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## SCENARIOS FOR KOREA

*ABSTRACT: After a series of missile tests in 2017, 2018 brought along direct negotiations between the US and North Korea as well as between the two Koreas. Are we at the doorstep of a peace process? The outcome of the negotiations so far is highly uncertain. This paper tries to model the possible scenarios in case of failure, as well as in case of success of the upcoming negotiation. Could negotiations reach an end for the crisis? Would a peace treaty with South Korea and the US really serve the best interest of the North Korean regime? Is the continued existence of the present regime in North Korea really in the best interest of China? Who would be the main beneficiary of a Korean reunification? And what if negotiations fail, and the military option is back on the table? Would the Northern artillery really flatten Seoul as retaliation for a surgical strike? Could North Korea wage a nuclear strike without the consequence of being annihilated? These and similar questions are attempted to be answered by this paper.*

*KEYWORDS: nuclear, crisis, Korea*

### INTRODUCTION

Before the US announced its willingness to directly negotiate with North Korea, the crisis around the nuclear arms buildup of Pyongyang already reached a critical stage, as the country tested intercontinental ballistic missiles that have the capability of hitting the continental United States, and US intelligence sources confirmed that it has miniaturized its nuclear weapons to a size that they can be mounted into intercontinental ballistic missiles, and also solved the problem of safe re-entry.<sup>1</sup> It is still unclear whether North Korea yet possesses these capabilities only on experimental stage yet or already on full operational stage. Tensions were further increased by North Korea claiming to have detonated a hydrogen bomb, and firing two missiles over Japan.

Then 2018 seemed to have brought a new beginning. In April 2018, presidents of the two Koreas, Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in met twice at the Panmunjom peace village, and issued a joint declaration about aiming to reach a peace treaty between the two countries. Then in June, US president Donald Trump met with Kim Jong-un in Singapore, and they too issued a joint statement aiming the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. So far, these declarations gave little more than words, however, and there are several factors in the equation that give us a good reason to be skeptical regarding the future of these negotiations.

This paper aims to take an overview on the possible scenarios, how this long lasting crisis could end. At first, we will take a look on possible outcomes of the recently started negotiated process, and after that we will take an overview on scenarios involving military options, in case the negotiations fail. As we will see, the issue of North Korea's nuclear program is made

<sup>1</sup> Lewis, J. "The game is over and North Korea has won". Foreign Policy. 9 August 2017. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/09/the-game-is-over-and-north-korea-has-won/>, Accessed on 28 September 2017.

especially complicated by certain external and internal factors. External factors, such as the conflicting interests of the two great powers involved in the situation the most, China and the US with South Korea, as well as the Sino-Japanese rivalry playing a special role, and internal factors, mainly the internal discourse of the North Korean regime, struggling to maintain its legitimacy in the eyes of at least a sufficient proportion of its people, while it borders a much more populous and much wealthier South Korea. As we will see, in this comparison it is far from clear, which scenario is in fact in the interest of which neighboring power, and what really is North Korea's motivation in pursuing its nuclear program the way it does.

## THE DRIVE BEHIND NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM – EXTERNAL SECURITY OR SOMETHING MORE?

To decide whether a negotiated settlement could really be reached, or the present round of negotiations would break down the same way as they did in the past two decades, and whether the North would pursue its present track anyway, first we have to find out what the main driving forces behind its nuclear program are.

The main reason usually cited behind the nuclear buildup of the North is the aim of the regime's survival; its fear of the fate of Saddam Hussein, and Muammar Gaddafi, a similar regime change orchestrated by the US. This reasoning however, may not be as justified, as it seems at the first look. The US, in fact did perform several examples of ill-fated "export of democracy" in the past decades, but if we look at the geopolitics of such events, we can see, that no such case has happened in East or Southeast Asia since the end of the Cold War. (Perhaps with the only exception of forcing Indonesia to grant independence to East Timor in 1998.) Vietnam and Myanmar were also anti-Western authoritarian regimes, they did not build nuclear weapons, yet they were not invaded by the US. Some reforms took place in both countries, which did not challenge the rule of the Communist Party in Vietnam, and the generals of Myanmar also did maintain determinative political influence as well as personal immunity during the country's democratic transition. What North Korea, Vietnam and Myanmar have in common is that they all share a border with China, and China regards all three of them as crucial for its own security. Obviously, if the US tried to invade any of them in order to "export democracy", China would be likely to step in. Sharing land borders with all three countries, there is no barrier to prevent China from deploying its enormous ground army, and the US could not have taken any use of its overwhelming naval power to prevent that. Of course, Vietnam did take a pro-US turn in its foreign policy due to geopolitical reasons, regarding China as the greater threat, but obviously, it would not have seen the US as a lesser threat if the US had threatened it with an "export of democracy".

In this respect, North Korea could feel even more secure than Myanmar or Vietnam, as unlike those two, it even has a security treaty with China. Even in the present situation, that is becoming increasingly uneasy even for China, Beijing still maintains that if the US attacked North Korea unprovoked, it would intervene on the side of the North. And as a "democracy export" to North Korea would obviously not be worth a war with China to the US, Washington would be likely to avoid it. So the notion that for North Korea the main reason for developing nuclear weapons is a realistic fear that otherwise the US would invade it, does not seem to be well founded. In fact the US not only did not attempt to "export democracy" to North Korea when it was not yet a nuclear power between 1994 and 2006, but even regarding North Korea's nuclear program, the US paid way less attention, than it did to similar developments in Iraq or Iran.

So, can we find another motivation that can be strong enough to pursue this program? Factors in the internal policies of North Korea may possibly be the key. There are factors that can lead us to sinister conclusions that the internal logic of the North Korean regime makes war rhetoric and nuclear buildup a march that can never end.

One such factor is that as early as the 1990s analysts concluded that North Korea appears to use a preemptive logic of aggression and provocations not to eliminate a direct threat, but as a preemptive tool of changing an unfavorable status quo in a favorable way. There were even conclusions, that in the early 1990s only the appeasing attitude of the US and South Korea prevented North Korea from possibly starting even a major war to change the deteriorating status quo.<sup>2</sup>

We can extend this logic with the recognition that deep internal reforms, peace with South Korea and the USA may not be an option for North Korea because of the very same reason: They would undermine the legitimacy of the regime. We can discuss these two options as one because one would result in the other: Chinese-style reforms in North Korea would necessarily lead to some kind of normalization of relations with the South and the US, while the normalization of relations with the South and the US would inevitably lead to at least some reforms. If reforms come first, then a reformed North Korea with Chinese-style market economy could not isolate itself from the South, the US forever, and not even from Japan as it does now. Barely economic ties would demand at least some degree of normalization of relations. If a peace treaty with the US and the South comes first, and instead of viewing it as a hostile “puppet-state” of the US, South Korea is officially recognized as a decent neighbor and a legitimate representative of Korea nationhood, the hermetic isolation of Northern citizens and Northern economy from the South will no longer be justifiable.

