



**MARCH**  
2014

## **If Deterrence Fails** *Rethinking Conflict on the Korean Peninsula*

By Patrick M. Cronin



Center for a  
New American  
Security

## Acknowledgements

The author is deeply indebted to numerous officials, both military and civilian, in the United States and the Republic of Korea, who took time to discuss the issues in this report. Because of the sensitivity of the topics, however, few would wish to be identified, and I simply thank all the men and women in the ROK and U.S. governments, and particularly in their armed forces, who are in public service and seeking to preserve the peace in the face of an unrelenting but evolving North Korean threat. I also thank my outstanding colleagues at CNAS, especially those who committed so much effort to help produce this report, including: Moon-young Kim Jun, Alexander Sullivan, Zachary Hosford, Liz Fontaine, JaRel Clay, Catherine Cloud, Dafna Rand, Shawn Brimley, Richard Fontaine and Robert Work.

### Cover Image

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un uses a pair of binoculars to look at the South's territory from an observation post at the military unit on Jangjae islet, located in the southernmost part of the southwestern sector of North Korea's border with South Korea.

(ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO/KCNA via KNS)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Introduction: If an Unpredictable North Meets an Unprepared South	5
II.	The Heightened Risk of North Korean Instability	7
III.	Why Deterrence May Fail: The Risks of Escalation	13
IV.	Shortfalls and Recommendations	19
V.	Conclusion	23

M A R C H 2 0 1 4

# If Deterrence Fails

## *Rethinking Conflict on the Korean Peninsula*

By Patrick M. Cronin

## *About the Author*

**Dr. Patrick M. Cronin** is a senior advisor and senior director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security.



# IF DETERRENCE FAILS: RETHINKING CONFLICT ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

---

By Patrick M. Cronin

M A R C H 2 0 1 4

**If Deterrence Fails**  
*Rethinking Conflict on the Korean Peninsula*



## I. INTRODUCTION: IF AN UNPREDICTABLE NORTH MEETS AN UNPREPARED SOUTH

By Patrick M. Cronin

Northeast Asia is entering a period of dramatically heightened tension. Because an unstable North Korea might trigger renewed war on the Korean Peninsula, national security decision makers should assume an elevated possibility of deterrence against North Korea failing in the next one to five years. In light of this, the United States and South Korea need to work harder strategically and operationally to preserve deterrence while preparing both defensive and offensive options in case war breaks out. This is all happening, however, as South Korea is trapped in a pincer movement between an increasingly uncertain, nuclear-armed regime in the North and an American ally shifting its diminished resources to hedge against long-term security competition with China.

Two factors are converging to exacerbate the risks of conflict. First, the continuing expansion of North Korean military capabilities, particularly its nuclear and missile capabilities, means that Pyongyang's threats, which may have once rung hollow are now more serious and more credible. Additionally, there are signs of greater internal instability since Kim Jong Un's succession. These two developments have increased the likelihood of a sudden change or tragic miscalculation on the peninsula. Second, as internal debates within the United States continue regarding U.S. defense priorities and spending, the South Koreans may be faced with greater responsibility to defend their territory. Yet if conflict were to break out during the remainder of this decade, the South Korean armed forces would suffer shortfalls in critical capabilities.

This report contends that, given the near- to mid-term risk for instability on the Korean Peninsula, the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) should readjust their security strategies. It further argues that the U.S.-ROK security strategy (at least as far as it can be perceived from the open domain) falls short in a number of regards, including the assumptions about a conflict that escalates over

---

*For South Korea, stuck with an unsteady Korean regime to its north and allied with a country undergoing a major military transition, heightened near-term risk requires concerted action to help prevent the failure of deterrence and mitigate the consequences should conflict break out.*

---

time or includes other actors such as China. A full range of contingencies must be considered and careful defense trade-offs must be made. For South Korea, stuck with an unsteady Korean regime to its north and allied with a country undergoing a major military transition, heightened near-term risk requires concerted action to help prevent the failure of deterrence and mitigate the consequences should conflict break out.

This report begins with an overview of the destabilizing economic, political and military trends in North Korea. It then argues how deterrence might fail; how escalation might occur; and why South Korea and the United States might not be ready. It also suggests what might be done about it, offering operational and strategic recommendations to ensure that the U.S.-ROK alliance can better meet this potential security challenge.



## II. THE HEIGHTENED RISK OF NORTH KOREAN INSTABILITY

East Asian security is more uncertain than at any time in the past several decades.<sup>1</sup> This is in substantial part a consequence of instability and risk emanating from the Korean Peninsula, which is itself the result of a number of political, economic and military developments in North Korea. These include: a) a deteriorating economy, further threatened by an apparent rift with China; b) political upheaval and, in the wake of brutal political executions, the risk of further emergent threats to the regime's legitimacy; and c) advancing nuclear and missile programs coupled with an increasingly perceived need among the North Korean leadership for Pyongyang to demonstrate strength.<sup>2</sup>

The opaque regime in Pyongyang poses a major military threat. A nuclear North Korea isolated from the world and still undergoing a potentially tumultuous political transition continues to be the region's most likely catalyst of war. The risks of an inter-Korean conflict have only risen since the last meaningful six-party talks were held five years ago, and such risks are likely to continue to rise for the rest of this decade. In fact, risks on the peninsula have not been this significant since the early 1990s. During that period, North Korea lost the patronage of the Soviet Union as the Cold War precipitously ended, Kim Il Sung walked away from his obligations as a voluntary signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and Kim Jong Il assumed power during an uncertain transition during which many South Koreans predicted the North Korean regime could not survive two years. Mass famine and failed internal reforms followed, leading to further and deeper doubts regarding the Kim Dynasty's sustainability. North Korea's closed economy and increasingly isolated society, contrasted with the rest of the Asian-Pacific region that was at the time growing more secure and economically prosperous, suggested the potential collapse of the North Korean regime. Yet the Kim family has survived.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to confuse regime endurance with regime stability.

Rather, officials need to err on the side of caution. North Korea should be treated as an increasingly unstable state because of its failed economy, its political infighting and its military-first policy. North Korea is a closed, Stalinist-style society with a dysfunctional economy and a mafia-like governing family. Besides nuclear weapons, an improving arsenal of missiles and one of the world's largest armies, the country has enough conventional artillery and rockets to threaten Seoul, where half of South Korea's 50 million people live. Finally, the people of the North, after decades of indoctrination, are determined to resist outside meddling.

Of greater concern is that North Korea is intent on building up its military capability even as it apparently is experiencing economic and political decline.<sup>3</sup> Kim Jong Un might go to violent new lengths should he think his survival is in jeopardy. Various officials have articulated the concern about heightened volatility, including retired General James D. Thurman, former commander of the U.S. Forces Korea Command.<sup>4</sup> According to Thurman, North Korea's cycle of provocations is becoming more dangerous even as its missile and nuclear programs advance.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that the risk emanating from the peninsula is growing, especially since the sudden elevation of Kim Jong Un, and even more so in the aftermath of the bloody purges of his regent-uncle Jang Song Thaek and the latter's family network. The combination of economic, political and military trends could well prove explosive.

### **Economic Failure**

Instability in North Korea also proceeds from the country's profound economic problems. North Korea's economy has been unstable at least since the end of the Cold War effectively cut off major power patronage from both the Soviet Union and

China. Since that time a black market economy and farmers' markets have emerged in North Korea, yet the North's chronic food shortage remains little changed in the past several years.<sup>6</sup> The famine of the 1990s that slowly took the lives of so many people (estimates range from several hundred thousand to more than 2 million among a population of only 20 million at the time) can be related to the broken public distribution system, chronic underinvestment and atrocious decisionmaking in Pyongyang under Kim Jong Il. To be sure, the regime survived (contrary to some forecasts). This rogue regime has learned to play nuclear-backed blackmail, keeping perceived foes at bay, immunizing the regime from dissent (preventing a "Korean Spring") and steadily forging ahead with nuclear, missile, cyber and even space systems. But the broken economy requires new ways to attract investment, which at this point appears a dim prospect.

