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## If There's War, Will Chinese Side With Kim?

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As the United States faces yet another crisis on the Korean Peninsula engineered by the vexingly erratic and disruptive North Korean regime, one key issue is how China might convince Pyongyang to dial back its provocations lest they escalate into military conflict.

Although current consultations between Washington and Beijing are taking place behind closed doors, we do have a window into how the U.S. assessed China's options during a similar crisis nearly two decades ago — options that included Chinese troops crossing the Yalu to secure its borders.

In 1994, the U.S. received new intelligence that North Korea, despite its commitments to the International Atomic Energy Agency under the Nonproliferation Treaty, was moving to produce nuclear weapons.

How to halt this program and secure IAEA inspection of North Korea's nuclear facilities was the focus of intense but unfruitful negotiations during the first half of the year, and the potential failure of the talks led Washington to briefly contemplate military action.

The crisis was only defused that summer, when former president Jimmy Carter engaged in personal diplomacy with North Korean leader Kim Il Sung.

Then, as now, the role Beijing would play in resolving the crisis was a major unknown. But a partially declassified Defense Intelligence Agency report from late January 1994 — published for the first time here and on the [National Security Archive's website](#) — laid out Beijing's options and possible responses, ranging from economic sanctions to war.

The report notes that the Chinese needed to "reconcile their interest in stability on the Korean Peninsula and long-standing ties to Pyongyang with their interests in a denuclearized peninsula, in avoiding isolation among UN Security Council (SC) members, and in maintaining stable relations with the U.S., Japan and South Korea."

In the event of efforts to impose economic sanctions, DIA analysts believed that China would protect its economic interests (such as maintaining Most Favored Nation status with the U.S.) by abstaining from any U.N. vote.

Beijing would further likely work to ease the impact of any sanctions by facilitating the supply of needed goods to North Korea with the primary goal of preventing the country's economic collapse, which would threaten a political crisis on China's border.

Military actions raised a whole new set of concerns for Beijing.

DIA analysis divided military contingencies into two main categories: war as the result of North Korean attack, and war resulting from a U.S./U.N. attack on the North.

If Pyongyang attacked South Korea, China would likely avoid giving military support and would work to end hostilities. But, if U.S. and South Korean forces pushed into North Korea, it would face a dilemma.

In a worst-case scenario, the report suggests that Beijing might deploy Chinese forces across the Yalu River to prevent the whole country from being overrun by the Americans and their allies.

Whether that would still be the case today is an open question, but China's perspective does seem to have changed recently. Whereas it refused to back U.N. sanctions two decades ago, last month it supported (and in fact helped the United States draft) new U.N. sanctions in response to North Korea's recent nuclear test.

That suggests it sees an increased need to rein in the North Korean regime and has a decreased tolerance for destabilizing actions.

In public, Beijing has stressed that it will not accept "troublemaking on China's doorstep."

While it is not likely that China will abandon its North Korean ally given its fear of unknown consequences, its analysts may well be scratching their heads (as their American counterparts are), asking what Kim Jong Un's endgame is — or whether he even has one.

And, if a war breaks out, will prior consultations between Washington and Beijing reassure the Chinese that our own endgame does not threaten their core interests or require military action to keep trouble away from their doorstep?

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