

Maintaining a Rogue Military: North Korea's Military Capabilities and Strategy at the End of the Kim Jong-il Era

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Abstract

This article will address exactly how North Korea has gradually, but quite clearly, changed the focus of its forces in order to meet the challenges of sustainment, aging equipment, and a prosperous, militarily well-equipped neighbor to the south. In addition, it addresses recent (since the mid 2000's) advances North Korea has been able to initiate in its military forces that directly threaten the ROK-US alliance, and the ROK-US ability to defend the South Korean landmass. Finally, this article will address the (often unpredictable and often highly unusual) process of the planned hand-over of power from father to third son in Pyongyang - and how this will affect military readiness and the stability of the military command structure now that Kim Jong-il is dead. A consideration of the threat from North Korea as it stands at the end of the Kim Jong-il era, shows a two-headed threat; a military that clearly managed to adjust to resource constraints and was able to "re-invent itself" as an army that focused on asymmetric forces, and a government (including the military) that in many ways was fighting to stave off instability, striving to avoid collapse, and ultimately absorption by the South.

Key Words: NKPA, North Korean Military, ROK-U.S. Alliance, Asymmetric Threats, North Korean Missiles, North Korean long-range artillery, North Korean SOF

North Korea was a constant source of news from 2009 through 2011. Kim Jong-il's health issues in 2009 led to a plethora of press speculation all over East Asia - as well as in the United States. Indeed, questions about how long the "Dear Leader" would continue to live also led to international curiosity about the regime succession process in North Korea - and the apparent plans for Kim to be succeeded by his third and youngest son, Kim Jong-un. But while these questions caught the fancy of the international press (as well as scholars who focus on East Asian

issues), the issues that truly made North Korea a constant and focused source of news and concern were associated with Pyongyang's violent military provocations against their neighbor to the south. Twice in 2010, North Korea's unprovoked acts of military violence against South Korea not only brought the Korean Peninsula into the headlines all over the world, but raised concerns over both the capabilities of the North Korean military, and the strategy that Pyongyang employs (and plans to employ) for this very large (the world's fifth largest military), and often unpredictable military.²

North Korea's obvious lack of hesitation to use violent military force raises a variety of national security questions - not the least of which is how North Korea's military strategy has changed in recent years. It is my belief - based on the evidence - that North Korea and its very large army is facing a variety of sustainment and modernization issues. Indeed, I would also argue that the North Korean military faces morale and welfare issues that continue to have an impact on its readiness to conduct warfare. This article, I will address exactly how the military (which in North Korea operates in more of a state of flux than most people realize) has adjusted to these issues. It will also address how North Korea has gradually, but quite clearly, changed the focus of its forces in order to meet the challenges of sustainment, aging equipment, and a prosperous, militarily well-equipped neighbor to the south. Along those lines, it is also my intention to address recent (since the mid 2000's) advances North Korea has been able to initiate in its military forces, advances that directly threaten the ROK-US alliance and the ROK-US ability to defend the South Korean landmass.

Because the succession process has played such a major role in the North Korean governmental infrastructure, and because the power structure of the government is so tied into the military in North Korea, I will address the (often unpredictable and often highly unusual) process of the planned hand-over of power from father to third son in Pyongyang - and how this will affect military readiness and the stability of the military command structure now that Kim Jong-il is dead. Finally, I will address how the South Korean military and their American allies have reacted to and planned for changes occurring in the North Korean military and government.

