

The North Korean Military Under Kim Jong-un Evolved or Still Following a Kim Jong-il Script?

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Abstract

This paper will address many issues and challenges that have occurred in the North Korean military since Kim Jong-un has taken over as the leader in North Korea. There have been numerous issues relating to strife in the North Korean military since 2011, and some have opined that this is because of Kim Jong-un's lack of control over this key institution within North Korea. The evidence confirms that there remain many challenges to Kim Jong-un gaining total control – and loyalty over the military. Largely to make up for this weakness, we have seen numerous purges and movement of officials within the North Korean leadership structure during the early stages of the Kim Jong-un regime. Kim Jong-un showed the world that he would use his military to conduct the same types of saber rattling that his father engaged in during the spring of 2013. But perhaps most importantly, North Korea has continued to advance its weaponry and capabilities since Kim Jong-un took over as the leader of the country. In fact, the country as a whole has not evolved - not in any way that can be easily seen. Quite to the contrary; it appears that the North Korean regime under Kim Jong-un is following a script laid out for it by Kim Jong-il and his advisors - many of whom are now in the power circle of Kim Jong-un. What has obviously been different in the early stages of the Kim Jong-un regime is the fact that, unlike his grandfather and his father, Kim Jong-un does not appear to have a strong grip on the military. This has led to large-scale purges and movement of officials from one position to another - even more so than occurred during the early years of his father's rule. But one thing is for certain, in following a script already laid out for him, Kim Jong-un will continue to maintain and upgrade the conventional military forces, the asymmetric forces, and the nuclear capabilities of his country.

Keywords: Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il, NKPA, North Korean military, North Korean stability, North Korean capabilities

Since Kim Jong-il's death in December of 2011, his youngest son, Kim Jong-un has been in charge of the country. This is despite the fact that he is very young (twenty-nine or thirty, depending on what one's sources are), and was very inexperienced in running the government of the DPRK when his father died. Thus, one has to wonder how effective the very young leader of North Korea will be when the key to his power is controlling the four key institutions in the country - the party, the military, the security services, and the Kim family inner circle.² Since the days of Kim Il-sung, these four institutions have been the key to managing the infrastructure of the country, both its foreign and domestic policy. In this article, I will look at one key institution in the country - the military. The North Korean military is the world's fifth largest, and has operated in a threatening manner (in a variety of ways) to both its neighbor to the South, and in the region, more generally since the end of the Korean War in 1953.³ Because of this, several questions arise when one addresses the North Korean military in the new Kim Jong-un era. In the military on the road to real change, or is it simply following a script written by Kim Jong-il and his key advisors? How has internal strife affected the stability of the military? What changes in military leadership have occurred since Kim Jong-un's rise to power? And, of course, what advances in weaponry and capabilities have occurred since December 2011?

In this article I will address several key issues regarding North Korea's military in the Kim Jong-un era - and attempt to answer the questions posed in the above paragraph. Since Kim Jong-un took over as the leader of the DPRK, there have been numerous purges (and the movement of officials from position to position) in all of the institutions of government, but, the military has arguably been affected more than any other. I will examine what has occurred, but perhaps as importantly, why these events have - and why they are likely to continue. There have been many reports of strife within the North Korean military in the last two years, including the "saber rattling" of 2013.⁴ This article will assess their impact and significance and the degree to which they have posed a realistic threat to the stability of the North Korean military - and to South Korea and the region.

Strife Within the North Korean Military as Kim Jong-un Takes Over

Kim Jong-un took over the country immediately after his father died.

It became obvious immediately that he intended to use the military as a key tool for his power base when Kim Jong-un reportedly announced a "military order" even before his father's death was made public as he ordered military units to halt exercises and return to their home bases - thus signaling his control of one of the key institutions in North Korea.⁵ The new leader of North Korea was formally declared the "Supreme Commander" of the DPRK military in state-run propaganda at the end of December, 2011. The propaganda outlets stated in part, "The dear respected Kim Jong-Un... assumed the supreme commandship of the Korean People's Army at the behest of leader Kim Jong-Il on October 8."⁶

