

Chinese Military Involvement in a Future Korean War

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IN LATE October 1950, with UN forces pushing north toward the Yalu River, Mao Zedong—influenced by the US Navy presence in the Taiwan Straits, Soviet heavy-handedness, and a somewhat altruistic desire to help his fellow Communist comrades—issued the order for China to enter the Korean War.¹ His poorly equipped, parka-clad millions eventually stymied the advance, pushing UN forces below the 38th parallel and into the uneasy armistice that still exists. Until the very last moment, US war planners (and Gen Douglas MacArthur himself)² ignored signs of Chinese preparations for attack—a strategic mistake which led to the hard-fought retreat of UN forces out of North Korea. Influenced by history, Korean analysts today often refer to the US fatal error when discussing future Chinese military involvement in a Korean conflict. This implies an almost fatalistic assumption that China would intervene on behalf of North Korea. By analyzing Chinese intentions simply through a historical perspective, we limit our conclusions to a prism of variables that may no longer be applicable in a post-Cold War era.

To avoid repeating the mistakes of the past (or being overly influenced by them), Chinese intentions in a future Korean war must be analyzed, first by exploring how China's interests and capabilities have changed since 1950. Once a divergence from the past has been established, it is then necessary to define concrete actions the United States could take to not only assuage Chinese concerns but to also deter China's entrance into the conflict. Simply put, a modern analysis of any future Korean war must attempt to define China's perceived costs and benefits from involvement and then create solutions through which the United States can influence the values assigned by the Chinese to their political decisions. The final

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goal is to convince the Chinese that the cost of intervening militarily for North Korea would be greater than the benefit China could receive by abstaining from the conflict.

Before delving into this analysis, it is important to broach the assumptions upon which this discussion is based. First, this analysis assumes an unprovoked North Korean attack into South Korea. Secondly, the argument assumes that North Korea initiated this unprovoked attack without prior Chinese approval. It is important to understand that this analysis does not discuss regime anarchy, political upheavals, or any other circumstance which would involve humanitarian crises in North Korea.

Why Did China Enter the Korean War?

China today is not the burgeoning bastion of Maoism that entered the Korean War in 1950, nor is the political paradigm the same bipolar schism of interests that so divisively partitioned Korea after World War II. In 1950, on the eve of the Korean War, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was a mere one year old, insecure in both its geopolitical viability and its domestic sustainability—plunging forward on the fumes of Mao's charismatic leadership and the spirit of the communist revolution. It was an infant state which, like all nation-states, was primarily concerned with survival—survival in the face of the US Navy's 7th Fleet, which was protecting remnants of the Chinese Republic exiled to Taiwan; survival in the face of the capitalist forces quickly advancing to the Yalu River; survival in the face of a region alarmingly antagonistic to the Communist Party and cornered by forces creeping in from Japan and the Korean peninsula (and with a Soviet neighbor that was not exactly trustworthy). A wide array of opinions exists on what ultimately pushed China into the Korean War. Here we'll explore some of the preeminent arguments, to include Mao's personal proclivities toward military romanticism,³ China's role as a non-nuclear state in an emerging game of nuclear deterrence, the role of Stalin, and US policy in the Taiwan Straits.

Scholars may disagree on what finally pushed Mao into the Korean War, but they can agree that he was the primary arbiter of the final decision.⁴ For that reason, Mao himself must be examined as a key variable in China's entry into the war. Perhaps most importantly, Mao believed the Chinese stood a fighting chance against the United States. Influenced by Marxist and Confucian theories, he stressed that the strength of character

and moral rectitude of the Chinese Communists mitigated any technological inferiority a PRC soldier might initially face in comparison to the well-equipped forces of the United States.⁵ In this way, Mao's decision to combat the United States was derived by an analysis of possible outcomes—not through quantitative variables (number of tanks, efficacy of weaponry, presence of aircraft), but through qualitative concepts (strength of will, resourcefulness, and courage). In weighing these qualitative elements, Mao's reasoning became highly skewed by Marxist concepts of the proletariat's historical inevitability. Therefore, if one PRC soldier exhibits the valor of 10 capitalist mercenaries, then Mao's forces would (as the reasoning goes) be able, in the long term, to combat the better-equipped US forces. Mao speaks to this explicitly in an October 1950 telegram to Stalin in which he explains, "[T]he enemy would control the air . . . but we should be able to concentrate our forces four times larger than the enemy . . . and to use a firing power one and a half to two times stronger than that of the enemy . . . so that we can guarantee a complete and thorough destruction of one enemy army."⁶ After determining that victory through strength of will (or sheer numbers) was achievable, Mao had next to decide if it was in the interest of the new People's Republic of China to become involved in the Korean War. Here his personal desires—respect in the eyes of international players, destruction of Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist forces and reunification of the Chinese territory, and cementation of his personal leadership in the quasi-independent Chinese Socialist Party—intertwined confusingly with national objectives. For the purpose of this analysis, we will discuss these variables as national interests.

