

Planning for the Future: Conditions of Combined ROK-U.S. Military Intervention in Potential DPRK Contingencies

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This paper addresses the key concerns of a joint/combined ROK-U.S. military operation in the case of a necessary contingency in North Korea. As such, it focuses on the necessary military issues, some of the likely scenarios where these issues would arise (there are simply too many to address them all in this paper), and the likely political factors in South Korea, the United States, and the international community that would be at play during this time period. China is likely to be the “elephant in the room,” though diplomacy with Beijing will be key and the Chinese are unlikely to agree to anything unless it is very clear to the world that North Korea is obviously in the throes of collapse, civil war, or complete anarchy. Any contingency operation into North Korea will be a very large, very expensive operation. South Korea simply does not have all of the resources or the military capabilities to carry out such an operation on its own—but it should lead any effort to intervene in North Korea because ultimately this is a Korea issue. A variety of factors, particularly the instability of the government, are likely to ultimately bring about a catastrophe in the DPRK. When this happens, a unified Korea, under a transparent democracy with its capital in Seoul, is the only viable option for the Korean people.

Keywords: ROK-U.S. alliance, North Korean military, reunification, contingency planning, North Korean collapse

The death of Kim Jong Il in December of 2011 raised more questions than answers. As was expected from events that had occurred over roughly the previous 18 months, the “Dear Leader’s” third son, Kim Jong Un was immediately propelled to the leadership of the country.¹ The “Great Successor” was (in the months following the death of his father) placed in several key positions of leadership within the government and the party, which had taken his father several years to acquire (at least officially).² There has been a great deal of debate among scholars, pundits, and policymakers, about exactly how powerful Kim Jong Un is, how stable the government is with him in charge, and if in fact he even is really the one in charge of the government.³

During the reign of Kim Jong Il—especially during the early years—there was a great deal of speculation that North Korea might collapse. In fact, this speculation

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surfaced again after Kim Jong Il had a series (reports indicate at least two) of strokes in 2008.⁴ The issue back then was of course that Kim Jong Il ruled the DPRK with an iron fist. That is to say, all power flowed through him. Thus, with his weakness there was a question about who was actually in charge of the key government institutions and the party. As is well known, Kim Jong Il recovered from his illnesses—but was never as strong physically as he had been before he had his first stroke. It does not take someone with a great deal of expertise to conduct a very simple analysis that will almost certainly lead to a single assessment; Kim Jong Il was a weaker leader (and thus the government was more unstable) than his father, Kim Il Sung, and Kim Jong Un is now a weaker leader (most would speculate far weaker—at least for now) than his father. Thus, the question that remains (and it has yet to be answered), how much weaker? Is Kim Jong Un so weak as a leader that the country is in peril of collapse? This is a concern that has led to a planning nightmare for military and policy-planning circles in both the United States and South Korea.⁵

The purpose of this paper will be to examine the conditions under which the ROK-U.S. alliance would find it necessary to conduct a contingency operation or operations in North Korea. Because of the issues discussed above, it should be obvious that this is something that can and must be planned for. Thus, one is prompted to ask the question, what are the most likely conditions that would lead the ROK-U.S. alliance to conduct a contingency operation in the North? Certainly it would have to be a situation in North Korea that was so serious that leaders in Seoul (and Washington) would feel there was no other choice except for a military operation. But one must ask the question, how would we know it was serious and what would the key warning signs be, if they were in fact obvious to outsiders? Of course, the end state for such an operation or operations would also be an important aspect of planning, and all of these issues will be addressed in this paper.

Another important factor in play for any future operations conducted by the ROK-U.S. alliance in North Korea would be addressing several key factors (and the implications these factors have for regional stability) that will determine an intervention or operation in North Korea. One would have to ask what the national interests of the ROK and United States would be for conducting such an operation. In addition, it will be very important to address public opinion in both countries. Not only will public opinion be important, but the leadership in both Seoul and Washington will be key. For example, the political philosophy regarding reunification of the two Koreas has been very different in the Lee Myung-bak administration than it was during the Roh Moo-hyun administration.⁶ One also needs to address how international opinion—including within the UN—will affect whether or not this operation occurs. And finally, it will be important to address joint and combined capabilities within the alliance for carrying out one of the various types of contingencies that may be necessary. An analysis regarding these concerns will be conducted in this paper.

