

THREAT PERCEPTION OF NORTH KOREANS AND ASYMMETRIC CAPABILITIES

■ Assessment of the Military Balance

Analyses on the security of Korea have been focused on the aggressive military policy, military balance, and arms race, including the nuclear weapons program of North Korea. The Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) armament has been justified as an effort to catch up with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea). The external causation of the arms race explanation has been the official rationale of the South. On the other hand, armament of the North has been explained by internal factors: the aggressiveness of the regime, with its unending ambition to unify Korea under Communism, or pressures from the military.

As late as 2004, South Korea had maintained that the North enjoyed military superiority, owing to its earlier defense industrialization and much heavier defense burden(1). The "myth" of the North Korean military threat continues even though the regime has been in a constant economic crisis ever since the early 1990s. It is the product of a "propaganda debate, conducted mainly in the media" rather than "the real debate among serious analysts, conducted largely in scholarly publications."(2) In spite of the military modernization of the South or the superior ROK-US war-fighting capability, it is maintained that North Korea still enjoys superiority thanks to its cheap weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The myth was further reinforced by Pyongyang's de facto declaration of being a nuclear power on February 10, 2005. For many, North Korean military superiority and threat is a constant.

Be that as it may, North Korea is definitely over-armed beyond its resource base, both demographically and economically. Its gross domestic product is less than the military spending of the South. If we accept bean counts or firepower scores as measurements of military capability, Russia today should be still respected as a superpower. However, it is China, with its economic potential, that the United States sees as its future rival. North Korea cannot effectively operate and maintain its obsolete/obsolescent weapons and large number of troops with its weak logistic infrastructure. More importantly, Pyongyang is simply unable to carry out a large or extended campaign with its almost bankrupt economy. The so-called "bean-counts" or the derivative weapon/firepower scores do not fully represent the capabilities. The force multipliers for the quality of manpower and weapons, organizational effectiveness, C4I and other information capability, and finally the logistics that determines the stock of firepower should be included. Third, capital stock is the best single measure of military capability as it represents the financial inputs for human, material and organizational components. Contrary to the widely held myth (and the official/mainstream position), comparisons of military capital stock utilizing more accurate data and methods reveal that the South has been superior to the North since the mid-1980s(3). The ROK could have achieved better bean counting ratios if it had opted for less expensive weapon systems that could still match or outperform those of the North.

Dynamic analyses also show the advantage of the South. The forward deployment of the KPA may not be a good indicator of aggressiveness. The ROK Army is more forward deployed -- the entire 21 active Army divisions, one Marine division and the U.S. 2nd Division have been forward deployed to defend Seoul. Pessimists who really believe in the KPA blitzkrieg do not seem to draw lessons from the Korean War. A successful KPA surprise attack is highly unlikely, considering the readiness of the ROK-U.S. forces and their early warning capabilities. The terrain definitely favors the area defense oriented around key positions; and the decisive military arm is most likely to be the infantry backed by the artillery. Even the Pentagon admits that South Korea would appear to enjoy "outright superiority" in static indices of firepower scores once the effects of superior training, equipment maintenance, logistics, C4I, and the advantage of fighting from defensive positions are factored in(4). Likewise, war games utilizing dynamic models such as the basic Lanchester "square law" simultaneous equations, Kugler--Posen "attrition-FEBA expansion model," or Apstein "adaptive dynamic model" show that the ROK can defend itself(5). The more one moves away from simple bean counts, the more powerful the ROK conventional war-fighting capability becomes. Some pessimistic scenarios of complex war games conducted by the ROK military, such as the Joint Integrated Combat Model (JICM) of the Rand, predict the fall of Seoul within 10-14 days of all-out North Korean attack. Yet they are the worst-case scenarios that include two least probable assumptions: a successful KPA surprise attack and the widespread use of chemical weapons(6). Likewise, North Korean chemical warfare capability, its intentions, and probability are quite overrated. The threat of its long-range artillery that can hit Seoul is also overrated.

■ Arms Race and North Koreans' Threat Perception

The arms model has an intrinsic appeal especially in the Korean case. An arms race does not have to be a symmetric "annual tit-for-tat" modeled in the Richardson simultaneous equation. The last five decades after the Korean War have witnessed the prolonged arms race between the two divided states: simultaneous race, diachronic seesaw games, status quo, and unilateral buildups. It is North Korea that triggered the indigenous arms buildups under the banner of self-reliant defense -- in the early 1960s -- but South Korea has been successful in catching up. Its prospering economy allowed increasingly larger defense spending since the mid-1970s. Faced with the energetic military modernization of the South, the North has tried since the late 1970s to maintain a balance by its own race: the labor-intensive approach and the asymmetric arms race. It adopted the labor-intensive buildup in the 1980s. Its manpower has more than doubled since the mid-1970s. Especially, the KPA has increased the more economical but effective light infantry and special forces (sniper, airborne, and reconnaissance) totaling 88,000 men in 22-25 brigades(7). Faced with the ROK-U.S. conventional superiority in the 1990s, an asymmetric force approach that includes WMD and missiles has been adopted.

