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Special Report

China: Potential Response to Korean Contingencies

~~(S)~~ Beijing is likely to circumvent UN economic embargoes imposed on Pyongyang. China, however, probably would not intervene aggressively in a Korean war because of the risks such intervention would pose to its national security strategy.

~~(S)~~ The North Korean nuclear issue creates special problems for the Chinese. They must reconcile their interest in stability on the Korean Peninsula and long-standing ties to Pyongyang with their interests in a denuclearized peninsula, in avoiding isolation among UN Security Council (SC) members, and in maintaining stable relations with the US, Japan, and South Korea. In this context, Beijing is likely to take a number of actions if the UN and the US apply punitive measures in pressuring North Korea.

UN Economic Sanctions

~~(S/NF)~~ China probably would try to avoid a tradeoff between its competing interests by abstaining if the UNSC tables a resolution calling for economic sanctions against North Korea. Key constraints on Chinese behavior would be the need to maintain Most-Favored

Nation (MFN) trade status in Washington or the need to regain MFN status if it is revoked in June. Nonetheless, Beijing is likely to circumvent any economic embargo by providing medical supplies, foodstuffs, and oil to North Korea; by allowing other nations to do so across the Sino-North Korean border or along coastal waters; and by refusing to cooperate with an extremely harsh enforcement of sanctions. China's primary objective would be to prevent a political crisis that might result from the economic collapse of the North.

A North Korean Attack

~~(S/NF)~~ If North Korea launched a military attack against South Korea in response to punitive measures,

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Sino-Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance

Article 2
"In the event of one of the Contracting Parties being subjected to the armed attack by any state or several states jointly, the other Contracting Party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal."

Article 3
"Neither Contracting Party shall conclude any alliance directed against the other Contracting Party or take part in any block or in any action or measure directed against the other Contracting Party."

11 April 1961

History and China's Response

China's intervention in the Korean War on 14 October 1950 provides a convenient historical analogy to predict its behavior if the current impasse over the North Korean nuclear issue escalates into hostilities. However, two other examples from history may provide better insight into Beijing's reaction to potential Korean contingencies: (1) In December 1971, China limited its response to India's intervention in East Pakistan (Bangladesh) to mobilizing Chinese forces on India's eastern border. Beijing took this restrained measure notwithstanding its longtime alliance with Pakistan and its visceral distrust of New Delhi's geopolitical ambitions. (2) Moreover, during the Vietnam war, China's assistance to North Vietnam was limited to providing air defense and logistic support, including troops, despite Beijing's pact with Hanoi and its view that US involvement in the war threatened China.

or on its own initiative, the Chinese would avoid extending military support to Pyongyang and call for a cessation of hostilities and peace consultations.

(b)(1), 1.4 (c)

Beijing is not required by treaty to provide military aid to an aggressive Pyongyang and probably would not provide substantial logistics, arms, intelligence, and electronic warfare support to the North.

~~(S/NF)~~ If a North Korean advance was halted and US and South Korean forces initiated a counteroffensive, Chinese hardliners would pressure senior leaders to intervene with the goal of preventing a potentially hostile force from gaining complete control of the Korean Peninsula. If such a development appears imminent or likely, Beijing may try to accommodate hard-line impulses and signal its resolve by crossing the Yalu River and establishing a forward defensive

perimeter some limited distance inside North Korea. Chinese doctrine explicitly justifies preemptive military operations along or beyond its geographic borders to defend China's "strategic boundary."

A Preemptive Strike

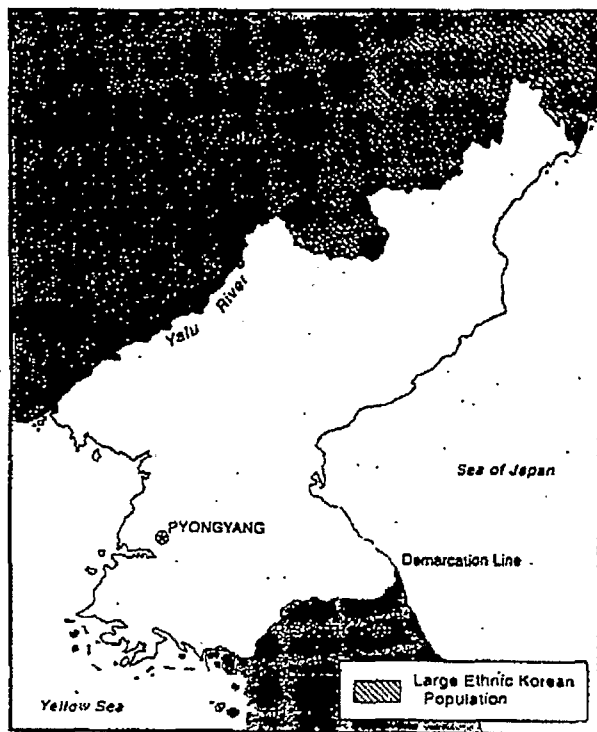
~~(S/NF)~~ China probably would not respond with aggressive military action to any preemptive UN or US military strike against North Korean facilities. Beijing would base this decision on its overriding interest in a denuclearized peninsula, in preventing a regional arms race, and in stalling a broader conflict.

(b)(1), 1.4 (c)

Such a move would be intended to bolster China's border defense and to prepare for civil unrest among the 2 million ethnic Koreans on the Chinese side of the border.

~~(S/NF)~~ If Pyongyang fails to take immediate military action in response to such a strike, Beijing would try to reduce the North's sense of isolation by providing it with economic and military support. (b)(1), 1.4 (c)

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~~(S)~~ North Korean President Kim Il-song (l) and Chinese President Jiang Zemin. Chinese and North Korean interests probably will diverge during any crisis over the North Korean nuclear issue, despite their formal solidarity.

~~SECRET~~

31 January 1994

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(b)(1), 1.4 (c)

China might even promise to intervene if the US launched a full-scale conventional attack against North Korea.

~~(S//NF)~~ Diplomatically, China probably would try to obtain UN censure of the US, call for Washington to compensate Pyongyang for any damages, and increase pressure on the US to alter its nuclear arms control policies in several multilateral forums. On a bilateral level, Beijing could be expected to expel the US Ambassador from China temporarily, withdraw its Ambassador from the US, and slow cooperative efforts on trade, human rights, and proliferation issues.

The Strategic Context

~~(S//NF)~~ China's standing in the UNSC and its relationships with Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul would have to deteriorate substantially for Beijing to risk the long-term costs to its foreign policy, economic development, and military modernization objectives that would accompany aggressive intervention in a war on the Korean Peninsula. Nonetheless, a Korean conflict would heighten Chinese concerns about the post-Cold War security environment and

(b)(1), (b)(3), 10 USC 424, 1.4 (c)

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