South Korea is a transparent, liberal democracy. Thus, it is to be expected that Seoul would follow international rules of law if it had to come to an intervention in the North. Because of this important factor, it will be key in this paper to conduct an analysis regarding the geopolitical aspects of what will be involved in a contingency operation conducted by ROK and U.S. forces. It will also be important to address what the threshold will be for conducting a military operation in the North. How hazy will the lines be? How much will it depend on the political philosophy of the governments in Seoul and Washington? And of course, it will be important to consider

the expectations of the two governments in both the United States and South Korea regarding when and how an intervention will occur—and why. These factors will all be considered and analyzed, along with the “China factor,” in this paper.

Likely Contingencies Leading to Intervention in North Korea

The apparent purge of North Korean People’s Army (NKPA) Chief of Staff Yi Yong Ho during July of 2012 caused a great deal of speculation in the international press. Yi was considered a member of the “inner circle” of the Kim family regime, and had also been reported to be a mentor of Kim Jong Un before his father’s death.⁷ There are even (unconfirmed) reports that gunfire erupted when Yi was relieved of his post.⁸ Soon thereafter, Kim Jong Un was named a “Marshall,” much as his father and grandfather had been, and little known (and newly promoted) Vice Marshall Hyon Yong Chol was named as Yi’s replacement. The shuffle—one of many that has occurred since Kim Jong Il’s death, led some to opine that this was another example of a “generational shakeup,” and proof that Kim Jong Un was striving to gain control of the military.⁹ However, the purging of a Kim family insider and high-ranking (and trusted) military official points to something even more important—stability remains a concern in North Korea.

Before addressing the types of contingencies that would lead the ROK-U.S. military alliance to consider intervention, it is first important to review the power structure in North Korea. As this author has stated in an earlier published piece, “Within the North Korean system, Kim Jong Il was the Chairman of the National Defense Commission, which in many ways is the de facto most powerful decision-making body in the country.¹⁰ Kim was also head of the party, and ran the party through a key entity known as the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), which has offices that even control promotions in the military.¹¹ The security services within the country are (precisely for security reasons) highly redundant, and, as will be discussed later in this paper, also hold a key role in the power broker process in North Korea. Finally, the Kim family inner circle, dominated by Kim relatives and old-time, absolutely loyal family friends, plays a key role. Kim Jong Il conducted a focused effort to bring his third son to power within all of these governmental power-broking institutions.”¹² Thus, Kim Jong Il ran the country through four key institutions—the party, the military, the security services, and that “Byzantine” entity that can only be described as the Kim family inner circle. Kim Jong Il was, without a doubt, absolutely in charge of these four key institutions. In fact, this is the way the country has been run since Kim Il Sung took over. Thus, the fact that Kim Jong Un is either still seeking to consolidate his power, or is only a figurehead for a group of people who are really leading the country, makes it less stable than it has been since the Korean War.

The instability that continues to exist in North Korea because of its young, inexperienced leader leads to several possibilities for collapse, implosion, or explosion. While the possibility of a military coup exists, the strong hold that the security services have over all communication and the way they monitor all North Korean citizens, including high-ranking military officers, makes that possibility remote.¹³ In addition, as described above, the military is not alone the most powerful institution in the country. This is often misunderstood by analysts. It is important to note that the military

is under constant surveillance from the security services—who also constantly watch each other. The party has control over promotions and other key power related to both the military and the security services. And the individuals who dominate all three of these institutions are long-time Kim family associates—the modern “Yangban” of North Korea if you will. Many of them are descendants of those who fought with Kim Il Sung as a partisan and later helped to rule during the early days of North Korea.¹⁴

The power in North Korea as described above means that if Kim Jong Un is a leader in name only, or if his power is weak, the country is for the first time ever left with a system that needs one man rule to function properly, but does not have it. Thus, when decisions have to be made, the power brokers in the country, none of whom have absolute power over anything but their own institution, are left with a big problem when it comes to resolving differences. This is the biggest issue. It is possible that a crisis could tear the system apart. It is also possible that squabbles could break out between agencies and entities that Kim Jong Un is simply incapable of resolving. This, in fact, may have been what part of the issue was with General Yi Yong Ho and his recent purging.

