

## Strategic Calculations of North Korea, China, and Russia in the Event of Simultaneous Crises on the Korean Peninsula and in the Taiwan Strait

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### ■ Introduction

Recent encirclement exercises conducted by the People's Republic of China (PRC) around Taiwan, coupled with the deepening strategic cooperation among North Korea, the PRC, and Russia, are intensifying concerns regarding the possibility of simultaneous crises scenario in East Asia. In particular, while both a crisis on the Korean Peninsula and a Taiwan contingency share a common trait that they are key flashpoints directly linked to United States (U.S.)–PRC strategic competition, Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang differ in how they perceive these crises and in how they approach alignment with one another. This article examines the PRC's crisis-management logic through an analysis of the characteristics shown during its encirclement exercises around Taiwan. Building upon this assessment, the article analyzes the conditions under which North Korea–PRC–Russia alignment may function, as well as its scope and intensity, in both a Taiwan contingency and a Korean Peninsula contingency. In doing so, it seeks to shed light on the implications of these two crisis types for the regional security order and for the strategic posture of the Republic of Korea (ROK).

### ■ Overview of PRC's 2025 Taiwan Encirclement Exercise

From December 29 to 31, 2025, the PRC conducted a large-scale encirclement exercise around Taiwan under the designation "Justice Mission–2025."<sup>1</sup> This exercise, executed approximately nine

months after the October 2024 “Joint Sword–2024B” exercise<sup>2</sup>, provided a high-intensity show of force and indicated Beijing’s continued elevation of military pressure surrounding the Taiwan matter. The exercise was conducted as a joint operation involving the People’s Liberation Army Ground Force (PLAGF), the PLA Navy (PLAN), the PLA Air Force (PLAAF), and the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) under the PLA Eastern Theater Command, as well as the China Coast Guard (CCG). The exercise area was configured to envelop the entire island of Taiwan in six sectors, such as the northern, southwestern, southeastern, and eastern waters, including the Taiwan Strait, effectively simulating the isolation of the island from all directions.

The core objective of this exercise was to provide further details on a blockade-and-strike scenario through which the PRC could sever Taiwan from external support while retaining the capability to impose immediate military pressure, if needed. To this end, the PRC military conducted live-fire drills, maritime and air patrols, simulated precision strikes, anti-submarine warfare (ASW) training, as well as a blockade training against Taiwan’s major ports. In particular, the ground maneuver target-strike training appeared to account for Taiwan’s recently acquired precision-strike systems, including HIMARS, indicating an anticipatory response to Taipei’s efforts to enhance its military response capabilities.<sup>3</sup> This exercise also aimed at exerting psychological pressure alongside a show of force by conducting anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) training in parallel, which factors in the possibility of an intervention by a third party.

Such training exercises show that Beijing is institutionalizing and regularizing military options short of a full-scale invasion. At the same time, by rendering military tensions in the Taiwan Strait a permanent feature, the possibility of inadvertent clashes in the Strait increases, which in turn becomes a key consideration in the security assessments of regional actors, including Japan and the ROK.

## ■ Prospects for North Korea–PRC–Russia Alignment in a Taiwan Contingency

If a Taiwan contingency were to materialize, the likelihood that North Korea and Russia would provide military support to the PRC would be limited, and Beijing itself would likely be disinclined to welcome such direct military intervention. This stems from the PRC’s perception of the Taiwan matter as a “controlled sovereignty crisis”, in which the involvement of external actors is to be minimized.<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Hong, Seok-jae. “China Conducts Taiwan Encirclement Drill in Nine Months; Japan: Intended to keep U.S. and Japan in Check...Increases Tension.” *Hankyoreh*, December 30, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Choi, Hyun-jun. “China Conducts Encirclement Drill Around Taiwan Involving Aircraft Carrier...In Four Days after Address by President.” *Hankyoreh*, October 14, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Davidson, H., & Hawkins, A. “China Launches Live-Fire Drills Around Taiwan Simulating Blockade of Major Ports.” *The Guardian*, December 29, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Stokes, J., Hart, K., Claffey, R., & Corel, T. (2025). Regional and global responses to a Taiwan contingency: Gauging the prospects for coalition-building under fire (Report). Center for a New American Security.

recent “Justice Mission–2025” exercise was likewise conducted unilaterally by the PRC, centered on the PLA and the CCG. The exercise did not consider showcasing North Korea–PRC–Russia alignment or soliciting participation from friendly foreign states.

