

The JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION

Strategic Assessment: China's Northern Theater Command

By Peter Wood

At the end of April, China's Defense Ministry announced it would be conducting "live fire drills" near the border with North Korea ([MOD](#), April 27). This followed weeks of rumors that the PLA was deploying in large numbers close to the Korean peninsula, which the MOD spokesperson subsequently denied ([MOD](#), April 27). North Korean revelations of new missile types, several missile tests and histrionic response to U.S. deployment of THAAD missiles have all contributed to escalated tensions between China, the U.S. and both North and South Korea. Further emphasizing the gravity of the situation, U.S. President Donald Trump said that "we could end up in a major, major conflict" ([Reuters](#), April 28). An examination of China's Northern Theater Command, its military organization responsible for Northeast Asia, provides insight into China's interests in this region, and particularly toward the Korean peninsula.

Guarding the Northern Gate

Each of China's Theater Commands (TC) is defined by its geography and the international borders it defends. China's Eastern Theater Command is largely focused on Taiwan. The Western TC protects China's borders with India and guards internal stability and counter-terrorism stemming from Central Asia. The Southern TC deals with the South China Sea, and the Central TC protects Beijing and reinforces other theaters (for detailed analysis of each theater

command see the following profiles in China Brief: [Eastern TC](#), [Southern TC](#), [Western TC](#)). The Northern Theater Command's (NTC) role is similarly driven by geography and China's relations with its neighbors.

The NTC covers five provinces: Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning and Shandong. Inner Mongolia is crescent shaped, and forms most of China's northern border with Mongolia. Heilongjiang forms the northeastern-most border with Russia, and is named after the Chinese name for the Amur River (lit. Black Dragon River; 黑龙江) which separates the two countries. Jilin province forms a part of central Dongbei and the eastern half of the border with North Korea. Liaoning province curves around the Bohai gulf and touches both Hebei province (which surrounds Beijing and Tianjin) and the western half of the border with North Korea. Liaoning also includes strategic geography that connects Beijing with the rest of the northeast. This strategic geography has shaped historical events and even today dictates the deployment of some of China's military units.

In Liaoning Province, Jinzhou controls the entrance to the northeastern end of the Shanhai Pass, part of the "Liaoxi Corridor" (辽西走廊), which connects land transportation between North China and Northeast China. The other end is protected by Shanhaiguan (山海关), a gate in

advantage of China's strategic depth. **[1]** According to a declassified National Intelligence Estimate from 1973:

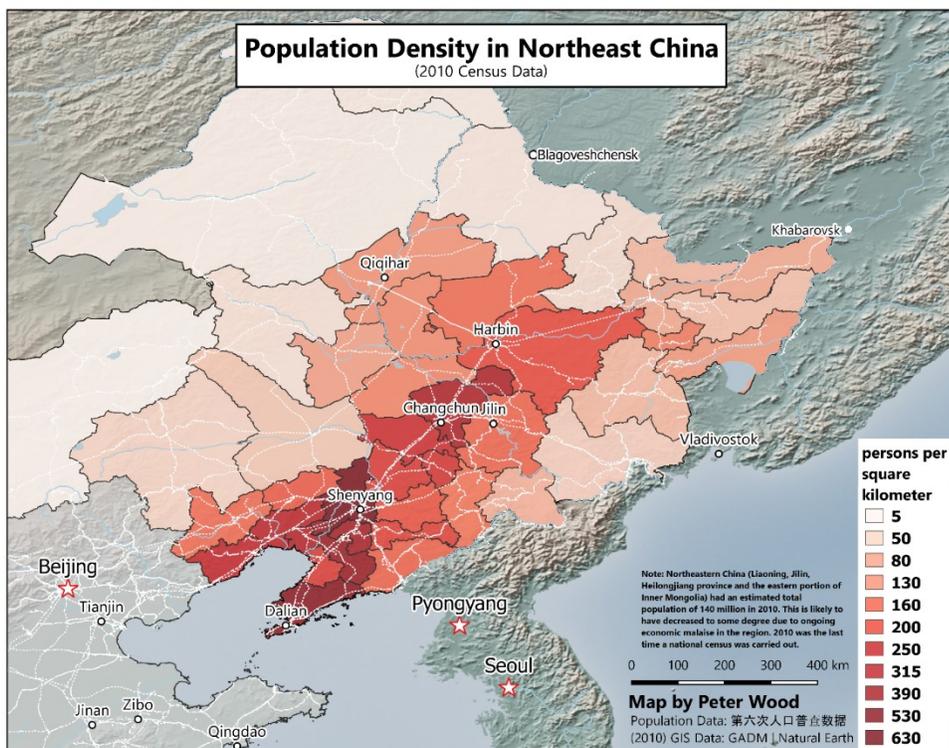
Peking elected not to confront the Soviet forces directly along the border; instead the Chinese have been building fortified areas in good defensive terrain well back from the border, thus compensating in part for the greater mobility and firepower of the Soviet forces. **[2]**