Issues Facing the North Korean People's Army

Always in the background of any discussion about the readiness and

capabilities of the North Korean military, Pyongyang's longstanding economic problems raise serious questions, and are often cited by East Asian analysts as a reason the army would not be able to fight effectively should a war with South Korea occur.³ The North Korean military has not been able to add as many upgrades to its forces as Pyongyang would prefer - and this situation has existed since 1990, when the Soviet Union cut off subsidies of military equipment and fuel.⁴

It is against the backdrop of a country that is struggling to feed its people and simply provide fuel and power nationwide that the issues for the North Korean military should be addressed. The military is the best fed, most efficient institution in North Korea. But in recent years reports have begun to seep out about morale, efficiency, and readiness issues in some military units. According to a Chinese source who visited North Korea and reported back to the South Korean press in early 2011, a new issue that has arisen is the proliferation of South Korean movies and dramas (illicitly) among officers and troops. Reportedly, the army is taking this very seriously, cracking down on those who get caught watching these films - largely because of the morale issue that this creates.⁵ In another report from 2011, soldiers are seen stealing food from local villagers, and some units are said to be getting less than normal rations - even by North Korean standards.⁶ Recent testimony from defectors also alleges that in some units - sometimes even key units like tank battalions - malnourishment exists.⁷ And an ongoing lack of fuel has reportedly led some units in the north of the country (which is not where the most important units are stationed - perhaps an important issue) to suffer from extreme cold in the winter time, and sometimes a lack of food.⁸

It is important to note that all of the reports coming out of North Korea which point to isolated incidents of food shortages or fuel shortages in the military are anecdotal. Indeed, there is no evidence to indicate that these reports are anything other than isolated incidents in units (at least for the most part) that are not of high military significance. Nevertheless, these reports do give one food for thought. How has a military that has more than one million men on active duty been able to maintain its military readiness and capabilities in the face of food and fuel shortages that have gone on in one form or another for more than 20 years? How does a military that is no longer supplied for free (as it was during the Cold War by the Soviet Union) with the latest military equipment and systems present a credible, threatening stance against its

neighbor to the south? And perhaps as importantly, has the very necessary adjustment in strategy been made that will allow the North Korean military to go "toe to toe" with the ROK-US alliance in combat?

North Korea's Strategy in the Kim Jong-il Era: Focus on Asymmetric Forces

As analysts and policy makers discussed the declining capabilities of the North Korean military, adversely affected by economic woes in the 1990s, the North Koreans were making a very focused, highly involved transition to asymmetric forces.⁹ This transition began in the mid-to-late 1990s and has evolved to the point that it can be assessed to be complete though still evolving. In fact, as emphasized earlier, North Korea continues to engage in violent acts of provocation, displays of brinkmanship (such as missile tests), and bombastic rhetoric, that have resulted in Americans' placing the isolated rogue state at the top of the list the greatest potential threats. According to a *Christian Science Monitor* and TechnoMetrica Market Intelligence (TIPP) poll released in December of 2010, Americans rated only Al Qaeda as a higher threat to the United States.¹⁰

This asymmetric strategy continues to be a very credible, deadly threat, even as North Korea struggles to maintain the capabilities of its slowly-declining - though large and very well armed - traditional conventional forces. In fact, in his confirmation hearings before the ROK National Assembly, South Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin remarked that North Korea's asymmetrical forces (strategic weapons, submarines, Special Operations Forces) "were increasingly becoming a serious threat to the South Korean military." He further stated that "An additional attack by the North using its asymmetrical strengths is the most serious threat as of now."¹¹

In compelling Congressional testimony given during 2010, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Affairs (and retired Lieutenant General, USMC) Wallace "Chip" Gregson stated, "As North Korea's conventional military capability slowly deteriorates, the unconventional threat it poses only increases, posing new challenges to the U.S.-ROK Alliance." Commenting on how resource constraints have affected North Korea's strategy, General Gregson stated, "Other nations possess material capabilities that match or exceed what North Korea possesses, but North Korea poses a unique threat because of its proven willingness to match resources and capabilities with provocative,

