

North Korea's Military Strategy, 2018

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As the focus shifted from North Korea's military advances in 2017 to its diplomatic offensive in 2018, we should not lose sight of the strategic thinking behind gaining the maximum time to develop the capacity to extend its military threat. At present North Korea needs time to perfect its nuclear strike capability. It has been very successful in developing missile capabilities, but it needs additional time to achieve its goals. Starting with high-level North-South talks on March 5, 2018, the DPRK has just gained what it needs most: time. Whenever the first talks begin with the United States and the DPRK, there should be no surprise if the DPRK comes with an improved capability to threaten the alliance. Thus, for an extended period in 2018, as diplomacy proceeds, we should expect a subdued North Korean approach: not flaunting its nuclear weapons and missiles, while striving to boost capabilities for the struggle ahead.

In the seven years since Kim Jong-un officially inherited the leadership of the DPRK, his stated policy has been *byungjin* (병진, 並進), the pursuit of both economic and military development. In conjunction with purges and efforts to eliminate rivals, *byungjin* may, in part, derive from Kim's efforts at the outset of his tenure to consolidate political power. Through it, Kim displayed moderate economic flexibility, thereby gaining favor with the North Korean people through facilitating an improvement in living standards. It is tempting to see *byungjin* as a sign of the regime's weakness, or as an indication of moderation, either of which would prompt the eventual collapse of the Kim regime. Correspondingly, one might see it as a reflection of Kim's immaturity, inexperience, and lack of political and strategic acumen. These viewpoints reflect mirror imaging more than a sophisticated understanding of North Korea. *Byungjin* may be more of a political device and a strategic communications element of a grand strategy, as opposed to the regime's strategy. It may be a significant instrument in the regime's effort to maintain elite cohesion and focus the energies of the North Korean people toward productive pursuits that likewise add to the regime's legitimacy and staying power. It by no means suggests any diminishing of the priority of making advances in nuclear and missile development in order to pose a more serious threat.

Since taking power, Kim's regime has fired close to one hundred missiles of wide variety and range compared to thirty-one for his father and grandfather combined. He has also conducted four nuclear tests, boasting of a thermal nuclear capability. During his 2018 New Year's address, Kim Jong-un proclaimed that the DPRK had perfected its nuclear and intercontinental missile capabilities, supporting North Korea's constitutional claim to be a nuclear power. Despite an upsurge in diplomacy after this address, we should keep our eyes on its military advances.

North Korean Military Strategy in 2018

It is unlikely that we will see another spate of nuclear and missile tests in 2018 even as secret development is continuing. Emphasis is probably placed on improving accuracy and re-entry capability. There should be no surprise when North Korea's next nuclear and missile provocations involve an atmospheric test, a thermal nuclear capability, or a 10,000 km plus range test with unquestionable re-entry capability. By the time North Korea conducts such a demonstration, it is conceivable that it will have acquired sufficient numbers to ensure that the world, especially the United States, understands it has a viable second-strike capability.

Of all the capabilities that North Korea possesses, the cyber threat is probably the most potent and threatening for 2018. With the difficulties in attribution and often non-kinetic impact, North Korea can seek to retain plausible deniability with respect to any particular attack, but its focus on cyber warfare is increasingly obvious. Attacks occur on a daily basis against government agencies and private organizations. North Koreans are developing increasingly sophisticated cyber techniques and methods that they will use during steady state conditions, causing concern about potentially more damaging capabilities they may use in the event of war. As North Korea faces economic sanctions they are more likely to utilize cyber theft to augment the loss of income.

A little-known area for the DPRK is Electronic Warfare (EW) capability. Attempts to disrupt friendly GPS signals continue. If successful, this would affect friendly precision bombing capability. EW as well as cyber capability could seriously affect alliance abilities to conduct operations. The North Korean People's Army (NKPA) will refrain from deliberate provocations, but accidental incidents will always be possible. For the time being, the NKPA will support the peace effort by being discreet in its activities to improve existing capabilities and to develop new abilities. The focus of improving existing capabilities will probably be towards missile accuracy and re-entry, a greater nuclear warhead yield, and some of its conventional forces. New abilities will be towards cyber, submarines, electronic warfare, and unmanned drones.