If the military begins to break apart and the security services lose control of their monitoring activities, we could actually see military corps fighting each other because there is no clear leader whom they can turn to. This is one scenario (if detected, which it is likely to be) that could lead to intervention because this scenario would also lead to anarchy and chaos within North Korea. Another scenario could be an attempted coup or change of power within the security services. If loyalties to Kim Jong Un do not hold together, they could possibly work with other institutions to overthrow him. The problem here would be no clear and obvious leader to lead North Korea—and thus anarchy and chaos as possible civil war or widespread violence erupted. Yet another possible scenario would be a lack of clear leadership in the country, with the major institutions continuing to function on their own, but as future crises begin to cause bigger and bigger fissures in the command structure, the country slowly implodes. It is this scenario that would make it more difficult to clearly know when to intervene, though it could eventually lead to such anarchy in North Korea that it would be obvious.

In any of the scenarios listed above, the possibility exists that if someone were able to hold a new government together for long enough to get the word out, this individual or group of individuals would request intervention from the South. This scenario would make an intervention into the North much less of a question, and while often discounted, is certainly something that must be considered. Regardless of the scenarios, if one is to ask whether a North Korean collapse or implosion would be a “hard landing or a soft landing,” the answer is most likely to be the former. The North Korean elite—the families who have been running the country since 1945—know that their privileged existence in a unified Korea would be inconceivable. Thus, they are not likely to want to give up power—even if it were obvious the country was falling apart and anarchy was breaking out. This leads to another important likelihood; in any intervention, there are likely to be pockets of resistance who have weapons (probably a lot of weapons), and most intervention scenarios are likely to involve at least some violence, especially in the early days of any contingency operation, and perhaps involving North Korea’s absolutely loyal (and brainwashed) Special Operations Forces.¹⁵ This of course leads to the end state, which (because of the very nature of the current DPRK government) must be a unified Korea, under a liberal, democratic government in Seoul.

Determining a ROK-U.S. Military Intervention: Implications for the Alliance

There are a variety of factors that would lead the ROK-U.S. alliance to an intervention in North Korea for a contingency operation. While on the surface, it would appear that the primary (perhaps the only in some views) determinant for intervention would be cut and dry—that is to say, collapse, anarchy, or civil war in North Korea—as it often is on the Korean peninsula, the picture is in reality not as clear. Thus, in this section I will address the likely determinants for an alliance intervention in North Korea—determinants that vary from simply the situation in the North.

The first factor to consider would be what South Korean and American interests were to be in conducting an intervention in North Korea. South Korean interests would seem to be obvious. North and South Korean families have been separated from each other since the formal founding of the DPRK, and many families have had no contact at all during this time period.¹⁶ This makes reunification an emotional issue, not just a security or economic issue. In addition, many scholars believe, based on a great deal of evidence, that despite the enormous costs of Korean reunification, the longer the wait to do so, the higher the costs will be, because of the decline of the North Korean economy and infrastructure.¹⁷ Further, as long as North Korea exists as a nation-state, it presents a grave security threat to not only South Korea, but the entire region, because of the DPRK's large conventional and unconventional military forces, and its weapons of mass destruction.¹⁸ Because of all of the three factors listed above (and a variety of others), a case could be made that intervention, and the sooner the better, would be in South Korea's interests should the need or opportunity arise.