Kim Jong-un was without question, declared the leader of the military and given all key titles his new status included. But one wonders how secure was his power and how comfortable was the military with his leadership? In a normal North Korean context, this would not be an important question. But Kim Jong-un's power was much more tenuous than that of his father. In fact, according to a North Korean defector living in the South, North Korea's belligerent military behavior during the spring of 2013 (discussed in detail later) was a sign that Kim Jong-un was struggling to control the armed forces.⁷ There were other (largely anecdotal) signs of strife within the military as Kim Jong-un took over in 2011, continuing into 2012 and 2013. Reportedly, during March of 2012, twelve North Korean defectors snuck across the border into China but were captured by Chinese troops and sent back. The previous month, two North Korean soldiers reportedly shot and killed their commanding officer and apparently still remain at large.⁸ According to another defector now living in the South, shortly after Kim Jong-un succeeded his father, there were clashes in the military over loyalty to the new leader and about morale. At least some of the clashes ended in violence and/or death.⁹

Most recently in this reported instances, in March of 2013, there were reportedly "murders" of several company commanders among guards on the Chinese border. The soldier responsible for these murders was captured by the Chinese after he escaped from North Korea and then returned, and the soldier's unit was apparently dismantled. If reports that one of the security services, the National Security Agency, has taken over control of border guard units are true, this points to a real discipline problem among troops there. Much of what has caused trouble with these troops along the border is said to be related to a meager food

ration.¹⁰ Border guards along the border with China reportedly began a rotation of at least every three months (instead of once a year) in 2013, at least one unit in the middle of the night.¹¹ The move was likely made to make it more difficult for personnel to escape across the border into China. In perhaps the most disturbing report coming out of North Korea during the spring of 2013, at the end of what is known as the "Winter Training Cycle," civilian evacuation drills, the government was unable to provide adequate food rations to people in shelters - which resulted in many desertions and even people losing consciousness.¹² This also goes to show that the government, at least in some very key anecdotal reports, may be losing the confidence of at least some of its people. When such situations arise - and it appears that there may actually be a trend - what does a new leader and his government do? The answer is purges and reshuffling, and that is exactly what has occurred since Kim Jong-un's rule began.

The Movement and Purging of Officials as Kim Jong-un Consolidates Power

Certainly the movement of officials (shuffling them around from senior position to senior position) and the purging - or even execution - of high ranking officials in North Korea is nothing new. It happened under both the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il regimes.¹³ In fact, it is to be expected that this practice would continue under Kim Jong-un because it also happened with great intensity at the beginning of his father's regime and continued until the very end. In fact, purges again picked up intensity beginning in 2009, when the succession process began for Kim Jong-un. According to press reports, there were at least twenty purges between the announcement of Kim Jong-un as the "next leader" and the summer of 2012.¹⁴

The purpose of this section is to show the intensity (and often viciousness) of the purges and position changes within the DPRK early in the Kim Jong-un regime. It will also be important to understand why. As evidenced in the previous section, there have been reports of turmoil and possibly even confusion in the armed forces that did not exist (at least for the most part) under Kim Jong-un's father or grandfather. It will also be important to understand why certain personnel were placed in appropriate positions - or why they were purged. Who you are is much more important than what you are in North Korea. This is because of the dynastic nature of the regime. It does not just apply to the Kim family.

It also applies to the sons, grandsons, and great grandsons of that "elite" who served with Kim Il-sung at the very beginning of the regime.¹⁵

The early months of Kim Jong-un's dynasty were filled with turmoil, to say the least. According to reports coming out of North Korea, Kim Jong-un was informed that the assistant chief of staff of the Ministry of the Peoples Armed Forces was found drunk during the mourning period for his father, Kim Jong-il. The younger Kim ordered that the officer be executed "to leave no trace of him behind down to his hair." The individual was horrifically executed using a mortar round, a method that literally blew him to pieces.¹⁶ Purges continued into the summer of 2012, when the reported purge of NKPA Chief of Staff Yi Yong-ho was reportedly purged in July. Yi was widely assessed as a member of the "inner circle" of the Kim Family regime. Perhaps even more importantly, he was reportedly a mentor of Kim Jong-un before his father's death.¹⁷ Though still unconfirmed, there are also reports that gunfire erupted when Yi was relieved of his post.¹⁸

