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Military Stalemate: How North Korea Could Win a War With the US

It's time to reexamine the assertion that North Korea's defeat is preordained.

By Franz-Stefan Gady
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North Korea's defeat in a war with South Korea and the United States is inevitable. At least that's the consensus among most military experts. The war would be "nasty, brutish, and short" and could cost the lives of up to 20,000 per day even before the use of nuclear weapons. Yet the outcome would never be in doubt: the defeat of the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK). This conclusion is drawn based on analyzing the relative military capabilities of North Korea, primarily seen as a function of its military hardware and munitions stockpile, versus the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the United States.

Chiefly focusing on the DPRK's military hardware — whether it is its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, artillery systems, or submarine force — in assessing the fighting strength of North Korea is understandable. It has always been easier to quantify military capabilities than, for example, training levels and motivation of a force. Especially in the case of the DPRK military, which has not fought a war in over six decades, intelligence gaps have amplified the old phenomenon that military analysts tend to focus on what is quantifiable (e.g., number of artillery pieces and types of ammunition fired) over what is not.

After all, if North Koreans run out of bullets, neither superior morale nor tactics will be able to make up for this deficit true to the old British imperialist maxim that, “Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim gun, and they have not.” Yet even during the heydays of military technological imbalance in the 19th century when European armies, like ROK and U.S. forces today, placed their trust in superior firepower and organization military defeats could happen. Those defeats were the result of military hubris including underestimating non-quantifiable yet nevertheless important elements of warfare such as fighting morale or “morale forces.”

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As Carl von Clausewitz notes in *On War*, morale forces are “are amongst the most important subjects in war.” They “are the spirits which permeate the whole element of war.” However, “unfortunately they seek to escape from all book-knowledge, for they will neither be brought into numbers nor into classes, and want only to be seen and felt,” as the Prussian philosopher of war laments. In the case of warfare on the Korean peninsula, by leaving out morale forces and other non-quantifiable factors, we have come to an explicit systematic and mathematical understanding of how such a war might play out akin to the pseudo-scientific pre-1914 ideas of the Prussian-German General Staff about a general war in Europe.

Consequently, based on Clausewitz’s dictum of the inherent unpredictability of war and his teachings of the importance of morale force in conflict, it may be worthwhile to pose the question: Could North Korea, despite its relatively limited military capabilities, still win a war? And if so, how? Victory for North Korea in that case is defined in the following ways. First, preserve the regime of Kim Jong-un. Second, preserve the territorial integrity of the DPRK. A thorough analysis of morale, however, would not only entail a closer look at the DPRK, but more importantly morale forces at play in the U.S. and ROK militaries and in their senior civilian and military leadership. The bottom line is that we must consider the possibility that Kim Jong-un has the means to re-create a military stalemate on the Korean peninsula and as a corollary “win” a Second Korean War.

(In this short piece, I do not address the question of economic warfare, nor do I get into details when it comes to DPRK external support in the event of conflict.)

How the North Could Win: Asymmetric Capabilities

For the DPRK to “win” a war against ROK and the U.S. it would need to achieve a military stalemate of some sort. North Korea’s military strategy is centered on guerilla warfare, hybrid warfare, and *Blitzkrieg*-like conventional warfare. Ever since Kim Jong-un assumed leadership, the military has increasingly focused on waging total war partially based on developing asymmetrical capabilities including WMDs. As South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense states in an assessment: “During contingency, North Korean forces are likely to resort to hybrid and guerilla warfare and blitzkrieg. There is a strong possibility that they will launch massive surprise attacks on limited targets, mainly using their asymmetric capabilities.” Consequently, the DPRKs nuclear weapons program should be seen in the context of an overall warfighting strategy designed to make conventional and hybrid conflict with South Korea and the United States possible should deterrence break down.

