

AIR WAR COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

DANCING WITH THE DRAGON:  
CHINA, NORTH KOREA AND REGIME CHANGE

*by*

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## **Biography**

Lt Col Steve Shinkel is a 1990 graduate of The University of Arizona with an undergraduate degree in Management Information Systems and has also earned two master's degrees. Lt Col Shinkel earned his navigator wings at Mather AFB California, where he was assigned to KC-135 Stratotankers. His assignments include Mather, Castle, Plattsburgh, Grand Forks, Fairchild, Maxwell, Scott and Andersen AFBs. Lt Col Shinkel also served as a staff officer at USTRANSCOM and commanded the 734<sup>th</sup> Air Mobility Squadron. He is a Master Navigator with over 3200 hours in the KC-135.



## Introduction

If there is one thing that Kim Jung Il is good at, it is capturing the attention of the world by generating a crisis.<sup>1</sup> North Korea's recent missile and nuclear tests demonstrate this fact.<sup>2</sup> These tests have not only spawned a great deal of angst among the United States (US) and her allies, but surprisingly in China as well. Clearly, China is not pleased with these actions especially since she was heavily engaged in the six party talks hoping to keep Kim Jung Il's regime nuclear free.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, Kim's successful nuclear tests weren't the desired outcome for China or the US.

North Korea's intransigence on the nuclear issue and corresponding inflammatory rhetoric raised questions if Kim's provocations would result in a conflict with the US or the Republic of Korea (RoK). Any military clash could escalate into a replay of the Korean War, though this time, dragging two nuclear-armed powers into a direct conflict with one another. Additionally, Kim's seemingly erratic behavior generated questions if he was fully in control of the government or himself.<sup>4</sup> Recently, North Korea stated that she no longer considered herself bound by the terms of the truce ending the Korean War, further raising tensions.<sup>5</sup> In the same release, North Korea stated that it considered South Korea's decision to join a US effort to search DPRK vessels for nuclear materials to be a "declaration of war" and pledged to attack if its ships were hindered.<sup>6</sup> This could be nothing more than rhetoric, but it is difficult to ascertain with certainty what Kim's actual intent is, or if he is still acting rationally.

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<sup>1</sup> Hongmei, "N Korea's Nuke: More bark than bite?"

<sup>2</sup> Bajoria, "North Korea After Kim".

<sup>3</sup> Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>4</sup> Shi, "Northeast Asia Security Conference"; C. Lee, "Conflicts in China's North Korea Policy"; Ji "Understanding China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>5</sup> BBC News, "Korean naval ships clash at sea."

<sup>6</sup> BBC News, "N Korea Threatens Military Action."

These fears don't appear to be far out of bounds according to one defector. Hwang Chang Yop, a high-ranking North Korean Communist Party member who defected in 1997, stated that Kim saw war as the only means to cover up the North's economic woes and was planning to attack South Korea.<sup>7</sup> One reason Yop gave for his defection was to warn the South and thwart Kim's plans.<sup>8</sup> This adds credence to concerns that Kim may seek to instigate a war with the South.

US or RoK military action is traditionally seen as the most likely threat to the survival of Kim's regime.<sup>9</sup> This is not surprising considering the history and potential for hostilities to erupt between the two Koreas. However, events in Korea also have a direct impact on China's strategic interests.<sup>10</sup> China believes maintaining regional stability is vital to her security and doesn't want hostilities to break out.<sup>11</sup> Any military action taken against the DPRK puts China in a conundrum; she is North Korea's protector but on the other hand, doesn't want a replay of the 1950's Korean War.<sup>12</sup> Thus, China has a strategic interest in preventing a conflict from occurring.

This leads to the research question of: What would China do if it appeared likely that Kim's provocations would instigate military action by the US or RoK? In this situation, China has three primary strategic options: she could choose to fight in a replay of the Korean War; she could do nothing and this could result in North Korea's defeat/occupation; or China could choose to intervene, which may involve a "regime change," to preserve the status quo.<sup>13</sup> The research suggests the third option of intervention most closely aligns with China's strategic and regional

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<sup>7</sup> Lee and Hsieh, "China's Two-Korea Policy at Trial," 325, 337.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>9</sup> Associated Press, "South Korea calls for pre-emptive strike".

