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Stability on the Korean Peninsula took a beating in 2017. The year began with Kim Jong-un's New Year's Address that declared North Korea had "entered the final stage of preparation for the test launch of [an] intercontinental ballistic missile"² and President-elect Donald Trump tweeted in response, "it won't happen."³ The subsequent twelve months witnessed North Korea's sixth nuclear test and over 20 missile launches, including the long-range Hwasong-15 that demonstrated the range to reach the continental United States. Rhetoric was equally contentious, as both sides exchanged fiery language and insults. Tensions reached unusually high levels, even for Korea, and threats to use force became commonplace throughout the year.

As these events played out, speculation was rife regarding the possibility of military action and what this would mean for Korea. One of the central questions in these discussions was the role China would play should war erupt there. Would Beijing become directly involved and send troops into the North or stay on the sidelines? Would China seek to prop up and defend North Korea or be most concerned with maintaining stability while shielding China from the bedlam that would be occurring across the border? Would Chinese and U.S. operations clash in their efforts to deal with the crisis?

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author, expressed in an unofficial capacity, and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Navy or the U.S. government.

² Kim Jong-un's 2017 New Year's Address, https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/KJU_2017_New_Years_Address.pdf.

³ Donald Trump Twitter account, 2 January 2017, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/816057920223846400?lang=en>.

In this well-researched and carefully crafted article, Oriana Skylar Mastro explores these questions and argues that China would almost certainly intervene, in large part, to secure North Korean nuclear weapons. She maintains that China has the motivation and has improved its capability to intervene successfully. Most U.S. assessments have been loath to see these actions as a positive development; China will likely intervene to keep the Kim regime in power and subsequently to reduce U.S. influence in Korea. However, Mastro argues that while there will be trade-offs for the United States, Chinese intervention is more likely to be successful than U.S. efforts in securing North Korean nuclear weapons and “would be beneficial, on aggregate, for U.S. interests and regional security” (89).

Two points require further discussion before proceeding. Mastro provides a clear and convincing argument that China would intervene to secure North Korea’s nuclear weapons and that this should be welcome news for Washington. This is a crucial point she makes that bears repeating. The chief concern for all parties is the possible use by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) of nuclear weapons and the potential for nuclear weapons or materials to migrate outside of the country in the midst of the chaos. As Mastro notes, preventing these actions is far more important than any struggle for influence that China will likely gain, regardless of the actions taken by the United States. Preventing a nuclear catastrophe should be Washington’s foremost concern, and if China can do so more quickly and effectively, all else is secondary.

The article raises a related point, however, that is debatable. Mastro maintains that “China will be intervening not to support the North Korean regime but to achieve its own strategic objectives—one of which is to prevent the use of nuclear weapons or a nuclear accident on the peninsula” (89). Yet, depending on the circumstances of the conflict, particularly the political dynamics within North Korea at the time, the condition of Sino-U.S. relations, and whether Pyongyang is viewed as the aggressor or victim in a crisis, Chinese intervention could occur to both secure North Korea’s nuclear weapons and support the regime. Thus, an underlying theme of the article is that Chinese intervention will lead to reunification, and Mastro cites several Chinese sources to confirm this point. However, it is not clear that Chinese leaders will see events in that manner; much will depend on the context and whether they believe reunification can be controlled to benefit Chinese interests. Mastro may be correct that Chinese intervention will lead to reunification but it is not difficult to think of other scenarios where this will not be the result.

The article is framed in the literature on state intervention⁴ in ongoing conflicts and examines six possible factors for Chinese intervention as suggested by these studies: fulfilling a Sino-North Korea alliance commitment; restraining refugee flows; preventing the use or transfer of nuclear weapons; reaping economic benefits that might accrue from the intervention; protecting geopolitical interests; and possessing the necessary military capabilities for successful intervention. Mastro argues that while an alliance relationship and economic considerations are present, it is the other four that would be the critical motives for China “not only

⁴ See, for example: John A. Vasquez and Ashlea Rundlett, “Alliances as a Necessary Condition of Multiparty Wars,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60:8 (December 2016): 1395-1418; Jacob D. Kathman, “Civil War Contagion and Neighboring Interventions,” *International Studies Quarterly* 54:4 (December 2010): 989-1012; Mi Yung Yoon, “Explaining U.S. Intervention in Third World Internal Wars, 1945-1989,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41:4 (Fall 2011): 714-715; and Jun Koga, “Where Do Third Parties Intervene? Third Parties’ Domestic Institutions and Military Interventions in Civil Conflicts,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55:4 (December 2011): 1143-1166.

to intervene, but to seize control of North Korea's nuclear storage facilities, weapons, testing tunnels, and missile sites" (93).

Mastro makes good use of the state intervention literature and Chinese sources. Particularly interesting are the author's interviews with Chinese scholars and officials that add a detailed and insightful base of evidence on Chinese thinking and strategy. Mastro's discussion of these points provides an important understanding of Chinese interests and intent along with how these assessments are changing.