Ironically, many analysts and some government agencies initially predicted that Kim Jong-un would be more interested in economics than in carrying out the traditional Kim family vision of "military first." At least thus far, this has not happened. Kim has realized that he needs control of the military as a key institution that supports the infrastructure of the nation, and the stability of the regime. According to some reports, by May of 2013, two-thirds of North Korea's senior generals had either been replaced, "demoted," or given new assignments. Some had clearly been purged, and all had signed "loyalty letters."¹⁹ In April of 2013 Kim Jong-un was said to have significantly strengthened his security detail out of fear of a coup or an assassination attempt. According to several sources, more than 100 armored vehicles were deployed near Kim's residence in Pyongyang, and personal bodyguards were more heavily armed. In addition, at any event Kim Jong-un attended, cell phones were jammed to ensure that they could not be used to detonate a bomb. Reports from March of 2013 asserted that there was an attempted assassination of Kim in November 2012, and that this was immediately followed by a power struggle within the North Korean military.²⁰ In what would be a very compelling move (if true), an unconfirmed report in the Japanese press stated that Kim Jong-un ordered the military be cut by 25 percent beginning in August 2013 (300,000 troops). South Korean defense ministry officials reportedly could not confirm the report.²¹ All of these fragmentary reports would seem to show that Kim Jong-un has

still not completely consolidated his power within the military - and that this will likely be an ongoing process.

In the spring and summer of 2013, a state of flux seemed clear for those who held high military positions within the country. In early May, Jang Jong-nam was formally introduced as the Minister of the People's Armed Forces, a move widely considered to be part of a trend to bring "younger" officers into Kim Jong-un's fold (Jang is reported to be in his 50s).²² Days later, Jon Chung-bok emerged as Vice Minister of the Peoples Armed Forces.²³ Meanwhile, one of Kim Jong-il's oldest and dearest friends - and a mentor of Kim Jong-un - Kim Kyok-sik became Chief of the General Staff (also during May of 2013) of the Korean Peoples Army. Kim has occupied various positions within the armed forces and is widely believed to be the mastermind of the 2010 Northern Limit Line provocations. He replaced Hyon Yong-chol, who had previously replaced the purged Yi Yong-ho - but for only ten months.²⁴ In May Choe Ryong-hae emerged as a key player within the Kim regime, chosen to visit China as Kim Jong-un's special envoy. At the time, Choe headed the powerful General Political Bureau, an agency answering to a separate chain of command and monitoring all military activities from the very top.²⁵ Even earlier, Choi Bu-il had been appointed the Minister of Peoples Security in February of 2013 - and "promoted" (he had reportedly earlier been "demoted") to full general. As head of one of the key security services in the country, Choi was able to wield significant power.²⁶ While many have said Chang Song-taek, and his wife (Kim Jong-il's aunt) wields significant power in the country, they do not have a base in the military. Thus, perhaps this has perhaps been (and will likely remain) the most difficult institution for Kim Jong-un to control.²⁷

Kim Jong-un Shows the World He's in Charge: Saber Rattling in the Spring of 2013

During March and April of 2013, the North Korean government and infrastructure spent a great deal of time and manpower conducting what can only be described as brinkmanship. As quickly and suddenly as it began, it died in May. The actions that occurred during this time period compelled many in the press and in academia (not to mention the policy and military communities in both the United States and South Korea) to ask, what was going on in North Korea? Were these actions meant to start a war? I would contend that what was actually happening was carefully planned and meticulously carried out. In fact, Kim Jung-un

was undoubtedly following a script, a script that was likely drafted for him by his father and his father's key advisors in the weeks and months before Kim Jong-il's death. This script covered not only foreign and military policy but also domestic policy more generally. Thus, all of the major events that occurred within the first eighteen months of Kim Jong-un's rule, from the crackdown on dissent to purges within the military and other key institutions to the missile and nuclear tests, can likely be attributed to a well-planned and carefully crafted script. The "saber rattling" during the spring of 2013 is probably no exception.