<sup>10</sup> Ong, "China, US and the North Korean Issue", 127.

<sup>11</sup> Glaser, Synder and Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Ong, "China, US and the North Korean Issue", 127.

<sup>13</sup> Col (Dr.) Daniel Baltrusaitus, AWC Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and paper advisor, discussions



objectives of maintaining the status quo.<sup>14</sup> The evidence presented in this paper will explain why intervention is in China's best interest and will implicitly refute the other two options of "fighting" or "doing nothing." This intervention does not mean the People's Liberation Army (PLA) will invade North Korea, but the Chinese may have Kim removed, quietly or otherwise, and replaced with a less confrontational leader to maintain the current status quo. Consequently, the biggest threat to Kim's regime may not be the US/RoK, but rather China.

This paper will examine reasons why China would intervene to prevent military action against North Korea. It will argue that China doesn't want a second Korean War and seeks to maintain the status quo with North Korea as a buffer state. Additionally, China doesn't want an "unfriendly" united Korea with hostile US or RoK forces on her border. China also wants to prevent the collapse of the DPRK, caused by military action or other factors, because it could undermine her internal stability. It will also discuss several advantages of maintaining the status quo. Finally, this paper will tie together the elements discussed and conclude that a regime change in North Korea would be a viable option for China to pursue in order to preserve the status quo, thereby saving valuable treasure, lives, and regional goodwill.

There are several research limitations with this paper. It was difficult to find primary Chinese sources regarding this subject. Consequently, the author relied on interpreting Chinese intentions from past actions, "think-tank" papers on China, and research from translated Chinese documents. There was no attempt to contact China for her official position on this subject. This paper only used unclassified, open source documents to prevent any security issues.

Determining the likelihood of a future conflict with North Korea and potentially China is beyond the scope of this paper, but is an area for further study. Due to length constraints, policy recommendations for the US are not included.

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<sup>14</sup> Lee and Hsieh, "China's Two-Korea Policy at Trial," 321.

## **Reasons for China to Intervene**

There are several reasons why it would be in China's best interest to prevent military action directed against Kim's regime. Overall, China's strategic interests are best served by maintaining the status quo on the Korean peninsula and ensuring Kim doesn't provoke a conflict with the US.<sup>15</sup> A military defeat for North Korea, as Professor Shen Dingli, Director of Institute of International Studies at Shanghai's Fudan University describes it, "would be disastrous for China."<sup>16</sup> Professor Dingli believes a unified Korea under American influence would complicate Beijing's response options to a Taiwan crisis and threaten her regional and internal stability.<sup>17</sup>

### **China Wants to Prevent Another Korean War**

One of the most important reasons why it would be in China's interest to prevent military action against Kim's regime is to keep a Korean War Part II from breaking out. China has a mutual defense treaty with North Korea to respond to attacks from outside sources.<sup>18</sup> The 1961 Sino-DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance hasn't been repudiated by either party, though from the Chinese perspective it has become strained, especially with Kim's intransigence on the nuclear issue.<sup>19</sup> Recently, China has expressed concerns that Kim's provocations and erratic behavior could drag her into an unwanted conflict.<sup>20</sup> Due to these concerns, the Chinese have hinted that she may not consider herself bound by the treaty if North Korea initiated hostilities; however if North Korea was attacked China would be obliged to respond.<sup>21</sup> Thus, China may find herself drug into a conflict not of her choosing.

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<sup>15</sup> Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>16</sup> Dingli, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China", 21.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Glaser, Synder and Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>21</sup> Dingli, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China", 26,27.

A conflict on the Korean peninsula would also counter China's "peaceful rise" and "harmonious world" public relations efforts.<sup>22</sup> China designed these concepts in part to alleviate fears that Beijing will embark on adventurism as her military power increases.<sup>23</sup> President Hu describes the harmonious world concept as a "world of lasting peace and common prosperity" where countries abide by international law, peaceful development and cooperation.<sup>24</sup> If China engaged in military action on the peninsula, it would destroy the international community's confidence that Beijing was rising "peacefully" and truly wanted a "harmonious world." This may cause other regional countries to align with the US to counter China.