In this regard, the PRC is expected to remain cautious about direct North Korean and Russian military intervention in a Taiwan contingency for the following reasons. First, the PRC is likely to seek clear control over the attribution of political and legal responsibility in the event of a Taiwan contingency. Beijing has consistently defined the Taiwan matter as an “internal affair” and a “sovereignty matter,” while criticizing external interference.<sup>5</sup> Within this logical framework, if North Korea or Russia were to undertake a military intervention, the PRC’s claims would lose persuasive power and could lead the international community to perceive the Taiwan contingency as a case of multinational armed aggression or combined provocation. The PRC would view such a perception as a major impediment to its efforts to assert international legitimacy.

Second, from the standpoint of escalation control, the PRC would likely perceive intervention by North Korea and Russia as a significant burden. In particular, if North Korea were to intervene in a Taiwan contingency, this could rapidly intensify military tensions on the Korean Peninsula, potentially resulting in an unintended expansion of the battlefield. Such escalation could increase the likelihood of involvement by the ROK and Japan, thereby further complicating the PRC’s strategic calculus. A North Korean intervention would likely be viewed not as a strategic asset but as a burden that amplifies the crisis. A Russian intervention would also be difficult to reconcile with the PRC’s crisis-management strategy. Russia is already engaged in a full-scale confrontation with the West through its war in Ukraine, and its approach to warfighting diverges from Beijing’s preference for an incremental pressure strategy. If Russia were to undertake a military intervention in a Taiwan contingency, the PRC could lose control over the tempo and intensity of the conflict due to the Russian variable, which could be one of the scenarios of concern for the PRC leadership.

Third, the PRC would seek to avoid a situation in which a Taiwan contingency is perceived by the international community as a bloc-to-bloc confrontation. If North Korea or Russia were to intervene militarily, the perceptions could emerge within the PRC that the crisis is shifting into a confrontation with democratic states. Such a development would accelerate the very “new Cold War–style bloc formation<sup>6</sup>” that Beijing has long sought to avoid. In particular, a Russian intervention would likely create a direct link between the Taiwan contingency and the Russia–Ukraine war, thereby positioning the PRC at the center of an all-out confrontation alongside Russia against the West

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<sup>5</sup> Wishnick, E. (2025, March 25). Russia-China-North Korea relations: Obstacles to a trilateral axis. Foreign Policy Research Institute.

<sup>6</sup> State Council of the PRC. Press Release Opposing New Cold War and Bloc Confrontation, September 6, 2023.

For these reasons, the PRC would likely expect only limited cooperation with North Korea and Russia, such as political support and diplomatic coordination in a Taiwan contingency, while seeking to exclude direct military intervention on the battlefield. This is not due to the absence of alignment among North Korea, the PRC, and Russia; rather, it reflects Beijing's intent to strictly manage both the scope and the means of such alignment. Accordingly, trilateral relations in a Taiwan contingency are more likely to function as a PRC-led alignment mechanism rather than as a military alliance.

### ■ Prospects for North Korea–PRC–Russia Alignment in a Korean Peninsula Crisis

Unlike in a Taiwan contingency, there are views that the PRC and Russia may perceive a crisis on the Korean Peninsula as a near-border contingency, potentially contemplating a conditional military intervention that goes beyond the North Korea–PRC–Russia alignment in political and diplomatic response.<sup>7</sup> In particular, the PRC perceives that a failure to control a crisis on the Peninsula could result in significant security costs, including border instability, large-scale refugee influx, and an increased risk of losing control over nuclear weapons.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, it is reasonable to assess that Beijing would judge active intervention and management to be preferable to passive observation in case of a crisis.

In this context, the PRC's attention may be directed towards preventing a scenario in which conflict on the Peninsula becomes protracted and the burden of security and administrative/public order management in regions adjacent to the border increases. Moreover, a full-scale war on the Peninsula would inevitably entail large-scale ROK–U.S. force projection, which Beijing could perceive as a major source of strategic pressure. In such circumstances, the PRC could face a dilemma in which would need to simultaneously consider the risk of entrapment in a conflict and the risk of abandonment—that is, the loss of influence over the Peninsula.

In addition, one factor to which the PRC is particularly sensitive is the potential loss of control over North Korea's nuclear weapons. The Korean Peninsula is characterized by a high concentration of nuclear risk compared to conflicts in other regions, and in a crisis, it is difficult to rule out instability in North Korea's nuclear command and control (NC2) structure. The PRC could conclude that the prospect of uncontrolled nuclear weapons in a region adjacent to its own border is one of the scenarios that need to be avoided. This risk is understood to encompass the movement, release, and unauthorized transfer of nuclear weapons and nuclear materials.<sup>9</sup> Such pressure could drive the PRC toward limited intervention through military means.

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. (2024). Annual report to Congress: Military and security developments involving the People's Republic of China (Dec. 18, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Jeong, Eun-yi et al. *Peace and Prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and Cooperation between the Two Koreas and China*. KINU, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Bennett, B. W., & Lind, J. *The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements*. RAND Corporation, 2011.