Moreover, North Korea's economic fortunes are now suffering from a rift with its largest economic benefactor, China. And in the wake of Jang's execution, China's investments are likely to slow, at least for some time, as Jang was China's main point of contact in the senior reaches of the regime. Given the degree of dissatisfaction with Kim Jong Un on the part of Beijing and the loss of China's key interlocutor in the government, Chinese food, fuel and perhaps arms will continue to flow, but it seems probable that trade will taper off.<sup>7</sup> Jang and his family, after all, appear to have been the gatekeepers and bankers for Chinese access – to infrastructure projects and resource extraction – that bought the Chinese a degree of stability, or at least a belief that this precarious border was manageable. That said, North Korea will not be willing to burn its bridges with China and therefore will be forced to bargain with its communist neighbor in the near future – most likely by asking for more funds, potentially through new bank accounts. Overall, however, the dramatic increase in Chinese

investment in North Korea over the past decade is likely to slow. And no other country is likely to make up for this reduction in foreign investments.

The Jang execution provides an important, if disturbing, window into the North Korean regime. Indeed, the execution of Jang surpassed the most cold-blooded killings of a *Godfather* movie. The deliberate publicity of these graphic details appears to have been intended also for Beijing; perhaps the message was to emphasize that influence cannot be bought in the DPRK.<sup>8</sup> Jang's dramatic demise apparently occurred because he had secretly accumulated a vast wealth independent of Kim Jong Un and the official apparatuses of power. As the administrator of some of North Korea's lucrative foreign currency earning operations, especially those with China, Jang was either becoming too powerful or was simply too corrupt, or both, for Kim to tolerate. Longtime North Korea expert Robert Collins has offered a compelling description of Jang's downfall.<sup>9</sup> Writes Collins:

"Jang's control of a wide number of currency-earning organizations enabled him to accumulate one billion dollars, which were deposited in the Bank of Shanghai. Kim Jong-un wanted access to these funds but Jang's men – primarily Administration Department 1<sup>st</sup> Vice-Director Ri Yong-ha and Vice-Director Jang Su-kil – mishandled the money to the point that the Chinese government shut down the account. In December 2013, Jang confessed his crimes before a military tribunal. He was branded a 'traitor of all ages' and executed shortly thereafter."<sup>10</sup>

The purge of Jang has been extended to his network, starting with cronies Ri Yong Ha and Jang Su Kil.<sup>11</sup> On previous occasions Jang Song Thaek, the husband of Kim Jong Il's sister, Kim Kyong Hui, had been accused of freelancing and "factionalism" and had been punished with hard labor and house arrest. Indeed, as Collins notes, Jang's most recent rehabilitation began in 2007, when he was

released from house arrest and appointed director of the Administration Department of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP). In that position, Jang was meant to help provide political (and family) oversight of the key organs of the North Korean police state (the State Security Department, the Ministry of Public Security and the judicial system).<sup>12</sup> Jang gradually gained greater authority of foreign currency earnings. Apparently, it was Vice Marshal Choi Ryong Hae who eventually called out Jang's corrupt operation and persuaded Kim Jong Un (who perhaps needed to demonstrate his purity from corrupt family members) to execute his uncle and his cronies.

In short, aside from China, there is no ready source of major investment for North Korea. In time, markedly improved inter-Korean relations could lead to sizable trade flows. However, no democracy, especially a South Korean government cautiously seeking to build trust, can entrust the North with a huge infusion of cash and investment. As those North Korean cronies who were dealing with China are eliminated, it will take time for the North Koreans to forge a new set of ties with Beijing, and few in North Korea will be as protected as Kim's uncle was – until late 2013 – to engage in such freewheeling, high-stakes poker. An unreliably equipped ski resort is hardly likely to draw serious tourism, and this need for revenue may explain why North Korea allowed some carefully monitored family reunions at Mount Kumgang.<sup>13</sup> But South Korean economic transfers to the North will be more measured, transparent and restricted than those flowing from China's neighboring provinces. Hence, the outlook for North Korea's dismal economy is even bleaker than before the young leader ascended to power in December 2011. His June 28, 2012, agricultural "reforms" have harvested few economic benefits.<sup>14</sup> Barring a sudden and dramatic about-face on nuclear proliferation, the North has no serious economic prospects that appear acceptable.

### Political Infighting

If the North's economic outlook is grim, Pyongyang politics are even more risky, particularly in the wake of Jang's purge.

Indeed, the future composition of the regime is unclear. There is little expert consensus about whether Jang's killing helps Kim Jong Un consolidate his grip on power. While disposing of a close relative may show that Kim is no figurehead, the drastic action simultaneously reveals that he appears to be ruling over a fractious set of elites. Certainly the execution also suggests that every North Korean, no matter how elite, is extremely vulnerable. Jang's violent execution is thus likely intensifying the deep paranoia that permeates North Korean politics. Additionally, Jang's purge and the subsequent shuffle of senior military and civilian officials may further undermine Kim's authority and even the integrity of his military command structure.<sup>15</sup> Vice Marshal Choe Ryong Hae's brief absence from public view earlier this year suggests that he may have suffered a loss of stature. And frequent changes in top-ranking military personnel could well leave crucial assignments filled with inexperienced officers.<sup>16</sup> This could have far-reaching implications for crisis stability and crisis decision-making. At least, this is another reason why alliance planners should assume heightened risk.

There remains much uncertainty about the young Kim's plans and motives. Thus far, since his father died of a heart attack in December 2011, Kim's rule has been characterized by unpredictable, erratic behavior. When Kim apparently approved a moratorium on missile and nuclear tests (the so-called Leap Day agreement of February 2012), there was optimism that the young leader might usher in a period of détente and reform. It took only days for that optimism to dissipate, however, as North Korea then proceeded to conduct a long-range rocket test, albeit one that failed. Similarly, an announcement in late June 2013 to

effectively introduce household farming and other agricultural reforms was met with guarded optimism that Kim Jong Un might adopt Chinese- or Vietnamese-style economic liberalization. His failure to follow through on genuine national reform has only cast a bigger pall over the North's ailing economy. Reports that Kim was shifting power away from the Korean People's Army (the military) to the Korean Workers' Party (the political apparatus) were perceived as a favorable trend to make North Korea less dependent on military power. A successful three-stage rocket launch in December 2012, on the eve of the South Korean election, and a third nuclear test conducted just before Park's inauguration in Seoul in February 2013 have only added to the concerns about the volatility of Kim Jong Un. Yet it is the gruesome details of the execution of Kim's uncle, Jang – the man who was meant to be the head regent preparing Kim's consolidation of power and had been given the important titles of vice chairman of the National Defense Commission and director of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee's Administration Department – that have shaken the assumptions about what we know and do not know about North Korean political machinations.

In addition, Kim may consider the increase in information penetrating into North Korea as a threat to his regime's stability.<sup>17</sup> Today, Chinese and South Korean information technology is able to cross the border; as a result the average citizen may be more likely to understand the economic disparities and human rights costs of living in North Korea. This may well explain the regime's scathing response to a recent United Nations Human Rights Commission inquiry that likened North Korean human rights to Nazi Germany.<sup>18</sup> Kim Jong Un has purged more leaders than both predecessors combined, thus suggesting a greater sense of instability under the young leader's tenure.<sup>19</sup> One wonders which generals and even which family members can fully trust one another in the

aftermath of such a pervasive purge. An "every-man-for-himself" mentality harbored by senior officials with power and guns suggests potential consequences yet to come.

Kim has a number of options going forward. Among the most disturbing is that a strong and overconfident Kim may want to strike out to signal his consolidation of power and the elimination of his biggest rival, much as his grandfather did in 1968, when Kim Il Sung felt sufficiently emboldened to send commando raids into Seoul. The 31-year-old Kim Jong Un, handpicked by his father as the most suitably cunning and ruthless son for "the family business," may well be intent on eliminating all his competition and putting his men in position. Alternatively, a weak and paranoid Kim may feel the need to use military activity to reinforce his narrative that enemies surround North Korea.

In the absence of clarity on the political competition occurring and the actions that might ensue from Kim's paranoia, national security planners in Seoul, Washington and elsewhere would be prudent to assume the potential for political instability.