North Korea in the past has followed a very clear pattern when engaging in brinkmanship. The pattern usually goes very simply like this; 1) a period of intense rhetoric against the United States and South Korea, that also involves acts of brinkmanship but no violence; 2) a "peace period," in which Pyongyang "attempts" to reach out to South Korea and/or the United States; 3) a violent provocation (or provocations) designed to inflict casualties on South Korea; 4) another "peace period"; and, 5) the cycle begins again at a time of Pyongyang's choosing. If one is to follow past precedents, the recent spate of provocative North Korean behavior was simply the first phase in a pattern that we have seen before, the most recent time period being 2009-2010.²⁸

During March and April of 2013, the North Korean military and propaganda services engaged in brinkmanship that startled the region and the world. The North Korean propaganda services threatened "all-out war" with the United States (including a nuclear attack), and the military began deploying ballistic missiles on the DPRK east coast. In response, the United States deployed Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) systems to Guam and took other initial defensive actions.²⁹ On April 6, the North Korean government told foreign embassies in Pyongyang "to consider the possibility of evacuations if tensions flare up."³⁰ The previous day North Korea had loaded two intermediate range missiles on mobile launchers and then hidden them inside a facility on the east coast.³¹ By April 11, Pyongyang had placed at least one missile in an upright position on its mobile launcher on the east coast.³² It should be noted that the missile, named the "Musudan," has a range of 4,000 kilometers and could hit Guam - thus the BMD deployed to Guam earlier in the month.³³ Also on April 11, the North Koreans were reported to have moved two Musudan missile launchers in and out of sheds located near the east coast city of Wonsan. According to experts, the Musudan can be

on "standby" for up to a week once it is fueled, a thirty minute operation.³⁴ Also spotted were other launchers for other ballistic missiles, including Scud and No Dong launchers. With up to five Scud and No Dong missiles on mobile launchers detected, there was a total of seven missiles being prepared for launch on the east coast.³⁵

As this was going on, the United States was not sitting by idly. In addition to the deployment of BMD to Guam, the Pentagon announced the reversal of earlier plans to reduce important BMD-related radar systems in Alaska.³⁶ Meanwhile, by April 20, North Korea had reportedly moved two more ballistic missiles on mobile launchers to its east coast.³⁷ According to sources in North Korea, fueling the Musudan missile must be done shortly before launch. After being injected at the home base, the missile is moved to its launch station before the final ignition agent concluded the process. If that agent is in the missile for more than thirty minutes, it rapidly becomes ineffective." According to one source during the April test, "The oxidizer and ignition agent are transported in 10t Russian trucks known as 'Urals'. The fact that right now they are not being transported with the missiles means that either they have already been fuelled, or they are attempting to hoodwink the South Korean side."³⁸

According to unnamed sources in the South Korean government, one of the "masterminds" behind the spate of North Korean brinkmanship episodes during the spring of 2013 was also one of the "masterminds" behind the Northern Limit Line provocations in 2010 (the sinking of the ROK Navy Ship *Cheonan* in March and the artillery barrage of Yonpyeong Island in November): Kim Yong-chol.³⁹ He was the general in charge of the Reconnaissance General Bureau, an elite and highly trained Special Operations Forces (SOF) branch, and easily among the most trusted elite military units in the country. Kim was also a member of the Korea Workers Party (KWP) Central Military Commission (CMC), a powerful body that is part of Kim Jong-un's power base.⁴⁰

According to some analysts, North Korea's spate of brinkmanship activities and rhetoric were aimed at somehow bringing Washington to the negotiating table. These writers contend that North Korea's nuclear test in February 2013 (and the expected negative reaction from the region, the UN, and other key players with interests in the region), were probably designed to force those resisting dialogue into having talks with Pyongyang anyway, and of course offering the appropriate concessions.⁴¹ Of interest, by the end of April 2013, a large-scale exercise was being

prepared near Pyongyang. Though rumored – to have taken place, and perhaps did, it was simply a routine training event with a large portion of North Korea's military engaged in spring farming at the time. This was a sign that any large-scale operations were unlikely.⁴² By May 6, U.S. officials had confirmed that Musudan missiles had been withdrawn from "launch sites" and sent back to a storage facility.⁴³ By the beginning of May, the Ministry of Unification in South Korea had acknowledged that North Korea's anti-South Korea rhetoric had died down significantly. According to a report published by the Ministry of Unification, the rhetoric had significantly decreased by the end of April.⁴⁴ Thus, the phase of brinkmanship and rhetoric had essentially ceased as quickly as it had begun. The use of North Korea's military as an instrument of foreign policy was now - very temporarily - put on hold, and North Korea could move on to the (temporary) "peace phase" of their cycle.