The Kim regime however, has a good reason to calculate that any kind of normalization of relations between North Korea and South Korea would lead to its imminent collapse. The legitimacy of the North Korean regime is based on the narrative that it is the sole legitimate representative of Korean nationhood. The North Korean state propaganda is in fact a strong advocate of Korean unity. The North Korean constitution names Seoul as the capital of Korea and Pyongyang only as a provisional capital, until unification is achieved. According to the official North Korean point of view, the key obstacle of unification is that the USA – as they view it – keeps South Korea under occupation, and maintains a “puppet government” there. If ties with South Korea are normalized, that also means that the North Korean regime has to declare that its southern neighbor is no longer an enemy. The DMZ would become a regular international border. Instead of the existing hermetic isolation at least some border traffic would start. Even if it starts only at a small scale, that is still more than nothing. An example of how a border of North Korea functions with a state that it does not regard as its enemy, can be seen on the Sino-Korean border. With the recognition of South Korea as a non-hostile, legitimate representative of Korean nationhood, information on Southern living standards sneaking in, and Korean unity having been the core of Northern propaganda for decades, such changes would deeply jeopardize the legitimacy of the North Korean regime. It is highly doubtful whether reforms, as well as peace with the South and the US, are acceptable for the Kim dynasty.

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<sup>2</sup> Cha, V. D. and Kang, D. C. *Nuclear North Korea: A debate on engagement strategies*. Columbia University Press, 2003. 17–40.

As an alternate option we can also ask the question, whether this course of avoiding reforms and following a saber-rattling rhetoric could not be followed by North Korea without developing nuclear weapons. There are at least two reasons, why this would not be easily feasible.

One reason is that although North Korea's security agreement is a guarantee to deter the US from trying to "export democracy" there, in fact for an unreformed, non-nuclear North Korea, with reliance on China could become too overwhelming. With no reforms, and no nuclear weapons either, North Korea would be nothing but an impoverished country of 25 million people not only facing South Korea with the double of its population and a GDP several times higher than its own, but also located among enormous neighbors, such as China, Japan and Russia. With no major reforms to boost its economy and no nuclear weapons to maintain its military might, North Korea would fade into insignificance. Even the large numbers of conscripts in its army would not be able to maintain its military might as the development of a conventional arsenal to a level where its deterring effect is close to equal of having nuclear weapons is much more expensive than nuclear weapons themselves, thus it can be unaffordable in a situation where the latter is still affordable. With no sufficient military capabilities to deter South Korea on its own, such a North Korea would be forced to increasingly rely on China. Such an increasing reliance would be an increasing dependence as well. Under such circumstances, North Korea would likely to fade into a mere vassal of China.

Of course, we can ask the question whether the US can make such an offer at the upcoming negotiations that would eliminate this risk for North Korea. The answer seems to be negative. Even if the US completely abandoned South Korea as a military ally (an option that the US certainly will not choose) in exchange for North Korea's disarming its nuclear arsenal, it still would not essentially change this perspective. South Korea would still continue to be so much stronger in conventional arsenal, and without large scale economic reforms and deprived of its nuclear arsenal the North would soon become weaker than the South to such an extent that it would sooner or later face the choice of either submitting to the South or becoming a satellite of China. The dismantling its nuclear arsenal, major economic reforms, and normalization of relations with the South, however, would still likely to cause a massive loss of legitimacy for the Northern regime.

The other reason is similar, it also comes from the fact, that with no reforms and no nuclear weapons either, North Korea is a relatively small, impoverished country compared to its neighbors. If we talk about the internal legitimacy of the regime, such a country can rarely offer the sense of success for its public. Of course, there are several small and impoverished countries on our planet, but most of them are not forced to be in a constant state of war-psychosis. If such a country is also in that state, then developing nuclear weapons is a rare show of success for its people.

So, it seems that internal reforms and a peace with the South and the US are hardly an option for the Northern regime, but without internal reforms or peace with the South and the US, saber-rattling and nuclear buildup cannot stop. This, however, means that North Korea cannot stop to follow this course, because it would lead to conditions that jeopardize the legitimacy of the regime. However, it also seems to be obvious, that warmongering, nuclear buildup, and a practice of deliberate provocations cannot be infinitely intensified.

## THE PROSPECT OF CONTINUED NEGOTIATIONS

The recent summits indeed seem to bear the potential of a peace deal and denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. The best scenario would be a peace treaty between the two Koreas, with the complete denuclearization of North Korea, and possibly with the US pulling out its forces from the South in exchange, and the two Koreas merging in some kind of a confederate structure, occupying a neutral position in the super power game between the USA and China. There are, however, several factors that can raise doubts over this prospect. The first major problem is that so far, North Korea has not taken any major steps to reduce its nuclear arsenal, and even in its promises avoided to state anything specific. The other one is that so far the tangible outcomes of the summits have rather suggested an asymmetric trend, with North Korea seemingly successfully using its nuclear arsenal to extract concessions from the US and South Korea, without having to give anything special in exchange. While the conventional arsenal of South Korea is, without a doubt, more modern and sophisticated the North with its nuclear arms has got a blackmailing potential that the South would be unlikely willing to withstand, if it was not backed by the US. In this case, the greatest danger to the South is a slippery slope where the South and the US gives newer and newer concessions to the North, without Pyongyang's reducing its nuclear arsenal. The conclusion of the Kim-Trump meeting, with Trump announcing the end of joint exercises between the US and the South without receiving anything but words from North Korea. As suggested above, this technically means that by developing nuclear arms, North Korea achieved significant military concessions, without having to give anything in exchange. What makes this asymmetry look even more sinister is that it fits in two decades of negotiations with North Korea, a trend that in itself, already shows signs of a slippery slope.