### **Military Risk and Unpredictability**

While economic and political risks are increasing, the military risks emanating from North Korea are at once more certain and more dangerous. The combination of greater asymmetrical means of attack and the increased potential for miscalculation are leading to a more precarious and a more hazardous Korean Peninsula. Since the 2012-2013 nuclear and rocket tests, North Korea's nuclear and missile programs have been advancing and appear to be on the verge of posing new risks to U.S. territory itself (including Guam and Alaska). More recently, Kim has appeared to call for what amount to battlefield or tactical nuclear weapons that might be fitted on Scud missiles capable of striking any target in South Korea.<sup>20</sup> And cyberattacks initially

---

*Since the 2012-2013 nuclear and rocket tests, North Korea's nuclear and missile programs have been advancing, and appear to be on the verge of posing new risks to U.S. territory itself (including Guam and Alaska).*

---

designed to probe the response of South Korea may already be loaded and ready to launch. Meanwhile, Kim appears supremely reliant for his security on Colonel General Choe Kyong Song, who in sharp contrast to defense ministers and other military leaders has commanded the XI Storm Corps for more than a dozen years. Yet he is the same man who was apparently behind the carefully calculated special operation to sink the South Korean naval vessel the *Cheonan*. This general is also in charge of the special force and light infantry forces that could conduct commando raids and acts of sabotage. His closeness to Kim suggests the likelihood of a more belligerent policy in the future. Moreover, North Korean actions appear likely to present Seoul with great difficulty in mounting an effective response that also does not lead to unwanted escalation.

A further contributor to the elevation of risk is North Korea's increasing provocations. But South Korean and U.S. counterprovocation plans have added to the dynamic that could lead to military escalation. These strategies, based on speed and preset rules of engagement and backed by general officers in the ROK army who want to prove their mettle, mean that the South would respond to any future attack in less than a minute, instead of the

seventeen that passed before the return of fire at Yeonpyeong Island in 2010. More importantly, the plan emanating from ROK officials is to fire back three bullets for every one fired by North Korea. It's not an eye for an eye, but an eye for an eye and "I'll break your glasses," one U.S. official explained.<sup>21</sup> This disproportionate response to punish the North is intended to tighten deterrence to stop such lethal uses of force in the first instance. But not only can the North attack in ways that could be difficult to respond to (from cyber to more acts of sabotage or terrorism), but the counterprovocation posture could produce unintended consequences and intensify escalatory pressures. It is one thing to hit back hard and then be fully prepared to answer your adversary's counterattack to your counterprovocation broadside, but it is another to assume that your adversary will not respond – which appears to be the case here. Either way, risk is heightened. If the attacks escalate, conflict may intensify, expand, and endure, even involving China and perhaps Japan. Even without other players entering the game, the response from North Korea is problematic enough – just because DPRK ground forces have atrophied does not necessarily mean an entrenched and well-armed North could not keep firing missiles, rockets and artillery or using special forces for weeks or months. And even if the counterattack did not lead to escalation, the resulting damage may still appear to have more effect on South Korea (a globally integrated economy with a free media, many vulnerable soft targets, and democratically elected politicians who may face unrealistic public expectations). Moreover, miscalculation could be magnified by the inseparability of external as opposed to internal threats in North Korean perceptions. Given the profound uncertainty about North Korea's internal power struggles and decisionmaking, how could Seoul and Washington have confidence as to how such a counterattack would be perceived inside the North Korean leadership? In addition, the deterioration

in relations between Japan and China and between Japan and Korea might also invite more distrust and lost opportunities for cooperation in response to a future North Korean provocation or abrupt change. Notwithstanding some recent encouraging steps in Japan-Korea relations, all sides must coordinate approaches to North Korean aggression, especially as Japan undertakes unilateral negotiations with the DPRK on the abductee issue that could undermine an overall strategy.<sup>22</sup>

For these reasons and with economic, political and military uncertainties heightened, there exists the real peril of near-term deterrence failure affecting South Korea. Perhaps this is why U.S. and other officials have concluded that the Korean Peninsula really is the most dangerous flashpoint in the region. Although there are real and growing tensions in the East China Sea and South China Sea, North Korea presents a more immediately lethal and acute threat. Needless to say, the consequences of war on the Peninsula would be dire. A bitter inter-Korean conflict could ignite like a tinderbox and could do so relatively soon and without early warning. The peninsula has not experienced open war for more than six decades, and the conventional view is that this status quo will continue. But it would be a serious, negligent mistake to underestimate the potential risk emanating from North Korea.

### III. WHY DETERRENCE MAY FAIL: THE RISKS OF ESCALATION

Risk of large-scale conflict – and related dangers of a wider war or futile search to control the North’s nuclear weapons – is higher on the Korean Peninsula than anywhere else in Asia. There is no greater military threat in Asia than that posed by North Korea, a threat complicated by the planned approach of South Korea, which since late 2010 has adopted a defense posture based on the need for an instant and disproportionate response to any lethal use of force. Although the geostrategic tectonic plates of the Asia-Pacific region are shifting, especially with the rise of China, the Korean Peninsula remains the epicenter of military risk. With a still uncertain political succession in North Korea, where nuclear weapons, missiles and brinkmanship compensate for a failed economy and a closed society, and a government in South Korea that, however justifiably, calls for a hair trigger and punishing reprisal, there is no telling what might happen next. Renewed fighting should not be ruled out.

The risk of instability emanating from North Korea has been an unrelenting element of regional security ever since an armistice was signed on July 27, 1953. As a reminder of just how brutal the fighting was during the preceding three years, it is worth recalling that more than 33,700 U.S. service personnel lost their lives in combat.<sup>23</sup> This is several times the U.S. death toll from the post-2001 conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>24</sup> But it is also considerably less than the more than 220,000 South Korean military personnel killed in action or the 2 million civilians estimated to have perished on both sides in the Korean War.<sup>25</sup> In a future war, casualties could be far higher on the South Korean side than in North Korea, if only because of the large population concentrated in highly exposed Seoul. It is no coincidence that the Obama administration articulated its rebalance to Asia policy in

2011, the year after the highest annual death toll in the post-2001 wars; but as tensions rise in Asia and especially on the Korean Peninsula, it is good to be reminded just how bloody another Korean War could be.

While North Korea has always had a degree of unpredictability and potential violence about it, instability seems to have grown since Pyongyang committed the most lethal use of force in decades in 2010. On March 26 of that year, a probable Yononisisub operating in the Yellow (West) Sea fired an acoustic-wake homing torpedo at the South Korean warship *Cheonan*, breaking it in half and sending 46 sailors to a watery grave. It would take months to formally piece together precisely what had happened.<sup>26</sup> The naval attack was a reminder that even in an area of presumed military superiority, a determined, cunning, surprise attack can achieve a strategic objective. Although experts have debated whether the incident was somehow related to succession troubles, at a time when Kim Jong Il was ailing and preparing for a transfer of power to his young son, Kim Jong Un, others have argued that North Korea struck to avenge the damage inflicted on one of its patrol vessels four months earlier.<sup>27</sup> To be sure, the disputed Northern Limit Line demarcating the maritime border between North and South Korea has seen previous casualties, especially in 2002 and 1999, and before that in 1967.<sup>28</sup> These are sometime referred to as the “crab wars,” in reference to the highly sought-after marine life present in those waters. The November 2009 incident heavily damaged the North Korean gunboat and killed one North Korean crew member. No doubt revenge was a factor in North Korea’s calculated attack on *Cheonan*. But in light of the recent purge in North Korea, it is also possible the order to seek disproportionate revenge may have been driven by changes in the center of power and decisionmaking authority.<sup>29</sup>

Instability also grew in the aftermath of North Korea’s second resort to lethal force in 2010. On

November 24, a month after the release of the comprehensive international investigation into the *Cheonan* sinking, at a time when South Korean forces near the Northern Limit Line were engaged in a live-fire exercise, North Korea conducted its first artillery assault on the South since the 1953 armistice. Some 170 artillery shells and rockets were launched at an ROK military outpost on Yeonpyeong Island, killing two marines and two civilian contractors. Seventeen minutes passed before South Korean soldiers returned gunfire, and even then the lack of real-time intelligence hampered hitting anything of value. South Korea has undertaken an agonizing reappraisal of the incident, with many condemning the sluggish and ineffective response. While some blamed then-President Lee Myung-bak for not giving an immediate order to return fire (instead making an inquiry about casualties), others have blamed the ROK armed forces for indecisive rules of engagement, a lack of readiness and inadequate command and control. From that moment on, officials in Seoul have concentrated on being prepared to execute an immediate, violent response that would be disproportionate to any future attack. The new defense minister, General Kim Kwan-jin, vowed air attacks on North Korea should it fire any more artillery, and Lee told the nation that next time he would make certain that the North “pays a dear price without fail.”<sup>30</sup> More recently, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has taken some credit for preventing such an escalatory response against the North. Calling the episode “a very dangerous crisis,” Gates contended, “South Korea’s original plans for retaliation were ... disproportionately aggressive, involving both aircraft and artillery. We were worried the exchanges could escalate dangerously.”<sup>31</sup>

It is one thing to plan on countering a provocation with a punishing, disproportionate attack; it is wholly another matter to be properly prepared for it. Even today, South Korea remains early in

the stages of acquiring the requisite command and control, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) and is just starting on the task of implementing missile defense upgrades that are needed. Its growing gap in front-line fighter aircraft, which will only expand in the next several years, is another shortfall in credible, ready ROK capability. Many assume the U.S.-ROK alliance has long come to a meeting of the minds over how to respond to future provocations, but in reality the issue remains contentious.