Advances in North Korean Weaponry and Capabilities Since 2011

As stated earlier in this article, Kim Jong-un is apparently following a script, a script prepared for him by his father and his father's advisors prior to Kim Jong-il's death. But, that script does not stop with brinkmanship and/or provocations - though they are (at least in my view) a key ingredient. When it comes to North Korea's military, the script involves the continued development and maintenance of its combat forces. This includes both conventional forces such as armor, infantry, and mechanized units and what many would categorize as "asymmetric" forces, forces that include SOF, long-range artillery, and ballistic missile units of course, nuclear weapons and long-range missile development are also important. The key here is that North Korea must invest huge amounts of money to maintain their conventional forces (because of large numbers), but must also invest heavily into the continuing development, advancement, and maintenance of its asymmetric forces. It appears that it was Kim Jong-il's wish to have his son carry on this policy, a policy that allows the North Korean military to threaten its neighbor to the South, conduct violent provocations, and create instability in the region.

Since Kim Jong-il's death, there have been several developments in North Korea's military forces that are both interesting and important. Not the least of these was a third nuclear test. The test was conducted in February 2013. The South Korean Ministry of National Defense placed the estimated yield of the device at six to nine kilotons, which would

make it larger than both of North Korea's previous tests. Numerous collection means were deployed by the United States, Japan, and South Korea to categorize and define the test. Still, no one was able to determine if it was a plutonium or highly enriched uranium (HEU) device. The more likely, however, is an HEU test.⁴⁵

A key piece of the puzzle involved nuclear test is the Iranian connection. Iran is not known to have a plutonium weaponization program, and thus would be unlikely to go to the trouble to send observers to the test if it was for a plutonium device. Thus, it is quite interesting that Tehran reportedly asked Pyongyang if key experts could be sent to observe the test of 2013. Also of interest, Iran is said to have paid Pyongyang tens of millions of dollars for the privilege of observing the event. The request reportedly was made by Iran's Atomic Energy Organization. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (then the Iranian President) approved the payment. Among the key Iranians reportedly in attendance was Mohsen Fakhrizadeh-Mahabadi, widely believed to be the head of Iran's collaboration effort with Pyongyang to develop an HEU nuclear warhead. There is some anecdotal evidence that the device tested in February 2013 was a miniaturized warhead for a missile.⁴⁶ Another key is that the DPRK's propaganda outlets proclaimed that they had used a "miniaturized and lighter nuclear device with greater explosive force than previously."⁴⁷ Based on these factors plus the fact that the North Koreans took careful precautions not to let particles escape from the test, the most logical conclusion is that the test conducted used an HEU device—most likely a warhead that could be mounted on a missile. There is however, as of the writing of this paper, no hard proof that this is what occurred.

The North Koreans also conducted not one but two long-range ballistic missile (Taepo Dong 2) test-launches following the death of Kim Jong-il, both in 2012. While the first test turned out to be another failure as had the tests in 1998, 2006, and 2009, the second was successful. The "satellite platform," as the North Koreans called it, went through all three stages of the missile successfully and launched a low-grade satellite into space. North Korea now has proven it has the technology to launch a three-stage ballistic missile with a sufficient range to hit targets in Alaska and Hawaii. Pyongyang has also shown that it is willing to share this technology (actual missiles, or technology, or both) to Iran.⁴⁸

South Korean experts conducted an analysis of components of the rocket's first stage following its separation from the rocket and plunge into the ocean during the launch on December 12, 2012. As one of the specialists observed to reporters following a thorough examination of the recovered missile components, "Because it used red fuming nitric acid as an oxidizer, which can be stored for a long time at normal temperature, the team concluded that [the rocket] was intended for testing [the North's] ICBM technology, rather than developing a space launch vehicle." The source further explained, "It used four Nodong missile engines for the first stage booster, while utilizing one Scud missile engine to make the second stage propellant in a bid to save time and cost." Another interesting assessment emerging from an analysis of the data and subsequent simulations was that the missile the North Koreans tested appeared to have a range of 10,000 kilometers if it carried a warhead weighing 500 kilograms.⁴⁹ In what may have been a stunning fact to some, a South Korean official stated, "They efficiently developed a three-stage long-range missile by using their existing Rodong and Scud missile technology."⁵⁰ Thus, the North Koreans essentially took components and technology that many experts said were too primitive to launch a three-stage missile and successfully launched a three-stage missile. This is a significant - proven - advance in North Korean technology, and policy makers and planners should take it seriously.