Also integral to Mao's reasoning was the relatively new appearance of nuclear bombs on the international scene. Though Stalin and Mao both had an emerging understanding of the power of nuclear weapons to deter states from invading one another, the concept of deterrence was yet to become a codified foreign-policy concept. In 1950, the Soviet Union was a newcomer nuclear state,⁷ and China was a nonplayer in the nuclear game. So, while China in 1950 assessed the very strong possibility of US aggression into its homeland,⁸ it was not deterred from intervening in the Korean conflict because it (correctly) assumed that the United States would either not use a nuclear weapon against a nonnuclear state supported by a nuclear Soviet Union,⁹ or the United States would use a nuclear weapon and the PRC's strength of will and population magnitude would still defeat US aggression.¹⁰ Either way, whether the United States used a nuclear

bomb or relied on its conventional strength, China was equally vulnerable to an opportunistic US invasion of Manchuria. As Mao reasoned in his 1946 interview with US journalist Anna Strong, “The atom bomb is a paper tiger with which the American reactionaries try to terrify the people. It looks terrible but, in fact, is not. Of course, the atom bomb is a weapon of mass annihilation: the outcome of a war is decided by the people, not by one or two new weapons.”¹¹ More cavalierly, Mao believed that one A-bomb—with the demonstrated capability to kill approximately 150,000—would prove inconsequential in an all-out conflict against the heavily populated PRC. He reasoned that Stalin’s Soviet Union, with its commensurate conventional and burgeoning nuclear capabilities, was a more likely recipient of the United States’ nuclear ire. It was a risky assessment in 1950, but surprisingly accurate.

Stalin made the same assessment as Mao, which helps explain why the Soviet Union took such pains to both extricate itself from blame for the Korean War and to avoid explicitly aiding the North Koreans. The Korean War, which embroiled the United States in costly conflict, diverted US attention from the Soviet Union and provided an opportunity for Stalin to irrevocably divide the United States and China. It also allowed Stalin to divert Mao’s attention from Taiwan and avoid Chinese requests for Soviet support to attack Chiang Kai-shek’s forces. Stalin knew Mao’s forces had no possibility of success if the United States placed its unequivocal support behind Chiang’s forces. These motivators explain a significant school of thought, which attempts to explain Mao’s final decision to enter the Korean War as a response to extreme pressure from a wily Stalin.¹² Stalin’s manipulation of Chinese insecurities is evident in his October 1950 cable to Mao, in which Stalin argues, “For you it is possible to help the Korean people, but for us it is impossible because as you know the Second World War ended not long ago, and we are not ready for the Third World War.” He went on to further elucidate the consequences to China if it were to ignore the conflict brewing along its borders, “The economic recovery of the Northeast [China] probably will be out of the question . . . [the Americans] at will could harass from air, land, and sea.”¹³ Bottom line, the milk has already been spilt. The Chinese could cry about the unfairness of the conflict which began without their consent¹⁴ and at great disadvantage to their Taiwan reunification plans, but in the end their hand had already been forced and they had nothing left to do but to limit the repercussions of the war at their front door.