The United States also has very important national interests on the Korean peninsula. South Korea in 2012 was the seventh-largest trading partner of the United States.¹⁹ So, restoring peace and stability (and as quickly as possible) to the Korean peninsula should a situation evolve that would involve a contingency operation, would be in the economic interests of the United States. In addition, the high cost of maintaining troops and systems on the Korean peninsula would likely go away soon (perhaps even a matter of months) after the contingency operation was complete, as there would no longer be a North Korean threat.²⁰ Each of the above addressed factors (among others) would seem to make it in Washington's best interests to pursue a contingency operation in North Korea should the need arise.

Public opinion in South Korea is interesting when it comes to conditions in the North. In a Gallup poll taken during 2006, as many as 67 percent of South Koreans favored unification, though a majority (56 percent) felt that there was more to lose than to gain from such an endeavor. To quote the results of the poll, "These seemingly inconsistent findings suggest that for many South Koreans the desire for unification is driven less by any expectation of short-term gain than by other factors such as a strong sense of common identity."²¹ This of course gets back to the emotional tie that Koreans have for a reunified Peninsula. Another poll released by Columbus State University's Professor Tom Dolan in 2012, suggests that while enthusiasm may be waning among South Koreans regarding emotional ties to reunification, the compelling security threat compels even younger South Koreans to react positively to it. Dolan, who conducted interviews in both North and South Korea, said the following: "South Korea would like to absorb the North, get rid of all vestiges of communism, and

then not have to worry about a military threat. North Korea says, ‘Our society is fine the way it is. We don’t want American imperialists to rule us the way they rule South Korea.’ It is an interesting time to be there.”²² This leads one to believe that even younger South Koreans would support reunification if the security threat from a collapsing North Korea were imminent.

The North Korean threat and North Korean stability certainly occupies a much smaller blip on the radar for more Americans than it does for South Koreans. That said, public support for a compelling contingency operation seems to be higher among Americans than one would expect. In a survey conducted by Victor Cha and Katrin Katz during 2010, as many as 61 percent of those who responded said, “on the question of whether they would favor or oppose the United States contributing military forces *together with other countries to a UN-sponsored effort* to reverse the aggression if North Korea attacked South Korea, the responses were almost reversed. In this scenario, 61 percent favored the use of U.S. troops, while only 34 percent oppose it.”²³ This may lead to the assessment that if a UN-sponsored, multi-nation effort was involved in conducting an intervention in North Korea, the majority of the American public would support it—as long as it was a compelling situation. This seems to mesh well with the attitude of younger people in South Korea addressed earlier. There seems to be support for an intervention in North Korea if necessary, but the security threat would have to be quite compelling.

While South Korean and American views are important regarding an intervention in North Korea, international views will also be important, particularly those of UN member states. China is a key member state and has intentionally kept governmental views very hazy, at least those released for public consumption. It can be assumed that if China were to stay out of reunification operations the wish of the government would be for a significant American troop reduction on the Korean peninsula as an end state. The Chinese would also likely want a unified Korea that was “neutral.”²⁴ Most other UN member states seem to at least tacitly support reunification if the situation has become so compelling that an operation must be undertaken to bring stability back to the Korean peninsula—though Russia, at least officially, remains hesitant to support any operations that would occur.²⁵

The evidence seems to suggest that a contingency operation will be something supported by the public in both South Korea and the United States—if the reasons are compelling and it appears that the governments in Washington and Seoul have no choice (in the interests of stability and security). It appears that such an operation would not only be supported by the majority of UN member states, but that a multinational contingent is likely to be part of any reasonable scenario. Thus, the key will be if the governments in Seoul and Washington agree to such a scenario. This is likely to be based on two things, 1) the political ideology of each government, and 2) the relationship in the alliance. President Obama and President Lee had a very good relationship during the time period when these two men led their respective nations.²⁶ It should be pointed out, however, that the alliance (since its inception) has been in a state of flux, and this relationship will be important when it comes to when and how action will be taken to initiate a contingency operation in North Korea.

