



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report identifies the major challenges that the United States, South Korea, and China would encounter in the wake of a North Korean government collapse. Commissioned by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), this report is based on a review of relevant existing literature, discussions during a US-Korea Institute Workshop, “Instability, Insurgency, and WMD in North Korea,” held in March 2017 in Washington DC, and the author’s work on contingency planning at the US Department of Defense. This report will inform potential USIP Track 1.5 dialogues with China on North Korea.

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North Korea and the Need for a US-ROK-PRC Dialogue

Summary

- The reality of a North Korea with advanced nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons programs makes it imperative for US policymakers and experts to intensify their examination of the security and humanitarian implications of regime instability and collapse.
- In a North Korean regime collapse scenario, the potential use of North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction and their movement outside of the country would be the paramount concern, especially for the United States.
- North Korean instability also has the potential to generate a large-scale humanitarian crisis, including millions of refugees pouring into China and South Korea—the Republic of Korea (ROK)—as well as severe starvation, poor health conditions, and human rights abuses within North Korea.
- Additionally, US-ROK Alliance and China’s forces would face massive stability operations, including conventional disarmament and potentially counterinsurgency.
- US-ROK Alliance and Chinese forces each have separate contingency plans but the threshold for intervention is unclear. Were these forces to intervene in North Korea without coordination and communication, confrontation and greater conflict are possible.
- The United States, ROK, and China should establish a sustained trilateral dialogue at the Track 1.5 or Track 2 level that focuses solely on North Korea contingency planning. The goal would be to share views on the implications of regime collapse and discuss ways to coordinate and collaborate to avoid miscommunication, conflict, and negative outcomes.

Background

Over the last three decades, the international community has failed to persuade the North Korean regime to relinquish its nuclear weapons program because the regime believes that nuclear weapons are the only guarantor of its survival. Kim Jong-un’s tenure, which began with the April 2012 satellite launch that scuttled North Korea’s last diplomatic agreement with the United States (the February 2012 Leap Day Deal) and continued with an unprec-

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edented number and level of nuclear and ballistic missile tests, has only reinforced the strong unlikelihood of a negotiated denuclearization settlement.

Recent North Korean actions have also underscored the additional threat of the regime's chemical and biological weapons programs. In February 2017, North Korean agents allegedly aided two unwitting women in assassinating the North Korean leader's half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, at Kuala Lumpur International Airport with VX nerve agent.

The reality of a North Korea with active weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs has made it imperative for US and ROK policymakers and experts to reinvigorate examinations of the security and humanitarian implications of North Korean instability and strengthen cooperation related to North Korea contingency planning. The present situation has also reinforced the importance of sustaining a dialogue with China to ensure mutual understanding of each country's perspectives, interests, and capabilities in a contingency scenario and to prevent the potential for conflict and other negative outcomes.

China has certainly planned for the possibility of instability but has been averse to discussing it with the United States and the ROK at the Track 1 level given the political sensitivity of the issue. However, the new US administration's prioritizing North Korea as the primary US security threat and stated willingness to use military options to counter Kim Jong-un's breakneck pursuit of a long-range missile capability may elevate China's sense of urgency on North Korea matters.¹

The implications of a North Korea contingency are dire. Pyongyang's advanced nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs could be used in a collapse scenario to quell domestic rebellion or prevent foreign intervention. These WMD along with related material and technology could also be transferred outside the country and end up in the hands of rogue states or terrorist organizations.² Furthermore, it is unclear whether US-ROK Alliance forces, People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces, or both combined have the requisite personnel, expertise, and training to locate and secure North Korean WMD across hundreds of potential sites. The potential for North Korean instability to generate a large-scale refugee and humanitarian crisis is another significant concern. Beyond the WMD elimination and humanitarian assistance challenges, Alliance and PLA forces would face massive stability operations, including conventional disarmament and possibly counterinsurgency. If Alliance and PLA forces intervene in North Korea without coordination and communication, the potential for confrontation and heightened military conflict is high.