Since the first time when the situation got heated over North Korea's nuclear program for the first time back in 1994, the attempts to resolve the issue by negotiations have failed each and every single time. North Korea seemingly always used negotiations and achieved agreements to gain time to continue pursuing its nuclear program. The first phase of this story was when North Korea first announced its withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty, but suspended this when reaching the framework agreement in 1994,<sup>3</sup> and maintained this position until 2003. The second phase started when North Korea did at last indeed withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003, and the subsequent six-party talks of 2006-2009, that ended in failure despite temporary achievements.<sup>4</sup>

So as repeated attempts of negotiations and agreements went on in a country merely pursuing research to reach the ability to produce one single nuclear bomb in 1994, by now North Korea has become a country that, according to the most recent information of the US intelligence, is already capable of reaching the continental US with its intercontinental ballistic missiles, also successfully solved the task of miniaturizing its nuclear weapons to a size where they are suitable to arm missiles, and was likely successful in detonating a hydrogen bomb in September 2017. Also, the number of its nuclear warheads is closer to 60 instead of being around a dozen as believed earlier in 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Pritchard, Ch. L. *Failed diplomacy: the tragic story of how North Korea got the bomb*. Brookings Institution Press, 2007. 25–57.

<sup>4</sup> Chinoy, M. *Meltdown: the inside story of the North Korean nuclear crisis*. St. Martin's Press, 2010.

Thus right now North Korea is likely to be able to reach the continental United States with an intercontinental ballistic missile with a nuclear warhead, and reached this capability through years of negotiations and agreements, repeatedly breached.

What deterred the USA and South Korea from surgical strikes against the North was that although a conflict would otherwise been a certain victory for them, their casualties would have been so massive (especially in case of an artillery attack on Seoul) which the South Korean and American public would have seen as unacceptable. Therefore, the main reason why North Korea was able to pursue its nuclear program without disruption was that the USA, South Korea and Japan were deterred by the foreseeable casualties. These potential casualties have been increasing year by year throughout the last two decades though: While 20 years ago, the greatest possible threat posed by North Korea was an artillery attack on Seoul, 10 years ago it increased to the level of a non-nuclear missile attack on Japan, one year ago to a non-nuclear missile attack on Guam, and now, a nuclear missile attack on the continental United States.

In summary, North Korea is again and again playing chicken with the South and the US, and it was always the South and the US that backed down at the end. The announcement by Trump about ending US-South Korean joint exercises, and the announcement by South Korea after the inter-Korean summit about the easing of economic sanctions if substantive steps towards denuclearization are taken, can be interpreted as the next episode of this trend. However a major difference is that while until now North Korea could simply get away with the next step of its nuclear program without the US and the South doing anything, now it practically is even awarded by significant concessions.

This raises sinister questions about the future trends: how far can North Korea develop its nuclear weapons, and how many concessions can it bargain from South Korea and the US? And how about the future? A North Korea with a large arsenal of hydrogen bombs? A North Korea with a nuclear arsenal large and sophisticated enough to display the MAD-doctrine against the US? A North Korea possessing cobalt bombs, or similar unconventional, devastating nuclear weapons? The US abandoning its military alliance with South Korea? South Korea submitting into Finlandization? The long-lasting trend of North Korea getting further and further without any real consequence may result not only in such options but also in breaking down the negotiations once again if the US and/or South Korea finds their expectations unfulfilled.

## IF NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR BUILDUP CONTINUES – IMPACTS ON THE REGION

After having taken an overview on both the military and diplomatic options for the issue, we can discuss what consequences of the continuation of North Korea's ongoing nuclear buildup can be for the region. Surprisingly, as we will see, they can hurt China the most, the very country that has so far been the only ally of North Korea.

Nuclear tests are a suitable tool to ensure the security of a country but no such actions suggest a deliberate intention of provocation better than the missiles flown over Japan, the threats of missiles fired to the waters around Guam, and the threats of an atmospheric nuclear test over the Pacific Ocean. It seems that North Korea follows another aim as well. This aim seems to be to deliberately undermine the credibility of threats by the US, by deliberately crossing every single red line set by the US and its allies (except for a direct attack against their soil) in order to demonstrate that they can do it, and the US does not dare to react.

Why would North Korea follow such a track of deliberately crossing red lines? (Except for the case it really follows a suicide mission – what it most likely does not.) A rational explanation can be if this is a deliberate program by North Korea that aims to undermine the Northeast Asian alliance system of the USA, the alliance between South Korea and the US, and Japan and the US. If South Korea and Japan face permanent threats by North Korea, and at the same time see that threats by the US to North Korea have no credibility, this can alienate them from the US in the long run. The Kim-Trump meeting and the inter-Korean summit suggest first signs of success of such an attempt. After the inter-Korean summit, South Korea offered significant economic concessions to the North without the consent of the US. After the Kim-Trump summit, the US made significant military concessions to North Korea without the consent of South Korea. The first cracks on the US-South Korea military alliance have already appeared.

How could such a scenario continue? What has happened now is practically the *de facto* implementation of the “freeze for freeze” proposal already, supported by China and Russia before. What was freeze for freeze about? In exchange for North Korea’s halting further development of its nuclear arsenal, the South and the US would stop military exercises that North Korea views as offensive. That exactly is what practically happened now. This, however, technically means that albeit on a very small scale, the US tunes down the military support that it gives to South Korea, in exchange for the North to slow its nuclear armament. If once the US starts going down that road, the end can be an abandonment of South Korea. The problem with “freeze for freeze” is that the stronger the nuclear arsenal of North Korea is, the more it can demand from the US in that manner, i.e. reduction of US military backing to South Korea. Thus, “freeze for freeze” is potentially is a first step down a road through which the US is technically blackmailed by North Korea into abandoning South Korea.

The case is somewhat different for Japan. Although it is also possible that North Korea would use such a bargain technique to achieve the US abandonment of Japan, such thing is way much less likely to happen. As part of the first island chain, cutting off China from the open territories of the Pacific Ocean, Japan is much more important for the US, than South Korea is, and much less important for North Korea, than South Korea is. Japan, an island nation shielded by seas, and having a large overall GDP but a relatively low military spending relative to it right now due to traditions linked to its “peace constitution”, the country is theoretically able to multiply its military spending as well as the arsenal of its armed forces without significantly burdening its economy. As an island nation, it can also afford focusing these improvements on its navy and air force (as it has done so far on smaller scales), and that way, it can become a great power on its own right in the region compared not only to North Korea, but to China and Russia as well. Of course, not one that could actively challenge China or Russia on the Asian continent, but one that could stand up to any offensive action by them on the seas, by using the edge that as an island nation, it can afford to focus its spending on its navy and air force, while China and Russia have to spend most of their military budget on their large ground forces, with relatively less funds remaining for air force, and especially less for navy. This is especially true, if Japan, in a changed strategic environment opts to become a nuclear power on its own.