There has been much talk on the perception of threat from North Korea. The one-sided South Korean

conventional arms modernization in the 1990s and 2000s may have been an effort to offset what it has perceived to be a major force imbalance. However, "North Korea's threat perception" should be equally dealt with. In fact, North Korea has been threatened with U.S. nuclear retaliation since at least 1955, while neither Moscow nor Beijing has officially confirmed a nuclear umbrella for Pyongyang. The most probable future war scenario on the peninsula is not a surprise attack by the North but the U.S. preemptive attack on nuclear facilities in Youngbyon followed by retaliatory attacks by North Korea.

The drama of North Korea's nuclear weapons program and Nodong and Daepodong missiles reflect the weakness, not strength, of the self-acclaimed "powerful socialist nation."⁽⁸⁾ In the late 1980s, the collapse of the actually existing (or existed) socialist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe reinforced North Korea's already deep-rooted "siege mentality." The dramatic economic growth, democratization and aggressive Nordpolitik of the South further accelerated Pyongyang's fear of the danger of being isolated. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall, North Korean media began to criticize the alleged "unification by absorption" policy of the South. The Gulf War demonstrated many weaknesses in the Soviet-type weapon systems, while South Koreans continued to build up its capabilities with more sophisticated equipment. To make matters worse, Moscow and Beijing established diplomatic relations with the ROK without the "cross-recognition" of the DPRK by the U.S. or Japan. The two former socialist allies cut their already shrinking aid to Pyongyang and demanded hard currency payments at market prices in bilateral trade.

The ailing North Korean economy, which had shown virtually no growth in the 1980s, was badly hit. Pyongyang officially reported the failure of its Third Seven-Year Plan (1987-93). During the 1990s, its economy showed continuous negative growth. The government budget and national income (or GDP) in the late 1990s declined to less than one half of those of the early 1990s, even in nominal terms. The North had neither internal resources nor foreign aid for its economic recovery. The sudden death of the "Great Leader" in July 1994 further raised the challenge of leadership succession. Political and economic troubles of the North reached such an extent that its government budget, usually announced in April by the Supreme People's Assembly, was not announced from 1995 to 1998. Again, the state budget was not announced in 2003 and 2004 except the vague expression of percentage of annual growth. The so-called "military first policy" declared in 1998 implies that the authority and role of the civilian sector of the Korean Workers' Party has been considerably weakened. In the midst of the crisis that threatened its very survival, North Korean leaders could not attempt serious reform or an open door policy. The July 1 economic reform measures in 2002, including elements of consumer markets, material incentives, and price liberalization, have not produced substantial growth or prospect for major change.

■ Nuclear Program: The Bomb and Bargaining Chip

Faced with the unprecedented crisis, Pyongyang pursued its nuclear option in the 1990s. The nuclear

project might have appeared as a 'two birds with one stone' attempt to solve its energy shortage and to gain a great leap forward in the arms race against the ROK-U.S. allies. The North Koreans had reportedly approached Moscow for their own nuclear bomb project as early as 1963. Ever since U.S. satellites found that Pyongyang was building a larger reactor and the so-called "radioactive laboratory" (a plutonium reprocessing plant) at the Youngbyon site in the late 1980s, the North Korean nuclear program had "replaced MIGs, forward deployment, commandos, tunnels, dams, and the million-man army as the number one concern."⁽⁹⁾ The reprocessing plant, if completed, could reprocess enough plutonium (from the spent fuel of the larger reactor) to fabricate several bombs a year. Worse still, North Korea has been suspected of reprocessing enough plutonium to fabricate 1-6 bombs from the spent fuel of its small, gas-cooled graphite reactor.

During the nuclear crisis, the two Koreas and the U.S. made threats and counter-threats. In April 1991, the ROK Minister of National Defense Lee Jong-Koo suggested that an "Entebbe-style" preemptive strike (or an Osirak-style air raid) could be an option for Seoul. In the climax of the nuclear crisis in June 1994, the Clinton administration almost decided to carry out a military option⁽¹⁰⁾. It is in this period that the ROK-U.S. AirLand Battle scenario, the OPLAN 5027, was disclosed to the public. The plan called not only for counterattacks but also the virtual elimination of the North Korean state itself. Being who they are, North Koreans responded with a counter-threat: if a war breaks out, "Seoul would become a sea of fire."