Since the end of 2010, U.S.-ROK allied military deliberations have concentrated heavily on counterprovocation contingency plans. The election of Park Geun-hye in December 2012 has reinforced the heightened state of readiness, mostly in response to a series of North Korean provocations that included a successful three-stage rocket launch (the Unha-3) just before her election and a third nuclear test in February 2013, less than two weeks before Park’s inauguration and move into the South Korean Blue House. North Korea’s “young general,” Kim Jong Un, threw obstacles in the way of Park’s plans for improving inter-Korean relations, greeting her tenure by closing down the only major economic investment between the two Koreas, the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Park eventually managed to win an agreement to reopen the joint economic zone, which uses North Korean workers to staff South Korean small- and medium-sized businesses inside a gated industrial park on the North Korean side of the Demilitarized Zone, but inter-Korean relations remain strained. Nothing added to the concern about uncertainty and instability inside North Korea, though, as much as the bloody purge of Jang – the man often described as the main regent to help smooth the transition for Kim’s consolidation of power.<sup>32</sup> Intermittent diplomatic overtures emanating from Pyongyang remain overshadowed by this pattern of growing risk on the Korean Peninsula.



## Implications for the U.S.-ROK Alliance

Today, there are many remarkable troops and public servants who are dedicated to maintaining peace, preserving the armistice and strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance. Yet, as this report has argued, there is a high risk of deterrence failing and conflict breaking out. These risks are likely to endure in the near- to mid-term (the next one to five years). By addressing the potential for growing near-term risk, alliance managers and national security planners in both South Korea and the United States can help to buttress deterrence, mitigate risk and be better prepared should deterrence fail. Specific policy recommendations at the end of this report focus on ways to reduce vulnerabilities on the Korean Peninsula in order to strengthen deterrence and – should it fail – ensure that South Korea and the United States have the agility, resiliency and capability to pursue a lasting solution to the threats posed by North Korea.

In short, uncertainty is heightened, deterrence may fail (again) and escalation could occur. Risk is in the future, not the past, and the risk of conflict is unknowable except in hindsight. But elevated concern about North Korea's leadership and political-military stability, mixed with trends and plausible calculations in and around the Korean Peninsula, could well be what tips the peninsula into a major conflict in the next several years. Given that, what is the alliance's state of readiness and, especially, what is the readiness of the ROK front line?

The U.S.-ROK alliance is militarily superior to North Korea's armed forces, but it is not well prepared for the full range of contingencies that could unfold. The alliance is primarily designed to preserve the 1953 armistice, not necessarily to deal with sudden and unexpected change in the North. For instance, planning assumptions for responding to provocations or upheaval in North Korea downplay the possibility of escalation and war. Some South Korean officers appear to believe that

the North would not engage in expanded combat operations, even if the South were to respond to an attack with greater force (and attacking not just the shooter of origin but also a higher-echelon command post). And some U.S. officers hew to the conviction that they, not the North Koreans, will choose the time and place of any conflict. At a minimum, these assumptions merit questions – questions that should be raised during relative peacetime rather than in the midst of renewed conflict, when the costs would be measured in human life. The ROK military is superb at defense but not noted for offense and lacks many offensive preparations and capabilities. As the ROK moves toward a leading wartime command role, it must be prepared to go on the offensive.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, if the North deploys road-mobile, intermediate-range nuclear missiles, a North Korean provocation could alter the calculus in Seoul. Faced with such a threat, some ROK decision makers may want to expand the objective from restoring the armistice to achieving unification. While the chance of such dynamics may seem remote, they are higher than zero and cannot be ruled out.

## Alliance and ROK Readiness

Although the South Korean armed forces provide a formidable deterrent and defensive capability, they face serious challenges for which they are not fully prepared. This is especially true as the South Korean military is still acquiring the necessary capabilities for its new defense strategy. The DPRK exploited South Korean vulnerabilities to asymmetrical threats near the Northern Limit Line in 2010, by sinking the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* and shelling Yeonpyeong Island. The ROK Ministry of National Defense responded to the provocation threat with the newly revised Defense Reform Plan (DRP) 307 on March 8, 2011, which sought to improve South Korea's capabilities against an asymmetric threat.<sup>34</sup> However, the ROK government is still in the midst of implementing its ambitious medium- to longer-term plans as

outlined in the recently issued Defense Reform Plan 2014-2030.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the defense budget has left some questions about acquiring the desired capabilities according to the anticipated time frame. The ROK government will need to increase its defense budget by 7.2% annually from its current 3.5% to implement the latest DRP, which may prove difficult in the current fiscal environment.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, the internal instability of North Korea has increased the potential security risks of these vulnerabilities.

These areas of relative South Korean weakness include but are not limited to: having a transparent, whole-of-government strategy; ensuring command and control for a “minute war” that may well endure for weeks or months; defending the vulnerable megacity and capital of Seoul against a range of attacks, including sabotage; thwarting North Korea’s missiles; deterring the DPRK’s possible development of tactical nuclear weapons; defending against North Korea’s other asymmetrical capabilities, including cyberattack; having multiple countermoves planned and thought through should North Korea escalate, for instance, in response to a counterprovocation strategy of disproportionate response; paying sufficient attention to the need for offensive operations in the ROK armed forces; replenishing front-line fighter aircraft and creating a serious capability to sustain strike operations against myriad targets throughout North Korea; and conducting operations based on commanders’ intent rather than waiting for precise, hierarchical instructions to be handed down. In addition to these capability shortfalls, the ROK also needs to address weaknesses with respect to its neighbors: the lack of contingency planning with Japan, on whom the United States would be heavily reliant in some contingencies; and the absence of a clear understanding of China’s red lines and moves in various contingencies. While the United States would eventually be able to mobilize overpowering superiority, that might be too late to prevent

horrendous damage to Seoul, and even then, a fully mobilized U.S. military might be effectively blocked from executing its plans by China. These are momentous assumptions, to be sure, but they point to a growing disconnect between an unpredictable North and an unprepared South.

---

*Conflict could break out and South Korea may find itself charged with military missions that it is not adequately equipped or prepared to conduct.*

---

Faced with stark uncertainty about North Korea’s political stability, the U.S.-ROK alliance must be prepared for numerous scenarios regarding causes of insecurity. So far as can be ascertained from unclassified sources, current operational plans for contingencies have successfully moved well beyond the long-standing concern over a second North Korean offensive (a repeat of 1950) to include both collapse and provocation scenarios. Yet based on this author’s discussions with numerous officers based in Korea from both the United States and the Republic of Korea, those plans remain deficient in some significant areas. U.S.-ROK assumptions diverge, at least somewhat, over the potential consequences of a disproportionate response, as well as over Chinese intervention. In addition, whereas the United States apparently assumes it will have months to mobilize before a serious war, South Koreans appear to dismiss the possibility of such a war. These apparent divergences create gaps that North Korea may seek to exploit, regardless of how reckless or how large a miscalculation that may be for Pyongyang.

Indeed, the alliance should assume that for the next several years sudden change and miscalculation that could precipitate conflict are likely to be part of the regional security environment. Heightened unpredictability and risk require heightened readiness, and the responsibility for heightened readiness will increasingly fall on South Korea. In other words, it should be decreasingly acceptable to the ROK government not to have a fully flexible and resilient armed force, one not only focused on missions of deterrence and defense but also some offense. This is controversial, but given the growing threat posed by North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles, the prospect of sudden change or miscalculation emanating from North Korea may necessitate a prolonged campaign. Even if the United States retains wartime operational control beyond the previously agreed turnover date of December 2015, budget pressures inside the United States will reinforce some prevailing planning assumptions – such as early warning time and sufficient months prior to the arrival of reinforcements needed to sustain a campaign – should a conflict break out and escalate.