The positions of South Korea are much weaker in this respect. While the alliance with the US is such a luxury for Japan, which allows it to keep its military spending low relative to its economic performance and thus to have a convenient space to expand or even multiply its defense budget, South Korea already has a pretty high military spending, burdening a much smaller GDP. While Japan as an island nation, and as such, unlike China and Russia, is free

of the burden of having to maintain a large ground force, and thus free to use its resources to build an air force and a navy disproportionately large and strong compared to the size of the country, South Korea does need to maintain a major ground force, and has no natural line of defense against North Korea.

Thus Japan is not only much more important for the US than South Korea but it also has much more room to enhance its defenses, with or without US assistance. To put it in a simple way, if times get tough, Japan is capable to build up a conventional arsenal several times stronger than it has now, but South Korea is not. Thus, in a changed strategic environment, Japan can transform into a much stronger military power than it is now while South Korea's positions can only weaken.

North Korea may view such a scenario as a favorable one. With no ambitions regarding Japan, and Japan having nothing besides defensive interests towards it, North Korea would perhaps be not bothered too much by Japan becoming a stronger regional power. A South Korea abandoned by the US, however, could be something where Pyongyang would possibly see certain opportunities. Of course, a full scale invasion, or an outright unification by the North are not realistic options, given the Southern population twice the size of that of the North, hostile, and greatly militarized. But using its nuclear might to blackmail an abandoned South Korea into cooperation or perhaps even into Finlandization is something where there are no major factors that would make it impossible for the North.

The only way an abandoned South Korea can defend itself from such blackmail is to decide to become a nuclear power as well. If South Korea opts to build nuclear weapons, North Korea could not do much. That however, with a nuclear-armed Japan and North Korea would make Northeast Asia the region with the highest concentration of nuclear powers in the world.

## WHEN NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM STARTS HURTING CHINA

In the short term, the US abandoning South Korea as a military ally, and South Korea stepping on the way of Finlandization in relation to the North could seem as a scenario in the best interest of China. In the longer term however, there are some possible long-term consequences of such a scenario. Such a future Northeast Asia, with nuclear-armed Japan and nuclear-armed South Korea facing nuclear-armed North Korea, and with Japan at the same time becoming a military power several times stronger than it is now, would be a nightmare for China.

A North Korea which does continue to pursue its nuclear program in the same assertive and provocative manner can, in the long run, hurt China's interests in several other ways as well.

Another issue is that South Korea is one of the most significant trade partners of China, and also the South Korean population has a considerably friendly attitude to China, and hostile attitude to China's key regional adversary, Japan.<sup>5</sup> This means that South Korea has several attributes that would make it a likely major regional ally of China in the future. The only factor preventing it from becoming one is its concerns with North Korea, and its military alliance with the US, something rather unpopular in the country, but justified by the

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<sup>5</sup> "How Asians Rate China, India, Pakistan, Japan and the U.S.". Pew Research Center. 11 July 2014. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/global-opposition-to-u-s-surveillance-and-drones-but-limited-harm-to-americas-image/pg-2014-07-14-balance-of-power-4-01/>, Accessed on 28 September 2017.



Northern threat. Besides possibly becoming a nuclear power on its own, the further North Korea intensifies its assertiveness the more South Korea could be alienated from China.

Also, at one point, the assertiveness of a nuclear North Korea can increase to a level, where its policies become even reckless towards China. What if, in a case where its nuclear program became inconvenient for China as well, in exchange to limit its nuclear program North Korea attempts to bargain economic concessions, in a similar manner as it does from South Korea? But this time, from China. What if, in exchange, it tries to pressure China to loosen its ties with South Korea? What if, in case of any trouble in Sino-Russian relations, (something that is unlikely to happen right now, but cannot be excluded in the future) it decides to side with Russia against China, with all its nuclear arsenal?

## RISK OF A PEACE TREATY FOR NORTH KOREA

One more reason why we can be skeptical towards the present negotiations is that – as we discussed above – a peace treaty with an even restricted opening of inter-Korean border, and with even limited recognition of South Korea as a legitimate state, could push the mere legitimacy of the North Korean regime to a breaking point. As the North Korean discourse builds the legitimacy of the regime on the claim that South Korea is an impoverished puppet-state, and the North is the sole legitimate representative of the Korean nation and culture, the recognition – even an implicit one – of the fact that South Korea is a more populous, incomparably wealthier, and technologically incomparably more advanced, more democratic, independent, and legitimate nation-state of the Korean people, may undermine the very basis of this discourse. If this discourse collapsed, then even if the Kim-regime offered a broad range of deep reforms after such a peace agreement, even then it is highly doubtful whether it could offer a new discourse to give a proper reason why the North Korean population should continue to support its tyrannical and incompetent rule any longer. Thus while on behalf of the USA and South Korea, the factor that can result in the breakdown of negotiations is increasing frustration of granting more and more concessions to North Korea without receiving anything in exchange except for further advancement of North Korea's nuclear arsenal, in North Korea a factor for that can be the fear of its discourse being undermined if the peace process goes too far.

## IF NEGOTIATIONS FAIL – THE MILITARY OPTION

After discussing possible outcomes of the continuation of the present trend of negotiations, we also have to take into account the military option, the option that made South Korea and the USA weary enough to make these concessions to the North. If after a certain point, the US and South Korea stopped giving concessions to the North, or if the Northern regime destabilized, the military option could still once again be on the table. Before we turn our attention on the actual arsenal, first we have to take a look at the possible role the Sino-US great power rivalry can play in such a conflict. Regarding even the possibility of any kind of armed conflict between North Korea and the US and its allies, everything would depend on China. China does have a security agreement with North Korea, according to which it theoretically guarantees defending it in the case of an attack by the US. Although relations between China and North Korea were far from ideal throughout the last decades, recent statements from China do confirm that Beijing would nevertheless intervene in defense of North Korea, albeit only if the US and its allies attacked unprovoked. If North Korea attacked first, however, it would stay neutral.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHINA

A war aimed at a regime change in the classical manner, as often depicted in Western media, with the US and South Korea taking over the entire territory of North Korea and absorbing it into a South-led democratic, US-allied, unified Korea would only be possible, if China somehow oversaw this to happen without taking any action. This however, is extremely unlikely to happen, as North Korea serves as a buffer for China between itself and the US bases in South Korea.