China did not change its Strategic Guidelines (战略方针) to reflect an improvement in relations with the Soviet Union until 1985. Interestingly, the concentration of forces further south, away from the border with Russia does not appear to have changed significantly since 1973. When China changed its military regions into Theater Commands at the end of 2015 it also changed the protocol order, moving the NTC from its predecessors' position as most important, to number 4, behind the Eastern, Southern, and Western TCs, indicating that the threat from Russia has receded, just as the importance of Taiwan, the South China Sea, and China's borders with Central Asia have increased. However, the economic importance of the area remains unchanged.

Economics

An additional element of Northeastern China's strategic importance is its rich economic resources. The region possesses great mineral wealth. The coal industry has a major presence here, and

Daqing (大庆), to the northwest of Harbin, is the site of China's largest oil field. Its discovery in the late 1950s helped jumpstart China's industrial economy (CNPC, [accessed May 4]). The region is also an important breadbasket (*China Brief*, June 1, 2016). Chinese farms run right up to the border with Russia, and Chinese investors have even purchased tracts of land within Russia, prompting Russian fears of a Chinese takeover (*Moscow Times*, April 14). Nevertheless, Chinese trade with Russia is rising, and in 2016 bilateral trade reached \$65 billion, emphasizing the importance of border rail hubs like Suifenhe (绥芬河) (MOFCOM, January 16). The area is also vital to Chinese maritime trade, and the NTC includes or protects four of China's top ten largest ports, including Tianjin, Tangshan, Qingdao and Dalian (*Global Times*, August 20, 2015). As can be seen in the map below, the 140 million Chinese people living in Northeast China are densely situated in Central Dongbei and along the shore of the Bohai Gulf. Notably, the densest areas, concentrated around Changchun, Shenyang and



Dalian, are all near North Korea, and would be affected by an outbreak of violence on the Korean Peninsula. The Korean Peninsula's west coast and the river crossing at Dandong, in particular, is the primary route for trade and would be the primary axis of advance in a crisis. The NTC is tasked with protecting this vital region and its composition and deployments reflect that task.