What may have been the greatest determinant into China's entry into the Korean War was a situation a few thousand miles south in Taiwan. Chiang Kai-shek's forces were seriously impeding the PRC's recognized entrance as an international player. In truth, Mao's primary goal in 1950 was not to support his communist brethren in North Korea but to finally quell his domestic enemies and cement his control of the entire Chinese territories.¹⁵ In fact, as Kim Il Sung crafted invasion plans with Stalin in May of 1950, Mao was otherwise engaged with Taiwan invasion plans. By June (and just a few weeks before the first shots of the Korean War), General MacArthur warned Congress that "the troops opposite Formosa [Taiwan] had been increased from less than 40,000 to about 156,000."¹⁶ Discussions between the Chinese and Soviet foreign ministries during this time period focus not on crafting a plan for North Korean invasion of the South, but on Soviet support of a PRC invasion of Taiwan¹⁷ (impossible to attempt without Stalin's support because the PRC had no amphibious or airborne capability to mount an attack). Unfortunately for Mao, Stalin beat Mao to the punch and condoned (if not influenced) Kim Il Sung's attack on South Korea.¹⁸ Stalin knew this would force the United States' hand—not only in regard to Korea, but also Taiwan. True to form, the United States (which had been toying with the notion of abandoning Chiang Kai-shek and offering recognition to Mao's PRC)¹⁹ interpreted the Korean attack as a potential domino in their Asian strategy and quickly moved the 7th Fleet into the Taiwan Straits to protect against any opportunistic move by Mao. In fact, in July 1950, the United States went as far as to send General MacArthur to a highly public meeting with Chiang Kai-shek, coupling the stunt with the forward deployment of strategic bombers to Guam.²⁰ America's aggressive move into the Straits was noted by the Chinese government and clearly discussed in a late-September statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

We Chinese people are against the American imperialists because they are against us. They have openly become the arch enemy of the People's Republic of China by supporting the people's enemy, the Chiang Kai-shek clique, by sending a huge fleet to prevent the liberation of the Chinese territory of Taiwan, by repeated air intrusions and strafing and bombing of the Chinese people, by refusing new China a seat in the UN, through intrigues with their satellite nations, by rearing up a fascist power in Japan, and by rearming Japan for the purpose of expanding aggressive war. Is it not just for us to support our friend and neighbor against our enemy?²¹

Later the seemingly unstoppable US drive to the Yalu River would lead Mao to equate a US victory in Korea with an eventual (if not immediate)

opportunistic American attack into northeast China.²² This would effectively open a two-front war (with Taiwan being a second front) from which Mao would not be able to garner enough resources to effectively retain control of the Chinese continent. Taiwan and Korea were impossible to decouple.

What Could Pull China Into a Korean Conflict?

Is China willing to risk nuclear war with the United States over North Korea? More than likely . . . no. However, a more difficult question may be whether China is willing to risk limited war with the United States over North Korea.

First and foremost, for China to be willing to risk a limited war with the United States, China must be sure the United States would not use its nuclear arsenal. Keir Lieber and Daryl Press argue in their article, “The Nukes We Need,” that for the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD) to work, both parties must be able to credibly support their threat of nuclear force.²³ Can (and does) the United States credibly claim that it would be willing to exercise its nuclear deterrent against China if People’s Liberation Army Air Force Flankers were to fly defensive patrols over Pyongyang? If Chinese vessels took up defensive positions at major North Korean ports such as Wonsan and Nampo? If Chinese Air Defense radars or surface-to-air missiles began to operate out of Sinuiju? The answer continues to be obfuscated in the recently published *Nuclear Policy Review* penned by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates which asserts,

In the case of countries . . . that possess nuclear weapons and states not in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations—there remains a narrow range of contingencies in which U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring a conventional or CBW attack against the United States or its allies and partners. The United States is therefore not prepared at the present time to adopt a universal policy that deterring nuclear attack is the sole purpose of nuclear weapons, but will work to establish conditions under which such a policy could be safely adopted.²⁴

With such a vague delineation of nuclear usage, it would be logical for China to assess that, no, the United States would not risk nuclear war by initiating a nuclear conflict against a state which controls a potentially threatening amount of US currency. No, the United States would not risk nuclear war against a state that has the capability to target not only

US-controlled Pacific interests but even the mainland United States (albeit in a limited manner).

We have established the possibility that the Chinese could assess the United States to be nuclearly unwilling. With this foundation, it is important to evaluate the possible circumstances which could lead China to determine that even the repercussions of a limited, conventional war would outweigh the international, domestic, and economic repercussions of abetting the North Koreans in an attack against the South. In homage to East meets West, it is time to introduce Clausewitz to the analysis. It is Clausewitz's argument that "the great uncertainty of all data in war is a peculiar difficulty, because all action must, to a certain extent, be planned in a mere twilight, which in addition not infrequently—like the effect of a fog or moonshine—gives to things exaggerated dimensions and unnatural appearance."²⁵ It is situations that Clausewitz described that lead to unfortunate incidents, and it is ultimately the most dangerous cinder block in the Korean scenario. How disciplined are Chinese air defense operators sitting watch as US aircraft skirt the border to prosecute North Korean targets? How advanced is the Chinese early warning system to be able to properly identify a US pilot from a North Korean pilot? How sure can a US vessel be that its nighttime engagement is with a North Korean frigate and not a Chinese frigate defending its perceived economic exclusion zone? I mention air and sea assets in particular because air and sea boundaries are inherently fluid (see the extensive arguments between China and the international community about the extent of their economic exclusion zone).²⁶ It is a matter of a simple GPS malfunction (or jamming) or operator error, which could lead forces on either side to improperly distinguish friend from foe or neutral from hostile.