Russia, meanwhile, would also perceive a crisis on the Peninsula as a strategically exploitable and geopolitically significant space. In particular, North Korea and Russia have recently strengthened their relations at an institutional level. The June 2024 Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between North Korea and Russia includes a clause stipulating that if any one of the two sides is put in a state of war by an armed invasion, the other side shall provide military and other assistance with all means in its possession<sup>10</sup>. Admittedly, it would be difficult to conclude that this treaty mandates automatic military intervention. However, the critical point is that the treaty provides political justification for Russian support to North Korea in a crisis and sends a strong deterrence signal externally. In particular, the treaty may generate a certain binding effect by obligating Russia to provide political and diplomatic backing and, depending on circumstances, to consider limited military assistance.

Furthermore, if a crisis on the Peninsula were to result in a unified Korea, significant changes in the regional geopolitical environment could ensue. A scenario in which a unified Korea directly borders the PRC and Russia could affect the long-standing perception of North Korea as a geopolitical buffer for both states. In the PRC's case, existing studies indicate that Beijing is likely to perceive a shared border with a unified Korea as a situation to be avoided, if such a unified Korea were to maintain its alliance with the U.S. and the continued presence of United States Forces Korea (USFK)<sup>11</sup>. Such concerns could be a factor that prompts the PRC to be on guard against a rapid collapse of North Korea or a unilateral military outcome. Russia is likely to share similar baseline perceptions. Taken together, these geopolitical and strategic considerations suggest that, compared to a Taiwan contingency, alignment among North Korea, the PRC, and Russia during a crisis on the Korean Peninsula could operate in a stronger form.

### ■ Strategic Calculation of Key Actors under Simultaneous Peninsula and Taiwan Crises

According to the preceding analysis, a situation in which the PRC's strategic attention and resources are focused in the Taiwan theater due to a Taiwan contingency is more likely to be perceived by North Korea not as a "window of opportunity," but rather as a situation accompanied by the risks of weakened PRC support and deepened strategic isolation. An intuitive expectation may exist that if North Korea were to preemptively escalate tensions on the Korean Peninsula during a Taiwan contingency, it could disperse U.S. attention and resources. However, one must also consider that the PRC's capacity and resolve to manage a Peninsula crisis simultaneously would be structurally constrained while Beijing remains deeply engaged in the Taiwan theater.

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<sup>10</sup> *Russia-DPRK Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, art. 4*, June 2024: "In case any one of the two sides is put in a state of war by an armed invasion from an individual state or several states, the other side shall provide military and other assistance with all means in its possession without delay in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter and the laws of the DPRK and the Russian Federation."

<sup>11</sup> Beijing's worst strategic nightmare is a unified Korean Peninsula under Seoul's leadership, with a continued U.S. military presence, which a sudden collapse of the North Korean regime could produce.; Luo, S. (2025, 8. 21). China's North Korea problem: How America can encourage Beijing to rein in Pyongyang. *Foreign Affairs*.: Luo, S. "China's North Korea Problem." *Foreign Affairs*, August 21, 2025.

In particular, if the functions that North Korea has expected from the PRC – diplomatic backing, logistical support, and “rear-area political safety valve” during crisis – were to weaken, Pyongyang could find itself structurally compelled to shoulder strategic and military burdens alone under simultaneous crisis conditions. Indeed, there is a growing body of discussion within the U.S. that treats a so-called “dual-front crisis” as a key assumption<sup>12</sup>, in which instability emerges simultaneously on the PRC–Taiwan front and the Korean Peninsula front. This suggests that even if North Korea were to shape simultaneous crises, the outcome would not necessarily converge in its favor. Consequently, such perceptions may operate as a significant constraint, tilting North Korea’s choice away from crisis escalation and toward ‘crisis-management-oriented observation’ or ‘limited provocation’.

The PRC’s calculus partially overlaps with that of North Korea in this regard. While Beijing is focused on a Taiwan contingency, managing a simultaneous crisis on the Peninsula would likely be perceived as a sharp increase in strategic burden. The Taiwan theater represents a core interest for the PRC and simultaneously constitutes a high-intensity competitive environment in which military, economic, and diplomatic instruments are utilized in concert. If a Peninsula crisis were to occur simultaneously in such a context, the PRC would face the challenge of managing multiple contingencies, which could rapidly increase its strategic burden. Consequently, during a Taiwan contingency, Beijing would likely prefer maintaining stability on the Peninsula and could seek to ensure North Korean restraint from escalation. Additionally, the PRC’s calculus may include the concern that triggering an additional crisis on the Peninsula could in fact strengthen U.S. alliance cohesion.