As North Korea entered the first two years of the Kim Jong-un era, missile capabilities continued to grow. As this writer noted on the "HRNK" website in early 2013, "North Korea has successfully manufactured, tested, deployed, and proliferated SRBM's (Scud B through D and the 'Extended Range' Scud), MRBM's (No Dong), and IRBM's (Musudan - which was sold to Iran in 2005 - 18 systems - and reportedly tested in 2006)."⁵¹ Now the successful test-launch of a Taepo Dong missile platform through all three stages of its system means that North Korea can add ICBM's to the list of workable systems and probably proliferated. But there is more. If one is to match up ballistic missile capabilities North Korea possesses with its likely nuclear weaponization capabilities, the assessment can be alarming. During April 2013, the Defense Intelligence Agency made the following assessment, "D.I.A. assesses with moderate confidence the North currently has nuclear weapons capable of delivery by ballistic missiles; however the reliability will be low."⁵² In my view, the recent assessment points to the fact that, by playing "connect the dots," one can find much

anecdotal evidence that North Korea has now weaponized HEU, has a working warhead, and can put it on a missile - likely the No Dong - which has a range of 1,500 kilometers and can hit Tokyo. It remains unclear whether or not North Korea can put a nuclear warhead on any other type of missile (and the assessment regarding the No Dong is speculation - not fact). Nevertheless, North Korea continues to advance both its nuclear and missile programs under the Kim Jong-un regime. Figure 1 shows assessed/proven ranges of key North Korean ballistic missile systems.

While North Korea has actively developed and maintained its ballistic missile force and its nuclear capabilities, it has not neglected its conventional military forces. As a Department of Defense report to Congress in 2013 states, "North Korea is making some efforts to upgrade its conventional weapons. It has reinforced

Figure 1: North Korean Ballistic Missile Capabilities



Source: Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea, "Defense White Paper," 2008, <http://www.mnd.go.kr/>.

long-range artillery forces near the DMZ and has a substantial number of mobile ballistic missiles that could strike a variety of targets in the ROK and Japan." The study further states, "During military parades held in Pyongyang in October 2010 and April 2012, a number of new weapon

systems were displayed for the first time, highlighting continued efforts to improve the military's conventional capabilities, despite financial hardships." And the study specifically focuses on ground forces when it says, "The parades featured several newly identified North Korean tanks, artillery, and other armored vehicles. New infantry weapons have been displayed as well. The display of these systems shows that North Korea continues to produce, or at least upgrade, limited types and numbers of equipment."⁵³

Among the key additions to its armed forces - and perhaps its most disturbing developments - is the deployment of 900 new tanks to the army since 2005. Many of the tanks reportedly have advanced fire control systems and can travel at speeds up to 70 kilometers per hour.⁵⁴ The continued production of such tanks means that the DPRK maintains the edge in numbers over South Korean armor. The North Korea ground forces have made some very important changes, and as shown on the map (Figure 2), 70 percent of North Korea's ground forces are located south of Pyongyang and relatively close to the DMZ.

North Korea continues to maintain and hone the capabilities of its asymmetric forces (SOF, long-range artillery, and ballistic missiles). SOF units in 2012 and 2013 continued to train at a high level and to maintain skills and capabilities that give them a "deep strike" threat to South Korea.⁵⁵ Another disturbing element of the capabilities of the SOF units is the ability to infiltrate the South using tunnels under the DMZ. By using these tunnels, SOF units (and other units) can potentially enter the South - in large numbers - undetected.⁵⁶

