

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. It offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics connected with politics, economy, international relations, and security and defense.

Military Confrontation on the Korean Peninsula

by Dr. Kongdan Oh

The two Koreas have suffered through a long history of military confrontation, and there is little reason to expect that relations will improve in the near future. Over the last few years both Koreas have strengthened their armed forces, and thanks to the 2010 North Korean attacks in the West Sea, this military buildup is likely to continue in the years ahead.

States in Confrontation

Confrontation is defined here as two states opposing each other in an explicit manner. Confrontation can be political, social, economic, or military in nature. There can be no doubt that South and North Korea have confronted each other since almost as soon as the peninsula was divided. Although I am going to focus on military confrontation, the core issue is really political confrontation, reinforced by social and economic differences. What this means is that military confrontation will continue until the two Koreas have found a way to eliminate the oppositional aspects of their political systems; and even if that should happen, relations will remain rocky as long as their social and economic systems are incompatible.

The essence of political confrontation is that both Korean governments claim jurisdiction over the entire peninsula. The South Korean government has granted citizenship to all North Koreans, and the North Korean government considers the government of South Korea to be an illegitimate American puppet regime. Economic confrontation has its roots in the incompatibility of centrally-managed socialism in the North and loosely-managed capitalism in the South. The many aspects of social confrontation include dramatic differences in individual freedoms and the role of law in organizing and guiding society.

The military confrontation is most visible in the face-off of forces, for example, along the DMZ, with Panmunjom being the closest point of contact between the two forces. The NLL is a less visible border, and perhaps for that reason, a place where more active confrontation can take place. The North Korean media insist that South Korea (and the United States and Japan) are in the final stages of preparing an attack. The ROK government's designates the DPRK government and military as an "enemy" (and formerly, the "main enemy").

When states confront each other, they are not necessarily fighting. In fact, most of the time confrontation is passive, with the military forces providing the resources for any outbreak of fighting. It could even be argued that as long as two armies openly face each other, a kind of balance exists in that the respective forces are deployed in such a way that any attack will be met by a successful counterattack.

If the ultimate goal of military confrontation on the Korean peninsula were total victory over the other side while keeping one's own losses within reason, war would be unthinkable. Unfortunately, even if a full-scale attack is unthinkable (as was the case during the Cold War US-USSR confrontation), it is always possible that small military skirmishes could escalate into the unthinkable war that neither side wants.

Forces standing at the ready can provide states with benefits apart from serving as a deterrence against attack. Although keeping a large military force drains the civilian economy, it does benefit certain sectors of the economy. Moreover, political leaders who are strong on defense in peacetime or war almost always gain in popularity. And in a controlled society like North Korea's, the public belief that the country is on the brink of war (as the North Koreans have been told for decades) helps rally the people to their government and distracts them from their difficult lives. North Korea even uses its confrontation with South Korea to get attention from other countries that desire peace and stability in the region.

When Military Forces Are Not Balanced

One danger of military confrontation is that a lack of balance or symmetry in military forces or policy can lead one state or the other to believe that it holds some military advantage that could be exploited by an attack. A comparison of the two Koreas reveals numerous asymmetries.

Nuclear Weapons. The North now has a few small nuclear weapons, which it repeatedly threatens to employ in an all-out war. The South does not have nuclear weapons, but does shelter under the US nuclear umbrella, which has thousands of such weapons. One would hope that North Korea would see the nuclear balance as decidedly in South Korea's favor. But that is not the entire story. The North can decide when and if it wants to use nuclear weapons; the South cannot. Moreover, the leaders of North Korea, especially top military officers, are probably less concerned about the consequences of using nuclear weapons than are the Americans.

Conventional Forces. Conventional forces are unbalanced in terms of type, quantity, and quality. US forces available to assist South Korean forces further complicate any calculations about balance. The following are estimates.

South Korea has fewer soldiers (687,000) than does North Korea (estimated at 1.1 million), and fewer tanks (2,700 vs. 3,500), artillery pieces (5,000 vs. 10,000+), and combat aircraft (555 vs. 590). South Korea also has fewer submarines (12 vs. 63) and fewer ships (350 vs. 130), but it has more large ships (44 vs. 8). In terms of quality and training, in all weapons systems (except small coastal combat boats) South Korea holds a decided advantage.

How the two forces would fare in various kinds of battles is difficult to say, but in a sustained conflict, especially with the support of US forces, most observers outside of North Korea believe the South would ultimately destroy Northern forces, starting with the North Korean air force (if it chose to fight). What is important to consider when estimating the likelihood of a North Korean attack is whether the North Korean leaders actually believe that their forces would ultimately be defeated, and whether their outcome calculations are based on events in a major conflict or in a limited engagement scenario.