The Nature of Collapse

Regime collapse and instability in North Korea could transpire in various ways, each scenario unfolding at its own pace and with its own set of issues.³ A relatively nonthreatening case might be a successful coup that leads to quick consolidation around new leadership and a similar system of government. A more alarming possibility is a successful coup that devolves into multiple factions vying for control, a protracted and bloody civil conflict, and eruptions of multiple humanitarian crises. Alternatively, the situation could entail a slow-boil crisis—like that in Syria—in which the central government maintains power but must fight multiple insurgencies from the periphery.⁴ Another scenario is a black swan event, such as a nuclear reactor crisis and radiation leaking at the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center (North Korea's primary nuclear facility), leading to mass evacuation, refugee outflows, and a breakdown in government. These scenarios have common challenges and opportunities as well as those that are unique to each. This report addresses the challenges of greatest strategic concern.

WMD Security and Proliferation Concerns

In a North Korean regime collapse scenario, the potential use of North Korea's WMD and their movement outside the country would be the paramount concern, especially for the United States. The expansive nature of North Korea's nuclear, chemical, and biological programs, and the poor security conditions characterizing these programs, increase the likelihood that WMD-related material and technology could be obtained by regime forces, competing factions, or opportunistic individuals.

North Korea has a comprehensive nuclear program that spans the complete nuclear fuel cycle, including a five-megawatt electrical plutonium reactor and uranium enrichment facility at Yongbyon, and more than one hundred other nuclear-related facilities. David Albright at the Institute for Science and International Security assessed that, as of the end of 2016, North Korea had enough fissile material and weapons inventory for approximately thirteen to thirty nuclear weapons.⁵ Joel Wit at the US-Korea Institute estimates that, in an average case scenario, North Korea could have up to fifty nuclear weapons by 2020.⁶ North Korea also has a biological warfare program that is believed to have developed anthrax, cholera, botulinum toxin, and other diseases, as well as a long-standing chemical weapons program, including nerve, blister, blood, and choking agents, and an estimated agent stockpile of 2,500 to 5,000 metric tons.⁷

The ways in which WMD might be used—or threatened to be used—in a North Korean collapse scenario would depend on many factors, such as the nature and speed of the collapse, the emergence of civil conflict, the extent of foreign intervention, and the level of access to WMD materials. For example, if Kim Jong-un felt that ongoing instability could lead to foreign intervention and regime change, he could conduct an atmospheric nuclear test over international waters to threaten the possibility of nuclear retaliation. In another scenario, if the US-ROK Alliance decided to intervene to stabilize the country, the Korean People's Army—the majority of which is forward-deployed close to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)—could use artillery fire with chemical weapons to block the advance of Alliance forces or even tactical nuclear weapons to weaken Alliance resolve, both of which would inflict mass casualties. If the conflict extended beyond the DMZ, Korean People's Army units could use chemical weapons explosives to obstruct further Alliance advances north or attack Alliance bases. Chemical weapons could also be used within a civil conflict by regime forces against opposition factions.⁸ PLA forces would not be exempt from WMD attack if China intervened, though the likelihood may be lower given that the circumstances of Chinese intervention would probably be less hostile.

Beyond the threat of WMD use, the next strategic priority for the international community would be locating and securing WMD to prevent them from ending up in the hands of rogue states or terrorist organizations. It is possible that, in a slowly evolving regime collapse scenario, the Kim Jong-un regime would try to sell or trade WMD capabilities through existing covert networks to secure funds that would help the regime stay in power. Additionally, military factions or individuals with access could attempt to sell WMD materials or technology outside of the country for personal gain or simply keep it to enhance their authority in a chaotic environment.⁹

Locating and securing WMD would be extremely difficult for several reasons. First, the US-ROK Alliance has limited intelligence on Pyongyang's WMD-related materials, facilities, and experts. North Korea also has an extensive network of underground facilities and tunnels that could be used to store WMD-related materials and equipment, which would complicate the search process. Second, the WMD mission would need to occur quickly, even before the intervention of large-scale forces, to preempt the theft of material by insider

As of the end of 2016, North Korea had enough fissile material and weapons inventory for approximately thirteen to thirty nuclear weapons.