Although it may not have pursued the nuclear program as a "bargaining chip," North Koreans soon recognized the utility of their own version of "neither confirm nor denial" policy. The North Korean brinkmanship diplomacy finally produced with the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework in 1994. However, both Washington and Pyongyang violated the framework in the second North Korean nuclear crisis since the Kelly visit to Pyongyang in October 2002. For Pyongyang, President George W. Bush, Jr. and his associates appeared to demand surrender, not a negotiation. The unilateral foreign policy approach of the Bush administration, the declaration of preemptive attacks on states armed with WMD and terrorists, the desire to bring about regime change/transformation in Pyongyang, and such remarks as "Axis of Evil" or "outpost of tyranny" have strongly reinforced North Koreans' desire to develop nuclear weapons for the survival of the state and regime⁽¹¹⁾. It is highly probable that North Korea is simultaneously pursuing the two options, namely, nuclear weapons and a bargaining chip. The U.S. accusation of the existence secret highly enriched uranium (HEU; recently, just uranium enrichment) program has yet to be validated⁽¹²⁾. North Koreans may have a pilot enrichment project, but their skill or infrastructure to produce the Hiroshima-type uranium bomb is quite limited. However, the plutonium is a more serious case. Unlike the previous informal claims that it has nuclear weapons in 2003 and 2004, the de fact declaration of being a nuclear power by the DPRK Foreign Ministry on February 2005 is too serious to interpret as another "brinkmanship tactic" of Pyongyang. However, it is highly unlikely that North Korea would use the bomb in a war against the South or the Allies. They may be too big to be delivered by missiles or light bombers, too unreliable, or too few to be risked. The use of any nuclear weapon would lead to retaliatory nuclear attacks by the United States. They are

weapons of deterrence as well as desperation.

■ Missiles and Chemical Weapons

North Korea also developed modified Scud SSMs and the Nodong I, an extended-range version of the Scud, through reverse engineering. As was the case with the nuclear program, the missile development was a dual-purpose program. North Korea exported missiles in earnest to Middle East states. The Kumchang-ri incident and missile talks indicate North Korean efforts to achieve limited political and economic objectives as well as military gains. The missile launch and the declaration of the "strong and prosperous power" had domestic motives as well: to encourage the depressed people and augment legitimacy of the regime. Kim Jong Il consolidated his leadership as the Chairman of the National Defense Commission as well as the General Secretary of the Party in the fall of 1998. However, the Daepodong missile, a multi-stage rocket that flew over Japan in 1998, demonstrated a symbolic threat to Japan and the United States and brought Washington back to the conference table. Contrary to the widespread fear of the ballistic missiles in the South, they are too inaccurate (with a CEP of 1-3 KM) to use against military targets - it would take dozens, if not hundreds, of these missiles to deactivate a South Korean air base. Yet North Koreans have been trying to extend the range of its ballistic missiles at the expense of accuracy(13). As the German V-1 and V-2 were called "vengeance weapons," North Korea's ballistic missiles are terror weapons against civilian targets - an excellent deterrence weapon against the South.

North Korea has been also accused of stockpiling thousands of tons of chemical weapons, the "poor man's atomic bomb." The MND has maintained since the late 1980s that North Korea has not only first-generation chemical agents such as phosgene and mustard gas but also various blister, nerve, blood, choking and tear gas. However, Washington tends to believe that there may be limits on the North's production capacity(14). Both Seoul and Washington have yet to identify the types of chemical ammunition, means of delivery, and the units assigned to offensive chemical warfare. There are also strategic, tactical, and technical constraints on the KPA chemical warfare capability. It is technically challenging to deliver and effectively disperse chemical agents using missiles. Chemical attacks by the frontline artillery units would be quite limited for fear of the counter-battery fire on their chemical rounds stockpiles and the hazard to their attacking ground troops. Chemical attacks on strategic targets would reduce the war-fighting capability of the South by delaying the reinforcements and supplies, but they would not change the basic capability imbalance. The frontline KPA long-range artillery threats to Seoul are considerable, but considering the ROK-US countermeasures, the number of the 170-mm SP guns and large-caliber multiple rocket launchers (MRLs) and their total rounds that may be fired are quite overrated. A widespread use of chemical rounds against Seoul would bring about international damnation and probably nuclear attacks by Washington. Like nuclear bombs, chemical weapons are of weapons desperation(15).