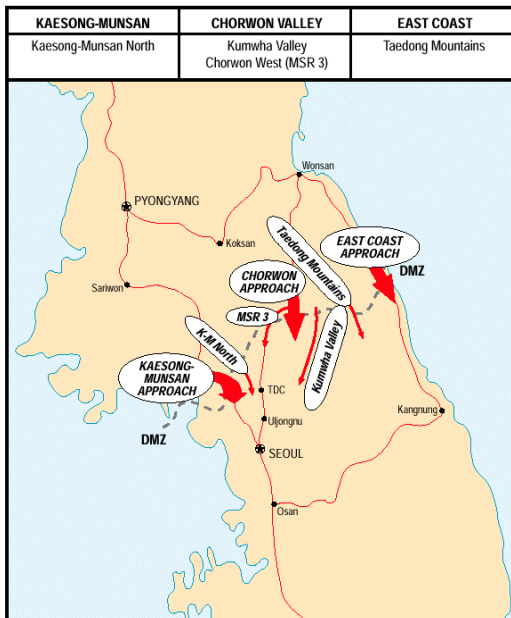
unpredictable behavior, and its continued export of illicit items to other states that seek to harm the U.S. and our allies and friends around the world. The danger posed by North Korean weapons and military strength are amplified greatly by the regime's willingness to dedicate its meager resources to maximizing its lethality." General Gregson made a most cogent and accurate assessment regarding the North Korean military strategy and the threat that it poses when he stated, "North Korea's decline in conventional military terms has led to an evolution in the nature of the North Korea threat, not a diminution of it. North Korea has adapted to the U.S.-ROK alliance's conventional military superiority by developing tactics and weapons systems that equip them with offensive capabilities that avoid confronting the greatest military strengths of the alliance, in an attempt to compete on what it likely perceives as a more favorable playing field."¹²

The statements by high-level officials in both the United States and South Korea reflect a concern for a North Korean strategy that has evolved to a degree of lethality, one which is highly threatening to security in Northeast Asia. But this leads one to ask the question, what comprises the asymmetric threat? It also leads one to ask, if there have been serious constraints on North Korean military acquisition, what advances has it made? I believe these are questions that are answered very easily. North Korea's evolving asymmetric threat is comprised of three key components: Long-range artillery, Special Operations Forces, and ballistic missiles. While North Korea also uses asymmetry in other aspects of its armed forces, these are the three key columns that form the hub of a threat that has been developed, honed, and maintained since the mid-to-late 1990s.

If one is to analyze the first component of the "tripod" that forms the North Korean multi-headed asymmetric threat, long-range artillery, the results are quite interesting. U.S. and South Korean estimates state that North Korea has more than 13,000 artillery and multiple rocket launcher (MRL) systems.¹³ There are a thousand of these systems (or more) that fall into the "long-range" category, and they consist of long-range 170mm self-propelled guns, augmented by long-range 240mm multiple rocket launchers. Somewhere between 250 and 400 of these systems have the ability to hit Seoul with their ordnance, and many are located in hardened artillery sites (HARTS), which have been constructed very close (often within 5kms) to the DMZ. Estimates state that there are as many as 500 of these HARTS positioned in locations from which they

could hit Seoul or surrounding areas with little to no warning (the locations are within the North Korean 2nd and 5th Corps along the DMZ). The artillery deployed to these locations mainly sits in the main invasion corridors into South Korea - the Kaesong-Munsan corridor and the Chorwon Valley corridor (see Figure 1). Perhaps as importantly, an estimated five to 20% of rounds provided to forward artillery units would be equipped with chemical munitions - thus quite literally turning North Korean long-range artillery systems along the DMZ into weapons of mass destruction.¹⁴ Press reports based on South Korean government released data contend that North Korea has approximately 5,000 tons of chemical agents - and could contaminate an area up to four times the size of Seoul - which means the long-range artillery North Korea has deployed along the DMZ presents a planning nightmare for ROK and U.S. military staffs.¹⁵

Figure 1: Korean Invasion Routes



Source: North Korean Country Handbook, U.S. Department of Defense, May, 1997, URL: <http://www.dia.mil/publicaffairs/Foia/nkor.pdf>