Another volatile element in the Northeast Asian security dynamic is the relationship between China and Japan. North Korea's presence as the "bad guy" in Northeast Asia is relatively short in the history of the region. The historical enemy of all countries—from China to South Korea—has in fact been Japan. This enduring legacy of Japan as the colonizer is still salient in Chinese memories. Only five years ago, Chinese citizens took to the street in a mass protest against Japanese history books. Visits to the Yasakuni Shrine by Japanese officials still provide sizeable concern to Chinese and Korean diplomats. And to this day, China and Japan refuse to accept the sovereignty of oil-rich islands located between the two nations. Susan Shirk captures this antipathy in her book *Fragile Superpower*

when she quotes a Chinese Internet user as saying, “I would like to donate one month’s salary if our army fought against Taiwan. I would like to donate one year’s salary if our army fought against America. I would like to donate my life if our army fought against Japan.”²⁷ This animosity is recognized and exploited by the North Koreans, who have spent the last two years of Six Party Talks working to drive a wedge between the Japanese and the region, reminding the region of Japan’s imperial past while steadily pushing Japan out of relevance in regional negotiations. A 23 October 2008 article in KCNA (North Korea’s official news agency) masterfully articulated North Korea’s strategy vis-à-vis Japan, declaring,

What Japan is now claiming under the pretext of “nuclear verification” glaringly reveals its present regime’s stance toward the DPRK . . . Japan’s negative attitude is a deliberate move to hamstring the implementation of the denuclearization of the peninsula . . . Japan can hardly be considered as a party to the six-party talks both in the light of what it has done at the talks so far and the insincere stance taken by it toward the fulfillment of its commitments under the agreement reached at the talks. The countries concerned still remember the hurdles laid by Japan to create complexities in the way of the talks. They are, therefore, cautious about the present Japanese government bringing to light its sinister intention, displeased with the current development. Japan now deserves cool treatment for opposing the new “verification proposal” of the DPRK under the pretext of the “alliance.”²⁸

The Japanese are partly responsible for the North Koreans’ effective manipulation of Japanese influence in the region. Japan is quick to react to North Korean aggression and often takes actions that countries, like China, view as counterproductive for achieving stability in the region. Taking into account these two foreign-policy objectives and strategies, it would not be out of the realm of possibility for North Korea to launch ballistic missiles at Japan in an attempt to draw Japan into the conflict, thus turning a simple equation of North Korea versus the United States and South Korea (a situation which could be tenable to China) into a more complicated scenario of North Korea versus the United States, South Korea, and Japan. Could China stand by as Japan executed what would seem dangerously similar to their colonial expansion of the early twentieth century?

A full discussion about China’s range of options in a Korean conflict cannot be concluded without discussing Taiwan. However loathe the United States is to link actions on the Korean peninsula with Taiwan, it is historically impossible to completely separate the two issues. As mentioned previously, China’s attempts to initially reunify Taiwan with the

PRC were stymied by the Korean War. Would it be possible for China to capitalize on the US focus on Korea to launch a simultaneous amphibious operation to conquer Taiwan? The answer to that question lies in the answer to two additional questions: (1) Does China believe that it could conquer Taiwan with the United States tied up in Korea? and (2) Does China believe that it is worth an offensive attack to reunify Taiwan?

As to the first question, China hosts an impressive array of short-range ballistic missiles and increasingly accurate medium-range ballistic missiles that reside uncomfortably close, across the Taiwan Straits.²⁹ According to a recent RAND study, the Chinese currently have the initial capability to destroy Taiwanese air defenses as well as its ability to launch offensive air operations. Assuming that US Pacific Forces would be tied up in a Korean conflict, China would be able to achieve air superiority within 24 to 48 hours of launching an attack on Taiwan. That would leave US long-range missile capability and Taiwanese ground troops to fend off a Chinese amphibious attack. The good news for the Taiwanese is that China still does not boast a sizeable amphibious capability.³⁰ It would take an operation of immense magnitude, planning, and resources to physically control the Taiwanese island. It is unknown whether the Chinese would be willing to enter into a conflict so antithetical to their Maoist principles of asymmetry. The conflict could devolve into a guerrilla conflict far too reminiscent to China's problems in Tibet. Ultimately China could most likely win the initial phase of a conflict but would find it difficult to completely secure and control the physical island.