The United States and South Korea have taken recent steps to bolster deterrence, especially since Kim executed his uncle last December. South Korea put its armed forces on high alert and warned of a possible North Korean provocation in 2014.<sup>37</sup> The United States offered frequent statements of reassurance, and President Barack Obama added Seoul to his April 2014 Asia trip to demonstrate the U.S. commitment to a strong alliance.

Conflict on the Korean Peninsula could break out in any number of ways. Consider the following scenario: An emboldened or embattled Kim launches a provocation against South Korea; the ROK armed forces instantly respond with a punishing strike, not only against the source of the attack but also against a higher-echelon command

and control facility. North Korea, having prepared for Seoul's counterprovocation approach, thinks it is calling South Korea's bluff and ups the ante, launching a separate attack in a different area and perhaps with very different kinds of weapons. Not able to appear defeated by Pyongyang, ROK armed forces once again respond with disproportionate force; North Korea then responds with hard-to-attribute special forces with an act of sabotage or terrorism inside South Korea, probably in Seoul itself.

Analysts can disagree on what happens next, but a wider conflict cannot be precluded. The North's actions are primarily aimed at an internal audience, and there is no telling how the battle looks inside Kim's inner circle: Are the South's counterprovocation attacks really the first wave of a regime-change offensive; or might this be an opportunity to demonstrate the North's capability to shake South Korean confidence by conducting a major attack in the nation's soft-target capital? The potential for added miscalculation in Beijing or Washington only adds to the range of possibilities. The argument is this: Conflict could break out and South Korea may find itself charged with military missions that it is not adequately equipped or prepared to conduct.

Uncertainty in the North is occurring at the same time that U.S. military readiness may be reduced in the short term. The United States is adopting an overall defense posture that will accept greater risk in the next five years, as its armed forces wind down from protracted ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) places a great priority on shifting investment to be better prepared for the 2020s and beyond, which may mean longer-term investments in air, sea, special operations, cyber and space assets. Acting Deputy Secretary of Defense Christine Fox articulated the argument for long-term investment before releasing the 2014 QDR, emphasizing the importance of the United States

maintaining military primacy, rather than accepting parity, with other powers including China. “[T]hose of us entrusted with leadership positions at the Defense Department do not wish to see the U.S. lose its decisive advantage or end up in a situation of parity against any military power,” Fox declared.<sup>38</sup>

Fox warned, however, that U.S. military dominance cannot be guaranteed in the future given strategic uncertainty in Asia and budget uncertainty in the United States. “The U.S. enjoys a margin of military superiority today in the Pacific but we cannot ignore the reality that American dominance on the seas, in the skies, and even in space, can no longer be taken for granted going forward.”<sup>39</sup> The implication to be drawn from this logic is the need to accept more near-term risk, perhaps for the next five years or so, in order to be in a position to invest in long-term technology and capabilities to enable superiority over China or any other near-peer competitor.

The implication of this U.S. investment strategy for allies is that they may be expected to shoulder greater burdens. South Korean defense capabilities have grown steadily but remain underdeveloped with respect to whole-of-government planning, the delegation of command authority, offensive capability and cost-effective acquisition for weapons systems that the country may need relatively soon rather than on some distant battlefield post-unification. For South Korea, this means moving procurement and readiness in the opposite direction of the United States to prevent a wider window of vulnerability from opening. Although South Korea may be tempted to make the same decisions as the U.S. does on procurement, Seoul decision makers need to be minding the most serious threat, especially during what could be a perfect storm of North Korean uncertainty. That uncertainty encompasses twin elements: possible new provocations that may both stem from and contribute to tragic

miscalculation, and decreased U.S. readiness that will leave U.S.-ROK forces to fend for themselves for some time should there be a “come-as-you-are war” on the peninsula. Consequently, South Korea should be placing greater priority on near-term deterrence for the full spectrum of scenarios.

## IV. SHORTFALLS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study is not alone in highlighting the growing instability under Kim Jong Un. A recent book on the subject concludes with this sober assessment: “As we look to the future of Northeast Asia, it is important to realize that the biggest threat to stability and security in the region is North Korea. Not only does North Korea engage in rogue and/or threatening behavior, but it is also a potentially highly unstable country.”<sup>40</sup>

To begin to mitigate the risk on the Korean Peninsula, the United States and the Republic of Korea must give new urgency to preparing for escalation and conflict during the next one to five years. No single action can prevent a conflict, but the following priority recommendations may help improve how the United States and the ROK cooperate to deal with the growing threat: a) transparent, whole-of-government ROK planning and strategy; b) U.S.-ROK command and control for an instant war that may endure; c) deterrence against North Korea’s possible development of tactical nuclear weapons; d) upgraded missile defenses; e) better societal resilience in South Korea, including a greater capacity to mitigate sabotage and other asymmetric attacks; f) added offensive capabilities in the ROK armed forces; g) more front-line fighter aircraft to make up for the growing gap caused by the rapid retirement of old fighters and the slow acquisition of the F-35; and h) improved, practical and serious regional security cooperation, starting among South Korea, the United States and Japan.

### 1. Improving South Korean and ROK-U.S. Defense Planning and Strategy

South Korean and U.S.-ROK defense planning processes suffer from stovepiping and lack of an integrated, whole-of-government approach. The South Korean government is so concerned with leaks that it does not share essential planning details across its ministries or with the United

States. Going forward, the ROK government must exercise greater transparency regarding contingency planning with its alliance partners. To cite but one example, the Ministry of Security and Public Administration governs a list of contractors for wartime that is not available to U.S. security planners. Moreover, when it comes to force development and acquisition, there should be a better alliance approach toward procuring, rationalizing and integrating missile defense and precision strike as well as command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR). The alliance and ROK also continue to focus on defense to the exclusion of sufficient offensive capability. Some senior U.S. and South Korean military officials consider those operational plans that have been prepared to respond to sudden change, including the collapse of the North Korean regime (OPLAN 5029), non-executable. This is in part because of a lack of ROK offensive capabilities, but also because of a sheer neglect of logistical realities.<sup>41</sup> Stockpiles are inadequate if they exist at all, and the logistics of ground operations, for instance, for any stabilization operation inside North Korea would be untenable. Indeed, some see North Korean soldiers better adjusted to the local terrain and better able to handle small arms than U.S.-ROK forces.

### 2. Developing Command and Control for a ‘Minute War’ that May Endure

The U.S.-ROK alliance needs to develop further a precise, rapid capability to achieve decisive success in counterprovocation strikes without disproportionate use of overwhelming, indiscriminate force. Put differently, both the ROK and the alliance need to develop the capacity to move swiftly and seamlessly from counterprovocation command and control to wartime command and control (a come-as-you-are war). While counterprovocation plans have dominated much allied discussion since 2010, South Korea and the U.S.-ROK alliance need more discussion on the subject. Unlike in 2010,

when it took the South Korean military 17 minutes to respond to a direct attack (and even then the response was limited to an ineffective return of fire in the direction of the specific source of shelling), the next provocation from North Korea may trigger instantaneous, disproportionate firepower. While speed is a hallmark of contemporary war, a response that is based on automaticity can be dangerous. The threat of a disproportionate response from South Korea may be central to alliance efforts to maintain deterrence. If deterrence fails, however, the U.S. and the ROK will need to keep open options despite the uncertainty and potential confusion that will ensue. As has been emphasized, North Korea may not want to absorb a disproportionate blow without its own surprise response. Thus, there may be multiple moves, because North Korea may be counting on a harsh reprisal.

### **3. Upgrading Missile Defenses**

One constant in an otherwise tumultuous North Korea is its continued efforts to develop ballistic missile ranges and capabilities. The North Koreans' successful three-stage rocket launch in December 2012, plus continued missile and nuclear programs and cooperation with countries such as Iran, suggests South Korea must accelerate the upgrade of its missile defense systems. With a North Korean capability to attack U.S. soil, the South will need to better safeguard its interests by having a robust defense force. Most of these systems are accepted by President Park, but what is needed is a complete commitment to a "4D" strategy to detect, defend, disrupt and destroy North Korea's increasingly capable missile inventory. The U.S.-ROK alliance endorsed such an approach in October 2013 as part of the official Security Consultative Meeting process, but implementation needs to accelerate. Detection requires better intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. Defense means improving passive and active defenses, including both expediting PAC3 Patriot upgrades and new sea-based interceptor missiles.<sup>42</sup>

Disruption entails developing both kinetic as well as nonkinetic means of thwarting an attack. Importantly, this requires deep-strike capabilities to attack key fixed infrastructure rapidly; this may be hard to do for a South Korean force that is retiring a large percentage of its aircraft with no quick replacement in sight. And destruction means a focus on adversary command and control or C4I assets. Deploying and integrating a ballistic missile defense system with the United States and Japan should be an overriding priority, and concerns about upsetting China should be dismissed. No one is interested in attacking China, but all should be interested in deterring North Korea.