Russia’s calculus under simultaneous crisis conditions may unfold differently from the PRC’s. Unlike in a Taiwan contingency, Moscow is likely to seek to increase U.S. strategic burdens in a Peninsula crisis by providing political and diplomatic backing as well as limited military assistance to North Korea. In particular, the 2024 Russia–North Korea treaty provides justification for such selective involvement, and accordingly, Russia may pursue a strategy of assuming a relatively more active role on the Peninsula under simultaneous crises conditions.

As clearly articulated in the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS), the U.S. is strengthening its focus on strategic competition with the PRC while calling for a greater role and increased responsibilities from its allies.<sup>13</sup> If a Taiwan contingency were to materialize, Washington’s strategic focus would likely center on deterring the PRC’s aggression. Against this backdrop, there are growing expectations that the ROK assume a greater leadership role in deterring conventional provocations and conducting the initial response on the Peninsula. Indeed, U.S. military officials, including the Commander of USFK, have indicated that while USFK will maintain the defense of the Peninsula as its core mission,<sup>14</sup> it may

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<sup>12</sup> Pacific Forum. “From Silent Observer to Strategic Enabler: South Korea’s Role in a Taiwan Contingency.” PacNet #52, 2025.

<sup>13</sup> The White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. November 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Lee, Geun-pyeong & Kim, Ha-na. “USFK Not Solely Focused on Defeating DPRK, CDR USFK...Implies Role for Taiwan Contingency.” *JoongAng Ilbo*, May 16, 2025.

also contribute to contingencies across the broader Indo-Pacific. This position is understood within the broader context on alliance modernization and strategic flexibility.

In conjunction with the wartime operational control (OPCON) transition, even if the ROK assumes a greater leadership role in warfighting on the Peninsula, the ROK's superiority in conventional forces is expected to enhance deterrence in escalation situations and provide favorable conditions for warfighting. Moreover, should North Korea's nuclear threats intensify beyond conventional conflict, the U.S. would likely provide extended deterrence in a more explicit and visible manner, increasing the likelihood that nuclear deterrent will function credibly at the ROK-U.S. Alliance level. In particular, as conventional–nuclear integration (CNI) between the ROK and the U.S. becomes more detailed and advanced,<sup>15</sup> the deterrence effect during a crisis will become increasingly clear.

Ultimately, even if North Korea perceives an incentive to exploit a Taiwan contingency as an opportunity to expand the crisis on the Peninsula during simultaneous crises, the combined effects of reduced PRC support for Pyongyang, Beijing's pressure to maintain stability on the Peninsula, and a strengthened ROK–U.S. readiness posture for simultaneous crises would likely constrain Pyongyang's preemptive crisis shaping. In this context, a simultaneous crisis environment would likely be perceived as a more disadvantageous strategic setting for North Korea than for the ROK and the U.S., and this dynamic is assessed as an important factor in securing deterrence stability on the Korean Peninsula.

## ■ Policy Implications

In sum, a simultaneous occurrence of a Korean Peninsula crisis and a Taiwan contingency is likely to increase the strategic burden on both North Korea and the PRC. From this perspective, both actors are expected to seek to avoid a simultaneous crisis environment itself. Nevertheless, even in the absence of clear legal or historical justification for intervention, the possibility remains that the PRC and Russia could adjust the intensity and means of their involvement in a Peninsula crisis in accordance with their respective security interests. Such involvement could manifest in various forms, including military, political, and diplomatic intervention. Accordingly, the ROK needs to maintain robust military readiness while continuously strengthening efforts for crisis management at political and diplomatic levels. In particular, it is important to engage in strategic messaging that highlights how stability on the Korean Peninsula aligns with the security interests of the PRC and Russia, thereby encouraging these states to contribute to maintaining stability rather than conducting military intervention.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Government of the Republic of Korea. "To provide further details to CNI concept into an OPLAN level and strengthen combined exercise and trainings, including TTXs" *123 National Policy Tasks*, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Republic of Korea Policy Briefing. "ROK–China Leaders Agree Yearly Summits...Strategic Dialogue Channel to be Restored." January 6, 2026.

At the same time, the ROK-U.S. Alliance must continue to advance its readiness posture on the assumption that simultaneous crises is a possibility, thereby preventing North Korean attempts to exploit simultaneous crises to its advantage. Critically, extended deterrence cooperation between Seoul and Washington must move beyond the level of declaratory policy and be translated into operational concepts that are functionable under actual crisis conditions. To this end, the Alliance should further develop CNI centered on the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), while establishing more elaborate mechanisms for information sharing, decision-making, and joint planning and execution across each phase of crisis. Such preparations will serve as a key element in substantially enhancing the credibility and predictability of deterrence even under simultaneous crisis conditions. Ultimately, they will form the foundation for preventing North Korea's strategic miscalculation while maintaining and reinforcing the stability and strategic initiative on the Korean Peninsula. ■