Since the US obviously does not want a third world war, if China does not agree to stay neutral, then an overall US invasion can be excluded, but this does not mean that there are no options. In this case, the only possibility could be a kind of undeclared agreement between the US and China. Perhaps such an option could be a limited strike, where the US and South Korea declares a clear restraint in that no ground troops whatsoever cross the DMZ into North Korean territory, and also make clear that they do not raise any opposition to Chinese intervention into the internal affairs of North Korea. In such a case, it would be more convenient for China to stay neutral for several reasons. First, such an attack would not endanger the geopolitical role of North Korea as a buffer state, and even if internal unrest occurs in the country due to the casualties suffered from US and South Korean air and artillery attacks, with US and South Korean troops not crossing the DMZ, China would be free to move in with its own army and take control over North Korea. In such a case it would make not much sense to get engaged in a military conflict with the US. Also, with no US and South Korean ground troops entering North Korea, a Chinese intervention could practically mean nothing but a Sino-US air and naval confrontation in the skies over and waters around North Korea, engagements with navy and air forces, both in which the US has superiority, and also engagements in which China can gain little if none of the sides cross the DMZ. Also, such a limited US strike would probably end swiftly so by the time, after diplomatic protests and ultimatums, China reaches the time when it could actually intervene, the US operations would have already been finished, making a Chinese intervention meaningless.

So the US can likely to exclude Chinese intervention if it assures China that it

Will not cross the DMZ into North Korea with ground troops.

Will not intervene if China moves into North Korea, and will cease any military action against North Korea at the latest when China moved in.

## NORTH KOREA'S OUTDATED CONVENTIONAL ARSENAL

In any case, North Korea would be unlikely to have much chance in a conventional war. Although in terms of conventional arsenal, North Korea still had the upper hand during the Cold War the obsolescence of its weaponry had already become clear by the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> The conventional arsenal of North Korea, although impressive in absolute numbers, is critically outdated on the basis of technological standards. In the absolute number of jet fighter aircraft, North Korea seems to be pretty strongly equipped compared to its two regional key rivals, South Korea and Japan. As Japan in fact shows the most concerned attitude among North Korea's adversaries, it would be a mistake to exclude it from such calculations.<sup>7</sup> As of 2016,

<sup>6</sup> Cha and Kang. *Nuclear North Korea...* 46–54.

<sup>7</sup> Bae, J. H. and Kim, S. Ch. "Japan's North Korea Policy: The Dilemma of Coercion". In Kim, S. Ch. and Kang, D. C. (eds), *Engagement with North Korea: A viable alternative*. SUNY Press, 2010. 73–98.

North Korea had 572 pieces, while South Korea only 448, and Japan just 287. However out of North Korea's 572 jet fighter aircrafts, 301 represented second generation types with the technology of the 1950s, (no other countries on Earth use second generation jet fighters any longer) 202 third generation types with the technology of the 1960s, and only as few as 69 fourth generation aircraft of the kind. Out of South Korea's 448 pieces however, 219 represented fourth generation technology, 229 third generation, and no pieces of second generation were in service any longer. In case of Japan, out of its 287 pieces, 216 represented fourth generation, and only 71 third generation technology.<sup>8</sup>

The case is similar if we compare North Korea and South Korea in the number of main battle tanks. (Japan, as an island nation is physically safe from a war fought by ground troops on land with North Korea, so there is no reason to include it in this comparison.) In absolute numbers North Korea has 4,500 main battle tanks, while South Korea has only 2,300, the North outnumbering the South close to two to one. If we look at the technology, however, out of the 4,500 MBTs of the North, 2,500 represents first generation models, 1,800 second generation models, and only 200 third generation models. On the side of the South however, out of its 2,300 MBT-s, only 800 are first generation models, none are second generation, and 1,500 are of third generation.<sup>9</sup> If we look at the precedent of the Gulf War in 1991, it shows that it is not only in the case of aircraft, but also in the case of main battle tanks, that outdated models are no match to more advanced ones, with the MBT arsenal of the Iraqi army being even somewhat less outdated back in 1991, than that of North Korea is now.

In these numbers the US forces are not even included so a conventional war would likely to be similar to the Gulf War of 1991, with conventional offensive capabilities of the North swiftly annihilated by coalition aircraft, and by technologically superior Southern tanks along the DMZ.

## POSSIBLE ASYMMETRIC WARFARE BY THE NORTH

There are, however, three conventional ways, where North Korea could make a victory by the US and its allies extremely costly.

The first is an artillery attack on Seoul. Seoul, an agglomeration of more than 20 million people, is within the range of North Korea's artillery and in the media one could read sensational estimates about possible casualties, often talking about millions of victims. Reality would likely to be somewhat less apocalyptic but still grim. An analysis by Nautilus Institute concluded that the number of fatalities in case of an artillery attack on Seoul would most likely to be around 30 thousand, before coalition air force would annihilate the artillery positions that have Seoul within their range.<sup>10</sup> 30 thousand South Korean civilian casualties, although far from the "flattening of Seoul" that is often depicted in the media, still means extremely high casualties, something that for example US allies, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel during the Gulf War did not suffer, not even remotely to this extent, despite being hit by the Scud missiles of Saddam Hussein. This alone would make such a war much

<sup>8</sup> *World Air Forces 2016*. Zürich: Ruag AG, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> "North Korea Military Guide". Global Security. <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/dprk/>, Accessed on 28 September 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Cavazos, R. "Mind the Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality". Nautilus Institute. 26 June 2012. <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/mind-the-gap-between-rhetoric-and-reality/>, Accessed on 28 September 2017.

more painful, and a whole different category for the US than its previous campaigns were in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Serbia.

The second is sabotage by Special Forces of the North in the South. North Korea has Special Forces with the strength of 200,000 soldiers. These Special Forces are notorious of covert operations in the south. On one occasion, a North Korean special unit was caught only 100 meters from the Blue House, the South Korean presidential palace.<sup>11</sup> The South Korean authorities so far detected and neutralized four tunnels running beneath the DMZ from the North to the South, to provide passage for Special Forces of the North. Nobody knows, how many tunnels lie in the deep still undetected.<sup>12</sup> In case of a conventional war, despite the overall superiority of US and Southern forces, North Korean Special Forces, dressed in Southern uniforms, appearing behind Southern lines through tunnels or by other covert means can cause a lot of damage before being detected and annihilated.