In 2018, a North Korean version of Information Operations to create seams along the ROK-U.S. alliance and to prevent trilateral cooperation among South Korea, Japan, and the United States will be a likely goal. The Winter Olympics of 2018 has already created an atmosphere of hope that could easily develop into strife within South Korea. North Korea's attempt to portray itself as the victim and its continuous message that its nuclear weapons are only for defense will deflect a limited military option by the United States or the alliance. North Korean cyber units will play a critical role by infiltrating South Korean social networks to create and form public opinion. False news as well as raising enough suspicion to plant doubt will be easy against an open society like South Korea.

The NKPA also has a role of earning money from various means. How sanctions have affected this role is unclear, but they must be making all levels of life within the North Korean military apparatus difficult. Efforts to minimize the disruption to the military as well as to find new means to engage in economic activity will preoccupy the NKPA. Finally, the NKPA will have the duty of maintaining stability within North Korea. Although the Kim family has been successful in controlling North Koreans for 72 years, keeping his closest security forces loyal must be as hard as any election in the free world. Therefore, maintaining and securing loyalty among his closest people will be a full-time job. A critical job for the NKPA military will be to keep stability and peace in North Korea.

Continuities in the NKPA

The North Korean military's strategic culture derives from Kim Il-sung. His view of war begins with *juche* (주체), in part a creative application of Marxist-Leninism. The North Koreans proclaim the uniqueness of their military philosophy, but in reality, it is based on their experience from the Korean War, Marx and Lenin's thinking, and Mao Zedong's

revolutionary military theory. The NKPA has played a central role in many aspects of society and politics, well beyond the realm of national security. The military drives the expression of social and political norms. First, the majority of men and a significant number of women spend the first 10 years of their adult life in the military. The military serves as a key institution in the socialization of North Korean adults. Further, the military occupies the time and attention of the most restive element in any population—young men. It serves as a unifying element in other respects. For example, the military is an object of pride. It symbolizes strength and power in a manner used to justify many sacrifices and deficiencies.

The North Koreans define their military as the revolutionary arm of the Chosun Labor Party (Korean Workers' Party or KWP), which inherited the honorable revolutionary traditions of the armed conflict against the Japanese. This is in accordance with KWP regulations (조선로동당규약). Ch. 7, Sect.4. Sect. 47 defines the NKPA as the "army of the party" and a "revolutionary army." These examples show the political nature of the organization and provide a glimpse as to the indoctrination that is provided to the average soldier.

As North Korea's communist party, the KWP is the ultimate authority ruling the NKPA. Since Kim Jong-un is the chairman of the military committee of the KWP, he is the commander-in-chief of the NKPA, effectively, making it his private army. The KWP states in its party regulations that its ultimate goal is to construct a communist society on the whole of the Korean Peninsula. It goes on to state that the North Korean labor party's immediate goal is "to guarantee the complete victory of socialism in the northern part of the republic and to conduct the liberation of the Korean people and democratic revolution task of the entire nation." These statements are unequivocal evidence that North Korea's goal is to unify the Korean Peninsula on North Korea's terms under the leadership of the Kim family dynasty.

The ideology of *juche* completely engulfs North Korea. This is not due to its principle or actual application. Many question whether *juche* should even be considered an actual ideology. Rather, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il used it as a political instrument and as a means of controlling the government and society. Kim Jong-un is no different. Military policy is based on *juche*, which advocates independence in ideology, politics, economics, and defense. In order to enhance its sovereignty and self-reliance, the North maintains the NKPA as the core of its indigenous revolutionary force and works to cultivate a support base in South Korea and obtain international support.