A restart of the Korean conflict would harm China's economic growth as well. War would disrupt China's economic relationships, consequently lowering her economic power, and threatening internal stability particularly in areas bordering Korea.<sup>25</sup> The costs of direct combat, repairing infrastructure, and refugee flows would magnify China's economic problems.<sup>26</sup>

It is clear China doesn't want another Korean conflict because military action would be destabilizing and a threat to regional stability.<sup>27</sup> A restart of the Korean War wouldn't serve China's strategic interests well, especially since other countries fear her growing economic and military might.<sup>28</sup> Kim's possession of nuclear weapons and bellicose threats may increase the risk of preemptive action by the US or RoK forces due to the risks involved.<sup>29</sup> This may invoke the defense treaty between China and North Korea. Consequently, if it appeared that Kim's provocations would result in US and RoK military action, it would make sense for China to

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<sup>22</sup> C. Lee, "Conflicts in China's North Korea Policy", .

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> 17th CPC National Congress, *Hu Jintao calls for building harmonious world*.

<sup>25</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense 2009, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Dingli, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China", 21.

<sup>27</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense 2009, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Dingli, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China", 27.

<sup>29</sup> Associated Press, "South Korea calls for preemptive strike if threatened".

intervene prior to the start of hostilities. North Korea is important to China as a buffer state for the following reasons.

### **Maintain North Korea as a Buffer State**

A key security concern for China is maintaining North Korea's integrity and thereby a security buffer along their shared 1,400-kilometer border.<sup>30</sup> This buffer keeps at bay over 30,000 US troops and hundreds of thousands of RoK forces.<sup>31</sup> In the case of conflict, having North Korea as a buffer buys China two valuable commodities, distance and time to counter any military action. Another benefit of having a buffer state is it allows China to keep fewer of her forces tied up countering unfriendly troops along her border.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the current North Korea buffer state status allows China to refocus her forces on core strategic issues such as Taiwan.<sup>33</sup> Keeping North Korea as a buffer state is strategically important to China and is another reason to keep Kim's provocations in check.

Additionally, external powers have historically used Korea as an invasion route against China. The Japanese used Korea as a launching pad to invade and devastate China prior to WWII.<sup>34</sup> During the Korean War, China intervened to prevent the DPRK's collapse and subsequent occupation of North Korea by American forces.<sup>35</sup> Many of China's senior leaders believed American's occupying North Korea would pose an unacceptable risk to Beijing's nascent Communist government.<sup>36</sup> This decision demonstrates the value China places on maintaining North Korea as buffer state.

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<sup>30</sup> Dingli, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China", 20.

<sup>31</sup> Shi, "North East Asia Security Conference".

<sup>32</sup> Dingli, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China", 20.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Ryan, Finkelstein and McDevitt, *Chinese Warfighting*, 124.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Ryan, Finkelstein and McDevitt, *Chinese Warfighting*, 124.

A North Korea buffer state also ties up significant numbers of US forces countering the DPRK's armies. This allows China more freedom of action because she doesn't need to dedicate a large number of troops to counter US forces on her border. North Korea has provided this strategic benefit to China for the last fifty years.<sup>37</sup> China benefits economically from this arrangement as well, because North Korea foots most of this bill.<sup>38</sup> China considers the strategic benefits of this relationship to be well worth the limited economic support provided to North Korea because it ties up a large number of US forces.<sup>39</sup>

However, to counter the buffer state argument, one senior PLA researcher from the Academy of Military Sciences has stated that the importance of keeping a buffer zone is declining.<sup>40</sup> This PLA researcher also asserted, "the Chinese military doesn't have special interests in preserving a buffer zone."<sup>41</sup> The PLA researcher didn't elaborate further on why this is so.<sup>42</sup> While this is an interesting point of view, most other sources from China contradict this position and insist that indeed, China benefits strategically from the status quo on the Korean peninsula.<sup>43</sup> Thus, ensuring North Korea remains a buffer zone is strategically important to China and provides a good reason why Beijing may intervene to prevent Kim from upsetting the status quo.