■ Conclusion

Today, there exists an asymmetric balance between the two Koreas in spite of the ROK superiority in military capital stock. It is a balance between the ROK(-U.S.) superiority in war-fighting capabilities against low cost DPRK deterrents. The North possesses both conventional deterrents, hundreds of long-range artillery that can damage Seoul as well as non-conventional deterrents, the alleged WMD capability. It has become next to impossible that the North can occupy Seoul in a surprise attack. Yet the psychological and political impact of the uncertainty about the threats posed by long-range artillery and missiles attacks on the fragile, accident-prone metropolis and its 11 million inhabitants is and will remain a strong deterrent. Against the increasing military threats from Washington, North Korea will keep Seoul as hostage.

To conclude, neither the North nor the South can buy more security through an arms race, as there exists a balance of threat or asymmetric balance. As the limitations and danger of the "porcupine strategy" of the North attests, the "law of diminishing returns" applies to military investment by the two Koreas(16). Furthermore, a future Korea, unified or not, should avoid the counterproductive or almost suicidal arms race against any major power in East Asia: China, Japan, Russia, or the United States. The current North Korean nuclear crisis requires that the two Koreas and the major powers should pursue "common security" through economic cooperation as well as arms control and disarmament in the region. Since such premature demand for arms control/reduction as the complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement (CVID) approach would more often than not be counterproductive, amplifying the perception of insecurity by North Koreans, a functional approach economic cooperation and social exchanges would be more productive. / Taik-young HAMM (Vice Director, IFES)

NOTES

1. See, for instance, ROK Ministry of National Defense, Defense White Paper, annual editions since the first publication in 1988.
2. Quoted from, John J. Mearscheimer, "Correspondence: Reassessing Net Assessment," International Security, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1989), p. 128.
3. Taik-young Hamm, Arming the Two Koreas: State, Capital and Military Power (London: Routledge, 1999); "Military Capability of North and South Korea," Korean Journal of International Relations (in Korean), Vol. 37, No. 1 (1997), pp. 27-60.
4. GlobalSecurity.org, "OPLAN 5027 Major Theater War - West: Phase 2 - ROK Defense," <http://globalsecurity.org/military/ops/oplan-5027-2.htm>.
5. Michael O'Hanlon, "Stopping a North Korean Invasion: Why Defending South Korea Is Easier than the Pentagon Thinks," International Security, vol. 22, no. 4 (1998), pp. 155-61; Nick Beldecos and Eric Heginbotham, "The Conventional Military Balance in Korea," Breakthroughs, Spring, 1995, pp. 1-8; Jae-Jung Suh, "Blitzkrieg or Sitzkrieg: Assessing a Second Korean War," Pacifica Review, Vol.

12, No. 2 (1999), pp. 151-76.

6. Hankook Ilbo, October 5, 2004. Cf. Taik-young Hamm, "North Korea's Military Capability and Military Threats Revisited," North Korean Studies Review (in Korean), Vol. 7, No. 3 (2005), pp. 69, 72.

7. The Military Balance 2004-2005, p. 178. Cf. Joseph Bermudez, Jr., North Korean Special Forces, 2nd ed. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998). However, their capability, with the exception of surprise, is lower than expected due to limited firepower, logistics, and means of transportation/infiltration. Also, the number is overrated: for instance, the 25,000 men strong ROK Marines, equivalents to the KPA navy sniper brigades, are not counted as special forces. Basically, their mission is to support the regular troops. DIA, North Korea: The Foundations for Military Strength - Update 1975, pp. 21-22.

8. Taik-young Hamm, "North-South Korean Reconciliation and the Security on the Korean Peninsula," Asian Perspective, Vol. 25, No.2 (2001), pp. 140-43.

9. Stephen D. Goose, "The Comparative Military Capabilities of North Korean and South Korean Forces," in Doug Bandow and Ted Nolan Carpenter, eds., The U.S.-South Korean Alliance: Time for a Change (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1992), p. 55.

10. Don Oberdorfer, The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1997), pp. 323-330.

11. Cf. Chung-In Moon and Jong-Yun Bae, "The Bush Doctrine and the North Korean Nuclear Crisis," Asian Perspective, Vol. 27, No.4 (2003), pp. 18-33.

12. Selig Harrison, "Did North Korea Cheat?" Foreign Affairs, January/February 2005, pp. 99-109.

13. Jae-Jung Suh, "Assessing the Military Balance in Korea," Asian Perspective, Vol. 28, No.4 (2004), pp.73-76.

14. IISS, North Korea's Weapons Programmes: A Net Assessment (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 53-54.

15. O'Hanlon, "Stopping a North Korean Invasion," p. 162.

16. Hamm, Arming the Two Koreas: State, Capital and Military Power, p. 166.

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