### **4. Deterring North Korea's Possible Development of Tactical Nuclear Weapons**

In a somewhat cryptic New Year's message in 2014, Kim Jong Un called for completing the miniaturization of a nuclear warhead. While it is logical to imagine he might have been referring to creating a nuclear warhead to fit atop a missile (and no doubt this remains an important goal), it appears he was talking about creating tactical nuclear weapons. South Korea has long assumed that nuclear weapons would not be used against it and that U.S. extended deterrence prevented such use. North Korea may be calculating, however, that using a small-yield nuclear weapon might not trigger a nuclear response and the mere threat of using these battlefield nuclear weapons against South Korea might create new leverage for Pyongyang. It is necessary to stay on guard for the deployment of these systems within the next three years and to further strengthen deterrence to prevent their use. The United States has underscored its own deterrence strategies, including its nuclear capabilities, as a bulwark for peace. The United States may want to extend its deterrence efforts to prevent the use of tactical nuclear weapons, in light of North Korea's potential breakout capability.

## 5. Improving South Korean Societal Resilience to Asymmetric Attacks

There is no way to fully protect Seoul, but there are ways to make it less susceptible to North Korean acts of sabotage and terrorism, the use of chemical or tactical nuclear weapons, or hard-to-attribute cyberattacks. The city cannot be evacuated without huge disruption and cost and it cannot be emptied quickly. By the time Seoul is hit, the North would have succeeded in sowing the panic it believed would compel the U.S.-ROK alliance to make crucial concessions or accept a punishing first strike. Even moving some government functions to Sejong, well outside of Seoul, will not protect those vital decision makers and sectors trapped in the capital. North Korea does not seek a war, but it certainly is not afraid to use all means at its disposal to keep its adversaries off balance. Act of sabotage and terrorism perpetrated by the North, much like the sinking of the *Cheonan*, would require time-consuming forensics work to attribute. The delay might prevent the opportunity to respond quickly. Better preparing Seoul to be resilient in the face of a variety of plausible attacks, including a massive cyberattack, can deter North Korean adventurism and support an effective response should deterrence fail.

## 6. Focusing on the Need for Offensive Operations in the ROK Armed Forces

U.S.-ROK exercises have largely been focused on defending South Korea from North Korean aggression. The rare exceptions only highlight how little attention has been devoted to the need for active, forward operations to respond to unfolding dynamics within North Korea. In the early spring of 2013, for instance, as alert levels rose in response to North Korean threats and military tests, the U.S.-ROK allied military force added a new dimension to its annual Joint Chiefs of Staff Foal Eagle exercise. Balance Knife 13-1 provided a joint combined exchange training exercise for ROK and U.S. special operations forces to simulate initial-entry

force movement of commandos into North Korea. The exercise was partly meant to help military forces understand just how dissimilar – and even more contested – a conflict in North Korea might be from the extensive recent military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The need to practice the “super forward operating base” concept for Korean contingencies stems from the possibility that U.S.-ROK forces would be fighting in hostile terrain, far removed from support.<sup>43</sup> The three-day Balance Knife exercise in April 2013 provided a rare opportunity for special operations forces to consider how to move in and out of North Korea to respond to various contingencies. It also considered ways to build a “loyal resistance” movement.<sup>44</sup> The drill included more than 800 ROK forces of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> ROK Special Forces Brigades, as well as some 250 troops from U.S. Special Operations Task Force 13.<sup>45</sup> Such demonstrations of capability for force can enhance deterrence. As three officers analyzing the exercise have argued: “Given the height of tensions on the peninsula, Foal Eagle could not have been better timed. Despite the fact that it is an annual exercise, the deterrent effect can be directly correlated to decreased rhetoric by North Korea. On March 11, 2013, at the start of the Key Resolve exercise, North Korea declared that they would unilaterally invalidate the 1953 armistice. However, by the time Foal Eagle was in full swing, they changed their position to say that armistice should be replaced by a peace treaty.”<sup>46</sup>

## 7. Replenishing Front-Line Fighters and Creating a Serious Offensive Strike Capability

OPLAN 5029 has advanced planning for sudden change, but it has left behind huge gaps in capability. South Korea does not even stockpile basic munitions sufficient to sustain a campaign, and U.S. timelines are long for reinforcements. Meanwhile, South Korea is facing a critical gap in fighter aircraft capability as it waits to purchase fifth-generation F-35s and yet must retire

immediately aging F-4 and F-5 aircraft.<sup>47</sup> Closing the fighter gap may not win a war, but it will prevent South Korea from potentially losing one. While others have pointed to the need for serious occupation forces, the recent experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as well-known North Korean indoctrination, would suggest not wasting the investment on those ground forces. Any occupying force from any nation is likely to endure hostility and bloodshed. But at least the ROK military can field a better force for striking missile and key command and control sites to avoid the most lethal damage to South Korea.

Tactically, the use of stealth and electronic warfare (EW) platforms such as F/A-18Gs could perhaps provide essential covert responses to limited attacks from North Korea. But Korea should probably forgo introducing a fourth new aircraft into the stretched force. Rather, it should consider slowing the cost and timeline of the F-35 in order to absorb a short-term addition of fighter capability such as 20 F-15s that have the payload and range to handle today's North Korean threat. Such a tradeoff keeps costs manageable while investing in a real threat today rather than what remains only a notional threat tomorrow (even if North Korea survives, its air defenses will not require fifth-generation stealth anytime soon); but South Korea's Park would be paying now for aircraft her administration won't see deployed during her tenure, when the risk of deterrence failure may be highest.

## **8. Improved, Practical Regional Security Cooperation**

Regional security cooperation that provides real defense security will require improved coordination among the military powers surrounding North Korea. This needs to begin with Korea, the United States and Japan. The current tensions between Seoul and Tokyo could seriously hamper the U.S.-ROK alliance. This recommendation will no doubt be the least well received in Korea. Serious issues exist that require high-level attention

from Tokyo and Seoul. But these recommendations are aimed at one goal: to address the window of vulnerability on the Korean Peninsula. Failure to conclude intelligence sharing and missile defense cooperation agreements and to engage in serious trilateral contingency planning among South Korea, the United States and Japan jeopardizes the security of all three countries. At the very least, Japan is vital for U.S. operations in support of South Korea, and in particular Japan's intelligence and missile defense assets are crucial for regional security against North Korea. Although the ROK has the best human intelligence, Japan has superior signals intelligence. Bringing Japan into the regional security fold would create the most immediate military benefit. Yet, to be effective, any regional security cooperation on the issue of North Korea must involve China.



## V. CONCLUSION

While the above recommendations are not cure-alls, they may help reduce the risk to regional and global security emanating from an unstable North Korea. This threat is occurring just as the United States, while fully committed to South Korea's security, is engaged in overhauling its armed forces after two protracted ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A renewed conflict on the Korean Peninsula is not likely to resemble recent wars. Even so, North Korea's capabilities should not be underestimated. For instance, a recent survey of 200 North Korean defectors with military experience overwhelmingly judged the North Korean military to be tougher and more battle-ready than South Korean soldiers and more likely to win a fight.<sup>48</sup> North Korea's cyber capabilities are growing and the number of probing attacks on Seoul in recent years suggests an ability to conduct a major strike at North Korea's time of choosing. Missile and nuclear tests and missile launches are possible at any time, and some of these may come without any significant warning time.

It is also worth remembering that amid the musical chairs of military leadership in North Korea, there is one commander who has held the same post for the past dozen years. Colonel General Choe Kyong Song, XI Corps commander, is in charge of the main Special Operations Forces, a 200,000-man force equipped with air assault, chemical weapons and a full range of capabilities. He is Kim's protector, and his vision is simple: "to put an end to the destiny of the aggressors along the way marked by the red arrow drawn by the Supreme Command."<sup>49</sup>

If war is to be deterred on the Korean Peninsula, then surely the best way forward is by rethinking deterrence and escalation in a changing security environment. Preserving a strong U.S.-ROK alliance is central to this mission.