Indeed, a military stalemate on the Korean peninsula can *only* be achieved via the use of DPRK asymmetrical capabilities. “I do not think that North Korea can achieve a conventional stalemate in a conflict in which the US/ROK have decided that they need to invade North Korea,” Bruce W. Bennett, a defense researcher at the RAND Corporation, told *The Diplomat* in a recent interview. “I think that North Korea would use chemical, biological, and perhaps even nuclear weapons to create a needed stalemate.” Bennett adds: “North Korea recognized the U.S. military technological superiority was significantly overcoming their military advances by the late 1970s. Starting in the early 1980s, if not sooner, North Korea began adjusting their military portfolio to include all forms of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), plus the artillery, ballistic missiles, and special forces needed to deliver those weapons. The quandary for North Korea is what happens when it starts to use WMD.”

Another burgeoning asymmetrical capability that the North is working on is cyberwarfare. According to South Korean military intelligence, the DPRK has formed a 6,800-strong unit of cyberwarfare experts capable of launching a variety of cyberattacks. “We must prepare for surprises, but in general, the North probably does not have the complex intelligence collection and analysis capabilities for effective cyber combat operations on any sustained basis,” Greg Austin, a professor in the Australian Centre for Cybersecurity at the University of New South Wales, told *The Diplomat*. “Cyber warfare is not as easy as nuisance hacking or simple espionage. The biggest cyber threat from Kim [Jong-un] is to civilian critical infrastructure, possibly including South Korean nuclear power plants.”

Jason Healey, a senior research scholar and cyber conflict expert at Columbia University, says that there are number of ways how the DPRK could slow down ROK and U.S. war efforts: “I suspect their best luck could be in a few areas, one directed at us [United States] and one at South Korea. The one at us would be to try and disrupt transportation networks, such as airports and especially shipping so we can flow forces to the region. We’ve known about those threats for literally decades but I suspect there are still vulnerabilities since even DDoS or ransomware attacks (e.g., NotPetya at Maersk) could be enough. The one directed at the South might disrupt traffic lights, ATMs, and other infrastructure to increase panic and especially delay evacuation of Seoul while limiting U.S. abilities to move forces into fighting positions.”

However, Healey rejects the idea that the DPRK would be capable of disrupting or even hijacking U.S. nuclear command and control systems: “Hell, hell no. Hard even for Russia and China and it is isn’t like China would help them. The truly paranoid might worry about a blackmailed insider, but that is just an incredibly ridiculous stretch.”

DPRK special operations forces would also contribute to achieving a standoff in the event of a conflict. The force is currently estimated to be around 200,000 strong and consist of wide array of units including light infantry divisions, amphibious assault forces, and sniper brigades. In wartime, special operations units are likely to infiltrate both the forward and rear areas through underground tunnels and the DMZ or with the help of other means of infiltration, such as submarines, landing craft air cushions (LCACs), AN-2 aircraft and helicopters, to conduct hybrid operations by attacking vital units, facilities and installations, assassinating key figures, and disrupting rear areas,” the South Korean defense ministry explains in an assessment. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that DPRK special forces have not been deployed for

full-scale military operations since the end of the Korean War (1950-1953). Consequently, it is difficult to assess their overall combat effectiveness.

Last, the DPRK's conventional forces should not be underestimated in the event of a conflict. North Korea has almost 1.2 million troops in its various conventional military branches. Seventy percent of DPRK ground forces are stationed near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) south of the Pyongyang-Wonsan line. (I will not go into the capabilities of DPRK air and naval forces here.)

According to South Korean intelligence estimates, the North Korean military has been working on improving its operational capabilities. Among other things, this entailed implementing an integrated tactical command and control system to improve C4I (Command, Control, Communication, Computer and Intelligence) capabilities. "North Korea is also improving its operational capabilities through equipment modernization, with its armored and mechanized units now being equipped with Chonma-ho and Songun-ho main battle tanks," the ROK defense ministry notes. The DPRK has also recently deployed new 300-millimeter multiple rocket launchers in close proximity to the border and overall has reinforced its artillery forces. However, "the level of training of North Korean artillerymen has declined recently," Colonel (ret.) James Creighton, the former Chief of Staff of the Eighth United States Army in Korea, told *The Diplomat*. Despite that the ROK defense ministry asserts that DPRK forces are capable "of carrying out a surprise attack on the South at any time."

