity for cooperation between China and the United States. The operational environment maintains advantages and disadvantages for both the

²¹ Ibid, pg 99.

²² US Congress. "United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission." 115th Congress, 2nd Session. Washington, 12 April 2018. Pg 11.

²³ Ibid, pg 29.

²⁴ Ibid, pg 33.

²⁵ Ibid, pg 29.

Combined Forces Command and People's Liberation Army. Through cooperation, advantages can be maximized and disadvantages mitigated, resulting in a mutually beneficial result of WMD sites secured, humanitarian crisis managed, and the risk of escalation eased. Establishing communication architecture between the Combined Forces Command and Northern Theatre Command will enable coordination of the forward lines of troops, intelligence exchange supporting WMD site containment, and collaboration during refugee operations.

The Forward Line of Troops and Preventing Escalation

Commander to Commander communications are necessary to coordinate military intent across the forward lines of troops, managing the potential for escalation. As conflict is ongoing, especially with a nuclear-capable North Korea, opportunities for miscalculation will arise that may result with nuclear escalation. It is paramount that Chinese and Coalition commanders understand each others' intent, so that they can de-escalate and isolate the conflict to a limited war. Additionally, as Coalition and China's forces advance to their objectives, overlapping battlespaces will likely occur. Chinese and coalition commanders must have a way to deconflict the forward line of troops, so that accidental Coalition on Chinese engagements are kept to a minimum. Commander to Commander communications are a priority requirement to operations.

Coordination between US and Russian forces in Syria provides a framework for communication between the Combined Forces Command and Northern Theatre Command. In a similar scenario, the US and Russia worked together, despite opposing strategic endgoals and a history of tensions brought on by competition. They found a commonality in pursuing the destruction of ISIS, even though the US opposed the Assad regime, Russia's ally.²⁶ The

²⁶ Ng, Nicole and Adrew S. Weiss. "Collision Avoidance: Lessons From U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019.

avoidance of nuclear catastrophe and securing regional stability offers justification for cooperation on the Korean Peninsula.

US and Russia's coordination efforts began with a memorandum of understanding on air safety protocols, but most importantly, the MOU established a 24-hour communication line between on-the-ground commanders.²⁷ This was used to deconflict air operations, ensuring American and Russian fighters did not encounter each other and that air strikes would not target each others' forces. This management of the FLOT safeguarded the risk of escalation. Eventually, the communication capability expanded to include "a twenty-four-hour hotline that connects mid-level US officers at the Combined Air Operations Center in Qatar with their Russian counterparts at Khmeimim Air Base in Syria."²⁸ Similarly, the air component commanders should have an established communication system, preferably a comparable 24-hour communication line, to prevent Chinese and Coalition fratricide.

As ground forces approached opposing FLOTs, it became necessary to establish coordinating lines. US and Russian staffs were able to coordinate boundaries along the Euphrates River to determine operating areas.²⁹ Pertinent to AO discussions on both sides was an emphasis that operating in the opposing force's area would get you killed.³⁰ This is critical because it baselines intent from both sides. When accidental encounters did occur, neither side had justification to escalate due to that clear intent. It is in China's national interest to create a buffer between a democratic, unified Korea and its border. Understanding this intent, and knowing how far the Northern Theatre Command intends to penetrate is critical to Coalition planners managing

²⁷ US Department of Defense. US-Russia Memorandum on Air Safety in Syria. 20 OCT 2015.

²⁸ Ng, Nicole and Adrew S. Weiss. "Collision Avoidance: Lessons From U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

their expectations. Staffs need to coordinate boundaries between Chinese and Coalition forces, to limit the risk of engagement. Also, similarly baselining expectations for accidents occurring if operating areas are violated. Accidents are going to happen in large scale combat operations. They occurred in limited conflict in Syria. However, the mutual understanding between staffs can de-escalate hostilities when these events occur. The ground component command staffs must have comparable communications established, preferably before conflict, but as a priority during.