The nuanced evaluation of Chinese capabilities that Mastro provides is also well done. Intervention to secure North Korea's nuclear capabilities is essentially a two-step process in which weapons and materials must first be found and secured. The second step is dismantling and disposing of the nuclear material. China has the location and military capability to secure North Korean nuclear facilities and materials more quickly than anyone else. If this challenge required securing only a handful of sites, the United States could possibly match Chinese advantages, but not so given the scale of the problem. Securing North Korea's nuclear weapons is far and away the most important task. The second step of dismantling and disposing of the nuclear weapons is in many respects far less important, and Mastro lays out several plausible paths for dealing with this part of the challenge, even if China lacks the requisite capabilities and cannot do it alone. In short, so long as the material remains secure, the second step of the process is the least of anyone's worries.

A war on the Korean Peninsula would be a complex, multidimensional disaster and in fairness, the focus of this study is on China and the United States. However, one aspect that would be central to these events and is underplayed is the role of South Korea. Mastro argues that South Korea, along with other states that are part of the United Nations Command, would provide a great deal of support to the overall war effort. However, she maintains that South Korea would be constrained in its participation in the securing and dismantling of nuclear facilities due to restrictions under the Nuclear non-Proliferation Treaty. However, if war and the possibility of North Korean nuclear strikes were imminent, South Korea would be closely involved in all aspects. For several years, the South Korean military has been developing a capability it calls "the Kill Chain" and is prepared to conduct preemptive strikes on North Korean military targets.⁵ The Republic of Korea (ROK) military has long-range cruise missiles, ballistic missiles that under new alliance guidelines have the range to reach all of North Korea, and fighter aircraft that can conduct these strike missions. Chinese efforts to seize nuclear facilities could occur when Seoul conducts these preemptive strikes. Given the stakes, the planning arrangements of the ROK-U.S. alliance, and the integrated command structure of the Combined Forces Command, it is difficult to envision ROK forces not being an integral part of these operations from the start. Mastro raises an important point that South Korea may not be central to the destruction and removal of nuclear material, but that does not preclude South Korea, which has a lot to lose, from being a crucial asset in securing North Korea's nuclear weapons.

The article presents a convincing argument that China has many advantages over the United States in the securing of North Korean nuclear weapons. Yet, even for China, this will be a daunting task and the stakes could not be higher. Many of the sites are close to the Sino-North Korean border, but Mastro's sources indicate that they have limited intelligence on the location of North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile sites (105). Moreover, these events are likely to evolve from a serious crisis, prompting North Korea to go on a

⁵ Republic of Korea, Ministry of National Defense, 2016 Defense White Paper.

heightened state of alert and disperse its assets, including deploying its mobile missile launchers, making the task of securing North Korean nuclear weapons even more difficult.

The People's Liberation Army reception in North Korea will also be a crucial variable. As Mastro notes, Sino-DPRK relations had been in terrible shape for the first six years of Kim Jong-un's rule. Since 2018, however, relations have improved even if there will always be wariness between Pyongyang and Beijing. A significant portion of North Korea's military assets are deployed south—70 percent within approximately 60 miles of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) according to the U.S. Department of Defense⁶— and the North Korean military's ability to sustain combat operations for any length of time is questionable. These factors limit the amount of North Korean opposition Chinese forces might face; they will likely have an easier go of it than U.S. or South Korean troops. Yet, if the context of China's intervention is to secure nuclear weapons, remove the Kim regime, and work toward reunification, resistance to China may be stiffer than expected. How all these elements could play out is uncertain. A more optimistic set of events may result, but it is also likely that these operations will be more challenging in terms of securing North Korean nuclear capabilities.

The most crucial part of the argument is the need for U.S. policy makers to be less concerned about who secures North Korean nuclear weapons and more focused on the success of the task, regardless of who accomplishes it. Mastro notes that U.S. planning for a unilateral operation to secure North Korea's nuclear weapons may not be practical and that Washington and Beijing should find ways to increase their cooperation on this goal. It is essential that Washington, Beijing, and Seoul collaborate as much as possible beforehand. There may be political limitations, as Mastro acknowledges, but this is another reminder that despite growing friction between China and the United States, they have important common interests that require cooperation. These efforts must be undertaken carefully and quietly so that the three states do not appear to be working on North Korea's demise. Should circumstances deteriorate and require intervention, however, there is a great deal of potential for the involved states to get in each other's way with deadly consequences. Predicting how this would all play out is a challenge, and the likelihood of events following any expected script is low. While ideally these plans will not need to be implemented, if the involved states fail to work together to deconflict military operations and do advanced planning, the results could be a disaster.

Oriana Skylar Mastro has written an insightful and thought-provoking article that raises many important questions for officials, analysts, and military planners to consider. This article adds much to our understanding of China's motives and capabilities, most importantly, how these elements have evolved in recent years. While the current climate of summits and reduced tensions may make the need for intervening in North Korea to secure its nuclear stockpile less likely, planning and coordinating for this type of undertaking between China, the United States, and South Korea remains essential.

Terence Roehrig is Professor of National Security Affairs and the Director of the Asia-Pacific Studies Group at the U.S. Naval War College. He was a Research Fellow at the Kennedy School at Harvard University and a past President of the Association of Korean Political Studies. He has published several books, including his most recent *Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. Nuclear Umbrella: Deterrence After the Cold War* with Columbia

⁶ Office of the Secretary Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Report to Congress," 9-6009878, 2017, 9.

University Press (2017). Roehrig has published numerous articles and book chapters on Korean and East Asian security issues, North Korea's nuclear weapons program, the Northern Limit Line dispute, the South Korean Navy, deterrence theory, the U.S.-South Korea alliance, human rights, and transitional justice.

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