forces or the local population, which is what happened to potential WMD sites in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom.¹⁰ According to the Nuclear Threat Initiative's 2016 Nuclear Security Index, among twenty-four countries with weapons-usable nuclear materials, North Korea ranked last on security conditions that protect against the theft of nuclear materials that can be used to build a nuclear device.¹¹

A third factor is whether Alliance forces, PLA forces, or both forces combined have the requisite technical experts, security personnel, and specialized training to fulfill the vast WMD mission. One estimate is that a minimum of three thousand to ten thousand personnel would be needed for the WMD elimination mission at two hundred North Korean WMD sites if resistance were negligible.¹² In the event of serious opposition, estimates range from 120,000 to 800,000 personnel for the combined combat and elimination missions.¹³ Currently, the Alliance has the capability to form a Combined Joint Task Force for the Elimination of WMD—including two US eleven-person nuclear disablement teams, subject matter experts from across US agencies, specialists from the ROK Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Defense Command, and general Alliance military and technical support—but this task force could not be assembled in theater quickly.¹⁴ On the other hand, the PLA could rapidly mobilize approximately 250,000 troops in the Northern Theater Command for a Korean contingency, but the extent of its WMD elimination capabilities is uncertain.¹⁵ Some Chinese military analysts have expressed confidence in Beijing's ability to deal with North Korean nuclear reactors given that Chinese and North Korean nuclear technologies are both derived from Soviet designs, but it is also possible that older technologies and facilities are more difficult and dangerous to manage.¹⁶

A related consideration is the need to disentangle competing political interests and coordinate roles and capabilities. China may be best positioned to secure most of North Korea's nuclear sites given its authority to take control of nuclear weapons as a nuclear-weapon state under the Non-Proliferation Treaty and its relative proximity—the Chinese border is about 110 kilometers from the Yongbyon nuclear complex and about ninety from the Punggye-ri nuclear test site. However, the ROK would likely object to Chinese military presence on the Korean Peninsula and push for the Alliance's intervention. Even assuming that the Alliance could neutralize North Korea's defenses and quickly intervene, the United States and the ROK would need to negotiate their respective roles in the WMD mission based on capabilities and resources. The ROK has readily available ground troops and the necessary Korean-language abilities to interpret North Korean materials and documents, but is prohibited under the Non-Proliferation Treaty from taking possession of nuclear weapons and other sensitive materials. The United States, meanwhile, maintains the authority and expertise to possess and exploit sensitive nuclear material and technology, but the number of its personnel in North Korean territory would be limited for strategic, political, and logistical reasons.

All these factors underscore that the WMD mission in North Korea would be an extremely difficult and massive undertaking and would require significant coordination, before and during the crisis, among the principal countries and international community.

Regime collapse and instability would disable the normal provision of state services, disrupt the functioning of markets, and threaten the overall security of the North Korean people, causing them to be displaced from their homes in search of safety and food.

Refugee and Humanitarian Concerns

The potential for North Korean instability to generate a large-scale refugee crisis is another significant concern, particularly for China. Regime collapse and instability would disable the normal provision of state services, disrupt the functioning of markets, and threaten the overall security of the North Korean people, causing them to be displaced from their homes in search of safety and food. Given that the majority of North Korea's population is centered around Pyongyang and in the northern half of the country, the refugee flow would

be primarily into Chinese territory. During the great North Korean famine of the mid- to late 1990s, estimates of the North Korean refugee population in northeast China ranged from ten thousand (the official Chinese estimate) to four hundred thousand; North Korean party cadre members, however, used the figure of two hundred thousand at the peak of the famine in 1998.¹⁷ This rapid influx of North Koreans caused significant concern for the Chinese government, which viewed the two million ethnic Koreans already living in northeast China as a potentially worrisome minority.¹⁸ In a worst case collapse scenario, some experts believe that the refugee numbers could be in the range of several millions.¹⁹

China has invested heavily to enhance its responses to natural disasters and emergency situations.²⁰ The civilian response capacity includes legal frameworks at all levels of government and interagency coordination mechanisms, but also remains complicated by complex bureaucratic structures and lack of protocols for international assistance. Similarly, the PLA maintains plans and budgets for emergency rescue and disaster relief, but when applied during the response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the response revealed shortcomings, including inadequate equipment, training, and supplies.²¹

The exodus of North Korean refugees would include a flow into South Korea, either by sea or across the DMZ. A 2012 report by the Korea Employers Federation estimated that in a sudden collapse scenario, anywhere from 1.61 million to 3.65 million North Koreans could cross over into South Korea for economic and employment opportunities.²² Although the inflow would not be as high as that into China, it would still require significant South Korean resources and personnel to maintain order, provide aid, and process people.