Juche military ideology is based on a modified version of Marxist-Leninism. In 1980 *juche* morphed into the "supreme leader's *juche* and revolutionary ideology." What was once an ideology comparable to Marxism-Leninism became an ideology that Kim Il-sung asserted was superior to Soviet or Chinese ideology. In 1964, *juche* formalized "three revolutionary areas of focus": 1) establishing an indigenous revolutionary force in North Korea; 2) cultivating a support base in South Korea; and 3) obtaining an international force supporting the revolution. The first focus ensures that North Korea provides a strong political, economic, and military base for revolution. The second seeks the establishment of a South Korean society that sympathizes with the North and is supportive of the North Korean regime and communism—of a unified Korea under the Kim regime. The final focus

centers on Russia and China, but also includes a broader set of international relationships. These traditional communist countries with friendships with third world nations were to provide international support for North Korean led unification. These efforts would isolate South Korea and prompt the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Korea; thereby paving the way for unification.

Traditional Military Strategy

North Korea's "short and decisive strategy" (단기속전속결) takes into consideration the terrain of the peninsula and the capabilities of the North Korean military, in addition to a number of other strategic factors. It is designed to offset the technological superiority of South Korean forces or the ability of the United States to reinforce the ROK. This strategy utilizes the element of surprise and a simultaneous offensive in the front as well as the rear culminating in a catastrophic panic in South Korea. In this panic, North Koreans hope to seize the initiative and conduct a blitzkrieg type operation with armored, mechanized, self-propelled units to penetrate deep into South Korea. The aim is to conquer the Korean Peninsula before U.S. reinforcements arrive and mount a counter-attack.

Until the 1970s, the NKPA maintained a superior military in quantity and quality. Special emphasis was placed on the ability to strike the front and the rear at the same time. Also, the ability to strike deep and quickly and the ability to strike first were priorities. By 1980, North Korea had forward deployed 70 percent of its forces, mechanized and supported by special forces and long-range artillery. All indications pointed to the conclusion that it wanted to achieve its military goals within three months. It seems the North Koreans realized that they would be challenged to maintain this superiority and started to look at asymmetric capabilities: chemical/biological weapons and nuclear capability. By the mid-1990s, the North Koreans lost an important ally, the USSR, amid economic hardship, responding by shifting to nuclear weapons development and delivery capabilities.

North Korean military strategy can be summarized as three stratagems. First, there is a surprise attack centering on blitzkrieg thrusts in the form of a large-scale conventional attack with unconventional special forces striking the rear and bypassing strongholds. An inferior force unable to sustain a long conflict would seek to occupy Seoul at the earliest possible opportunity. Second, is the aforementioned short and decisive attack stratagem, a lightning war, where light, fast, and maneuverable units are the main actors supported by SCUD missiles, air and ground fire power, and high-speed landing craft as well as fire support vessels. North Korea possesses the capabilities for this offensive strategy. Finally, there is the mixed stratagem (배합, 配合)—a mixture of Mao Zedong's guerilla warfare and traditional Soviet military strategy. The enemy is attacked from every direction. There is to be no front line or rear area. Battles will be simultaneous and everywhere. Chaos will do the rest. The enemy's main forces will be held at the front lines by the conventional forces, while critical facilities will be destroyed by infiltrated units, and disgruntled masses in the South could revolt. Although not entirely clear, the North Koreans seem to have held to this strategy through the late 1990s.

The Evolution of the North Korean People's Army (NKPA)

More than 500,000 Chinese troops remained in North Korea after the Korean War, but it is probable that Kim Il-sung was always suspicious of foreign influence. The NKPA numbered about 280,000 in 1953. Kim believed that a strong military was the first priority. By the time the Chinese troops had withdrawn in 1958 it was rebuilt. When a military government was established in South Korea, with a strong anti-communist agenda, this was another factor in investing in the North Korean military. The rift between the PRC and USSR also made clear that North Korea could not rely on foreign allies. Thus, *juche* became the mainstream ideology. The Cuban missile crisis underscored the limits of superpower politics.

The independent execution of military operations became more attractive as the world situation changed in a direction different from what Kim Il-sung wanted, making unification of the Korean Peninsula harder. From the 1960s, North Korea created a military that was offensive and sizable. Defense spending is estimated at 10-30 percent of the national budget. North Koreans bought T54/55 tanks, MIG-21s, SA-2s, and W class submarines, far outclassing the South. The number of uniformed troops is estimated to be 480,000 with more than 2.5 million in reserve.