North Korea is estimated to have a large enough military stockpile (e.g. munitions, fuel) to fight for one to three months. (Clandestine or overt Russian or Chinese military assistance could extend this timeline.)

How the North Could Win: Morale Forces

Nonetheless, discussing a possible military stalemate in the event of a war with the U.S. and ROK would not be complete without factoring in fighting morale and motivation, as I mentioned above. Let's just consider one scenario. Should a war break out and the WMD threshold along with full-scale conventional artillery attacks on Seoul be crossed, ROK and U.S. forces will be compelled to invade DPRK territory. While the U.S. and ROK air forces will be able to take out a substantial number of targets in the North, ground troops would still be needed to eliminate artillery and missile launch sites with certainty.

"The approximately 7,000 North Korean tubes that are in range of Seoul are all deeply buried and dug in," James Creighton said. "The U.S. and ROK Air Forces combined with U.S. and ROK artillery are well trained and rehearsed to take them out but it would probably be 1 – 2 weeks at best." A lot can happen during those two weeks of war. "I believe that it would be a tall order for air forces to get all of the sites. North Korea has developed mobile capabilities which makes it even more difficult," Creighton adds. "The U.S. Air Force could definitely destroy most of the capability but not all of it."

Military success in a fight in the North will, among other factors, depend on the morale forces at play.

U.S. and ROK ground forces would likely encounter a substantially degraded but still deadly foe. Casualties would run high. The notion that air power and precision-guided strikes will break the DPRKs will to resist can be disproven with numerous historical examples from the past including the Korean War and Vietnam War. In addition, North Korea's geography, unlike that of Iraq, favors the defender. Furthermore, in comparison to Saddam Hussein's forces, the military of Kim Jong-un had decades of peace to prepare for a clash with ROK and U.S. forces. "Both sides have had fifty years to think through these issues," a study by the Nautilus Institute notes. "They have also used every sense available to man and machine to map, model and study every aspect."

The Korean People's Army (KPA) remains the backbone of the Kim Jong-un regime. To paraphrase the famous quip attributed to the Vicomte de Mirabeau about Prussia: "Other states possess an army, North Korea is an army with a state." While there remains debate over the exact influence of the military over the state, there are no known indications (e.g., high desertion rates, stories of insubordination etc.) that the KPA is suffering from low morale or lacks ideological motivation to face U.S. and ROK forces. The ideological fervor of the KPA is perhaps best exemplified by a well-known 1976 attack in the DMZ when two U.S. soldiers were hacked to death by North Korean troops over a poplar tree. The civilian population also appears ready to endure a conflict and thinks that the DPRK could emerge victorious, as Nicholas Kristof reported from Pyongyang this month: "Ryang Song-chol, a 41-year-old factory worker, looked surprised when I asked if his country could survive a war with America. 'We would certainly win,' he said."

Besides, in the event of a U.S.-ROK invasion of the DPRK, it would be even easier to motivate Northern soldiers to fight than vice versa given the powerful motivation to defend one's home. This simple truth of military conflict is perhaps best illustrated by the exchange between a poor Southerner who had taken up arms against Northern troops in the U.S. Civil War. "Why are you fighting anyhow?" the invaders purportedly asked him back in 1862, to which he replied, "I am fighting because you are down here!" What would be the Americans and South Korean soldiers' motivation in a war with the North? U.S.-ROK leadership would have a substantially tougher time motivating troops in the long-run. We tend to believe that the rally-around-the-flag effect following the outbreak of war paired with a professional sense of duty will suffice to motivate soldiers to fight. Yet, a Second Korean War will probably be unlike anything that U.S. and ROK soldiers have experienced since the end of the last Korean War (particularly when it comes to casualties) and we can't be sure how these fighting men will react even with U.S.-ROK air superiority.