Those North Koreans who remain within the country after a government collapse would likely face severe deprivation, poor health conditions, and human rights abuses. North Korea is already in the midst of a prolonged humanitarian crisis, an estimated eighteen million of twenty-five million people facing chronic food insecurity, 10.5 million being undernourished, and 3.5 million having no or scant access to safe water, sanitation, or hygiene.²³ Government collapse would likely exacerbate this situation into mass starvation and widespread incidence of diseases. Another consideration in a collapse scenario is the fate of two hundred thousand North Korean political prisoners. Some analysts have warned that North Korean officials could decide to eliminate the prison camps and their inhabitants quickly to remove any traces of human rights abuses that would be evidence for future prosecution.²⁴

Stabilization

Beyond the daunting WMD elimination and humanitarian assistance challenges, Alliance and PLA forces could face massive stability operations, including conventional disarmament and counterinsurgency. As government control and military discipline breaks down, criminal activity such as looting, banditry, and robbery would likely increase. Rapid disarmament operations would be necessary to preempt the looting of arms stockpiles and the formation of armed insurgencies. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, for example, inadequate disarmament efforts led to extensive arms caches and tens of thousands of tons of ammunition being looted, which fueled the insurgency. One estimate is that even in the most benign of circumstances of a government collapse, approximately 260,000 to 400,000 ground forces would be needed to carry out the overall stabilization mission, including humanitarian assistance, border control, WMD elimination, conventional disarmament, and counterinsurgency.²⁵

Intervention and the Potential for Conflict

The possibility of significant security and humanitarian risks stemming from North Korean instability could prove to be a trigger for Chinese intervention.

The possibility of significant security and humanitarian risks stemming from North Korean instability could prove to be a trigger for Chinese intervention. China seeks to mitigate any crises that might threaten its three core interests: safeguarding its political system, defending sovereignty claims and territorial integrity, and developing its economy.²⁶ A collapse of the North Korean regime—which could lead to military conflict on the Korean Peninsula, the potential loss of a buffer state, and massive refugee outflows into an area that has a large ethnic Korean population and a history of having once been under Korean rule—would certainly threaten each of those interests.

The PLA maintains at least three contingency plans for North Korea: humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, peacekeeping, and “environmental control” missions for securing nuclear weapons and dealing with contamination.²⁷ In the early stages of a contingency scenario, China would likely mobilize its People’s Armed Police to seal the border and prevent the flow of North Korean refugees into Chinese territory. If the contingency were to become more severe, experts believe that the PLA and People’s Armed Police forces could enter into North Korea to establish a fifty to one hundred kilometer buffer zone to contain refugee flows, provide humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping operations, and support WMD security operations.²⁸

China could also intervene to forestall potential intervention by the US-ROK Alliance or mitigate additional advances after the Alliance has already intervened. The common expectation is that China is prepared to intervene to preserve a functioning North Korean government and state if a US-ROK Alliance intervention is detected.²⁹ Given the ROK’s long-standing desire to reunify the Peninsula, China may believe that the ROK will use instability, humanitarian issues, and even self-defense as a pretext to enter North Korea without the approval of the United Nations Security Council. In a US-ROK Alliance intervention scenario, China could mobilize forces and enter North Korea quickly to prevent the possibility of US forces nearing the Yalu River. Under a 1961 mutual defense treaty, Pyongyang can request China’s military assistance if North Korea comes under armed attack, which means it would offer little to no resistance to PLA forces.³⁰ If necessary, PLA forces could reach Pyongyang in two hours.³¹