The work to establish a communication capability directly resulted in warfare being limited in Syria, and when opportunities to escalate arose, staffs were able to de-escalate. Specifically, in 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24. Additionally, in 2018, an attack on US troops killed hundreds of Russian contractors.³¹ In a perfect system, the attacks would have been deconflicted before they happened. However, being able to coordinate resulted in the incidents not escalating into warfare between the US and Russia or Turkey and Russia. Also, after eight years, the rarity of incidents should be considered a success. Syria as a case study proves how vital communications are to maintaining a FLOT and minimizing escalation. China and the US should look to this to establish their own intercommunication system.

WMD containment

Regarding WMD containment, China and the US must establish coordination capabilities to synchronize targets and share intelligence. The US and coalition forces do not have the capability or positioning to secure all North Korea's WMD sites in a timely manner, as they must first fight North Korea's conventional forces. China will likely secure sites to mitigate their own security concerns, and are better positioned to do so. The Coalition has an advantage in

³¹ Ibid.

intelligence, but is disadvantaged in time, space and force. In contrast, the Chinese have an advantage in all three operational factors, but are believed to be weaker in intelligence. This creates an opportunity for cooperation, with the Coalition providing intelligence support to Chinese forces seizing WMD sites.

At the beginning of conflict, Coalition forces will be busy defending the avenues of approach to Seoul, conducting non-combatant evacuation operations and managing reception staging and onward integration. Two-thirds of North Korea's military, the fourth largest in the world with 1.3 million personnel and over 10,000 tanks, armored vehicles and multiple rocket launchers, is positioned in the country's southern third.³² The US will only have 28,500 Service Members on the peninsula, and it will likely take 30-60 days to build minimal forces for offensive operations. During the invasion of Iraq, it took 30 days for two carrier strike groups and the first two combat divisions to arrive in theatre.³³ Once offensive operations are ready, North Korea's WMD sites may range as far as 200 miles from the DMZ. The contested distance and time it would take to stage a force demonstrates the disadvantage in time, space and force by coalition forces.

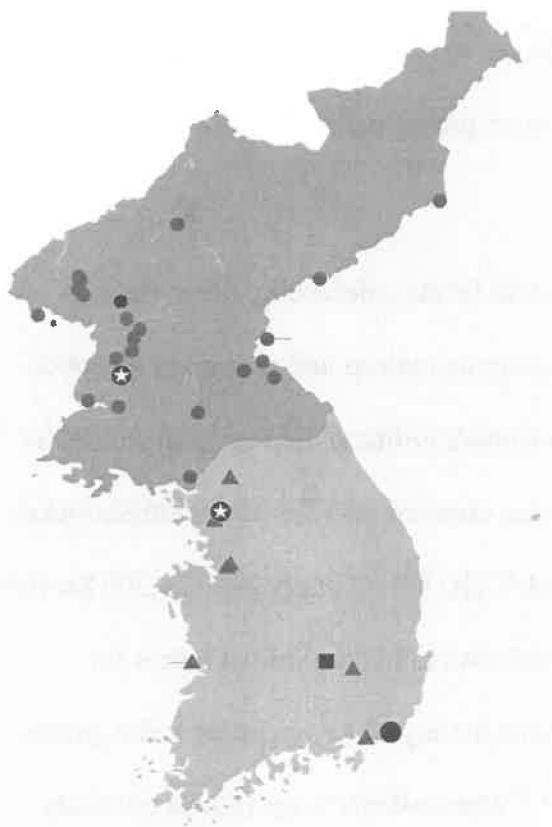
Comparably, Chinese forces have been established and are in place. The Northern Theater Command has three Army Groups of 30,000 to 50,000 Soldiers, each with an organic aviation and special operations forces brigades, giving China the capability to intervene by ground or air.³⁴ Additionally, it is likely that Chinese forces will have a far less impeded route into North Korea than coalition forces from the south. The preponderance of North Korea's military is in the south

³² "North Korea's Military Capabilities," Council on Foreign Relations, 28 June 2022.

³³ Bonds, Timothy. *Strategy-Policy Mismatch: How the U.S. Army Can Help Close Gaps in Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction*. RAND Corporation, 2014. pg 28.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pg 29.