This of course leads to an assessment of capabilities. Why does South Korea need Washington’s help in conducting a contingency operation in the North? The answers are fairly obvious. While the South Korean military is quite large (especially for a country of 50 million people), South Korea is still lacking in some key capabilities

that the United States can provide in support of an operation.²⁷ There are several examples of capabilities the United States would provide that South Korea is lacking in (and is likely to remain lacking in). One example is amphibious lift, where American naval shipping can provide key maritime troops and supplies to operations in the North.²⁸ In addition, the United States will be able to provide, and the ROK military is likely to be able to integrate with, key C4I assets.²⁹ Yet another aspect of support that the United States will be able to provide (that South Korea is lacking in) is airpower. In a contingency operation, transport aircraft (a relatively weak capability for South Korea) will be key.³⁰ These are just some of the main examples of ways that the American military would be able to enhance and support any joint/combined contingency operation in North Korea. All of these examples would be vital factors in any operation, no matter what the scenario was.

Thresholds for a ROK-U.S. Alliance Military Intervention

Most analyses that examine the possibilities of a joint/combined ROK-U.S. military alliance intervention into North Korea involve scenarios that include at least two nations—South Korea and the United States.³¹ It is therefore important to examine the key aspects of the treaty that bind these two longstanding allies together. It will also be important to discuss the national and international law that these two nations will turn to when it comes to addressing an intervention in North Korea, and what the thresholds will be. A military intervention is of course the most potentially costly type of undertaking by any nation-state. Thus, examining the thresholds that exist or are likely to exist will be important for predicting future actions.

The ROK-U.S. mutual defense treaty is an important document. Article 3 of the treaty signed in 1954 declares, “Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties in territories now under their respective administrative control, or hereafter recognized by one of the Parties as lawfully brought under the administrative control of the other, would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.”³² The wording of the treaty, which is rather ambiguous, leads one to believe that the mutual defense treaty does in fact, legally, authorize an intervention into North Korea if activities there merit a danger to the safety of South Korea. It also clearly authorizes the United States to participate in such an intervention as South Korea’s military ally.

While it appears that if an obvious scenario existed where intervention in the North was necessary would be legal from an alliance perspective, one wonders what such scenarios would be. Many have addressed these scenarios in academic writings. A report by the Center for U.S.-Korea Policy at the Asia Foundation published in 2009, states, “Any response to instability in North Korea will depend on the stage of contingency and functional issue, and requires a clear understanding of the appropriate form and sequencing of cooperation.” The report from the Asia Foundation further goes on to say in part, “Rather than relying on domestic law as a justification for intervention, the best option for establishing South Korea’s right to intervene would be authorization from the UNSC, through which South Korea could intervene in the name of “humanitarian intervention” so as to win support from all permanent members of the UNSC.”³³ Analysis by Professor Han Yong-sup of the Korea National Defense

University seems to support this viewpoint. He states, “The UN, in particular, may look back on the Yugoslavia crisis in the early 1990s and tilt toward intervention in the aftermath of a North Korean collapse.”³⁴ Thus, national and international laws, and international support (perhaps importantly from China, specifically, on the UNSC) would be important for conducting a contingency operation—and many analysts agree (as articulated above) that North Korea would clearly have to be in the throes of collapse for such a contingency to occur.

While there are various assessments regarding at what stage the ROK-U.S. alliance would feel it necessary to intervene in North Korea, there are some very compelling circumstances that leave no doubt. Professor Han describes one of these circumstances when he states, “The power vacuum in North Korea drags out for the long term, and the people are carrying out large-scale riots. The military is systematically mobilized, and the military and the people clash. Different factions in the military collide, resorting to violence in the process. That results in a national rebellion and civil war. There are increasingly clear signs that some elements in the military are attempting to smuggle out WMD overseas or use the weapons at home or abroad.”³⁵ Michael O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution states, “Demands for American forces could vary greatly with the specific scenario, within an overall 5029 war plan framework. If the problem developed very fast, available American main combat forces would of course be limited in number to those already on the peninsula, and perhaps also to some of the Marines on Okinawa.” He further expands on this when he describes a threshold that would develop more slowly, “A variant on the collapse scenario might involve the more gradual descent of North Korea into internal conflict—in which case the United States might well have the option of deploying forces from the U.S. homeland in appreciable numbers on a meaningful and relevant time scale.”³⁶