Indeed, as the first year of the Korean War illustrates low fighting morale and bad leadership can spell disaster despite ostensible military superiority when U.S. General Douglas MacArthur's army had to retreat from Chinese troops (who lacked any air support) in 1950-51 in what came to be known as "The Big Bugout." As David Halberstam writes in *The Coldest Winter*: "Particularly upsetting was the fact that these were not the flawed troops the United States had thrown into Korea back when the war began: these were the best the country had, and yet they had been hammered badly; and now the Americans were fighting [an enemy]... whose underarmed forces suddenly seemed invincible. It was a horrendous equation: the war was much bigger, the enemy more powerful, the domestic political support for it greatly diminished and

becoming slimmer by the way.” It goes without saying that the U.S. experience in Vietnam also serves as a cautionary tale for what can happen when military forces suffer from low morale and a leadership vacuum.

Similar to the soldiers that served in Korean War, ROK-U.S. forces will ultimately have to ponder whether they are willing to “die for a tie,” as a cynical quip in the 1950s went. This in no way suggests that we should expect open insubordination. However, “no one likes to lose, especially militaries,” a former U.S. Army officer wrote in 2015. “It has been shown over and over again that troops are willing to tolerate extreme hardships, so long as they ultimately lead to tangible results.” Yet, tangible results will be hard to come by on the Korean peninsula during a prolonged military campaign. As a result, we should perhaps expect reduced combat performance by ROK-U.S. forces or at least consider it if the conflict drags on inconclusively.

Aggravating this military situation (and the potential to further undermine fighting morale and amplify a leadership vacuum) is the growing perception that the incumbent President of the United States, Donald Trump, is trying to taunt the North Korean dictator into starting a conflict. This could be due to a flawed understanding of the concept of military deterrence. Yet, a senior Republican recently rang the alarm bells and characterized Trump’s threats toward other countries as “reckless” that could set the U.S. “on the path to World War III.” How would the U.S. public react to being drawn into a conflict that was potentially triggered by the U.S. president? How would it affect national morale? More importantly, how would the South Korean public and the ROK military react if it perceives that U.S. policy left the DPRK no choice but to launch a preemptive attack that subsequently triggers a full-scale war?

If recent events are a guide, not very well: it would likely negatively impact national cohesion and moral.

Conclusion

An outbreak of hostilities on the Korean Peninsula is not preordained. Retired U.S. Navy Admiral James Stavridis, dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, tells *The Diplomat* that he can envision a military exchange “between North Korea and South Korea possibly including United States that does not lead to a total war. That is probably a 20 percent.” He adds: “I’d say it is about a 10 percent outcome of that the wheels come off and we end up in a full-blown or possibly with a nuclear detonation by the North Koreans” Yet Stavridis thinks that there is a 70 percent change that “we muddle through with diplomacy and sanctions” and “end up with a peninsula that remains divided [...] using a forceful deterrent machine.” James Creighton concurs: “It is a military stalemate now and has been for 70 years. I would not rule out rhetoric running its course and a stalemate continuing.”

Nonetheless, should a conflict break out, it is important to understand that this will not be a simple “shock and awe” campaign ending with a bloody American victory, a leveled Pyongyang, and a chastised North Korea. It will likely last longer and can indeed end in a military draw that partially will be the result of what Clausewitz called the ‘morale forces’ of war. The old military maxim that morale matters in war continues to hold even in the Second Nuclear Age. Consequently, in order to get a more comprehensive understanding of future warfare on the

Korean Peninsula, we need to include less easily quantifiable factors such as morale into our calculations. We need to expand our discussions beyond DPRK military capabilities and hardware lest we be surprised if events do not unfold according to our assumptions. War is inherently unpredictable. Yet, we can perhaps make greater efforts to think about it more comprehensibly.