### **Prevent the Occupation of North Korea by Unfriendly Forces**

China may also seek to change North Korea's leadership to prevent US/RoK military action, which may result in a reunified Korea unfriendly to China. This doesn't mean Beijing is

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<sup>37</sup> Dingli, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China", 20.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Glaser, Synder and Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor*, 8.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy"; C. Lee, "Conflicts in China's North Korea Policy"; Bajoria, "North Korea after Kim".

against Korean reunification, merely Chinese security concerns must be considered as part of the solution.<sup>44</sup> A forced reunification resulting from military action, even if instigated by Kim, may create conditions unacceptable to China, especially if US forces occupied North Korea.<sup>45</sup> This would eliminate the security benefits provided by a North Korean buffer state and increase Beijing's concerns the US was seeking to contain China and counter her regional influence.<sup>46</sup>

A unified Korea, occupied by US/RoK forces, would also counter China's objective of reversing US regional hegemony.<sup>47</sup> An occupied Korea would complicate China's efforts to grow her regional influence while reducing the US'.<sup>48</sup> The Chinese are engaging South Korea and Japan, economically and politically, to improve relationships and lay a foundation to counter US influence.<sup>49</sup> An objective of China's South Korean engagement strategy is to limit US influence in reunification discussions.<sup>50</sup> This is important to China because an American presence in North Korea would undermine Beijing's regional leadership and could threaten her.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps the biggest reason Beijing doesn't want an unfriendly Korea on her border is that it complicates her options in responding to a Taiwan crises.<sup>52</sup> Beijing sees Taiwan as Chinese territory and views reunification as a vital national interest.<sup>53</sup> If China is drug into hostilities on the Korean peninsula, Taiwan may use this as an opportunity to declare independence.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> C. Lee, "Conflicts in China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>45</sup> Lewis and Litai, *Imagined Enemies*, 270.

<sup>46</sup> T. Zhang, "Chinese Strategic Culture", 84.

<sup>47</sup> C. Lee "Conflicts in China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>48</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Dingli, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China", 21.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Lewis and Litai, *Imagined Enemies* 252

<sup>54</sup> Ji. "Understanding China's North Korea Policy".

American forces occupying North Korea could directly threaten China with ground forces and complicate her ability to shift forces closer to Taiwan if needed.<sup>55</sup>

Another factor China may find disconcerting, is South Korea could emerge as a nuclear power following reunification by capturing weapons and scientists. China would view this proliferation as destabilizing, especially because the weapons could threaten her.<sup>56</sup> A nuclear South Korea may entice other regional countries to pursue nuclear weapons development.<sup>57</sup> Preventing the growth of the nuclear club is another reason China wants to keep North Korea aligned with her and the current status quo helps achieve this objective.

### **Prevent Regime Collapse**

Another reason, which may provide an impetus for China to seek a regime change in North Korea, would be to prevent the collapse of the DPRK. A myriad of factors could precipitate a collapse including military action, economic meltdown, environmental disaster, or Kim's erratic behavior.<sup>58</sup> Keeping the North Korean government from collapsing is in all parties strategic interests because of the resulting humanitarian repercussions, refugee flows (which could create instability), and economic costs of rebuilding what is a failed state.<sup>59</sup> Obviously, a regime collapse precipitated by internal issues or an attack by US/RoK forces is a troubling scenario for China. This would be a threat to regional stability and run counter to China's strategic interests.<sup>60</sup> From China's perspective, it makes sense to keep the DPRK government intact and replace a few of its' leaders quietly, as opposed to the whole government. In effect, this would keep North Korea functioning, at least at a minimal level. Replacing a select few

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Dingli, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China", 27.

<sup>57</sup> Shi, "Northeast Asia Security Conference".

<sup>58</sup> Glaser, Synder and Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor*, 14-15.

<sup>59</sup> Bajoria, "North Korea After Kim".

<sup>60</sup> Qian and Wu, "The Art of China's Mediation during the Nuclear Crisis", 87.

DPRK leaders would be a better strategic option, than allowing a war to break out which may threaten China's economic progress and security.

One of the consequences of a collapse of Kim's regime would be the resulting North Korean refugee flow.<sup>61</sup> The large number of refugees flowing into China would disrupt Wen Jiabao's reconstruction plans for China's northeast region, be expensive to support and potentially destabilize the region's security.<sup>62</sup> China views DPRK refugees as destabilizing because there are already roughly two million ethnic Koreans in this area and waves of refugees could dilute Chinese control in the region.<sup>63</sup> Compounding Chinese concerns are discussions in both Koreas that this border region is part of the ancient Korean Koguryo kingdom.<sup>64</sup> The Chinese fear this claim could incite Korean nationalistic sentiment and internal unrest in the region and have been working to counter this claim.<sup>65</sup> A large North Korean refugee flow would increase China's concerns regarding these claims.<sup>66</sup>

Preventing the collapse of Kim's regime saves Chinese treasure and increases her security. There are many incentives for China to either reign in or replace Kim if his actions become too bellicose and threaten his regime's survival. Economically, strategically, and logically, it makes sense for China to intervene prior to the start of hostilities which will likely result in the DPRK's destruction.