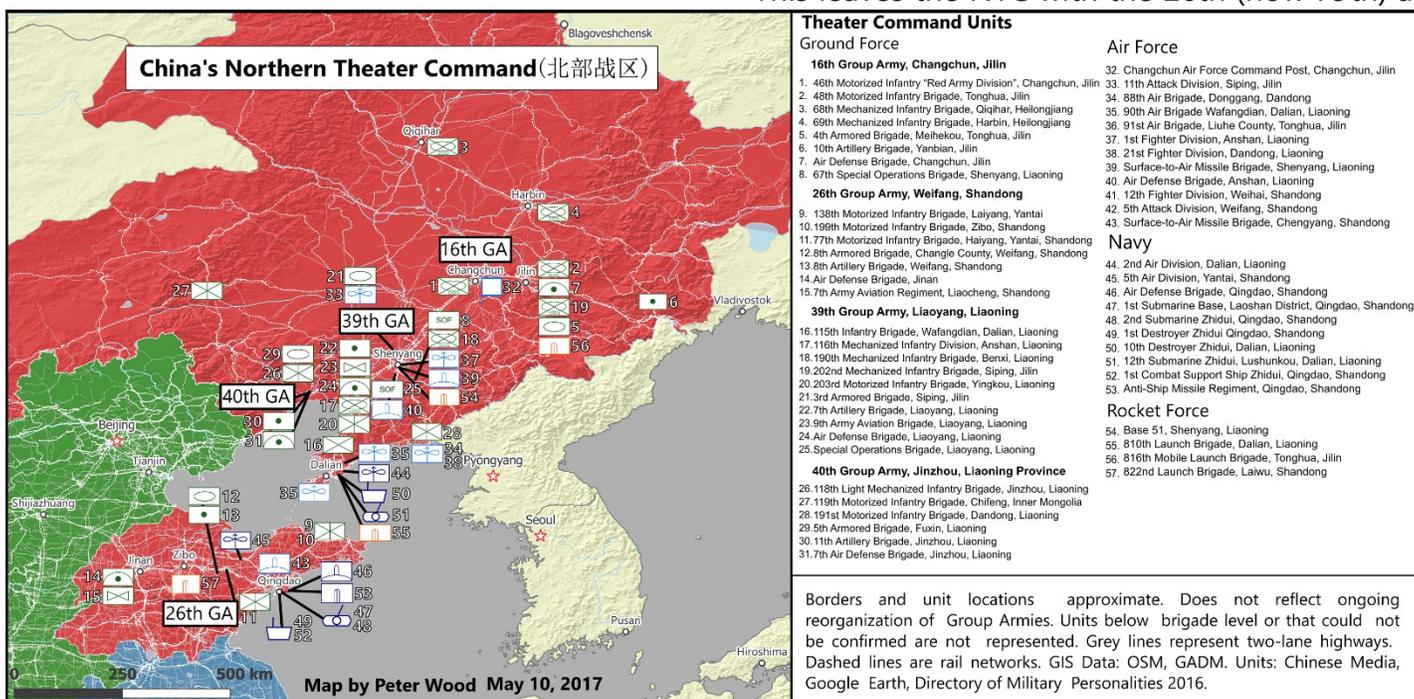
The NTC's Structure

While NTC units in Liaoning, Heilongjiang and Jilin were all part of the former Shenyang Military Region (MR), units in Shandong province previously fell under the Jinan MR. Geographically split from other units in the NTC by the Bohai Gulf, Shandong's inclusion in the NTC makes strategic sense. Particularly in a scenario involving the Korean Peninsula, or a defensive scenario involving protection of the capital region, careful interservice coordination would be necessary. In several crisis scenarios on the Korean Peninsula, moving troops from Shandong via ships and air might be necessary. Air Defenses

and aviation units creating a buffer zone between Beijing and the Yellow Sea would need to coordinate units on both peninsulas.

Reflecting the need for joint coordination, the NTC's top command structure includes members of two services. NTC Commander Song Puxuan (宋普选) is a Ground Force officer, while Commissar Fan Xiaojun (范晓骏) is from the Air Force (Pengpai, April 17). Before taking his current post, GEN Song served in a number of important positions, including as head of China's National Defense University and Commander of the Beijing Military Region. LTG Fan Xiaojun's career includes a number of notable posts, including serving as Commissar for the 15th Airborne Corps and as Director of the PLA Air Force Political and Political Work Departments (Baidu Baike, [accessed May 4]).

The PLA recently announced a further reorganization that reduced the number of Group Armies (GAs) from 18 to 13 and implemented a new numbering system (MOD, April 27). This demobilization includes the 40th GA in Jinzhou. This leaves the NTC with the 26th (now 79th) at



Weifang, 16th GA (78th) in Changchun and 39th (80th) GAs in Liaoyang. While the restructuring may further change the collection of units in the NTC, this article and accompanying map will use their former designations as little additional information about the new system is available. This move, as with other aspects of the reorganization into Theater Commands, is meant to streamline command and control, demobilize ground formations equipped with older systems and eliminate unnecessary echelons ([China Brief](#), February 4, 2016).

Ground Forces

The 39th Group Army, headquartered in Liaoyang, Liaoning, hosts a number of upgraded and advanced units. The 9th Army Aviation brigade, for example, features new Z-19 and Z-10 attack helicopters. An armored brigade is backed by at least three mechanized infantry brigades, as well as artillery and air defense brigades. A Special Operations unit is also present, one of two in the NTC. As the core of the restructured GA system in Northeast China, this large and powerful group may be greatly expanded, and have simplified command ability over the breadth of the borders with North Korea and Russia.

As a part of the former Jinan Military Region, the 26th GA in Weifang, in central Shandong province, has a lower number of well-equipped units compared to other GAs. Nonetheless it has extensively conducted joint exercises, including amphibious landings on the Liaoning Peninsula. Three motorized brigades are present, though there is some reason to believe these are being reduced or, in one case, transferred to the Navy to form the core of a new Marine brigade ([China Defense](#), February 15). There has been speculation that each of China's three fleets will eventu-

ally include a Marine brigade. At least three brigade-level air defense units belonging to the army, air force, and navy are present to protect the important airspace above Qingdao and the Bohai strait. More vital areas have received larger numbers of advanced strategic Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs) but some, notably, an Air Force installation on an island in the center of the Bohai strait, still operate ancient HQ-2 (S-75/SA-2) SAMs.