Reports from 2010 and 2011 indicate that North Korea has deployed more artillery systems (recently) along the DMZ. According to multiple sources, Pyongyang has added perhaps as many as 100 multiple rocket launchers (MRL) along the DMZ. Some of these are shorter-range systems that would target smaller cities and towns in Kyonggi province. But at least some are likely the long-range 240 millimeter MRL's, which means in recent years Pyongyang has actually added to the lethality of the weapons systems it has deployed along the DMZ, systems that are capable of causing panic and mass casualties in Seoul (North Korea may now have 200 or more of these long-range MRL systems deployed where they can hit Seoul, and 200 more of the 170 millimeter guns also deployed where they can do the same.) In addition, Pyongyang has (recently) added to the survivability of its artillery systems deployed along the DMZ. Press reports citing ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) officials state that at several artillery sites, the North Koreans have built tunnels into hills and/or mountains. The systems would fire their ordnance from behind the hill or mountain, and then "scoot" back into the tunnel - making it more difficult for ROK or U.S. counter-battery fire and/or ground-attack aircraft to take them out.¹⁶

An analysis of the second tripod of North Korea's asymmetric threat - ballistic missiles - shows an evolving, ever improving threat. North Korea's ballistic missiles threaten not only South Korea and Japan, but regions much farther away (as described later). North Korea received its first ballistic missiles in the form of the SCUD B from Egypt as early as 1976.¹⁷ Pyongyang was able to build on technology from the SCUD B to later develop the SCUD C, and, in following years, the SCUD D, which has a range of more than 700 kilometers).¹⁸ In 2006, the North Koreans conducted missile tests that, when analyzed by experts, showed that they now had an extended-range or "ER" SCUD with a range of 850 kms.¹⁹ The North Koreans have also developed, deployed, and successfully test-launched (at least twice) the No Dong missile - which has a range of 1300 to 1500 kms (and can hit Japan). The No Dong missile is believed to have been developed from SCUD technology.²⁰ The development of the missiles described above means that with SCUD's, North Korea can literally target every inch of the landmass of South Korea. With the No Dong missile, North Korea can also target key nodes in Japan - including Tokyo. North Korea continues to hone the capabilities of the SCUD and No Dong missile systems.

North Korea also has other short-range missiles that rate discussion. Key among these missiles is the North Korean version (with an extended range) of the Soviet SS-21. North Korea probably acquired this missile from Syria in the late 1990s. Soon after obtaining the missile, well-known for its deployment facing allied forces in Europe during the Cold War, the North Koreans engineered their own indigenously produced version, identified as the "KN-02". This tactical, mobile missile has a range of at least 120 kms, and can target US and ROK bases south of Seoul.²¹ The "KN-02" is "road mobile," which means it is on a truck-mounted, transporter-erector-launcher (TEL). The North Korean version of the SS-21 uses solid fuel, which means it can be deployed faster, loaded, and fired more rapidly than other less modern systems.²² Pyongyang has conducted several test firings of this missile, and analysts have stated that they appeared to be successful.²³

There is another missile that the North Koreans have developed successfully in the past 10 years - and this missile has received far less publicity than the (often reported in the press) Taepo Dong missiles. This missile is called the Musudan (sometimes also known as the Taepo Dong X). The North Koreans built the Musudan based on SS-N-6 technology (the SS-N-6 is one of the former Soviet Union's submarine launched ballistic missiles). Since Pyongyang lacked the submarines capable of launching such a missile, the North Koreans converted the missile so that it could be deployed from mobile land-based launchers, otherwise known as "TEL's." The Musudan also is reportedly deployed at fixed sites. Perhaps the most ominous characteristic of the missile is that it has the range (up to 4,000 kms) to hit Guam.²⁴ The public got its first look at the Musudan in 2010, when it was shown in a military parade in Pyongyang.²⁵ Just as disturbing, some analysts reportedly believe that the Musudan is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead.²⁶ By 2010, the North Koreans had apparently deployed so many Musudan missiles that they decided to form a new independent missile division to match this new capability.²⁷ The deployment of these missiles appears to have changed the South Korean assessment on the number of North Korean ballistic missiles. In March of 2010, the South Korean Minister of National Defense reportedly stated that North Korea had about 1,000 ballistic missiles, apparently a direct reference to an assessment regarding the Musudan missile.²⁸