Ultimately, one of the clear “red lines” appears to be if there is anarchy or civil war in North Korea and there is no apparent control over the country’s WMD. This of course means that the country would not only (clearly) be the source of an immediate humanitarian concern, but also a clear and immediate security threat to the Peninsula and the region.³⁷ South Korea would of course need American expertise to help secure WMD because this is where the expertise in these types of operations exists.³⁸ Nevertheless, the most likely nation to lead a contingency operation into North Korea can and should be South Korea. In fact, there are reports that the Pentagon plans to support stability operations in North Korea, but South Korea will take the lead.³⁹ This would be important, because it will add to the credibility of a unified Peninsula, and will enhance the legitimacy of the government in Seoul as a transparent democracy and the center of government for all of Korea. As David Maxwell of Georgetown University’s Center for Security Studies states, “Along with the establishment of the end state, a decision must be made regarding Alliance transformation and leadership of operations in North Korea. It is imperative that South Korea leads the effort in reunification and operations in the north because this will help to undermine the sixty plus years of propaganda in which the South has been portrayed as a puppet of the United States.”⁴⁰

Based on the information discussed above, the evidence shows that in most if not all instances, a joint/combined effort by ROK and U.S. forces will be necessary. The number of American forces deployed to the Peninsula will depend on how long the United States has to work on the effort—and this will depend on how clear the signs are that North Korea is in the midst of collapse, civil war, or anarchy. But this

can be taken one step further. It is not only likely that every scenario will involve ROK and U.S. military forces; it is also likely that most scenarios will involve a multinational force—perhaps one mandated by the UN.⁴¹ The force can and should be centered on ROK military forces, which will have both the numbers, and the requisite planning in place to lead such an operation.

The Biggest Unanswered Question: China

China's role in the event of a North Korean crisis that requires outside intervention has often been debated among academics and pundits—yet apparently this has been a topic of discussion that the Chinese have avoided addressing (at least officially) with South Korean or American diplomats. While the Chinese government has publicly refused to address the issue of the role it would play in the event of a North Korean crisis that required intervention, many have called for a serious discussion on clarifying this for planning purposes. As Douglas H. Paal of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has stated, “Beijing has been reluctant to engage in this kind of dialogue, although Chinese thinkers have increasingly acknowledged privately the need for such an authoritative conversation. North Korea watches for any sign of disloyalty by Beijing, however trivial.”⁴² Thus, at least for now, China continues to maintain an ambiguous position on the role it would play in any contingencies involving North Korea because of a reluctance to alienate its ally in Pyongyang.

Press reports have cited a cable from February of 2010 that reportedly was sent by U.S. Ambassador to Seoul, Kathleen Stephens, addressing a conversation that a high-level South Korean diplomat had with two high-level Chinese officials. The cable reportedly stated that the South Korean diplomat (then Vice Foreign Minister Chun Yung-woo) repeated a conversation with the two Chinese officials in which they said, “China could live with a reunified Korea under the control of South Korea.” The two Chinese officials also reportedly told Chun that “China would clearly not welcome any U.S. military presence north of the Demilitarized Zone in the event of a collapse.” They followed this up with the statement that “Beijing would be comfortable with a reunified Korea controlled by Seoul and anchored to the United States in a ‘benign alliance’—as long as Korea was not hostile toward China.”⁴³ This anecdotal information indicates that China plans to play a more “benign” role in the event of a contingency that involved intervention in North Korea, but would also insist on clear guidelines for both the United States and South Korea.