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<sup>61</sup> Glaser, Synder and Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>63</sup> C. Lee, "Conflicts in China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*



## Advantages of Maintaining the Status Quo

To prevent the problems above, it is in China's best interest to ensure the DPRK's government doesn't collapse and maintains the peninsula's status quo.<sup>67</sup> The North Korean government collapsing would be devastating for regional stability.<sup>68</sup> A sudden collapse of Kim's regime would require quick action from China and/or the US and RoK to minimize the effects of the ensuing humanitarian catastrophe and refugee flows.<sup>69</sup> There are several other reasons why maintaining the status quo is desirable to China.

As long as Kim's provocations don't go too far and he is acting somewhat rationally, the US or RoK isn't likely to respond militarily. China can then use periodic Korean provocations to grab or occupy America's attention as needed. This concept is similar to one Mao employed on a Taiwanese controlled island off the coast of China, called Jinmen.<sup>70</sup> China frequently shelled this island and generated crises to grab US attention by stepping up or scaling back the bombardment to meet her objectives.<sup>71</sup> Mao referred to this as "the noose strategy" because it was akin to the US having a rope around her neck, and this allowed China to get the West's attention quickly.<sup>72</sup> As long as Kim's regime doesn't provoke a military response, China could use the DPRK to pursue a version of Mao's "noose strategy" to keep America's attention focused north instead of on the Taiwan straits.

To China, having a proxy such as North Korea, can also be a valuable means to "poke" the US and her allies and not be seen as culpable. China could leverage the US responses to collect intelligence on American, RoK, and Japanese systems and plans. As an example, China

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<sup>67</sup> Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>68</sup> C. Lee, "Conflicts in China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>69</sup> Glaser, Synder and Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor*, 19-20.

<sup>70</sup> Ryan, Finkelstein and McDevitt, *Chinese Warfighting*, 164.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid*, 165.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid*, 164.

could use recent North Korean missile launches to analyze how the US and her allies responded, to include the use of anti-ballistic missile systems. China could use this information to improve ballistic missile technology or develop countermeasures to US capabilities. China could also exploit North Korean provocations to determine US deployment and employment patterns then use this data to develop countermeasures to US military capabilities. Having North Korea play a proxy role for China is another reason why Beijing prefers maintaining the status quo.

Maintaining the status quo allows China time to help engineer a soft-landing for North Korea's government instead of a hard crash.<sup>73</sup> Kim's regime collapsing would generate tremendous humanitarian suffering and refugee flows.<sup>74</sup> Responding to a collapse would be extremely costly in terms of resources and people for China.<sup>75</sup> If the Americans and South Koreans acted quickly and filled the DPRK government void, this could lead to reunification on terms unfavorable to China.<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, China will be very sensitive to any events which change the status quo, including intervening if Kim's provocations go too far and could generate a military response.

### **Past Chinese Interventions**

The previous section presented reasons why China wants to maintain the status quo on the Korean peninsula. This section provides several historical examples of China's willingness to intervene in the internal affairs of her neighbors if her interests are threatened. These examples support the proposition that China could execute a DPRK regime change to prevent hostilities and maintain the status quo on the peninsula.

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<sup>73</sup> Johnston, 40.

<sup>74</sup> Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy"

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Snyder, "North Korea's Challenge of Regime Survival", 532.

In 1979, Vietnam experienced the wrath of Chinese intervention just a few short years after Beijing supported her reunification efforts.<sup>77</sup> While there were many reasons for the invasion, not examined here, there are several points worth discussing. China's invasion of Vietnam demonstrates Beijing will intervene, with force if necessary, in the internal affairs of her neighbors if her strategic interests are threatened. This is contrary to China's stated policy that "she does not interfere in the affairs of a sovereign state."<sup>78</sup> It would be hard to argue invading a neighbor isn't interfering in their affairs, though the Chinese characterized her actions as "self defensive counter attacks."<sup>79</sup> This is not to say China wants to invade the DPRK, it merely demonstrates that the Chinese will act when her interests are at stake. In North Korea, it is likely China could achieve her objectives using minimal effort, such as quietly replacing Kim.