---

*If war is to be deterred on the Korean Peninsula, then surely the best way forward is by rethinking deterrence and escalation in a changing security environment.*

*Preserving a strong U.S.-ROK alliance is central to this mission.*

---

## ENDNOTES

1. For instance, see Kurt Campbell, "Asia enters an age of increasing uncertainty," *Financial Times*' A-List blog on ft.com, January 30, 2014, <http://blogs.ft.com/the-a-list/2014/01/30/asia-enters-an-age-of-increasing-uncertainty/#axzz2vDoyy4SW>.
2. The foremost long-term trend is the impact of a rising China and the challenge of fitting it into a regional and global system largely determined during the postwar period of American pre-eminence. An increasingly powerful yet internally insecure China is determined to exercise greater influence on its periphery. The primary result of this probing for regional control is growing instability, especially in the East China Sea and South China Sea. For the first time in modern history, China has declared its intent to have a major blue-water navy. This trend has been highlighted by the commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III; see Andrew Tilghman, "PACOM chief: Uncontested U.S. control of Pacific is ending," *Air Force Times*, January 15, 2014, <http://www.airforcetimes.com/article/20140115/NEWS08/301150028>. But this is a long-term challenge that could be altered by China's own internal complications and economic slowdown. These maritime tensions are important and mounting and may well precipitate a greater maritime arms competition, but for now they chiefly point to the need for largely interdependent countries to re-establish or create rules for good order at sea and the global commons, build mechanisms for averting dangerous incidents and escalation, and over time forge a new regional architecture. Some critics try to imply that every assertive action taken by China is nothing but a response to U.S. policy, when in fact it has much more to do with Chinese internal calculations, plans and domestic politics. For instance, Li Guoqiang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences blamed U.S. rebalancing policy for pushing China into asserting an East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone. See Demetri Sevastopulo, "Chinese navy makes more waves in the Pacific," *Financial Times*, February 12, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/7848ddfc-9396-11e3-8ea7-00144feab7de.html#axzz2t6p7LgYz>.
3. This is an argument expounded by one of America's top officials working on North Korea, Sydney Seiler, director for Korea at the U.S. National Security Council, speaking at the Center for Strategic & International Studies on January 21, 2014. It was reiterated by three previous commanders of the United Nations Command/Combined Forces Command/U.S. Forces Korea: General John H. Tilelli Jr., USA (Ret.); General Walter "Skip" Sharp, USA (Ret.); and General James D. Thurman, USA (Ret.); see "U.S.-Korea Security Agenda in Asia 2014," <http://csis.org/event/us-korea-security-agenda-asia-2014>.
4. The Commander of U.S. Forces Korea Command (USFK) is simultaneously Commander, ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) and the United Nations Command (UNC).
5. Ibid.
6. On black markets, see, *inter alia*, James Pearson, "Black Markets Get Some Respect in North Korea," *The New York Times*, November 4, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/05/business/international/black-market-gets-some-respect-in-north-korea.html>. On food consumption, the most recent estimated rice harvest shows a decline; see "N. Korea's rice output to dip in 2013-14 harvest year: U.N. report," Yonhap News Agency, November 12, 2013, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2013/11/12/29/0200000000AEN2013112003300315F.html>.
7. Reports suggesting no change in trade may simply be too soon to reflect a likely change in Chinese largesse. For instance, see Kwanwoo Jun, "Jang Purge Yet to Hurt North Korea-China Trade," *The Wall Street Journal's* Korea Realtime blog on wsj.com, February 28, 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/korearealtime/2014/02/28/jang-purge-yet-to-hurt-north-korea-china-trade/>.
8. "Full text of KCNA announcement on execution of Jang," North Korea Tech, December 13, 2013, <http://www.northkoreatech.org/2013/12/13/full-text-of-kcna-announcement-on-execution-of-jang/>.
9. Robert Collins, "North Korea's Theater of the Absurd and the New Number Two's," WarontheRocks.com, February 13, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/02/north-koreas-theater-of-the-absurd-and-the-new-number-twos-3/>.
10. Ibid.
11. "Cheohyeongdoen 'Jang Seong Taek Cheukggeun' Ri Yong Ha- Jang Su Gil-eun Nugu? (Who are the executed 'close associates of Jang Song Taek,' Ri Yong Ha and Jang Su Gil?)," *The Dong-A Ilbo*, December 3, 2013, <http://news.donga.com/BestClick/3/all/20131203/59313235/1>.
12. Ibid.
13. "Hundreds of Koreans hold tearful family reunions," Yonhap News, February 23, 2014, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/search1/2603000000.html?cid=AEN20140223000753315>.
14. For a running critique of the June reforms, see "Archive for the '6.28 Policy on Agriculture (June 28)' Category," North Korean Economy Watch, <http://www.nkeconwatch.com/category/policies/6-28-policy-on-agriculture-june-28/>.
15. This is the argument of John G. Grisafi, "Kim Consolidates Power in February: N. Korean Regime Attempts to Reinforce Loyalty While Making Position Changes after Purge," NKNews.org, March 10, 2014, <http://www.nknews.org/2014/03/kim-consolidates-power-in-february/>.
16. Ibid.
17. "U.S.-South Korea Military Relations," C-SPAN video, January 21, 2014, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?317340-1/panel-ussouth-korea-military-relations>.
18. A press release from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights summarizes the report; see "North Korea: UN Commission documents wide-ranging and ongoing crimes against humanity, urges referral to ICC," February 17, 2014, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14255&LangID=E>. For one North Korean response, which blames a U.S.-led conspiracy, see James Pearson and Ju-min

Park, “North Korea condemns Australian judge behind U.N. rights report,” Reuters, February 28, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/28/us-korea-north-un-idUSBREA1R09020140228>.

19. Please refer to retired General James D. Thurman’s comments in “U.S.-South Korea Military Relations.”

20. This is based on my discussions with senior Korean officials during interviews in Seoul in January 2014. This concern is related to why some in South Korea have been pushing to strengthen America’s extended nuclear deterrent by reintroducing theater nuclear weapons into South Korea, thereby reversing the U.S. policy undertaken by President George H.W. Bush after the end of the Cold War. See David E. Sanger, “In U.S., South Korean Makes Case for Nuclear Arms,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/world/asia/in-us-south-korean-makes-case-for-nuclear-arms.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/world/asia/in-us-south-korean-makes-case-for-nuclear-arms.html?_r=0).

21. Author interview with officials at U.S. Forces Command, Seoul, January 27, 2104.

22. “Japan, N. Korea agree to restart dialogue soon,” *The Japan Times*, March 20, 2014, [http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/03/20/national/japan-n-korea-agree-to-restart-dialogue-soon/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=japan-n-korea-agree-to-restart-dialogue-soon#.Uyx2T-ewLrQ](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/03/20/national/japan-n-korea-agree-to-restart-dialogue-soon/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=japan-n-korea-agree-to-restart-dialogue-soon#.Uyx2T-ewLrQ).

23. Department of Veterans Affairs, *America’s Wars* (May 2013), [www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs\\_americas\\_wars.pdf](http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_americas_wars.pdf). These numbers do not include some 2,800 other deaths in theater or the nearly 8,000 personnel considered missing to this day. See Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office, *Progress on Korean War Personnel Accounting* (February 11, 2014), [www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/factsheets/documents/Korea\\_factsheet.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/factsheets/documents/Korea_factsheet.pdf).

24. As of February 2014, more than 5,200 U.S. service personnel had been killed in action in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, but total deaths were closer to about 7,000. See [www.defense.gov/news/casualty.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/news/casualty.pdf).

25. “Beyond 60 Years,” *United States Forces Korea Strategic Digest* 2013, 13.

26. Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, *Joint Investigation Report On the Attack Against ROK Ship Cheonan* (September 2010), [http://old.armscontrolcenter.org/policy/northkorea/articles/cheonan%20investigation%20report\\_1.pdf](http://old.armscontrolcenter.org/policy/northkorea/articles/cheonan%20investigation%20report_1.pdf).