The US-ROK Combined Forces Command has also developed military plans for addressing instability in North Korea, but it is unclear what factor or combination of factors would meet the threshold for the plan’s activation. Washington and Seoul would likely weigh security and political considerations similar to those Beijing considers, and then make a decision based on close consultations. An urgent security crisis such as potential WMD use or proliferation would likely spur combined Alliance intervention. However, it is possible that divergences in Alliance thinking about national security priorities and end-states could lead to different thresholds for intervention. For example, the ROK may view instability in North Korea as a singular historic opportunity to achieve reunification of the Korean Peninsula and eliminate the chronic North Korean threat once and for all. If China intervenes first, the ROK may advocate for Alliance intervention as well, fearing that Beijing could install a new North Korean regime or even absorb the territory altogether, thwarting the dream of unification. The United States, on the other hand, may need to see a more grave security threat before it is willing to risk an intervention that could provoke a conventional or WMD response by North Korean forces or lead to potential military confrontation with China. Ultimately, if one side intervenes, the other side is likely to follow, which introduces the possibility of skirmishes and even full-scale military conflict.

Recommendations for a US-ROK-China Dialogue

Previous studies on North Korea contingency planning have generated useful recommendations for the United States and its regional allies and partners with regard to improving their ability to respond to the potential challenges of a sudden change scenario.³² These recommendations generally focus on

- enhancing US national planning to ensure a comprehensive and integrated response to the potential political, military, economic, and humanitarian challenges associated with North Korea-related contingencies;
- strengthening allied coordination related to contingency planning, including establishing common objectives and end-states, clarifying respective roles, missions, and capabilities, and examining collaboration with the international community;
- developing strategic communications directed at the North Korean people, including soldiers and scientists, that provide hope for economic and physical security, minimize fears of loss of privilege or position, allow for co-option of key officials, and prepare the stage for potential reunification; and
- fostering regional transparency and communication, particularly with China, to avoid misperceptions of strategic intentions and the potential for conflict.

This report places special emphasis on establishing a sustained dialogue with China. Given China's predominant role in the region, its substantial interests and concerns related to the Korean Peninsula, and its significant resources and capabilities, how the US-ROK Alliance engages with this important actor before, during, and after a North Korean government collapse would determine whether a difficult situation becomes a crisis of catastrophic proportions or an opportunity for extraordinary cooperation that leads to peace, stability, and prosperity in the region. China has been understandably resistant to official talks with the United States or the ROK out of fear that word might leak to North Korea. Sporadic bilateral discussions have been held at the Track 1.5 and Track 2 levels, but not sustained and none with a trilateral format.

Appropriate US, ROK, and Chinese institutions should establish a sustained trilateral dialogue at the Track 1.5 or Track 2 level that focuses solely on North Korea contingency planning. It is vital that the ROK participates, not only to assuage fears of strategic marginalization but also to ensure coordination with a principal actor that brings unique capabilities and resources to the mission and whose interests and objectives will not always align with the other two sides. The goal of the dialogue would be for the three sides to share their views on the implications of North Korean regime collapse and discuss ways to coordinate and collaborate in advance to avoid miscommunication, conflict, and negative outcomes. As much as possible, the dialogue should steer away from assessing the likelihood of collapse and instead focus on ways to cooperate if and when it does occur. Several dialogue topics are especially promising:

- *Desired end-states and guiding principles for each country.* The US and ROK representatives should assure their Chinese counterparts that the Alliance's ultimate goal for the Korean Peninsula—peaceful unification under ROK control based on the principles of denuclearization, democracy, and a market economy—would not challenge China's core interests. They could also address China's concerns about territorial integrity, US troops above the 38th parallel, and US force posture on the Korean Peninsula in the absence of a North Korean threat. For their part, Chinese representatives could provide greater transparency about China's interests regarding the future of the Korean Peninsula after a North Korean collapse. It would be helpful for all sides to discuss how their objectives

(such as stability versus denuclearization versus reunification) are prioritized over the short, medium, and long term and how to reconcile seemingly conflicting objectives.