The centrally located 16th GA, headquartered in Changchun, sits astride the important rail line that connects the southwestern and northeastern halves of Dongbei. Mechanized brigades, situated well back from the border with Russia occupy similar positions in Qiqihar and Harbin to the north. The rail and highway network nodes branching out from them allow for quick responses to incursions while maximizing China's natural strategic depth in this area. East from Harbin the same rail lines Japan and Russia fought over more than a century ago form the primary trade link to Russia, crossing the border at Suifenhe and curving south inside Russia to the largest Russian city in the Far East, Vladivostok. An armored brigade well situated to respond to contingencies near the Russian or North Korean Border is equipped with China's advanced Type 99 Main Battle Tank as well as the standard Type 96B.

Prior to the reorganization/reduction, the 40th GA featured mostly lightly equipped units, with motorized brigades at Chifeng, in Inner Mongolia, and Dandong, in Liaoning, but mostly concentrated at the strategic city of Jinzhou, one end of the strategic pass leading to Beijing. Importantly, it contained neither an Army Aviation nor Special Operations unit, denoting it as a low priority formation. Under the new organization,

these units will likely be demobilized, or absorbed into the successor to the 39th GA. Motorized units have for some time been a focus of reductions, transfers to the People's Armed Police, or upgrades into mechanized units. Given the strategic location, some units, such as the 5th armored brigade, are likely to remain.

While the geography and strategic tasks of the NTC require large numbers of ground forces, the Naval and Air units focused in the region are likely to take an even more prominent role in coming years.

Navy

The PLA Navy's North Fleet, headquartered in Qingdao, is home to many of China's most advanced systems and testbed projects. From a naval perspective, ports along the two peninsulas guard access to the Bohai Gulf. On the north side of the gulf, Dalian is a strategic, ice-free port. Port Arthur (旅顺), just up the coast, was a key objective during the 1904 Russo-Japanese war. Nuclear-energy propelled (long-distance) Han-class submarines are part of the 12th Submarine squadron (*zhidui*; 支队) in Dalian. China's first indigenously produced carrier was recently launched for the first time in Dalian (navy.81.cn, April 28). To the southwest, on the southern edge of the Shandong Peninsula is Qingdao, another key trade and naval port. The Liaoning, China's first aircraft carrier, is homeported in Qingdao. A hardened submarine pen outside Qingdao offers concealment and protection for ballistic missile submarines. Destroyer squadrons at Dalian and Qingdao round out the force and give the North Fleet powerful surface combatant capability.

Naval Aviation

Most PLA Naval Aviation units are equipped with older strike and air superiority fighters with two notable exceptions: specialized aircraft and China's nascent carrier aviation force. NTC naval aviation includes a number of highly specialized aerial early warning, electronic warfare, signals collection and maritime surveillance aircraft based at Laiyang and Tuchengzi airbases. These aircraft regularly transit through the Miyako Strait in the East China Sea along with H-6 bombers and long-range fighters ([China Brief](#), October 26, 2016).

Perhaps the most important naval aviation unit in the NTC is the naval aviation training base outside Xingcheng, where China trains its carrier pilots. The base features three runways, complete with ski-jumps to simulate China's carriers, and what appear to be both steam-powered and electromagnetic catapults for future carrier variants ([East Pendulum](#), February 17). Although China's sole operational carrier and its embarked aviation unit are currently directly subordinate to the CMC, this unit will create the core of China's carrier wings and pave the way for more advanced naval aviation. Though Chinese carrier aviation lags behind its American counterpart by multiple decades of experience, significant progress has been made, and more joint and live-fire training exercises are being carried out ([China Brief](#), December 21, 2016).

Air Force

Since it plays a key role in air defense of the capital region and important bases, a number of units in the NTC are equipped with advanced fighters. The 1st Fighter Division, located near Anshan, for example, includes regiments of J-10 and J-11s. Closer to the borders with North Korea and Russia, the 21st Air Division in Qiqihar and 88th Air Brigade at Dandong, respectively,

details are hard to come by, China has a number of border security regiments and People's Armed Police units that could be used to help control the situation. The following map attempts to give a sense of their numbers, locations and major border crossings.