Another reason cited for China's invasion was anger at Vietnam's ungraciousness for decades of aid.<sup>80</sup> China felt betrayed and wanted to "teach Vietnam a lesson" to make it clear Beijing was the region's leader.<sup>81</sup> Recently, tensions between the DPRK and China have risen because of the nuclear issue and Kim's intransigent behavior.<sup>82</sup> The testing of atomic weapons resulted in China briefly suspending oil shipments to the DPRK in 2003, making the point that China was not happy with Pyongyang and the negative impact to Beijing's international prestige.<sup>83</sup> Due to these rising tensions, some in China are beginning to question whether Kim's regime is a strategic asset or a liability.<sup>84</sup> If Beijing views Kim as a strategic liability threatening

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<sup>77</sup> Ryan, Finkelstein and McDevitt, *Chinese Warfighting*, 217.

<sup>78</sup> C. Lee, "Conflicts in China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>79</sup> X. Zhang, "China's 1979 War with Vietnam", 863

<sup>80</sup> Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, 120.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid*, 120,125.

<sup>82</sup> Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>84</sup> Glaser, Synder and Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor*, 8.

her interests, it is likely China will act to preserve the status quo, and this may include removing Kim from power.

The Korean War is another example of Chinese intervention to protect her interests.<sup>85</sup> China intervened despite the tremendous costs to rescue Kim Il Sung's regime and keep the American's out of North Korea.<sup>86</sup> A significant lesson China learned from the Korean War was to keep it from reoccurring, and if this is not possible, preempt its occurrence.<sup>87</sup> This philosophy supports China's "stability claims precedence over all others" declarations.<sup>88</sup> China sees stability as vital to her peaceful rise and continuing economic growth.<sup>89</sup> China demonstrated the importance of this concept in the 1970s when she actively pressured Kim to cease his plans to reunite Korea by force.<sup>90</sup> This demonstrates China will act against Kim's regime to prevent him from instigating another Korean conflict and upsetting the status quo.

Instability in North Korea is an issue China takes very seriously and comments made to a visiting delegation from the United States Institute of Peace to China in 2007 demonstrate a willingness on China's part to intervene in North Korea in response to certain conditions.<sup>91</sup> The fact the Chinese would discuss this with a US delegation highlights the importance of this issue. It was stated during their China visit that the PLA had plans to intervene in the DPRK in three scenarios: 1) in response to a natural disaster; 2) to perform "peace keeping" such as serving as civil police (perhaps regime collapse); and 3) to clean up nuclear contamination following strikes or to secure weapons and fissile materials.<sup>92</sup> The fact that the PLA has discussed possible

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<sup>85</sup> Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, 85.

<sup>86</sup> Ryan, Finkelstein and McDevitt, *Chinese Warfighting*, 185.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>91</sup> Glaser, Synder and Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor*, 1, 19.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 19.

operations in North Korea adds credence to the argument that China would intervene if she thought her interests were at stake. Scenario three above is interesting because it implies Kim's regime has collapsed or been attacked. It also implies China has plans and forces to secure North Korea's nuclear weapons. One complicating factor with these plans is they will be difficult to execute if a conflict is underway on the peninsula. This is another reason why it is in China's interest to prevent a conflict from erupting in the first place.

During the same visit, China also denied she would promote regime change under any circumstance.<sup>93</sup> As quoted in the report, one Chinese expert said, "We don't care who is in power as long as stability is maintained."<sup>94</sup> His comment seems to reinforce China's policy of "non-interference" in the internal affairs of another country. However, the interesting part of the statement is the last half, "as long as stability is maintained." This part of the statement appears to leave maneuver room for China to act if North Korea's stability comes into question. This maneuver room could involve replacing Kim, especially if his actions threatened to drag China into a conflict. Some PLA analysts also stated that China wouldn't oppose "a regime change that took place as a result of domestic impetus."<sup>95</sup> An argument can be made that this "domestic impetus" could occur with China's prodding, and in all likelihood, Beijing would keep any such actions low key to preserve the façade she doesn't interfere in the internal affairs of other nations.