Special Forces. North Korea's special forces are believed to number about 200,000, compared to less than 20,000 South Korean special forces. The role of DPRK forces will be to open a front inside South Korea, bypassing the conventional defense lines. Taking these forces into consideration, it becomes even more difficult to predict the short-term effect of South Korea's superior conventional forces, although in the long-term, South Korean-US forces would almost surely prevail. Special forces can disrupt but not defeat the South Korean forces. Thus even if they expect that their forces will be bested by South Korean conventional forces, the North Koreans may believe they hold a short-term advantage if they use their special forces to strike quickly and then negotiate for a cease-fire before being hit by the superior South Korean-US conventional forces.

Force Mobility. North Korean forces are dug in, often in mountainous terrain. Except for the mobility of the forward-based forces that would try to penetrate South Korean defenses, the North Koreans would have to rely on fighting in place in a defensive posture. South Korean forces are more mobile, especially considering that they would enjoy air superiority, but in the initial phases of South Korea's combat frontline forces would be relatively vulnerable to North Korea's artillery, and all forces might be vulnerable to North Korea's special forces.

Military Policy. North Korea is a country on the edge of war. The North Korean leaders seem to truly believe they are in danger of being attacked. Given the likelihood that they would lose a lengthy war, their military policy is offensive in nature, stressing the need to attack a potential aggressor before coming under attack. This preoccupation with preemption adds an important destabilizing element to the balance of forces on the peninsula. The North Korean media have also boasted that their army and people will fight to the death, adding a dangerous suicidal note to North Korean threats.

Value of Targets. South Korea is filled with high-value targets that are fully exposed, the best case being Seoul, which is within range of North Korean artillery. In this sense the superiority of South Korea's economy counts as a military disadvantage in war because the South Koreans would lose much greater value in the early days of fighting. Hence the repeated North Korean threats to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire." North Korean cities are smaller, and both military and civilian facilities are in sad need of repair anyway. A good example would be North Korea's largest building – the unfinished Ryugyong Hotel – whose destruction would be an absolute boon to the North Koreans, saving them the cost of tearing it down.

Value of People. The value of individual lives is discounted in a dictatorship like North Korea's. Decisions about war and peace, like everything else, are made by the leaders as they consider what will benefit them. The Kim regime might be willing to lose millions of its people if it felt it could improve its own standing. A South Korean government decision that proved costly to the people would be immediately followed by a repudiation of the government and punishment of its leaders. Not so in North Korea. Witness how Kim Il-sung survived his disastrous decision to launch the Korean War.

Military Alliances. The two Koreas have very different military alliances. The ROK-US alliance is solid, and from the beginning of any military exchange, the U.S. forces would likely play an important role. The relationship that the DPRK has with China is not a military alliance, and the North Koreans probably do not count on the Chinese coming in on their side again. This lack of support dramatically influences their wartime options, forcing them to launch a strong first strike and then hunker down and hope that the Chinese can convince the Americans and South Koreans to abandon their counterattack.

Decision Making. The way the two Koreas make military decisions is likely to be different. In the South the civilian leadership would make the final decisions about war-fighting (in conjunction with decisions by American civilian and military authorities in wartime). In North Korea, the top members of the Kim regime would make the initial decisions without being accountable to anyone. However, after the first days of the war, by which time the North's communication links might be cut, combat would probably be directed by military officers at lower levels. These people would be less likely to take a strategic view of war and less likely to be concerned about international opinion.

Satisfaction with the Status Quo. South Koreans are doing well and want only to be able to live in peace and continue to pursue prosperity. North Korea is by nature a revolutionary country: neither the leaders nor the masses can be satisfied with the status quo. The regime has frequently told its people that reunification must be accomplished to fulfill the behest of Kim Il-sung, and the soldiers have been told that "A war is the inevitable way to accomplish a historic reunification." North Korea tried this once and failed. Perhaps such slogans are simply meant to boost morale. In any case, most military provocations come from the North rather than the South, so North Korea is the state that will decide when and if future military confrontations will take place.

When Military Confrontation Becomes Military Action

Although it has been almost sixty years since the Korean War ended, the Korean peninsula has witnessed hundreds of smaller military actions, the majority initiated by the North. As a sample, consider the following, in declining order of seriousness:

- Open attacks: by North Korean airplanes against ROK or US airplanes or ships (1965; 1968, 1969, 1999, 2002, 2003); torpedoing of the Cheonan (2010), artillery attack on Yeonpyeong, 2010)
- Commando raids: against the Blue House (1968); on the east and west coasts (1968, 1969, 1975, 1980, 1981, 1985)
- Submarine incursions: 1996, 1998
- Military infiltration across the DMZ (1969, 1970, 1976, 1979, 1980, 1992, 1995)

- Intrusions of North Korean soldiers across the MDL: e.g., 1996, 1997)
- Assassination missions against ROK authorities: 1974, 1983
- Tunneling under the DMZ: discovered in 1974, 1975, 1978, 1990
- Airplane hijackings: 1958, 1969, attempted in 1971; KAL bombing in 1987
- Kidnappings and boat hijackings: too frequent to list; according to the ROK government, 3,835 South Koreans have been abducted since the end of the Korean War, with 517 still held in North Korea.