This brings us to the second question. Does China believe it is worth launching an offensive attack against Taiwan? I find this question to be very difficult for Western (read American) analysts to comprehend. We simply do not have the equivalent to Taiwan in our cultural vernacular. It is hard for us to understand what domestic issue would be so salient it would be worth being declared an international pariah. In many ways, much of the same cost-benefit analysis computed for a Korean scenario would go into analysis of a Taiwan attack. How much would this hurt the Chinese economy? How much would it hinder China's ability to operate in the international community? How much domestic pressure would be put on China to use the Korean conflict to reunify Taiwan?³¹ The answers to these questions lie with the Chinese policymakers and are almost impossible to discern as an outsider. For this analysis, what is important is not the answer to these questions but that the Chinese could *possibly* be

motivated to pursue an opportunistic invasion of Taiwan during a Korean conflict. This would consequently proliferate the Korean conflict to the Taiwan Straits and, by proxy, complicate US allocation of diplomatic and military resources during a Korean conflict.

Why China Won't Enter the Next Korean Conflict

Today China is more secure in its geopolitical position and domestic survivability than the China of 1950. Though still driven by state survival, China is less concerned with the preservation of communism and more focused on stability to its burgeoning economy and global presence. Despite reluctance to codify its pragmatic focus into clear-cut foreign policy statements, China is no longer preoccupied with the proliferation of “isms”³² and is more concerned with the aftermath of a nuclear-empowered, unstable North Korea.

Perhaps most noticeably, China of 2010 has no Mao. Instead, it has developed a bureaucratic system of governance with individuals who hold key positions but no one leader so charismatic as to control all national objectives. As a result, the possibility of personality-driven decision making is significantly decreased. The need to generate factions of consensus mitigates much of the romanticism endemic in Mao's military choices. Therefore, by removing Mao from the equation, the decision to intervene in a Korean conflict becomes a much more transparent equation of utilities, with a rational balance of domestic and international objectives.

Domestically, China is preoccupied with the impact that a Korean conflict might have to its economic and demographic stability. Northeastern China boasts several major industries—including steel, automobile production, and petroleum refining. Its three provinces—Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang—generate over \$413 billion in gross domestic product³³ and are the home base of the Shenyang Aviation Company, the centerpiece of modern aviation development in China. It is also the research and development hub for Chinese fifth-generation aircraft.³⁴ Were China to assist the North Koreans in a conflict, they could assume that these industries as well as major air force installations in the Shenyang region would be targeted by the United States, even in a relatively limited conflict scenario.

Add to the Chinese calculus the variable of over 1.5 million ethnic Koreans residing in the northeast region of China, and it leads to a very

serious Chinese concern. Not only would a large influx of North Korean refugees potentially provide a destabilizing demographic, but there is also the obvious cost of wartime refugee flows of hundreds of thousands to millions of starving North Koreans. The Chinese, who have been loath to provide for North Korean refugees in the past, will be assailed with a massive requirement to provide food, water, medical supplies, and basic housing. Chinese military forces in the region will have to police the porous border, establish rule of law in refugee camps, and mitigate the amount of international involvement in the humanitarian crisis. The Chinese have been preparing for this scenario since the 2006 North Korean nuclear test. Then, reports flooded newspapers worldwide of Chinese fence construction along the Sino-Korean border, implying containment, not involvement.³⁵ It seems counterintuitive that China would aid the proliferation of a conflict, which would have such dramatic repercussions to their own territories.