The examples above should serve as a warning to Kim's regime that China may indeed seek to replace him if his actions go too far in provoking the US or RoK. China's temporary suspension of oil shipments to North Korea in 2003 sent a clear signal to Kim's regime that

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 20.

China wasn't happy with the continued nuclear tests and blustering.<sup>96</sup> This has raised questions in China about whether the DPRK is a strategic asset or liability. The answer is North Korea is a strategic asset to China; however, Kim himself is becoming a liability. Beijing may have to make a tough call to replace Kim if he becomes too great of a liability in order to keep North Korea within the Chinese sphere of influence.

## **Conclusion**

Dealing with Kim's intransigence and confrontational rhetoric has challenged both the US/RoK alliance and China. His provocations and pursuit of nuclear weapons have resulted in fears that another major war could erupt on the Korean peninsula, accidentally or instigated by Kim. Kim's erratic behavior has exacerbated these fears and fueled Beijing's concerns that regional stability may suffer and threaten China's security interests. This leads to the research question posited at the beginning of this paper: What would China do in regards to North Korea if it appeared US/ROK military action was imminent? The answer to this question is China would likely accomplish a regime change to prevent the outbreak of hostilities in order to maintain the status quo on the peninsula. This is in-line with supporting Beijing's strategic interest of regional stability. Consequently, China may be a greater threat to the survival of Kim's regime than action from US or RoK forces. The evidence cited previously in the paper supports the proposition that regime change is a likely course of action and makes sense for several reasons.

One reason is a regime change in North Korea allows China to keep the strategic benefits of the status quo, while at the same time preventing the start of a second Korean War. A direct conflict with the US over Korea would disrupt regional stability and could lead to other problems

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<sup>96</sup> Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy".

such as Taiwan declaring independence. If China believed Kim's actions were getting out of hand, it would make sense to remove Kim in order to eliminate the reasons for US/RoK action. This would help ensure that North Korea remains a buffer between US forces and China. This allows China to redeploy forces from the Korean border to areas closer to Taiwan. These factors demonstrate the strategic value of North Korea to China.

If China believed Kim's actions were leading to a conflict on the peninsula, a regime change strategy makes sense because it would be the least risky and costly option to keep North Korea in the Chinese camp. As Professor Dingli said, "If China fails to handle the matter with deftness there is a real chance that North Korea will be cornered into provoking a war with the United States, a conflict that may eventually lead to North Korea's defeat."<sup>97</sup> In this case, replacing Kim's regime would serve to reduce tensions and remove the reason for a conflict. A benefit of removing Kim prior to hostilities commencing is this would keep DPRK institutions intact, and save the expense of war and reconstruction. This allows China to maintain the status quo with minimal risk and costs while keeping North Korea in her sphere of influence. Regime change, in this case, would serve to support Beijing's goal to protect China's security, prevent a DPRK regime collapse, ensure China isn't drug into a conflict with the Americans, and prevent a united Korea occupied by hostile forces directly on her border.

Regime change would likely be accomplished by supporting a "coup-like" action to replace Kim's regime. It is doubtful China would result to a large-scale military operation to attack Korea, when her goals could be accomplished using much less effort. If China precipitated a regime change quietly, most of the world may never know. This would also allow China plausible deniability and she could continue her rhetoric of non-interference in the affairs

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<sup>97</sup> Dingli, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China", 21.

of other countries. The benefits to China are clear, North Korea doesn't collapse and regional stability is maintained.

China's willingness to intervene in other countries when her security interests are threatened should cause Kim's regime concern.<sup>98</sup> China's security interests will always override any commitment Beijing has to Kim's government. After all, China needs North Korea; they do not necessarily need Kim running the DPRK to meet their strategic goals. As stated earlier by a Chinese analyst, "we don't care who is in power as long as stability is maintained."<sup>99</sup> Thus, the biggest threat to Kim's regime may not be the US or RoK, but the Chinese Dragon in his own backyard.

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<sup>98</sup> C. Lee, "Conflicts in China's North Korea Policy".

<sup>99</sup> Glaser, Synder and Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor*, 19.



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