North Korea's WMD Sites



Source: Nuclear Threat Initiative; US Forces Korea

in vicinity of the DMZ, meaning that Chinese forces will have less resistance in penetrating from their border.³⁵ Additionally, besides the absence of military barriers, majority of North Korea's roads and railways cross from the Chinese border into North Korea, facilitating movement.³⁶ "Of the most important known North Korean nuclear and missile sites, around 44 percent of the former and 22 percent of the latter are located 50 kilometers or less from North Korea's border with China. An advance of only 100 kilometers from the Chinese border would give the PLA control of almost all of North Korea's priority nuclear sites and a majority of its

priority missile sites."³⁷ These factors all describe why China has a clear advantage in force, time and space.

What China lacks is an indepth knowledge of North Korea's WMD sites. Currently, the Chinese believe that the US has more detailed collection on North Korea's WMD sites,³⁸ providing the opportunity for intelligence value from the US to China. Specifically, Mastro

³⁵ US Congress. "United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission." 115th Congress, 2nd Session. Washington, 12 April 2018. Pg 36.

³⁶ Bonds, Timothy. *Strategy-Policy Mismatch: How the U.S. Army Can Help Close Gaps in Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction*. RAND Corporation, 2014. pg 11.

³⁷ Mastro, Oriana Skylar. "Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula," *International Security*, 2018, Vol. 43. Pg 97.

³⁸ *Ibid*, pg 106.

identifies through interviews with Chinese officials, China's WMD-Control, Defeat, Disable, and Dispose operations have limited information on the "location and nature of the DPRK nuclear program."³⁹ Additionally, those interviewed PLA planners still required intelligence identifying the sites "that store the most material and have the least redundancy in capability," to plan their operations.⁴⁰ This highlights China's disadvantage in the Intelligence function.

Cooperating, China can provide the action arm, and the Coalition can provide the intelligence. To do so will require communication in order to share intelligence. In 2023, in the midst of competition with China, this will be the boldest concept for the US to accept. Syria can again provide lessons learned for how to best manage this information flow. Russia, partnered with the Assad regime, had an established connections to intelligence on targets due to their decades long military and intelligence relationship. The US had more persistent overhead collection. It never came to fruition, but negotiations in 2015 attempted to establish a joint operations center for intelligence and targeting sharing.⁴¹ When the effort failed, instead of a coordinated effort to defeat ISIS, Russia and the US consistently targeted each others' trained militia groups.⁴² So that they do not counter each other's efforts, the US and China should establish a joint operations center for intelligence sharing on WMD targets.

Refugee Operations

Throughout and following conflict, millions of refugees will require a coordinated global response to the humanitarian crisis, meaning the US and China must communicate and cooperate. Refugee traffic will likely flow north with the preponderance of combat operations

³⁹ Ibid, pg 105.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pg 106.

⁴¹ Ng, Nicole and Adrew S. Weiss. "Collision Avoidance: Lessons From U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019.

⁴² Ibid.

happening in the south. Though preparing for humanitarian operations, China has a history of poor performance. China can conduct a more effective operation through coordination with the Coalition, bringing more resources to bear.

China has already planned and prepared several containment and control measures to handle refugees. These include designating refugee camp sites and constructing temporary housing for the care of the refugees, and emplacement of blocking obstacles (barbed wire fencing) along the border to control the flow of refugees to designated sites.⁴³ However, China's history of refugee operations have been heavily criticized and damages its international legitimacy. For example, when dealing with tens of thousands of refugees from Myanmar, China faces criticism for inadequate shelter and support, and has denied international aid organizations access.⁴⁴ This compares to US humanitarian assistance operations worldwide, which have historically seen foreign approval as high as 85% to 89%.⁴⁵ This creates an opportunity for the US to cooperate with China to conduct improved operations. With refugee flows potentially reaching millions and China seeing backlash managing tens of thousands, coordination with coalition forces is a must in order to mitigate the humanitarian crisis.

