

## China's North Korea conundrum

Show of force: A file photo of a missile during a military parade in Pyongyang. AP

Securing North Korea's missile launchers and nuclear, chemical and biological weapons sites would likely be a chief priority for China in the event of a major crisis involving its communist neighbour, analysts say, although Beijing so far is keeping mum on any plans.

Despite China's official silence, its People's Liberation Army likely has a "vast array" of contingency plans involving military options, said Dean Cheng, an Asia security expert at the Heritage Foundation think tank in Washington.

The PLA and paramilitary People's Armed Police could also be deployed to deal with refugees and possible civil unrest, he said.

What's less clear is whether and under what conditions China would commit troops as an occupying force should North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's regime fall apart, Mr. Cheng said. "We can hypothesise that they might, but, as the observation goes, those who know don't say and those who say probably don't know," he said.

With tensions between the U.S. and North Korea running high and relations between Beijing and Pyongyang at a historic low, questions are being raised about how China might respond in the event of a regime collapse. The scene along the China-North Korea border in the wild mountains of northeast Asia provides some clues.

Despite a dearth of traffic and trade, construction crews are at work on a six-lane highway to the border outside the small Chinese city of Ji'an along the Tumen River, a corridor that could facilitate the rapid movement of tanks and troops.

### Strategic choice

Guard posts, barbed wire-topped fences and checkpoints manned by armed paramilitary troops mark the frontier along the border signs of concern about potentially violent border crossers or even more serious security threats.

China's unwillingness to discuss its plans is likely a strategic choice by the notoriously secretive PLA, but potentially threatens unintended consequences were a major crisis to emerge, experts say. Asked about Chinese preparations for a North Korean crisis, defense ministry spokesman Col. Wu Qian offered assurance but no details at a monthly news briefing on Thursday.

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