The effects to the Chinese border area would not be limited to refugee crises or errant bombs. On an environmental level, China could also suffer the repercussion of nuclear, chemical, or biological fallout from North Korea. While these events could occur regardless of Chinese military involvement, the probability they would occur is more likely in a drawn-out guerilla warfare scenario than a Persian Gulf-style US advance through North Korea, partly because a quickly dominated North Korea would have less access to weapons of mass destruction. According to the International Crisis Group and International Institute for Strategic Studies, North Korea may have stockpiled 2,500–5,000 tons of chemical agents³⁶ and experimented with biological warfare capability—to include anthrax and smallpox. Both chemical and biological weapons are notoriously difficult to control after dissemination and could spread to the Chinese territories, especially if North Korea chose to use those weapons within their own territory as US forces pushed north. There is also the potential concern that US targeting of North Korean facilities could inadvertently release dangerous toxins into the environment. According to *Global Security*, North Korea hosts chemical facilities within the Sino-Korean border town of Sinuiju,³⁷ just a short distance from Chinese territory and too close to contain fallout from reaching into northeastern China. Compound China's cost-benefit calculations with the devastating regional effects of a North Korean nuclear attack on Seoul or a subsequent reprisal attack by

the United States on Pyongyang, and it is clear China would benefit far more from mitigating conflict than by encouraging or abetting it.

Internationally, China is a major nuclear player, interested in asserting regional dominance while also parlaying to international norms in many ways dictated by the United States. The concept of nuclear deterrence is a linchpin in China's strategic defense and would influence its actions in any Korean conflict. Today, China understands the very real possibility of inciting a nuclear war if it were to pit itself against the United States. It also understands its relative inability to compete with the United States in terms of quantity and survivability of intercontinental nuclear strike platforms. Instead, it retains a limited deterrent capability designed to provide regional coverage and prevent territorial aggression. As Lt Gen Li Jijun, vice president of the PLA's Academy of Military Science, said in a 1997 speech, "China's strategy is completely defensive, focused only on deterring."³⁸

This has a very important repercussion for Chinese–North Korean relations; in particular, the current interpretation of the extent of the Sino–North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance. While the Chinese promise that "in the event of one of the Contracting Parties being subject to the armed attack by any state or several states jointly and thus being involved in a state of war, the other Contracting Party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal,"³⁹ they do not extend a nuclear umbrella over North Korea as the US does explicitly over South Korea and Japan. The Chinese also make their support contingent on an offensive attack into North Korea. This is a foreign-policy decision North Korea clearly understands. A July 2009 report from North Korea's news agency stated,

As for the treaty of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance between the DPRK and China is concerned, it was concluded when China was a non-nuclear state. It is, therefore, quite irrelevant to the provision of "nuclear umbrella." It is our view that China has pursued the policy of keeping "minimum nuclear deterrent" for protecting itself only. In fact, China's existing nuclear armed forces are not big enough to protect other countries and they do not stand comparison with the nuclear armed forces of the U.S. threatening the DPRK, in particular. This is a well known fact.⁴⁰

Perhaps the greatest argument against Chinese military involvement in a second Korean War is its position and reliance on the global economy. As one of the world's leading exporters, China's fortunes are irrevocably intertwined with states poised against North Korea. According to PRC Ministry

of Commerce data from February 2010, China in 2009 completed almost \$32 billion in trade with the United States, \$16.6 billion with South Korea, and \$25.5 billion with Japan. In total, China's trade with the United States, Japan, and South Korea totaled roughly \$74 billion and comprised a full 30 percent of China's total trade.⁴¹ In comparison, China claimed the paltry sum of \$380 million in legitimate trade with North Korea, most of which is comprised of highly subsidized loans and aid. To add to the economic repercussions, China is the largest single holder of US currency.⁴² The devaluation of the dollar due to a drawn-out war on the peninsula would deplete the value of China's stockpiles and perversely damage the Chinese perhaps more acutely than the United States.

These impressive economic statistics belie the overall repercussions of Chinese involvement in a second Korean War. China's ability to operate in and with multinational institutions like the World Trade Organization is contingent on international support. US displeasure over Chinese action vis-à-vis a Korean conflict would likely translate to blackballing of Chinese goods from major transnational trade agreements and could lead to allied nation sanctions. Furthermore, the impressive US blue water Navy could pose a significant threat to China's tanker-delivered supply of oil—an Achilles' heel to any oil-dependent nation.

Persuading China to Refrain

Despite the reasons why China will not likely enter a Korean conflict, there are some very concrete actions the United States can take to mitigate reasons why it may. First and foremost, the United States must establish a clear nuclear policy vis-à-vis Chinese involvement. For instance, the United States could, given certain Chinese provocations, respond with a tactical nuclear strike against key infrastructure. Secondly, the United States must demonstrate its capability to pursue conventional deterrents. The 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* partially addresses this issue with its explicit promise to strengthen conventional capabilities, to include ballistic-missile defense.⁴³ However, the review does not go far enough in articulating nuclear strategy to the Chinese government. By setting clear trigger points as well as expectations, we are able to establish a decision matrix that elucidates players' perceived values to particular actions. This, in turn, will limit the range of assessed choices available to China.