- *Missions and requirements.* The three sides should outline and reach a common understanding of the diverse and complex potential missions in a North Korea contingency as well as the enormous military and civilian requirements, which would reinforce the need for multilateral and eventually international cooperation.
- *Defined roles and capabilities.* The potential for conflict could be minimized if the three sides were to delineate roles and responsibilities based on the identified missions and requirements as well as each country's authorities, capabilities, resources, and interests. For example, as described earlier, China might be best positioned to secure North Korea's nuclear weapons and material given its relative proximity to nuclear sites and its authority to take possession of nuclear weapons. On the other hand, no country has more experience dismantling WMD programs than the United States. An honest discussion of issues like these may cause participants to rethink existing steadfast principles such as the desire to prevent any Chinese or US presence in North Korea. This discussion could also broach the potential contributions of Russia (e.g., expertise with nuclear facilities) and Japan (e.g., naval assets for nonproliferation, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance). The emphasis on a trilateral US-ROK-PRC dialogue is not intended to discount the importance or interests of other countries and the international community in a North Korean contingency, but rather to begin with the most practical, yet appropriate, format.
- *Table-top exercises.* Each round of dialogue should incorporate a table-top exercise to simulate contingency scenarios; probe respective interests, objectives, and likely courses of action; and test mechanisms for cooperation and communication. Any conflicts, capacity shortfalls, or misperceptions encountered during the exercise could serve as the basis for the next round of dialogue.

For all of these issues, each side should consider the appropriateness and utility of unilateral transparency. In some instances, one side may be unwilling or unable to share a particular objective, interest, or capability, but another side could still provide information unilaterally in the interests of transparency, communication, and coordination. For example, even if China is unwilling or unable to be forthcoming about its interests in the case of a collapse scenario, it would still be beneficial for all sides if the United States were to explain to China its interest in minimizing US troop presence above the 38th parallel and keeping the China-North Korea border unchanged. The ultimate goal is to increase understanding and cooperation and reduce the potential for conflict, even if the process is incremental.

Notes

1. In early April 2017, after the United States conducted missile strikes against a Syrian airfield, unconfirmed news reports indicated that China deployed 150,000 troops along the North Korean border in case a similar strike occurred against its traditional ally (Soon-do Hong, "China Increasing Troops on North Korean Border," *Huffington Post*, April 11, 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/china-increasing-troops-on-north-korean-border_us_58eb9aabe4b0acd784ca5a5b).
2. North Korea has a history of nuclear proliferation, including providing Libya with uranium hexafluoride (used in the enrichment process) and providing Syria with nuclear reactor technology (until 2007).
3. For discussions of how the North Korean government might collapse, see Bruce W. Bennett, *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2013), 48; Paul B. Stares and Joel S. Wit, *Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2009), 10–15; Richard C. Bush, "China's Response to Collapse in North Korea," Brookings Institution, January 23, 2014, www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/chinas-response-to-collapse-in-north-korea/.
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9. *Ibid.*, 17–18.
10. Stares and Wit, *Preparing for Sudden Change*, 23.
11. Nuclear Threat Initiative, *The 2016 NTI Nuclear Security Index: Theft/Sabotage*, 3rd. ed. (2016), 20.
12. Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Lind use examples of military forced-entry operations into facilities to arrive at the three thousand to ten thousand personnel figure. This figure is likely an underestimate given that the historical cases addressed short-duration missions, such as freeing hostages or capturing individuals, and the mission of locating, securing, and exploiting WMD sites would be immensely longer and more complex ("The Collapse of North Korea, Military Missions and Requirements," *International Security* 36, no. 2 [2011]: 103–4).
13. Bennett, *Preparing for the Possibility*, 99–100; Robert J. Peters, "The WMD Challenges Posed by a Collapse of North Korea," April 14, 2015, www.38north.org/2015/04/rpeters041415/.
14. Peters, "WMD Challenges."
15. The PLA has, however, trained with decontamination units for decades. See Thomas Woodrow, "The PLA and Cross-Border Contingencies in North Korea and Burma, The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China," in *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China*, ed. Andrew Scobell, Arthur S. Ding, Philip C. Saunders, and Scott W. Harold (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 210.
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