Almost all of these actions have been unpredictable. North Korea routinely issues so many threats against the South that the threats do not serve as a signal that something is about to happen. These North Korean military actions have absolutely no chance of leading to a military victory over South Korea, so they must serve other purposes, such as probing military defenses, increasing political tension, blackmailing for peace, sending a political message, or keeping the South Korean government and military off balance.

Given the hierarchical nature of North Korean governance, it must be assumed that virtually all of the military actions (except kidnappings) were planned or authorized at the highest levels of government, and in that sense, they can be considered state-sponsored provocations (and in most cases, terrorism, because they are not intended to defeat the South Koreans but only scare them). Most of the actions are meant to send a political message to South Korea, but the message is so general in nature that it is little more than a political statement. The frequent military intrusions, and the recent attacks in the West Sea (1999, 2002, 2009, 2010) send a more specific message; namely that North Korea claims jurisdiction over that area. In other cases, the general message that attacks and commando raids into South Korea send is simply that “we don’t like you” and there is little that the South Koreans can do about that.

It is also likely that some of these actions are the direct result of frustration felt by Kim Jong-il. When a dictator gets angry, he can do something about it without fear of being reprimanded by his people.

Prospects for Future Military Incidents

The political confrontation on the Korean peninsula continues. North Korea’s fortunes continue to decline. It is not reasonable to expect that the North Korean regime will simply accept its destiny. It needs to reverse its political and economic fortunes while maintaining a dictatorial state, so the use of its military forces is a natural way to pursue its political and economic goals, domestically and internationally.

In the next few years, the factors that are most likely to prompt Pyongyang to engage in provocations are the (possible) decline in the decision-making abilities of Kim Jong-il; the dynamics of the leadership transition, with different groups jockeying for position in the new power hierarchy; and pressure on the regime to deliver at least something on its promise to make the year 2012 a celebration of the founder’s birth.

I have always assumed that Kim Jong-il and his father were rational decision-makers, although the younger Kim is sometimes moved by his emotions. Little is known about Kim Jong-un. His youth and inexperience, and the already prominent role given to the top generals, suggest that the military may play a more important role in decision making in the future,

despite an apparent strengthening of the role of the Party. The military, while it has outside interests in the form of foreign trading companies, is probably less in touch with and less concerned about international relations than are the government and Party, which suggests that the military leaders may be less likely to take into account long-term consequences of military actions.

And then there is the fact that weapons continue to become more lethal. Any nuclear weapons that the North Koreans may possess could be considered usable. North Korea's continued progress with missile development would make nuclear weapons more accurate and longer-ranged. The transportation and weaponry available to the special forces will continue to be developed (e.g., torpedoes on small submarines), making these forces more lethal.

In sum, the motivation for North Korea to engage in active confrontation continues, and may even be increased, and the resources that could be employed in those confrontations are becoming more deadly.

Responding to North Korea's Military Confrontation

I have argued that in North Korea, as in other states, military action is initiated in order to achieve political goals, and that North Korea's political goal of survival as a dictatorial state is the same as it was before the Korean War. By this calculation, in order to eliminate military confrontation it would be necessary for the nature of North Korean politics to fundamentally change, but that is not likely to happen as long as the Kim dynasty or any like-minded successor regime remains in power.

I believe that efforts should be made to replace this regime at the earliest possible date, but I recognize that such a policy is not popular in South Korea or any other state in the region – for a variety of reasons that I can't go into here. The hope in South Korea is to keep the two Koreas separate for the time being while making the North more peaceable and economically viable. I am pessimistic about the success of this policy line.

It follows from my policy preference that I believe any aid or engagement with the North Korean people that goes through the leadership and strengthens that leadership should be viewed with skepticism. Likewise, any political or economic rewards offered to North Korea in return for nuclear disarmament carry the danger of strengthening the current regime. In my view, a North Korea without nuclear weapons is almost as dangerous as one with those weapons.

So I doubt if it is possible to shape or tame the Kim regime, which will take whatever is offered while resisting change for fear that the post-reform leadership would be replaced just as quickly as the leadership of other former dictatorships. Negotiating a peace treaty or redrawing the NLL will not make any lasting difference to the North Korean leaders because such adjustments would not improve their prospects for continued survival of the regime.