The third option is a defensive war that Northern armed forces can wage on North Korean soil in the rather unlikely case if China would somehow stay neutral and allow coalition troops to wage a full scale invasion of the North, and complete a regime change there. Although such passivity on behalf of China is extremely unlikely, we still have to discuss this option as well in order to take all possible options into consideration. It has also been argued, that there can be hope for the Northern population to welcome such a regime change only if the occupying force looks nothing but Korean, thus not hurting Korean patriotic sentiments of the Northern population, and convincing it that what is going on is not a foreign occupation but a Korean unification. Thus the occupying force has to be almost entirely South Korean, with the US and its other allies playing only supporting roles, as invisible as possible.<sup>13</sup> This would put a great burden on South Korea, since it would have to solely provide all the ground troops for an occupation. Even if all these conditions are met and the coalition wins the war, China somehow stays neutral, and the occupying ground troops are composed entirely of South Koreans, the occupation can be an extremely difficult task. The terrain of North Korea is rugged and mountainous, covered with temperate and subarctic woodlands, thus providing an ideal background for guerilla warfare. Since up to 40% of North Korea's population is involved in reserve service of one or another armed force of the country, even in the rather uncertain case if a majority of the population is convinced of the benevolence of the Southern occupying forces, even if only a fraction of these reservists decides to go on a guerilla war, that can still possibly mean hundreds of thousands of armed guerillas. If we take the number of North Korea's Special Forces as a reference, that are the best trained, and probably the most indoctrinated part of the North's forces, that number alone makes up 200,000 individuals.<sup>14</sup> To make things worse, hidden bunkers and arms depots are believed

<sup>11</sup> "The Blue House Raid – North Korea's Failed Commando Assault on Seoul". *Military History Now*, 3 December 2014. <http://militaryhistorynow.com/2014/12/03/the-blue-house-raid-north-koreas-failed-commando-assault-on-seoul/>, Accessed on 28 September 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Szoldra P. "South Korean 'Tunnel Hunters' Fear Surprise Attack By North Korea". *Business Insider*, 11 March 2013. <http://www.businessinsider.com/war-north-and-south-korea-underground-2013-3>, Accessed on 28 September 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Reid, J. "The Day After the Second Korean War". *The Diplomat*, 17 May 2017. <http://thediplomat.com/2017/05/the-day-after-the-second-korean-war/>, Accessed on 28 September 2017.

<sup>14</sup> "N. Korea Boosts Special Forces, Conventional Arms". *The Chosun Ilbo*, 31 December 2010. [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2010/12/31/2010123100850.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/12/31/2010123100850.html), Accessed on 28 September 2017.

to be scattered in the mountains and woodlands of North Korea.<sup>15</sup> A guerilla force of 200,000 people, waging guerilla war on a mountainous, wooded terrain, using a network of prebuilt covert bunkers and arms depots scattered there, would be a guerilla war of unprecedented efficiency. Especially that even if China somehow stays neutral, it can still provide supplies and shelter for the North Korean guerillas across the long and porous border between the two countries, thus expanding the war to an unpredictable duration. This could make the occupation of North Korea for the South Korean forces something like Vietnam was for the US, or Afghanistan was for the Soviet Union, unless they manage to convince a vast majority of the Northern population that a Southern-led unification is in their best interest, and socially isolate supporters of the guerilla war. A task they would be highly uncertain to achieve.

We can conclude that a war, even if North Korea does not use its nuclear weapons, would be extremely painful for the US and South Korea, and offer relatively little to gain. South Korea would almost for sure suffer tens of thousands of civilian casualties. At the same time, such an attack could not happen without some kind of agreement with China, and even if such agreement is somehow reached, the price that China would ask for, would almost certainly be the control over the future of North Korea. As we will discuss later, this could result in a situation that could be favorable for South Korea in the long run, but still in the short term, this would mean that the South had to suffer such tremendous casualties, but despite winning a war over the North, it would still not be allowed to unite the country on its own terms. The situation becomes even grimmer, if we take into consideration the use of nuclear weapons by the North. A nuclear attack on South Korea, Japan or the US would be so devastating, that it would make the costs of such a war unacceptable for the US and its allies.

## NORTH KOREA'S DILEMMA ON RETALIATION

What makes the situation peculiar, however, is that it is not only the US and its allies that could face unforeseeable risk. In fact, for North Korea the question of retaliation bears a major risk. The basic problem for North Korea is that if it opts for significant retaliation, nuclear or conventional, the retaliation-for-retaliation by the US and South Korea will likely be fatal for the regime. There are options, where a US attack alone may not be fatal for the regime, if North Korea does not retaliate. For example, in case of a surgical strike, albeit weakened, the regime could theoretically survive – for the time being at least. So in case of a surgical strike, a nuclear retaliation by North Korea would be suicidal, as it would bring annihilation on the regime by the US, while it could otherwise continue its existence. But there is a trap: no retaliation would be a viable option either since it would give a green light for the US and its allies to deliver limited strikes on North Korea in the future, sooner or later weakening Pyongyang's capabilities to a point where it loses its capability of nuclear retaliation, and then, its whole nuclear program was in vain.

Conventional retaliation may look more easily calculable but in reality it is not likely to. North Korea can obviously play its trump card of an artillery attack on Seoul in case of an all-out attack by the USA and South Korea. But what would it do in case of a limited strike against its nuclear facilities? If it does start a full-scale artillery bombardment of Seoul, South Korea and the US will obviously strike back in a manner that exceeds the scales of

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<sup>15</sup> Mizokami, K. "North Korea's Secret Strategy in a War with America: Go Underground". *The National Interest*, 6 May 2017. <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/north-koreas-secret-strategy-war-america-go-underground-20525>, Accessed on 28 September 2017.

the original surgical operation. A massive artillery attack on Seoul can only be responded to by an air campaign destroying those North Korean artillery positions that have Seoul within their range and this would also bring the necessity of destroying North Korean air defense positions covering these artillery positions. Since much of North Korea's conventional arsenal is concentrated in these areas along the DMZ, this would mean a great proportion of its entire arsenal. Also, to make sure that North Korea's air force will not challenge them during such an extensive bombing campaign, the coalition forces would also likely to target the most significant air bases all over the country.