The US and coalition partners are able to provide great aid to Chinese refugee operations. First, North Korea's targets ports, Nampo and Wonson, are likely to be under Coalition control once stability operations begin.⁴⁶ Through these facilities, the coalition can route aid into northern North Korea. Second, the US has established relationships with international agencies

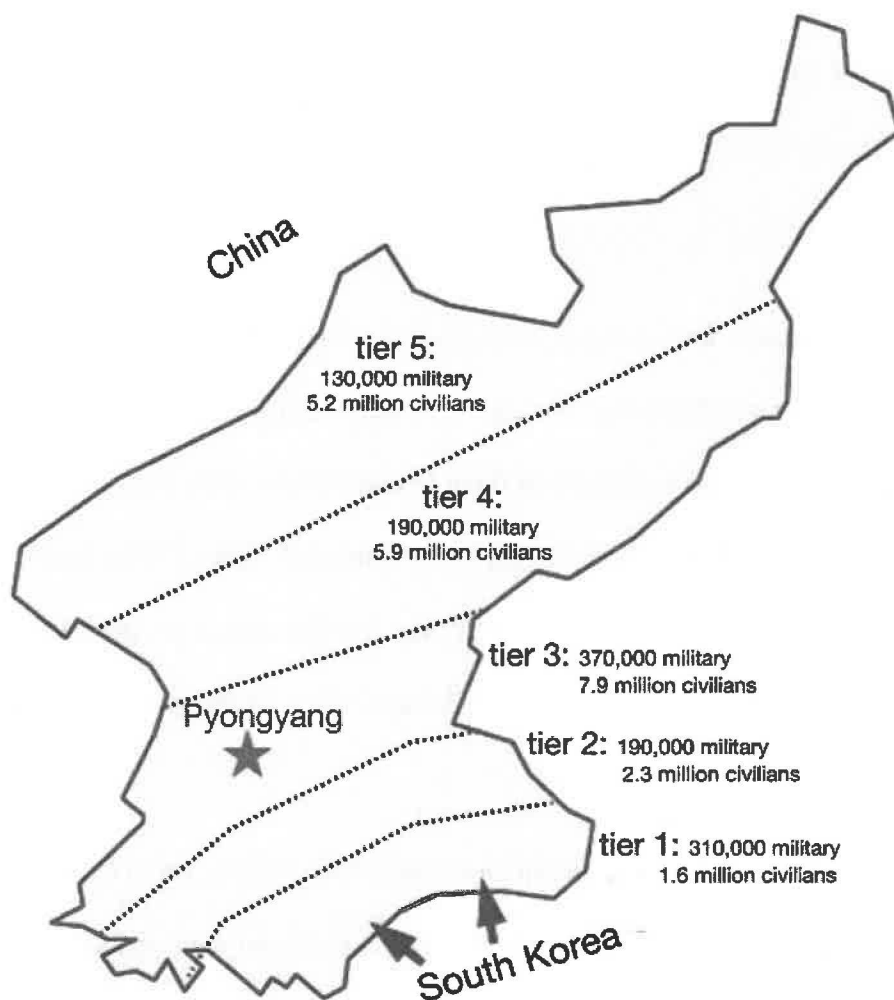
⁴³ Perlez, Jane. "Fearing the Worst, China Plans Refugee Camps on North Korean Border," New York Times, 11 December 2017.

⁴⁴ Song, Lili. "Refugees or Border Residents from Myanmar? The Status of Displaced Ethnic Kachins and Kokangs in Yunnan Province, China," International Journal of Refugee Law, Volume 29, Issue 3, 13 November 2017, Pg 467.

⁴⁵ Wike, Richard. "Does Humanitarian Aid Improve America's Image?" Pew Research Center, 6 Mar 2012.

⁴⁶ Bennet, Bruce and Jennifer Lind. "The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements," International Security, Vol 36, 2011, pg 96.

that China has spurned before.⁴⁷ Through these relationships, the Coalition has a clear advantage in sustainment function when conducting humanitarian aid. What China will need to provide is information on which camps under their control need what support. For this reason, communication capability must exist between Chinese and Coalition forces, even in the stability phase.