Perhaps the most pragmatic and achievable action that could reduce the chance of Chinese intervention into a Korean conflict would be to establish clear rules of engagement with the Chinese government. This concept, while tactically feasible, is revolutionary in regards to US–Chinese interactions. The US government would have to make the theoretical leap that the Chinese are not default enemies and would find it mutually beneficial to avoid war with the United States. After making this theoretical leap and with the eruption of conflict on the peninsula, the United States would begin coordinating with the Chinese to establish rules of engagement and guidelines to the conflict. Below are some initial recommendations:

1. Establish air, sea, and land buffer zones (or alternately conflict limit lines), beyond which US and Chinese forces will not operate. South Korean forces will be allowed to operate within the unified Korean territory, to include national air and sea boundaries.
2. Assign governance responsibility for refugees along Sino-Korean borders, to include nongovernment organization (NGO) and nation-state roles, responsibilities, and reporting authorities.
3. Delineate procedures through which countries may report violations of rules of engagement.
4. Assign repercussions for violations of the agreed upon rules of engagement.

It is highly unlikely China will want to be perceived either as colluding against the North Koreans or likewise as an ally in efforts against US and South Korean forces. Despite these Chinese concerns, the rules of engagement could still be effective as a secret agreement. Accordingly, the rules of engagement would be followed by all US and allied forces unless the Chinese were found to be supporting the North Koreans.

Because the idea of coordinating rules of warfare with China is a new concept, it would be irresponsible to discuss these rules of engagement without touching on China's possible reaction to proposed rules of engagement. First and foremost, China will likely note the advantage of their position and use that advantage to request information about US and allied countries' tactical operations, to include locations and times of major operations and units tasked in the conflict. As counterintuitive as it might at first seem, divulging a level of information to the Chinese could help establish a rapport without giving the Chinese much more than what

they would be able to ascertain with their own intelligence resources. Furthermore, information also must be divulged with preconditions. If evidence were to be found of China leaking important tactical information to the North Koreans, the Chinese would lose their privilege to further information (this would be included in the rules of engagement).

As mentioned earlier there is a danger of schisms of regional interests should Japan be pulled into the war. To avoid this regional bifurcation, the United States must first assure Japan of its willingness and ability to defend Japan against North Korean actions. This will be a difficult argument if North Korea has already successfully attacked Japan with ballistic missiles. It will be the job of the United States to clearly explain to Japan its lack of resources or constitutional viability to prosecute targets outside of their international boundaries. Japan must be convinced the use of its air and naval forces is more beneficial in defense of the homeland, in particular, filling the gaps of combat air patrols and naval defenses previously manned by US forces and possibly forward deployed to the Korean peninsula. Japan must also be convinced to limit or refrain from any military actions near islands disputed with the Chinese or around the southern islands, which abut Chinese-claimed economic exclusion zones. If possible, the United States will need to demarcate Japanese and Chinese defense zones. It is important Japan not be included as a component of US allied forces nor be seen as part of the forces engaged in conflict with North Korea. It is highly unlikely China would be willing to sign any statement that included Japan as a member of the US alliance against North Korea.

Rhetorically, the United States must convince the Japanese that hawkish statements, while appealing domestically, could serve as a springboard for Chinese involvement. The Japanese must avoid any references to their history and instead focus their statements on the importance of regional stability and perseverance of the economic dependence of Northeast Asia. In this particular situation, Japan would profit from demurring to the United States, which is historically seen as less of a threat in the region than Japan.⁴⁴ The rhetorical aspect is particularly applicable to dissipating historical antipathies because, as in the first Korean War, the United States would likely use basing in Japan to launch and support many of the logistical operations during a conflict against North Korea. The North Koreans could argue their actions were combating Japan's imperial forces in a conflict much like the anti-Japanese struggle before and during World War II.