For North Korea the problem with this option is that if we summarize it, the result that we can see is that a US and South Korean retaliation would annihilate the Northern forces stationed along the DMZ as well as the entire air force of the country, virtually leaving it defenseless, and the road to Pyongyang open for South Korean troops. Will South Korea and the US show such restraint in that case that despite North Korea being virtually disarmed, and the road to its capital open, they do not attempt a march on Pyongyang and a unification of Korea? If China steps in and threatens with intervention in case Southern and US ground troops cross the DMZ, that would likely to deter them from doing so. But even in that case, North Korea disarmed to that degree, would leave it to the mercy of China to defend it from the South and the US in the future. In such a case, after such losses, could the Northern regime exclude the possibility of internal unrest, or a Chinese takeover? Or even both of them happening simultaneously? These would be possible fatal consequences for the regime, which could otherwise be avoided simply by not displaying any significant military reaction to a limited or surgical US strike.

If Pyongyang does not respond, however, then this again would send the message to the US and South Korea that they are free to deliver limited strikes on the North without having to fear retaliation. Quite a trap.

Basically, in both cases, the main dilemma for North Korea is that although, in the case of any other attack against its soil, it is capable of retaliation causing massive casualties in the South, and possibly in Japan and the US as well, any significant retaliation by the North would most likely result in its annihilation as a counter-reaction. So while we usually talk about what retaliation the US and South Korea would risk with a surgical strike against North Korea, the dilemma of North Korea is no lesser, regarding how to, or how not to respond, if such an attack does occur.

We can still speculate, whether there is any option for North Korea, to somehow trick the United States in a way that could enable it to use its nuclear weapons without being annihilated. North Korea could, theoretically follow a logic, that it delivers a nuclear strike on Guam, or US bases in Japan, in the hope that the US would not dare to use nuclear weapons to retaliate, in fear of a North Korean nuclear attack on the US mainland. This however, may still trigger a conventional US retaliation of annihilating scale, and would make it politically impossible for China to protest against a full scale US invasion of the North, possibly resulting in the otherwise unlikely case of a US invasion without China openly stepping in. So to decide about nuclear retaliation would be impossible for the Kim regime, but at the same time, the US cannot rule out the option of it being done. The main problem with any kind of military option is that we already reached a stage where a North Korean nuclear strike cannot be ruled out as a form of retaliation.

## REGIME COLLAPSE AS AN INTEREST OF CHINA?

Discussing these matters we reach our next question: Is preserving the present regime in North Korea really the lesser evil for China compared to what a regime collapse could bring along?

North Korea has been seen by many as an annoyance in China for almost two decades now.<sup>16</sup> The Chinese analyst community has long been divided on the issue of North Korea into two main groups, the “Strategists” being of the opinion of a tougher policy on North Korea, increasingly viewing it as a threat on China’s national interests; and the “Traditionalists” continuing to view Pyongyang as an ally. On the one hand, in this debate the “Traditionalists” still seem to have the upper hand. On the other hand, it is apparent that North Korea fits less and less into the picture of a peaceful and prosperous Asia, which China envisions in its OBOR initiative.<sup>17</sup> With its economy closed, its policies being hostile to international transit routes running through the country, its increasing trend of repeatedly and recklessly damaging China’s otherwise growing influence in, and flourishing relations with South Korea, and the risk of igniting a war with the US right at the doorstep of China.

China already has plans to occupy North Korea, should things run out of control.<sup>18</sup> If we think further a regime collapse could offer opportunities for China, which it could in fact use to reshape the regional power balance for its own benefit. First of all, in case of a regime-collapse it would most likely be the Chinese Peoples’ Liberation Army that would be able to move in, and take control of the situation. The US has only 30 thousand troops in South Korea, and has no major ground forces in the region. To build up a ground force of several hundred thousand strong it would need such a long time frame that by then Chinese troops could already be able to move in and take control.

## A CHINESE-CONTROLLED NORTH KOREA AS BEIJING’S BARGAIN CHIP FOR A FAVORABLE REUNIFICATION – THE AUSTRIAN STATE TREATY AS AN EXAMPLE

By taking control China could turn North Korea, a reckless nuclear power, into a controllable satellite state. This would also provide China the opportunity to achieve a favorable unification of Korea by using its control over the North as a bargain chip. This would enable China to achieve a Korean unification that would follow the example of the Austrian State Treaty of 1955. From the end of the Second World War in 1945, Austria was under Allied occupation of the USA, the USSR, the UK and France. By 1955, the Allies had reached an agreement in accordance with which the three Western powers as well as the Soviet Union would pull out their troops, and the Soviet Union would agree for Austria becoming a Western style market economy and multiparty democracy, in exchange for the guarantee, that it will remain a neutral county, and will not join NATO. The Treaty successfully founded Austria’s international role as a neutral state for the next three decades throughout the Cold War.

Regarding Korea, if China took control over North Korea, this pattern could be followed. China would pull out its troops and accept unification under Southern domination only if in

<sup>16</sup> Pritchard. *Failed diplomacy...* 89–93.

<sup>17</sup> “Shades of Red: China’s Debate over North Korea”. International Crisis Group. 2. November 2009. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/179-shades-of-red-china-s-debate-over-north-korea.pdf>, Accessed on 28 September 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Csoma, M. “Észak-Korea a kínai szatellitállammá válás útján”. *Külügyi Szemle* 7/1. 2008. 73–83.

exchange, the US also pulled out its forces from South Korea, and the unified Korea became a neutral country through annulling the US-South Korea security treaty. Such an arrangement would be extremely beneficial for China for several reasons. First of all, even if such unification would pose a great burden for Seoul due to the enormous social and economic differences between the North and the South, the Southern public opinion would hardly allow the Southern leadership to do anything but accept such an offer from China. Opinion polls show that foreign policy attitudes of the South Korean population are slightly more pro-China than pro-US, and are considerably anti-Japanese. This, combined with the fact that the Northern population is staunchly anti-Japanese and anti-US, means that in such a hypothetical situation a unified, neutral Korea, even if its constitutional system follows the traditions of South Korea, would most likely to be rather pro-Chinese, anti-Japanese, and keeping a certain distance from the US. This China-leaning trend of a unified neutral Korea would be further enhanced by the fact that China would be its greatest trading partner as it is already the greatest trading partner of not only North Korea, but South Korea as well.<sup>19</sup>

Such a unified Korea, albeit formally neutral, would be a China-leaning state. In East Asia after China and Japan it would possess the third largest economy and also a significant military force. With such a country on its side, the regional influence of China would expand considerably. US influence would retreat to Japan, and Japan would have to face China and the China-leaning unified Korea without any pro-US buffer state between itself and them.