Conclusion

Although the economy of China's northeast has faded somewhat, it remains a core strategic area for China. History has consistently tied the northeast's fate to that of China. Particularly with the tensions in North Korea at their highest point in the past decade, the Northern Theater Command will likely receive more attention and investment, even as China extends its military reach to the South and East.

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Notes

1. The Science of Military Strategy [战略学], 3rd ed., Beijing: Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], 2013, pp. 45-46.
2. National Intelligence Estimate - The Sino-Soviet Relationship: The Military Aspects September 20 1973. Declassified March 2,

2011. CREST reference code LOC-HAK-541-7-5-8 p. 30.

3. Ref: Sean O'Connor, Ausairpower, "PLA Second Artillery Corps," December 2009. Verified via Google Earth image April 4, 2016. <http://www.ausairpower.net/APA-PLA-Second-Artillery-Corps.html#mozTocId836202> ; Jeffrey Lewis, "Chillin with the Second Artillery," 38North, January 21, 2015. <http://38north.org/2015/01/jlewis012115/>

Additional References: Andreas Rupprecht, *Flashpoint China: Chinese Air Power and Regional Security*, Harpia, 2016.

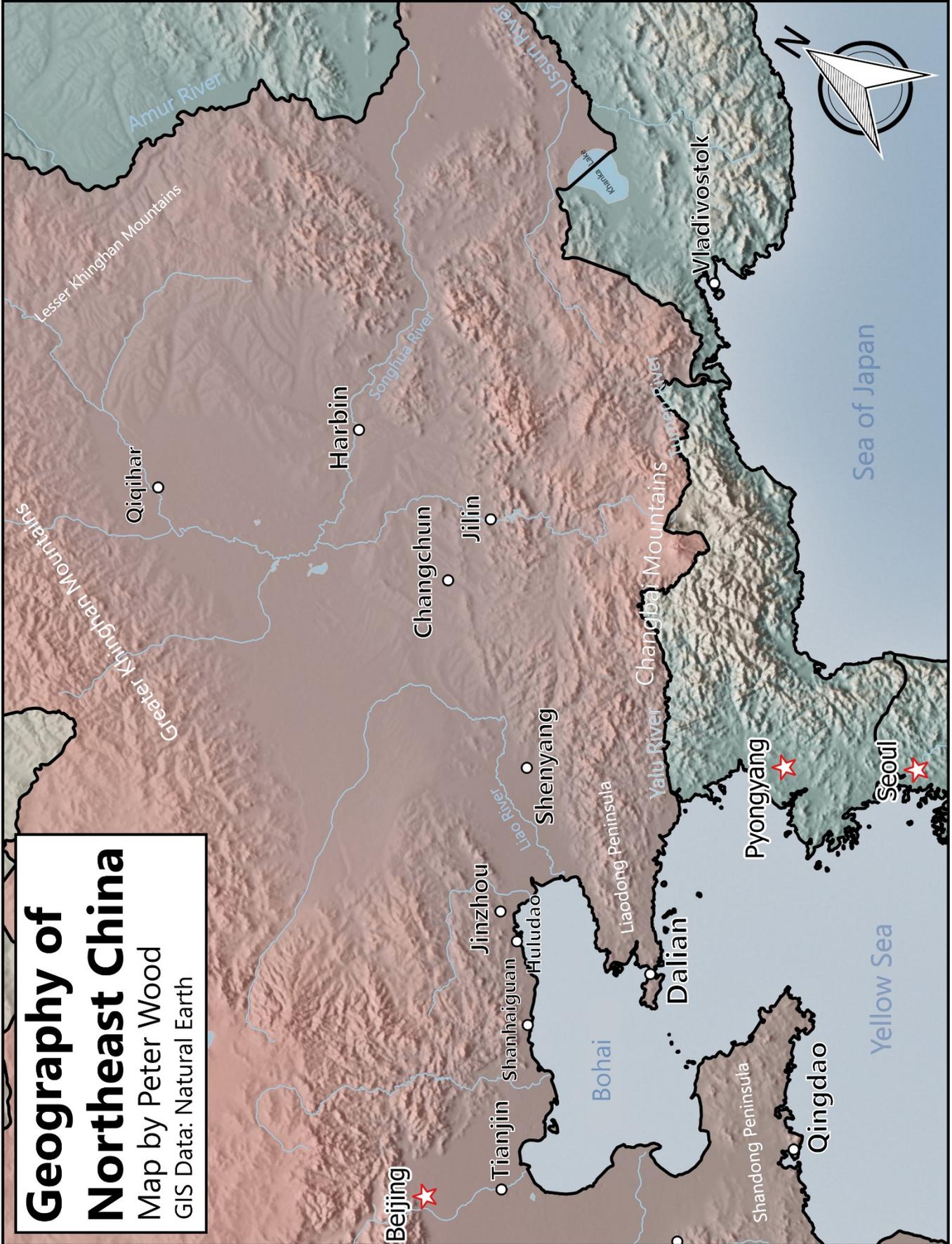
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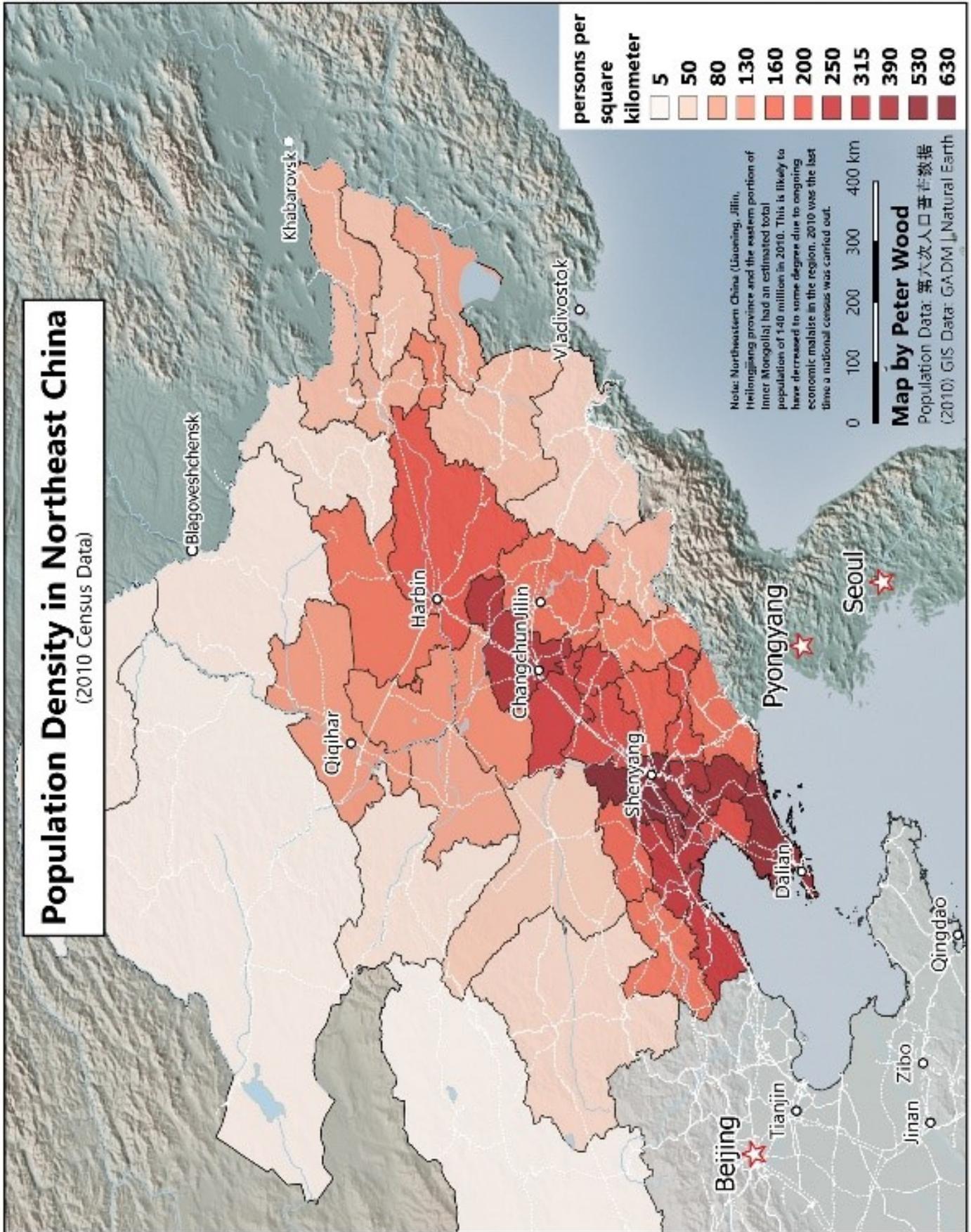
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Appendix: Graphics



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