By 1980, North Korea had about 700,000 men in uniform, nearly doubling in a decade. At the beginning of the 1970s it possessed approximately 8,800 pieces of artillery, by 1980 this number had increased to 25,000, threatening the Greater Seoul Metropolitan Area (GSMA). By this time, North Korea had more than 13 percent of its population under arms with over two million more ready in reserve. The NKPA deployed light infantry units able to exploit penetrations made along the front as well as long-range units that would infiltrate by sea, air, and land (tunnel). The Vietnam War influenced the North on the value of a second front as well as guerilla warfare.

The NKPA steadily increased its numbers to over a million men in uniform by 1989, a critical factor in the failure of the North Korean economy, which with the complete disintegration of the international communist order created an economic crisis. All these sacrifices were in an effort to secure the ability to defeat the South Korean military and the United States without external assistance. The Gulf War must have been an eye opener—a new type of war was born: precision guided munitions. At this time, North Korea seems to have realized this new reality and accelerated its nuclear and missile programs and started on cyber capabilities as well as maintaining its chemical and biological capabilities.

Kim Jong-il probably recognized that North Korea was incapable of reunifying the peninsula by force through a traditional conventional attack due to factors such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, natural disasters, famine, and industrial collapse. However, the regime's ideology, and its basis for legitimacy, could not abide an admission that it was militarily weaker than the ROK, let alone that it could not reunify Korea by force. One of the regime's imperatives is to project strength internally to ensure elite cohesion and public compliance. The regime embarked on a new military strategy meant to be asymmetric in nature and to enable North Korea to use its military in a variety of ways, including deterrence, coercive diplomacy, and the conduct of limited objective attacks. The capabilities at the foundation of this strategy include nuclear, biological, chemical weapons, ballistic missiles, cyber-warfare, special operations forces, long-range artillery, and submarines.

Nuclear

Kim Jong-il invested in a nuclear program to weaponize nuclear technology that was provided with the understanding of peaceful use. North Korea started its nuclear interest just one year after the Korean War in 1954 by establishing the Nuclear Defense Section (핵무기방위부문). In 1956, North Korea dispatched thirty nuclear physicists to a Soviet Union research center. In September of 1959, the Chosen-USSR Atomic Agreement was signed, and in 1962 a research reactor was built in Yongbyeon. By the mid-1960s, North Korean officials started to publicly mention a desire to become a nuclear weapons state. Kim Il-sung stated “We will soon have nuclear weapons” In 1967, he told his commanders that “we will soon have nuclear weapons.¹ If the US uses atomic weapons we will use them too.”²

Missiles

The North Koreans first laid their hands on SCUD B rockets from Egypt in 1976.³ They soon improved the SCUD B to the C and D model. The SCUD D had a range of seven kilometers and was referred to as the NoDong (refers to the village of the first sighting) missile. By 2006, the NoDong Extended Range (ER) had an estimated range of 850 km. Further improvements have made the NoDong a missile with a range of 1300-1500 km, which easily reaches Japan.

The KN-02 is a tactical missile with a suspected range of 150 km and is the least appreciated but most threatening for tactical units. The HwaSong series includes the HS-6 (500 km), HS-12 (4500 km), HS-13 (8000 km), and HS-14 with a range of more than 10,000 km capable of reaching the continental United States. The MuSuDan (BM-25) is based on the Soviet SS-N-6 missile with an estimated 4,000 km range, which could reach Guam.

North Korean missiles are diverse and mobile. The more than one hundred mobile launchers or Transportation Erector Launchers (TEL), provide North Korea with an offensive capability that will be very difficult to completely overcome. In 2017 alone, North Korea tested more than fifteen missiles. Although it has declared that it has the capability to strike the continental United States, it is still unlikely that North Korea has the accuracy or the re-entry capability for an intercontinental strike. Despite this, there should be no question that its SCUDs and short-range tactical missiles have chemical and possibly biological capability that can threaten not only Koreans and Japanese populations but also the many international citizens in these countries.

Finally, North Korea is developing a submarine-launched missile capability. The KN-11 is a submarine-launched missile with an estimated range of 1200 km. Although North Korea seems to lack a credible number of missile launch submarines, it is no doubt a formidable threat on an international scale.

Cyber

Kim Jong-un started 2018 proclaiming that North Korea had perfected its nuclear capability. By accepting the invitation to the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, he has presented himself as a peacemaker with many people forgetting why we are in this crisis. He agreed to a combined North-South team and sent an art group and cheerleaders to Korea as well as his trusted sister to represent him at the games. He then offered a North-South summit and

received a Korean delegation on March 5, 2018. The North Korean military has been quiet. Another form of offensive is on the way, and it is expected that the North Korean military will support this new strategy of “peace.”

Military Strategy in 2018

The North Korean basic strategy of *juche* will not change in 2018. The goal for the North Korean military will not change: the unification of the Korean Peninsula. Militarily, the First Strike with No Notice Strategy, Short/ Decisive Attack Strategy and Mixed Strategy (배합, 配合) will remain but with lesser priority. An estimate of what the priorities might be for each North Korean military service follows.

Ground Forces

The NKPA has been maintaining its large land forces and in fact increased the term of service and drafts women to maintain its million-man level of troops. Although large-scale training maneuvers are limited due to a shortage of fuel, rigorous education/indoctrination of troops continues. Absolute obedience and loyalty to Kim Jong-un is the prime message of the brainwashing. A large part of the military engages in physical labor, and corruption is widespread, but still mutual surveillance and political officers who are at the top of the food chain make mutiny unlikely. Shortages in basics such as food suggest that training must be limited and very rudimentary. The long years in the military have merits of their own. The average North Korean enters service at the age of seventeen and serves for ten to thirteen years. Large-scale exercises are probably difficult, but the North Koreans concentrate their limited resources on the Special Units, Light Infantry, and Sniper Units. Training and equipment are probably dedicated to these units. Military parades show that these units have modern body armor, night vision goggles, secondary weapons, etc.

Along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), provocations will be unlikely. Most efforts will go to preventing North Korean soldiers and civilians from defecting across the DMZ. These efforts will include increased patrols, more land mines, and increased check points. Developing and improving artillery capability will continue but discreetly. North Korean air defense is a subject that is not often discussed but the KN-06 is a good example of investing in the area. In all North Korean parades, one can observe an array of man portable air defense systems (Manpads) on all vehicles. Training for reserve units will probably continue, but little is expected since limited resources prohibit North Korea from any serious maneuver activity.

Maritime and Air Forces

North Korea has been improving its shipborne missile capability, and it seems that they will use this lull to improve and complete the on-going projects. It would be no surprise if the North Koreans unveil a new or improved submarine capable of ballistic missile launch capability. Another area is Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM) capability. ASBMs are a serious threat to surface combatants, especially if they have nuclear capability. Since the North Koreans believe that causing mass casualties of Americans will deter further U.S. involvement on the Korean Peninsula, an attempt to sink a U.S. carrier has always been a goal. ASBMs are the best chance to achieve this goal, and North Korea will continue to develop this capability.

The North Korean Air Force (NKAF) boasts a large fleet of aircraft. Due to lack of fuel and spare parts, it relies on primitive flight simulations for training. There is no question as to the outcome in the air if there should be a conflict, but the large numbers of antiquated aircraft suggest suicide types of missions being planned. They would cause the expenditure of valuable surface to air assets and could result in considerable damage.

Conclusion

The intent of the DPRK has been clear: 1) to create a fait accompli for DPRK nuclear weapons; 2) to create seams in the ROK-U.S. alliance by portraying the United States as the aggressor; and 3) to gain time in the hope to improve its nuclear and missile capability. Only time will tell if Kim Jong-un's diplomatic outreach in 2018 represents a break from this longstanding strategy.

Endnotes

¹ 이기택, *한반도 통일과 국제정치*, (Seoul: Samyongsha, 1991).

² Ibid.

³ Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., "A History of Ballistic Missile Development in the DPRK," CNS Occasional Paper No. 2, Center for Non-Proliferation Studies, The Monterey Institute, 1999, <https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/op2.pdf>.