As discussed above, SOF and ballistic missile capabilities continue to improve. But North Korea has not been idle with further development of its long-range artillery capabilities. During May 2013, the Pyongyang conducted test-launches of what were originally reported as short-range missiles off of their east coast. Later, the test-launches were reported to be of a new 300-milimeter caliber multiple rocket launcher (MRL). The new launcher is apparently in the final stages of testing and development. Once deployed, it would have a significantly longer range than the current long-range MRL's that North Korea has deployed along the DMZ (240-milimeter MRL's). The systems could also be placed in caves and/or hardened shelters and readied for near-immediate use, much as the current systems that remain deployed along the DMZ. The new MRL weapons system, which is reported to have a rocket 4-5 meters long, and able to fire at targets (based on test-launches tracked by ROK

forces) as far as 130-150 kilometers away, may be deployed along the DMZ within the near future, according to unidentified South Korean officials. The range for the system remains unclear, but in drills conducted on July 1, 2013, the MRL's reportedly fired at a range of approximately 100 kilometers. The launch platform for the MRL system reportedly consists of a four launch tubes. If these systems are deployed and if the reported ranges are accurate, these systems will not only be able to threaten all of Seoul, but ROK and U.S. bases south of Seoul, including Camp Humphries and Osan Air Base. South Korean military officials reportedly consider the advanced MRL system a new security threat, and adjustments to planning and operations may already be underway.⁵⁷

Figure 2: North Korean Disposition of Ground Forces



Source: "Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea 2012," Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 2013, URL: http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Report_to_Congress_on_Military_and_Security_Developments_Involving_the_DPRK.pdf

In what may be a related development to North Korea's reported 300 millimeter MRL system development, Pyongyang has now reportedly fielded increased numbers of 240 millimeter MRL systems along the DMZ. These new systems are even longer-range systems than the previously deployed 240 millimeter MRL systems. Earlier systems had a range of up to 60 kilometers, while these systems reportedly have a range of 70 kilometers. The deployment of these long range systems with their advanced ranges means that even more areas of Seoul and its surrounding metropolitan region are potentially within range.⁵⁸ The fact that these systems can be equipped with chemical munitions makes this increased threat even more ominous.⁵⁹

A final capability noted by analysts in recent years is the cyber warfare arm of the North Korean military. This is a capability that became a priority for the North Koreans in the final years of the Kim Jong-il regime. In fact, North Korea has now become so good at this capability that the Commander of USFK, General James Thurman, commented on it in 2012: "The newest addition to the North Korean asymmetric arsenal is a growing cyber warfare capability." Furthermore, he noted, "North Korea employs sophisticated computer hackers trained to launch cyber-infiltration and cyber-attacks. . ." South Korean intelligence officials state that there are at least 1,000 North Korean cyber-attack specialists who have conducted successful attacks against government and business interests in Seoul and elsewhere.⁶⁰ Other sources believe that the DPRK has as many as 4,000 hackers who target South Korea and others.⁶¹ According to sources in the South Korean press, Kim Jong-un was quoted in February 2013 as saying, "If we have strong information technology and brave warriors like the Reconnaissance General Bureau, we will be able to break any sanctions and have no problem building a strong and prosperous country."⁶² Meanwhile, the South Korean government has reportedly confirmed that North Korea was behind the massive cyber-attack that was conducted against financial firms and broadcasting corporations in the ROK during March of 2013.⁶³ This has become a capability that threatens not only the government, but South Korean society more generally.

Conclusion

The evidence regarding the North Korean military under the Kim Jong-un regime shows that it has not deviated from past patterns and practices. Quite to the contrary, it appears that the present North Korean

regime is following a script laid out for it by Kim Jong-il and his advisors, many of whom are now in the power circle of Kim Jong-un. The military has not become either a "more powerful" or a "less powerful" entity under the Kim Jong-un regime. The institutions that have always been the stalwarts of power in North Korea remain the same. The military is no exception. What has obviously been different in the early stages of the present regime is that, unlike his grandfather and his father, Kim Jong-un does not appear to have a strong grip on the military. This has led to large-scale purges and the movement of officials from one position to another, even more so than occurred during the early years of his father's rule. But one thing is for certain, in following a script already laid out for him, Kim Jong-un will continue to maintain and upgrade the conventional military forces, the asymmetric forces, and the nuclear capabilities of his country. It is what his father and grandfather would have wanted, and it is a legacy he cannot avoid.

Notes:

¹ The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Angelo State University.

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