
WOULD CHINA AND RUSSIA SUPPORT A NORTH KOREAN INSURGENCY?

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A U.S.-South Korean military victory over North Korea is not preordained. In fact, as I argued yesterday (See: Military Stalemate: How North Korea Could Win a War With the US), a bloody military stalemate is just as likely as a costly victory over the Kim Jong-un regime. However, it goes without saying that we should continue to entertain the possibility that Republic of Korea (ROK) and U.S. forces succeed in defeating the conventional forces of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK).

Yet, what happens the day after the Second Korean War?

For one thing, it seems clear that North Koreans will not greet U.S. and ROK forces as liberators. As John Reid wrote for The Diplomat in May:

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It would be a grave error to assume that North Koreans will simply be overwhelmed with joy at having food, iPhones, and K-pop. Much like in post-war Iraq, the vacuum created by the loss of an authoritarian regime cannot simply be filled with platitudes of freedom and liberty.

Indeed, there is a real possibility that a violent collapse of the Kim Jong-un regime could lead to an insurgency in a post-DPRK North Korea. We tend to forget that the North Korean state has been built up around a guerilla myth, as Bruce Cumings notes.

A 2017 study by the U.S.-Korea Institute (USKI) at SAIS finds that a collapse of the North Korean state could open the door to potential civil war inside the DPRK as well as resistance to an intervention seeking to reunify the Korean peninsula. Consequently, politicians and military

planners alike must take seriously the possibility of insurgency in any state following rapid and violent governmental change. A number of factors could make North Korea ripe for an insurgency.

First, there likely would be a large stockpile of unsecured weapons available to insurgents. Of course, this would depend on the duration of the conventional military campaign and the scale and scope of destruction. Nevertheless, various sources have indicated that the DPRK is actively preparing for an insurgency in the event of an invasion and would therefore likely have taken care to store stockpiles of weapons for conducting insurgency operations not to be used for conventional warfare.

The USKI study notes that securing these weapons would prove difficult and would require at least 50,000 soldiers: In a plausibly worst-case scenario, such as the violent collapse of the regime, it would likely be impossible to secure many of these stockpiles, as looting of stockpiles would happen too quickly. As a result, any insurgency in the North would likely be well-armed.

Second, over 8 million North Koreans have undergone some form of military training in their lifetime. DPRK military reserve forces alone consist of close to 7.5 million or roughly 30 percent of the entire population of the country. The reserve force consists of reserve military training units, Worker-Peasant Red Guards, the Red Youth Guard, and paramilitary units. (Some of these units only have access to obsolete weapons or indeed are unarmed).

In addition, the DPRK has a large number of special operations forces (up to 200,000) specifically trained for insurgency operations. These units could readily provide the same type of cadre similar forces provided to the post-regime insurgency in Iraq, the USKI study states. This would be particularly important in terms of being able to organize and train would-be insurgents in unconventional warfare.

The make-and-break factor in conducting a victorious insurgency campaign is the availability of sanctuaries. The potential for sanctuary for a North Korean insurgency is perhaps the single most important and highly contingent factor in a post-regime collapse scenario, the USKI study underlines. Only two countries would be able to offer sanctuaries: China and Russia. USKI discusses China (but not Russia):

Like Pakistan and Syria in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, China would not overtly provide sanctuary, but the costs of raids into Chinese controlled territory to target insurgents could be substantial. China would thus pay relatively limited costs while ensuring the post-regime consolidation in North Korea will be slow and costly. It could also tacitly use sanctuary for insurgents as a bargaining chip in an effort to achieve its objectives, such as a Korean peninsula free of external forces—including those of the United States.

One of the major questions in an insurgency scenario is whether Kim Jong-un and his acolytes would be able to coordinate an insurgency campaign from China or Russia. Retired Admiral James Stavridis tells *The Diplomat* that China or Russia would probably provide sanctuary to Kim Jong-un from where he could coordinate a military campaign against the U.S.-ROK occupiers.

Bruce Bennett, a North Korea expert and defense analyst for the RAND Corporation, concurs: It is always possible that Russia or China could offer the Kim family a safe haven after a failed North Korean attack on South Korea, Yet Bennett also points out to *The Diplomat* that Chinese and North Koreans harbor a deep-seated animosity toward one another. So I do not believe that Kim Jong-un would be willing to accept such an offer [of sanctuary] from China—he would not trust the Chinese.

(Chinas position would also depend on whether it chooses to militarily intervene under the terms of the 1961 Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance.)

Russia might be a different story, according to Bennett. But this would be subject to Kims use of weapons of mass destruction during the initial phase of a possible Second Korean War.

A Russian offer might be different, but even with Russia Kim Jong-un knows that the several billion dollars he has in overseas bank accounts won't do him much good if the Russian government ever decides to take action against him (politics trumps wealth), Bennett notes. And if he has used nuclear weapons or other WMD, Russia would be under incredible pressure to turn him over to international justice. I am skeptical that he would view such a possibility as being safe for him.

Consequently, after a closer look, the possibility of insurgency sanctuaries for the Kim regime in China or Russia seems possible but farfetched. First, it appears implausible to begin with that Kim Jong Un would survive the use of WMDs in a conflict with South Korea and the United States. The retaliation would be massive, as I explained previously:

In the event of a North Korean nuclear attack (or even signs of preparations for one), KMPR specifically calls for surgical strikes against key leadership figures of the communist regime and

military infrastructure with the missiles part of a so-called kill chain consisting of integrated information, surveillance, and strike systems, as well as the Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) system.

Second, even if Kim and other senior North Korean leaders would manage to make it through the first hot phase of a military clash between DPRK and U.S.-ROK forces, it is highly unlikely that either China or Russia would be willing to offer sanctuary following the launch of WMDs.

Third, given Kims apparent mistrust of China or Russia it is difficult to imagine that he would put his life in the hands of two countries that in the past, according to North Korean thinking, have repeatedly failed to support the DPRK and historically (e.g., the Korea War) not lived up to the expectations of Pyongyang.

Consequently, if Kim would have to pick between WMDs or sanctuaries in China or Russia, based on most publicly available information about the thinking of the North Korean leadership, he would most probably pick the former and still attempt to conduct an insurgency even without access to the latter.

However, there still looms the danger that North Koreans would launch an insurgency without coordination by Kim and senior DPRK leaders. [Th]e DPRK regime has had more than six decades to propagandize the North Korean population, USKI elaborates. Even if the regime has only inculcated 10 percent of the population with this xenophobic racist propaganda, this means it can provide a mobilizing ideology for over two million potential insurgents.

Whether China or Russia would quietly support a North Korean insurgency that is not led by Kim remains an open question.

Kaynak/Source: