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Is North Korea a Paper Tiger?

By Bruce Bechtol

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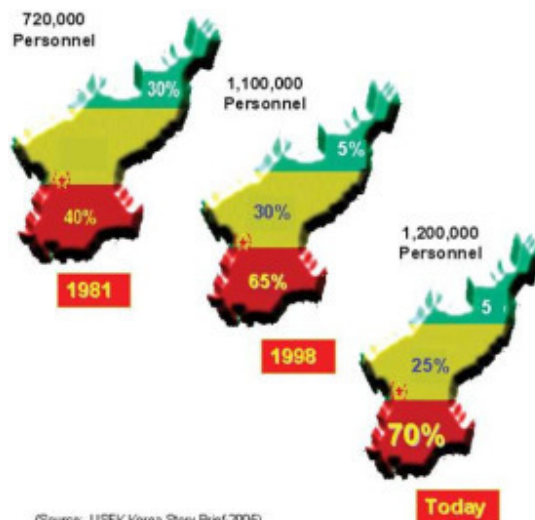
If so, it's one with a bit more roar than you think.

Following North Korea's latest spate of brinkmanship -- including everything from nuclear and missile tests to bombastic rhetoric -- one cannot help but wonder how worried we should be. Suddenly, military confrontation or worse, full-scale conflict on the Korean Peninsula, looks less like a far-off nightmare and more like an impending threat. If it happened, what kind of punches could North Korea throw?

Many assume that the country's military -- like its people -- has been starved by the regime's isolation. But the opposite is true: The key reason why the populace is so short on resources (particularly fuel and food) is because the majority of these have been routed directly to troops. As easy as it seems to dismiss the starved country and its sickly leader, North Korea's conventional military has adjusted to dire economic times and is far more capable than many analysts realize. Pyongyang's armed forces, not just its nukes, could wreak havoc on the region.

There are two aspects of today's North Korean military that warrant a careful look. The first is the near two-decades-old build up of North Korea's asymmetric forces (in this case, forces that carry out unconventional missions). The second matter is reorganization -- much of which has resulted in a significant portion of the conventional forces being moved closer to the demilitarized zone (DMZ) such that they are perpetually poised to attack the South.

North Korea has three types of asymmetric forces poised to attack South Korea, organized into long-range artillery units, short-range ballistic missile units (SRBMs), and Special Operations Forces. In the first case, Pyongyang's long-range artillery includes indigenously produced versions of Soviet 240-mm multiple rocket launchers and 170-mm guns. The country has significantly beefed up the numbers of both weapons systems along the DMZ since the late



(Source: USFK Korea Story Brief-2005)

USFK Story Brief, 2005

Red menace: In recent years, Pyongyang has deployed ever more troops to the border with South Korea.

1990s. And because the systems have ranges of 40,000 meters or more, this means that at least 250 of them are now positioned in range of Seoul. They could target the South Korean capital and surrounding areas in Kyonggi province on a moment's notice. And to exacerbate the threat, between 5 and 20 percent of the systems are thought to be equipped with chemical munitions.

All this means that the potential damage from artillery alone, according to estimates from both South Korean and U.S. Defense officials, could reach 200,000 casualties -- and that's just on the first day of an attack. If war broke out, North Korea's artillery could shell Seoul, South Korea's political, commercial, and cultural center, back to the 1980s in a matter of hours.



North Korean Country Handbook, U.S. Department of Defense, May 1997

Short-range ballistic missiles are the second asymmetric component of North Korea's arsenal. Since the 1990s, Pyongyang has worked to enhance its ballistic missile capability in numbers, command and control, and doctrine. The North Koreans now possess 200 No Dong missiles and more than 600 SCUDs, the latter with ranges between 300 and 850 km -- enough to target literally every inch of the South Korean landmass. North Korea has also added the SS-21 system, an old Soviet platform, to its missile arsenal. Known as the KN-02, this indigenously produced version of the SS-21 uses solid fuel and can be moved very quickly. With a range of at least 120 km and greater accuracy than most other missiles, it could easily target U.S. bases south of Seoul.

These first two components -- artillery and missile -- would be used in tandem if an attack took place, thanks to a reorganization of North Korea's military during the late 1990s. Both types of forces are now commanded by artillery officers, who would (in accordance with their training doctrine) consider missile systems to simply be artillery systems with a longer range and would target them accordingly. In an attack, many of North Korea's artillery systems might aim for Seoul and much of the surrounding province, while simultaneous missile attacks hit every key node in South Korea.

The path to invasion: If North Korea struck the South, its troops might enter in here.

North Korean SOFs are probably among the best-trained, best fed, and most motivated of all the forces in their military. They routinely undergo intense training that includes carrying 50 pounds of sand for 10 km in one hour, hiking in extreme cold weather, martial arts methodologies that include fighting with three to 15 opponents, and even using spoons and forks as weapons. Troops also engage in intense marksmanship training and even daily knife-throwing training. They can attack quickly, reaching key nodes in South Korea by aircraft, through tunnels in the DMZ, or even by maritime vessel.

As for North Korea's Special Operations Forces (SOFs), South Korean estimates now place their numbers at as many as 180,000 men.

The combined use of North Korea's asymmetric forces would almost certainly incite panic during any attack on the South. In the confusion, it is possible that enough cracks might open in South Korea's and the United States' defenses to allow Northern maneuver forces (infantry, armor, and mechanized forces) to move forward and take ground. (It is no coincidence that, over the past 15 years, North Korea has moved many of its conventional forces to forward positions -- often near invasion corridors along the border.) Put all this together, and an attack would inflict casualties to the tune of hundreds of thousands -- the majority of them civilian and many in Seoul.

Despite the primitive state of many of North Korea's systems compared with those of the United States and South Korea, Pyongyang's ability to make creative use of its limited resources is indeed alarming. The world would do well to look beyond just the nukes.

Bruce Bechtol is professor of international relations at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College and author of Red Rogue: The Persistent Challenge of North Korea.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, the Marine Corps University, or the U.S. government.