The Way Ahead: Solving the Problem of Regional Imbalance

For years, scholars have asserted that China's need for a North Korean buffer state would lead the PRC to intervene militarily on North Korea's behalf in any future Korean conflict. Though this argument may have lost much of its strength after the demise of the Cold War and the souring of relations between North Korea and China since 2006, it is essential that we address China's fundamental balance of power concerns. Reassuring the Chinese of their continued importance in the region will be pivotal in convincing China's government not to support the North Korean war efforts. Fundamentally, the United States and China have the same interests in Korea—stability on the Korean peninsula. Stability can be achieved by creating a process of reunification, which espouses incremental government change, links North Korean unification with US withdrawal from Korea, and focuses on the creation of a Korean state independent from the United States. China could be convinced that the dissolution of North Korea would not weaken China's influence within Northeast Asia and could at the same time ensure a stable Korean state on Chinese borders.

The change could prove advantageous for decoupling the Taiwan situation from the Korean peninsula. By demonstrating the will to use force, openness in military planning, and gracious collaboration in victory, the United States would demonstrate its inherent trust in China to participate in the region as a stabilizer. It would also highlight the continued US commitment to nuclear and conventional deterrence for its allies. In a game of multiple iterations, a Korean conflict could help the United States and China more advantageously perceive utility and value of each nation's interests and actions in Asia. By building trust between the two players in the Asian region, the probability of provoking conflict becomes less likely. Perversely, if executed properly, a conflict on the Korean peninsula could serve as a stabilizing event in the Pacific region. **SSQ**

Notes

1. Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 208.
2. David Halberstam quotes MacArthur in the fall of 1950: "Gentlemen, the war is over. The Chinese are not coming into this war. In less than two weeks, the Eighth Army will close on the Yalu across the entire front. The Third Division will be back in Fort Benning for Christmas dinner." David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter* (New York: Thomson Gale Press, 2007), 692.

3. For an in-depth analysis of Mao's decision-making influences, see Shu Guang Zhong, *Mao's Military Romanticism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).
4. See Chen's citation of Mao's opening statement in the Politburo Standing Committee meeting on China's decision to enter the Korean War. Chen, *China's Road to the Korean War*, 173.
5. Shu, *Mao's Military Romanticism*, 188–91.
6. Chen, *China's Road to the Korean War*, 177.
7. Thomas C. Reed and Danny B. Stillman, *The Nuclear Express* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2009), 33.
8. Zhou Enlai, "Resist America and Aid Korea, Defend Peace (24 October 1950)," *Zhou Enlai Wijiào Wenxuan* [*Selected Diplomatic Documents of Zhou Enlai*] (Beijing: Central Press of Historical Documents, 1990).
9. Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 165.
10. Henry D. Sokolski, ed., *Getting MAD: Nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction, Its Origins and Practice* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, November 2004), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=585>.
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12. Argument put forward by Richard C. Thornton, *Odd Man Out* (Washington: Brassey's, Inc., 2000).
13. Shi Zhe, *Zai Lishi Juren Shenbian Shi Zhe Huiyilu* [*Beside Great Historical Figures: The Memoirs of Shi Zhe*] (Beijing: Central Historical Materials Press, 1991), 496–97.
14. Goncharov et al., *Uncertain Partners*, 146.
15. Di He, "The Last Campaign to Unify China: The CCP's Unmaterialized Plan to Liberate Taiwan, 1949–1950," *Chinese Historians* 5, no. 1 (1992): 2.
16. Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol. 2 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 508.
17. In April 1950, Zhou Enlai requested that the Soviet defense minister expedite the delivery of ships, airplanes, and artillery by the summer of 1950. As cited by Goncharov et al., *Uncertain Partners*, 149.
18. *Ibid.*, 143–47.
19. Thornton, *Odd Man Out*, 141.
20. *Ibid.*, 258.
21. *Ren Min Ri Bao* (*People's Daily*), 25 September 1950, as cited in Thornton, *Odd Man Out*, 321, n.13.
22. Chen, *China's Road to the Korean War*, 203.
23. Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The Nukes We Need," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 6 (November/December 2009), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65481/keir-a-lieber-and-daryl-g-press/the-nukes-we-need>.
24. Robert Gates, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20Nuclear%20Posture%20Review%20Report.pdf>.
25. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (London: Penguin Books, 1832), 189.
26. Andrew Scobell, "China's Geostrategic Calculus and Southeast Asia—The Dragon's Backyard Laboratory," Testimony before US–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 4 February 2010, 7.
27. Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11.
28. Korean Central News Agency, 23 October 2008, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/dprk/2008/dprk-081024-kcna02.htm>.

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31. For an analysis of the domestic issues involved in the Chinese-Taiwan relationship, see Shirk, *China*, 181–211.
32. Shirk, *China*, 11.
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