

Asymmetric Warfare on the Korean Peninsula

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According to a high-ranking North Korean defector and South Korean government officials, North Korea has developed an invasion plan of the South that employs asymmetric warfare techniques including nuclear capabilities to level the playing field for conflict on the peninsula. The existence of a plan is not surprising however, its nature is of concern to the ongoing security of the Korean Peninsula. Indeed the US and South Korea have the standing defence plan ‘OPLAN 5027’ however the revised North Korean strategy appears far more aggressive than anything devised by either the US or the South.

Geopolitics is hard to predict and small changes in the political environment can rapidly escalate, as such, it is not surprising that North Korea would maintain a conflict plan for the event of all-out war on the Korean Peninsula, after all, the 1953 armistice that has held a make-do ‘peace’ has not always looked strong enough to prevent all-out war with many crises bringing the peninsula extremely close the 1976 ‘Axe Murder’ incident, the 1994 nuclear crisis, the 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong island to name a few. However, the nature of North Korea’s current approach should be of concern to both South Korea and the US.

The North Korean plan is not defensive in nature but distinctly offensive. It doesn’t call for artillery and forces to hold the 38th parallel but instead for first strikes with missiles and or nuclear capabilities that may deter American reinforcement. It is clear that North Korea would not be able to endure a drawn-out conventional conflict with the US, at least not without the direct intervention of China. However, it could strike a terrible blow to South Korea and it may expect that, if that strike is harsh

enough, US foreign policy would not be able to stomach deploying troops to reclaim irradiated warzones.

The plan, initiated in 2012 - early into Kim Jung Un's leadership, has been deemed the 'Seven Day Plan' in that North Korea would need to take control of the Korean Peninsula within 7-days for it to be fully effective ? a time too short for US reinforcements to be redeployed in the Pacific.

It is determined that missiles and nuclear capabilities would be the primary tools of disrupting any US-South Korean response, meanwhile troops would secure vital interests and conventional military hardware would then be deployed to secure victory. Increased missile testing as well as North Korea's third nuclear test in 2013, should come as a severe warning of the North's commitment to this plan. Notably, there is an absence of consideration for or reliance on Chinese support. Clearly, difficulties in relations over the last few years has created a climate for a more desperate self-sufficient North Korean military strategy.

Parallels may rightly be drawn between the new North Korean approach and the way in which Russia annexed Crimea from the Ukraine in 2014. The Crimea situation has demonstrated an international reluctance towards a decisive response. The 'Shock and Awe' strategy of Russia left the international community at a loss for how to respond and before a military response was feasible, a new order has been established. It is possible that North Korea will now doubt how decisive the international community's response would be if South Korea was to fall to a sudden precise military action. In actuality, South Korea is heavily embedded in the international community and so those same parallels may be limited and the commitment of the US to defend the South is particularly strong. Additionally, an attack on South Korea would involve US casualties and it would be argued publicly to be a direct attack on the US ? a US response would be inevitable.

In 1950, Kim Il Sung had assumed that his rapid conquering of South Korean territory would have been the end of a divided Korea - in his favour. However, even when pushed as far south as Busan, South Korean and the UN forces pushed the North back to the Yalu River on China's boarder. If such a decisive international response rescued a South Korea that had been deemed 'not a vital part of the US defense perimeter in Asia' by then secretary of state Dean Acheson, then it must be expected that today's South Korea would be assisted by the international community in the face of any eventuality. The important thing to note is that if it is the North Korean perspective that the South would receive limited support then an extremely dangerous precedent has already been set.

If the North is prepared to use nuclear capabilities in a first-strike capacity then the US and South Korea must seriously consider pre-emptive strikes on nuclear facilities to eliminate this threat. As such, the new Seven Day Plan pushes all sides closer to war. With a North Korea unable to win either

an arms race or a protracted conflict as a result of vast economic disparities it must be appreciated that its nuclear capabilities are not solely a political bargaining chip. Other aspects of its approach for asymmetric war lend credibility to the threat the military structure of the North is heavily reliant on submarines (which constitute a naval guerrilla strategy), landing craft (which constitute mobility of land forces) and missile capabilities (which will disregard civilian life in order to achieve military superiority).

In response to the heightened North Korean threat, the South Korean Military strategy will need revisions. In order to offset risk posed by the North's first strike nuclear strategy, reliance on US support will become more important than ever before. This will mean relevant revisions to OPLAN 5027 as well as revisions to OPLAN 5029 (the contingency strategy in the case of a North Korean regime collapse). A heightened military threat posed by North Korea would perhaps be most critical should there be a sudden political destabilization in the North. Additionally, an emphasis will need to be made on maintaining the joint RoK-US Joint Forces Command that is responsible for the immediate response in the event of a crisis. There are few direct countermeasures - aside from pre-emptive precision airstrikes to prevent their use - that removes the direct threat that nuclear weapons and missiles present. As such, in a worst case scenario, it would fall to US capabilities of launching from aircraft carriers and out of neighbouring bases to ensure the security of South Korea. As such, a strong unified approach, as well as being politically important, offers the strongest military defence strategy.

The Seven Day Plan could never be a wholly successful approach for the North. Consensus exists that there are no feasible scenarios in which the US would not commit its military to maintaining and/or re-establishing the sovereignty of South Korea. However, the plan constitutes a direct and severe threat in that it pushes all sides closer to initiation. Beyond this, it severely raises the risk of deployment of weapons of mass destruction and greatly enhances the risk of civilian casualties in the event of all-out war. Despite the North's revised strategy, the immediate situation remains stable but tensions that arise on the peninsula in the future will have to be managed with increasing care by all parties in order to avoid greater catastrophes than the limited conflicts previously witnessed.

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