If China wanted, it seemingly would have the capability to initiate such a scenario. It could cut supplies on its border with North Korea, then (as 90% of North Korea's foreign trade is with China<sup>20</sup>) wait for the collapse of the Kim regime and as soon as the collapse started move in with its army, take control of North Korea, set up a puppet-government there, and then make the "Austrian State Treaty-offer" to South Korea. If South Korea accepts the offer, China will get a friendly, neutral, unified Korea, and US troops out of the Korean peninsula. If South Korea rejects it, China can still maintain a reformed North Korea as its vassal, with strategic advantages such as access to the Sea of Japan for its navy. If China decides to follow such a scenario, there will not be much that North Korea could do. If things go wrong, it can turn out that the North Korean regime is more resilient than anyone would think, and it can turn out, that it can even survive such a total economic embargo. But as China would not act with its military before the regime collapses, it would not need to fear a North Korean nuclear response, as so far North Korea seems to keep its nuclear weapons as a deterrent against possible military attack but not as a tool of retaliation against any kind of economic embargo. The risk of this scenario is, instead of one of a military nature, in the internal politics of China. If China implements a total embargo against North Korea with the hope that the regime will collapse but then the regime somehow still manages to stay in power, then such a failure, alienating North Korea but failing to take over it as a satellite state, would be a major embarrassment for the Chinese leadership that actually took this step.

China could also use a US attack on North Korea as the opportunity to take over the county, and play out such a scenario: it can make clear to the US, that it approves an attack on the North without intervening, only if the US and South Korea do not move ground troops across the DMZ into the country. By doing so, China would also gain much easier access to

<sup>19</sup> "South Korea". The Observatory of Economic Complexity. <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/kor/> Accessed on 28 September 2017.

<sup>20</sup> "North Korea". The Observatory of Economic Complexity. <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/prk/> Accessed on 28 September 2017.



taking control over North Korea. As we could see, the air campaign by the US and its allies would likely to eliminate virtually all nuclear facilities, the entire air force, air defense system, and command and control system of the North Korean military, as well as much if not most of its artillery. That would greatly reduce the capability of the North Korean military to resist a Chinese invasion. Besides that, China could even use a pretext to move in, stating that it is only doing so as a pre-emptive measure to prevent an American-South-Korean invasion, possibly even gaining support from some of the Northern elite, who could possibly see the involvement in a China-controlled, reformist puppet government a lesser evil compared to the uncertainty of continuing under the Kim regime with North Korea being deprived from most of its military capabilities under the looming threat of a future full scale invasion by South Korea and the US (a situation that would be similar to that of Iraq between 1991 and 2003). This, however, would be a much riskier version since, as in all other scenarios for a direct military option, North Korea could still deliver a nuclear strike at the US and its allies before the air campaign knocks out its nuclear facilities (a North Korean nuclear attack on China would be less likely even in the case of this scenario, as China would only act after the US and its allies have already completed their air campaign disabling North Korea's nuclear capabilities.) In such a scenario China can try to pressure the North Korean elite not to use nuclear weapons in exchange of granting asylum for them, but the success of such persuasion is highly uncertain. Also, since in such a scenario the US, South Korea, and their allies would have to face the entire risk of North Korean retaliation with Pyongyang still having the full capacity of its arsenal, while China would get most of the gains by taking North Korea as a satellite, we can highly doubt, whether they would be willing to launch an air campaign along such an agreement, merely to get rid of the North Korean nuclear threat. Thus the other option for a Chinese takeover, trying to trigger a North Korean regime collapse by an economic embargo and taking military steps only after the regime has already collapsed, without involving the US, seems to be a much less risky, thus much more realistic scenario.

## CONCLUSION

As we can see, the situation is so complicated that the interests of the US, China, Japan and the two Koreas, regarding which option would be the best for them, are far from clear. So far China has granted its support to North Korea in order to maintain it as a buffer state between itself and the US troops based in South Korea. A peace process, where North Korea denuclearizes and US troops leave South Korea would be a dream scenario for China. With a peace process gone wrong, however, where North Korea refuses to denuclearize at the end and in response South Korea and Japan, feeling abandoned by the US, establish their own nuclear arsenals, this dream could turn into a nightmare. On the other hand however, given how the South Korean population views China, Japan, and the US, China would be the main beneficiary of a South-dominated but neutral and unified Korea, pushing back the US influence in the region to the border of Japan, and gaining a strong, wealthy, and China-leaning neighbor at the same time. So, if the peace process fails, a regime change in North Korea can surprisingly be in the interest even of China. On the other hand, it also raises the issue of interests of the US and Japan. While being the main adversaries of North Korea, the existence of the regime so far was in a way helpful for them, by keeping South Korea as a US ally and preventing it from drifting towards China, their main strategic rival in the region. North Korea's nuclear arsenal is, however, reaching a level where it is increasingly becoming such a threat for the US and Japan that removing that threat is likely to overrule

such considerations. For South Korea unification only seems to be a viable scenario under an agreement with China, which would likely mean neutrality for the unified Korea, and an end of its security agreement with the US. As we discussed, even in the unlikely case of a US-allied Seoul-lead unified Korea, formed without China taking direct action, with the Northern regime having amassed vast resources suitable for a guerilla war, and with a hostile China in the neighborhood, willing to indefinitely supply Northern guerillas, could for the South turn the absorption of the North into something like Vietnam was for the US or Afghanistan was for a USSR. In the case of unification South Korea can only be sure about cooperative behavior by Chinese authorities along the long and porous Sino-Korean border if that unification takes place with the approval of China, the price of which would most likely be neutrality. We also reached a conclusion, that if the US wants to avoid a war with China, a military move against North Korea can be an air campaign at most as any move that would suggest the US taking control over the northern half of the Korean peninsula, such as US and South Korean ground troops crossing into Northern territory across the DMZ, would hurt the vital interest of China in keeping the northern half of the peninsula as a buffer between itself and US troops. Last but not least, while for North Korea, blackmailing the US into abandoning South Korea and blackmailing South Korea into finlandization would be a dream scenario at first sight, even limited opening of the borders and recognition of South Korea as a peaceful neighbor and legitimate Korean nation state would bear the risk of fatally undermining the legitimacy of the North Korean regime.

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