NOTE: Civilian population data are based on Central Bureau of Statistics, *DPR Korea 2008 Population Census* (Pyongyang: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Military populations by tier are authors' estimates.

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⁴⁷ Perlez, Jane. "Fearing the Worst, China Plans Refugee Camps on North Korean Border," *New York Times*, 11 December 2017.

⁴⁸ Bennet, Bruce and Jennifer Lind. "The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements," *International Security*, Vol 36, 2011, pg 95.

Under the Obama administration, alleviating the humanitarian impact of the conflict in Syria was a priority. This meant that high-level negotiations attempted to pressure Russia and the Assad regime to apply more resources toward refugee camps and to give more access from international agencies to those in need. However, collaboration on humanitarian assistance failed in Syria.⁴⁹ Unlike military operations correspondence, this coordination did not occur at the commanders' levels, even though they carried out the humanitarian operations. The commanders will be the ones in charge of the ports, railways and roads in occupied territory, so they should hold the coordination authority for aid.

Can China Be Trusted?

The above recommendations for increased communication between China and Coalition forces has not addressed the vulnerabilities this can create. Though regional stability and nuclear security are in China's interest, it is also beneficial to them to maintain a buffer between a unified Korea and China. This interest, and the relationship between China and North Korea, lends to the risk of limited intelligence sharing to degrade coalition efforts. Another risk is the potential access that China may gain into US systems, benefitting China in other theaters during this period of competition.

As Mastro describes, "the biggest trade-off would come after the conflict, when China would seek to use the leverage it gained in controlling North Korean territory and nuclear facilities to ensure that the terms of reunification were more favorable to Beijing than to Washington."⁵⁰ This conceptualizes the justification that China may have to degrade the Coalition's advance into

⁴⁹ Ng, Nicole and Andrew S. Weiss. "Collision Avoidance: Lessons From U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019.

⁵⁰ Mastro, Oriana Skylar. "Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula," *International Security*, 2018, Vol. 43. Pg 89.

North Korea. The more territory that Chinese forces can occupy, and the less the Coalition is able to, then China can contribute to its desired buffer zone between a unified Korea and China. It is in China's best interest to facilitate North Korea's success in limited tactical operations to delay the Coalition.

In the larger picture, intelligence sharing may potentially give China vectors into US intelligence architecture. Since 2000, China has attempted more espionage targeting the US than any other nation, resulting in billions of dollars in commercial and technological damages.⁵¹ Additionally, China has shown both creativity and desperation with attempting access. The most recent example of the Chinese spy balloons drew international attention, as the US shot them down for collecting on strategic military sites.⁵² The overall aggression of China in their intelligence collection efforts almost guarantees attempts to exploit any collaboration.

These issues can be addressed in two ways. First, the US can establish a scale for intelligence sharing that can increase or decrease sharing as the enemy threat level changes, mitigating the risk of intelligence exposure. During the transition from combat operations into stability operations, intelligence sharing would decrease. Triggers would most likely be required, such as positive confirmation of certain WMD sites being secured. By doing this, the US can manage the risk of espionage in comparison to its gauge of the security situation.

Another option depends on an access quid pro quo. Mastro observes two ways in which China can provide intelligence value to Coalition forces. First, China maintains radar and signals intelligence collection sites along their border, providing additional vectors to ballistic missile

⁵¹ "Survey of Chinese Espionage in the United States Since 2000," Center for Strategic and International Studies. [Survey of Chinese Espionage in the United States Since 2000 | Archives | CSIS](#)

⁵² Ibid.

launches, and communication intercept. Second, China has direct access to North Korea's fiber optics cables, which access the outside world through China, supporting a vector into North Korea's network.⁵³ Negotiating for similar vulnerabilities within China's information architecture, as well as access into North Korea's systems, can be used to offset risk. By utilizing these two methods, the US can at least reduce the risk to its systems, but guaranteed safe guarding is never possible. Regardless, the risk of escalation, militarily or nuclear, and the likelihood of a humanitarian crisis outweigh the risks of exploitation.

⁵³ Mastro, Oriana Skylar. "Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula," *International Security*, 2018, Vol. 43. Pg 105.