27. Leon V. Sigal, “Primer—North Korea, South Korea, and the United States: Reading between the lines of the *Cheonan* attack,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 66 no. 5 (2010), 35-44, [http://www.ssrc.org/workspace/images/crm/new\\_publication\\_31/%7B8cc2ccd-94d0-df11-a822-001cc477ec84%7D.pdf](http://www.ssrc.org/workspace/images/crm/new_publication_31/%7B8cc2ccd-94d0-df11-a822-001cc477ec84%7D.pdf).

28. Jon M. Van Dyke, Mark J. Valencia, Jenny Miller Garmendia, “The North/South Korea Boundary Dispute in the Yellow (West) Sea,” *Marine Policy*, 27 (2003), 143-158, <https://www.law.hawaii.edu/sites/www.law.hawaii.edu/files/content/Faculty/N-SKoreaBoundary2003.pdf>.

29. Indeed, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates believes succession issues were involved. As he writes: “North Korean leader Kim Jong Il had been ill for some time, and speculation was that the sinking was the bright idea of

his twenty-something son, Kim Jong Un, to prove to the North Korean military, as I suggested earlier, that he was tough enough to succeed his father. This line of thinking suggested that other provocations might be coming, so underscoring the strength of our alliance was very important.” Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 426.

30. “South Korea’s defense minister vows airstrikes if North Korea attacks,” CNN, December 3, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/12/03/south.korea.threat/>.

31. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, 507.

32. In retrospect, Jang Song Thaek appears to have been under suspicion for some time. Based on one of the few available metrics—the number of times referenced by the DPRK’s official Korean Central News Agency—Jang suffered a significant and increasing reduction in coverage after 2011 but especially throughout 2013. Coverage during this period fell from about 12 references per month to about 2 references per month. See “Jang Song Thaek,” NKNNews.org, <http://kcnwatch.nknews.org/site/person/jang-song-thaek/>.

33. President Park Geun-hye has requested virtually an indefinite delay in wartime operational control (OPCON) reversion, but presumably South Korean politics will demand the leading role in wartime and not just the time of the armistice. See Lee Chi-dong, “Pentagon wants ‘conditions-based’ OPCON transfer to Korea, official says,” Yonhap News Agency, January 29, 2014, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/full/2014/01/29/26/1200000000AEN20140129000251315F.html>.

34. Bruce W. Bennett, “A Brief Analysis of the Republic of Korea’s Defense Reform Plan,” Occasional Paper OP-165-OSD (RAND Corporation, December 2005), [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional\\_papers/2006/RAND\\_OP165.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2006/RAND_OP165.pdf).

35. Hong Kyu-dok, “The ROK Announces its Defense Reform Basic Plan 2012-2030,” Korea Institute for Defense Analyses *ROK Angle*, Issue 74 (October 4, 2012), <http://www.kida.re.kr/?sidx=711&stype=2&pageNo=3&skey=&sword>.

36. “Ireon Gukbang-gaehyeok-euro Buk-Dongbuk-a Anbo Wihyeob Matsseogetna [Will this Defense Reform Plan stand up against a North Korean or a E. Asian security threat?]” *Donga Ilbo*. March 7, 2014. <http://news.donga.com/Main/3/040109/20140307/61504859/1>

37. “Park Fears N. Korean Provocation Early This Year,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, January 15, 2014, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2014/01/15/2014011500791.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/01/15/2014011500791.html). Also see “Military on Full Alert for N. Korean Provocations,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, December 19, 2013, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2013/12/19/2013121901368.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/12/19/2013121901368.html).

38. U.S. Department of Defense, *Remarks by Acting Deputy Secretary Fox at the 2014 AFCEA WEST Conference, San Diego, California* (February 11, 2014), <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5369>.

39. Ibid.

40. Bechtol, *North Korea and Regional Security in the Kim Jong-un Era: A New International Security Dilemma*, 124.

41. "S. Korea, U.S. Complete N. Korean Contingency Plan," *The Chosun Ilbo*, March 10, 2014, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2009/11/02/2009110200526.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/11/02/2009110200526.html). The concerns about the planning were expressed by a number of senior U.S. and Korean military officers during discussions in Seoul in January 2014.
42. In the interim between when this report was first drafted and its final publication, the South Korean government announced its intention to upgrade its PAC2 air defense system by buying PAC3 missiles and upgrading its PAC2 fire-control system. See Kim Eun-jung, "S. Korea to buy PAC-3 Missiles Next Year," *Yonhap News*, March 12, 2014, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/full/2014/03/12/70/1200000000AEN20140312009000315F.html>.
43. Captain Brian Hartigan and Captain Ben Lee, "Preparing for ODA Level Initial Entry UW Operations in Korea," *Special Warfare* (January-March 2014), 27 no. 1, 59-61.
44. *Ibid.*, 60.
45. Major Joshua Thiel, Captain Saong You and Captain Jason Couture, "Foil Eagle 2013: Combined Unconventional Warfare," *Special Warfare* (January-March 2014), 27 no. 1, 62.
46. *Ibid.*, 62-65.
47. Yang Uk, "F-X, Deo isang Jiyeondwaeseon An Doeneun Iyu [The Reason Why the F-X Project Cannot be Delayed Further]," *Hanguk Ilbo*, September 17, 2013, [http://www.dapa.go.kr/internet/information/major\\_business\\_plan/fighter\\_02.jsp?mode=readForm&boardCode=BDADMI23&curPage=1&searchField=TITLE&searchWord=&articleSeq=12001](http://www.dapa.go.kr/internet/information/major_business_plan/fighter_02.jsp?mode=readForm&boardCode=BDADMI23&curPage=1&searchField=TITLE&searchWord=&articleSeq=12001).
48. See Kim Byeong-uk and Kim Young-hui, "Oebu Sajo Yuibgwa Bukhangun Uisik Byeonhwa Silche [A Study on the Influx of Capitalist Elements and Alteration of Consciousness within the Korean People's Army]," *Korea Institute for National Unification*, 22 no. 2 (December 2013), 26, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/servlet/Download?num=895&fno=935&bid=DATA03>.
49. See Bill Rockwood, Evan Wexler and Sarah Childress, "Inside Kim Jong-un's Military Shakeup," *Frontline*, January 16, 2014, [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/secret-state-of-north-korea/inside-kim-jong-uns-military-shake-up/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+FrontlineEditorsNotes+\(FRONTLINE+Latest+Stories\)](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/secret-state-of-north-korea/inside-kim-jong-uns-military-shake-up/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+FrontlineEditorsNotes+(FRONTLINE+Latest+Stories)).





## *About the Center for a New American Security*

The mission of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) is to develop strong, pragmatic and principled national security and defense policies. Building on the expertise and experience of its staff and advisors, CNAS engages policymakers, experts and the public with innovative, fact-based research, ideas and analysis to shape and elevate the national security debate. A key part of our mission is to inform and prepare the national security leaders of today and tomorrow.

CNAS is located in Washington, and was established in February 2007 by co-founders Kurt M. Campbell and Michèle A. Flournoy. CNAS is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt nonprofit organization. Its research is independent and non-partisan. CNAS does not take institutional positions on policy issues. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the authors.

© 2014 Center for a New American Security.

All rights reserved.

### **Center for a New American Security**

1152 15th Street, NW  
Suite 950  
Washington, DC 20005

TEL 202.457.9400  
FAX 202.457.9401  
EMAIL [info@cnas.org](mailto:info@cnas.org)  
[www.cnas.org](http://www.cnas.org)

## *Production Notes*

**Paper recycling** is reprocessing waste paper fibers back into a usable paper product.

**Soy ink** is a helpful component in paper recycling. It helps in this process because the soy ink can be removed more easily than regular ink and can be taken out of paper during the de-inking process of recycling. This allows the recycled paper to have less damage to its paper fibers and have a brighter appearance. The waste that is left from the soy ink during the de-inking process is not hazardous and it can be treated easily through the development of modern processes.





**Center for a  
New American  
Security**

**STRONG, PRAGMATIC AND PRINCIPLED  
NATIONAL SECURITY AND DEFENSE POLICIES**

1152 15th Street, NW  
Suite 950  
Washington, DC 20005

TEL 202.457.9400  
FAX 202.457.9401  
EMAIL [info@cnas.org](mailto:info@cnas.org)

[www.cnas.org](http://www.cnas.org)

ISBN 978-1-935087-83-0

5 0999 >



9 781935 087830



Printed on Post-Consumer Recycled paper with Soy Inks