The alternative, then, is to try to limit the regime's propensity for using its military forces against South Korea. The basic principles for discouraging bad behavior are well known. Such behavior should be followed immediately by punishment that is appropriate in strength and character to the nature of the bad behavior (punishment fits the crime). The punishment should also be strong enough to materially reduce the chances that a similar provocation will

be launched in the future. How strong the response needs to be is always a matter of guesswork, but past experience can provide guidelines. We know, for example, that condemnation from the United Nations has no effect on North Korea and thus does not count as punishment; sanction resolutions are likewise largely ineffective. Threats of future punishment are useless.

The usual recommendation is to supplement punishment with rewards for good behavior (carrots and sticks). Unfortunately, in North Korea's case I think rewards will mostly strengthen the regime without changing its nature, so while they might temporarily reduce the likelihood of provocations, they will have the opposite long-term effect. At the very least, the rewards should be reversible and subject to withdrawal. The revenue that the North Korean leaders receive from the South Korean businesses in Kaesong can be counted as a reward, but that hasn't stopped North Korea from attacking South Korea.

Let me just add a few words about the practical difficulties of implementing a punishment regime. Reward and punishment principles were developed and refined in psychology laboratories. In the real world it is not so easy to make immediate and appropriate responses to provocations, especially when those provocations can come at any time, in almost any form, and from almost any direction. It costs too much to be ready to repulse all attacks immediately, so delayed responses must be accepted as a practical alternative.

The principle of strong and immediate punishment encounters another obstacle in the form of the danger of military escalation. If the military response to a provocation is immediate counterattack, it will be difficult for North Korea to respond because military decisions will have to be made on the spot. Also, the international community is likely to consider an immediate South Korean counterattack as a justifiable response. However, if the response is delayed, it becomes retaliatory in nature and may not only draw international criticism, but be treated by North Korea as a separate attack to which a new response will have to be made.

If a delayed or escalated South Korean retaliatory counterattack on North Korea seems likely to provoke an escalated attack, the South, more exposed to attacks than the North, might end up receiving more punishment than it delivers. A way to get around this restraint is to respond asymmetrically. This is in fact what South Korea did in response to the Cheonan and Yeongpyeong attacks, although without sufficient resolve, in my opinion.

North Korea is a military-oriented state that is primed for war. Launching a military attack on North Korea (apart from a defensive response) is playing to its strength. On the other hand, North Korea is perennially poor, and the North Korean leaders need to keep their people ignorant and under control. South Korean responses in the form of economic punishment and information warfare may be more useful in discouraging North Korean attacks than bombing a few military installations, and these non-kinetic kinds of responses would be much less likely to trigger further military action. Furthermore, such responses may confront the Kim regime with a dilemma because its military leaders would probably be less concerned about economic or information warfare responses than would the political leadership.

Moral considerations should also guide decisions on how to respond to North Korean provocations. The use of counterforce results in military and civilian casualties, but not to the people who ordered the initial attack. If the response is economic, the North Korean leaders will be hurt less by economic sanctions than the people, but the widespread economic hardship resulting from sanctions can also help alienate the people from their leaders, thus weak-

ning their hold on power. Better yet, bombarding North Koreans with information is not going to hurt anybody, but information will help weaken the regime.

Conclusions

The incompatibility of the political, economic, and social systems of the two Koreas is a continuing source of ill will. Military confrontation is an extension of political confrontation. Until the political system of North Korea changes, South Korea's best hope for peace is to limit the North's employment of its military forces in active engagements.

When North Korea attacks South Korea, punishment should be meted out quickly and in proportion to the attack. In responding, South Korea should play to its strengths, which are economic, political, and social in nature. After an immediate military response, economic sanctions and "information attacks" should be used as follow-up measures that will have a potentially long-lasting, punitive impact on North Korea's leaders.

The Kim regime in Pyongyang lives by the sword and, since the Korean War, has thrived by the sword. It will die by the ballot box. South Korea should work for the day when the North Korean people are free to change the nature of their political system. This is a battle that South Korea should wage constantly, not simply waiting for North Korea's next military provocation.

Remarks:

Lecture given by Dr. Kongdan Oh at the 1st RINSA-Konrad Adenauer Foundation International Conference "European and Asian Perspectives on International Security Policies" , organised by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in cooperation with the Research Institute for National Security Affairs (RINSA), Korea National Defense University (KNDU) , February 15, 2011 in Seoul, South Korea.



Dr. Kongdan Oh

Dr. Kongdan Oh is is a Research Staff Member at the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), Alexandria, Virginia, U.S.A., which provided funds for the writing of this paper. However, the views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of IDA or its clients.