Most analysts, including the author of this paper, believe that China continues to prefer the existence of a buffer state on its border—a state that separates it from one of Washington's most loyal allies. Nevertheless, if it becomes obvious that the viable existence of such a state simply no longer exists, it seems reasonable to reach an assessment that Beijing may agree to allow an international force led by ROK forces, supported by U.S. forces, and with participation from other UN nations, to conduct a contingency (if absolutely necessary) in North Korea. It is unlikely that China would want to actually occupy North Korea in the event of collapse—though perhaps a small buffer zone along the border may be an option the Chinese are considering. Robert Kaplan and Abraham Denmark address this possible scenario when they write, “Thus, in an emergency, the Chinese People's Liberation Army may have to cross the Yalu and Tumen and occupy a buffer zone inside North Korea

itself, setting up barriers and refugee camps to keep the population in place; in the process, the Chinese army may also occupy factories and WMD facilities. This may occur as fighting rages in Pyongyang and elsewhere. Indeed, the definition of a collapse may be when Beijing signals that it is more concerned with instability on its riverine borderlands than with the survival of the Pyongyang regime itself."⁴⁴ One hopes that Beijing would not consider it necessary to take such a measure, but it remains a compelling possibility.

As discussed earlier in this paper, the Chinese could also engage in delaying actions (as could the Russians) in the UN Security Council. This would also be a dangerous scenario for not only South Korea and the United States, but for the entire region. Because of the various negative scenarios that could arise with China if detailed dialogue does not occur ahead of time, China specialist Bonnie Glaser states, "The United States, China, and South Korea should candidly discuss the various possible scenarios that could take place and how they can cooperate to promote mutually favorable outcomes. Each country should be prepared to take steps to address the fears of the others. China should be assured that the United States would not use a collapsing North as a pretext to station troops in the northern part of the country; that nuclear weapons would be removed from the peninsula; that if reunification takes place, a reunified Korea would be friendly to China and its economic interests would be protected; and that the enduring U.S.-Korea alliance would not be used to harm Chinese interests."⁴⁵ Of course the bottom line here is that no one knows for sure (at least not officially) what the Chinese will do in the event of a North Korea collapse. Many questions will remain unanswered until Beijing engages in detailed and realistic talks with Seoul and Washington. This factor continues to be a key consideration in military and diplomatic planning cells.

Conclusions

It has been the purpose of this paper to address the key concerns of a joint/combined ROK-U.S. military operation in the case of a necessary contingency in North Korea. As such, this paper has focused on the necessary military issues, some of the likely scenarios where this issues would arise (there are simply too many to address them all in this paper), and the likely political factors in South Korea and the United States that would be at play during this time period. It is important to state that China is likely to be the "elephant in the room," though diplomacy with Beijing will be key and the Chinese are unlikely to agree to anything unless it is very clear to the world that North Korea is obviously in the throes of collapse, civil war, or complete anarchy. That said, it is important to state that China will be likely to insist on specific ground rules for U.S. troops entering North Korea during a contingency (and likely for the forces of other multinational participants as well). Beijing will also possibly insist on a withdrawal of all U.S. troops from the Peninsula following a completion of the contingency—or at the very least, a significant drawdown.

Any contingency operation into North Korea would of necessity be a very large, and very expensive, operation. South Korea simply does not have all of the resources or the military capabilities to carry out such an operation on its own, but it should lead any effort to intervene in North Korea because of the scenarios described earlier in this paper. While the many scenarios are often confusing, hazy, and unpredictable,

the same applies to the stability of the current government in the DPRK. Thus, the current planning that continues to occur and the training that ROK and U.S. forces engage in to meet these challenges is extremely important. Ultimately, it is likely that when (not if) North Korea collapses and ceases to exist as a legitimate nation-state, South Korea will take the lead in stepping in (despite the extremely formidable economic challenges) and stabilizing the Peninsula. This would be inevitable because despite international efforts and some changes in North Korea, it is a state that simply faces too many challenges to continue to exist (at least in the long term) as a country, and a government that knows too many changes will bring about a downfall of the regime. These factors, and the instability of the government, are likely to bring about a catastrophe in the DPRK in the eventual future. But this should not necessarily be viewed as a bad thing. A unified Korea, under a transparent democracy with its capital in Seoul, would be the best outcome for all of the Korean people.

Notes

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