Of course, the SCUD missiles can target all South Korea, the No Dong can target key nodes in Japan, and the Musudan can target

America's Guam. All of these systems have been successfully test-launched in one form or another (The Musudan has not been test-launched from North Korea, but was successfully tested by Iran, which acquired the missile from North Korea, in 2006.)²⁹ The North Koreans continue development on the Taepo Dong 1 and Taepo Dong 2 systems, but to date, these three-stage missiles have not proven to be successful in test launches conducted in 1998, 2006, and 2009. Once these missiles are successful, they will have the potential capability to target the continental United States (and certainly the range for Alaska and Hawaii).³⁰ For a map showing some examples of the ranges of North Korea's ballistic missiles, see Figure 2. Of course, as North Korea continues to develop its short-range, medium-range, and long-range ballistic missiles, it also continues to develop the facilities from which test launches of these missiles will occur. A facility at Tongchang-ni, a significant upgrade over facilities for earlier missile launches) is reportedly ready to go and may be the site from which the next long-range missile test will take place.³¹

The third and perhaps most ominous (to South Korea) tripod of the North Korean asymmetric threat is Special Operations Forces (SOF). North Korean SOF are the best trained, best fed, and easily the most indoctrinated of all DPRK military forces. North Korean SOF has a variety of missions - and thus a wide variety of units. These units can be organized by brigade or battalion, all the way down to special two or three man "teams." Most of the SOF units fall under a variety of commands - who often work closely together during exercises or live operations. There are units subordinate to the Light Infantry Training Guidance Bureau (sometimes called the "11th Corps), the Reconnaissance General Bureau, Army Corps' and Divisions, or Korean People's Navy/Air Force. Most official estimates place their strength at more than 25 brigades and five independent reconnaissance battalions, though those numbers have probably grown significantly since 2006.³²

Figure 2: North Korean Ballistic Missile Capabilities



Source: “Defense White Paper,” Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea, 2010, <http://www.mnd.go.kr/>

North Korean SOF can insert into South Korea a variety of ways. They can "para-drop" from one of the 300 AN-2's in North Korea's air inventory (or via helicopter), are able to use a variety of maritime insertion means (submarines, air-cushion vessels, and semi-submersibles), and are also capable of entering the South via tunnels dug under the DMZ.³³ A defector report attributed to a former North Korean military officer stated that between 2004 and 2007, the DPRK built 800 bunkers or more close to, or indeed on, the DMZ. According to the former North Korean military officer, the contents of the bunkers include military equipment in sufficient numbers to arm up to 2,000 men. The defector also stated that South Korean military uniforms and name tags were stocked in the bunkers so that North Korean forces could disguise themselves prior to infiltration, as well as small arms that would be very effective at the tactical level, such as 60 millimeter mortar shells.³⁴ Evidence at least partially confirming these assertions came to light in late 2010, when North Korean SOF troops were spotted training in military uniforms with the same camouflage pattern as seen on uniforms issued to South Korean troops.³⁵

According to a report by retired Brigadier General Lee Won-seung of the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology and released

to the South Korean press, North Korea's SOF have been trained to infiltrate and strike more than 90% of its targets in South Korea. The report, at least partially based on defector testimonies by former North Korean SOF states, "After witnessing the drills, the North's defectors concluded that North Korean special forces could infiltrate more than 90 percent of important facilities in South Korea." The South Korean Ministry of National Defense now places the numbers for SOF in North Korea at around 200,000 men. General Lee also stated that North Korean SOF "have been trained to conduct composite operations, such as major target strikes, assassinations of important figures and disruptions of rear areas in South Korea."³⁶ High ranking North Korean defector Hwang Jang-yop stated in testimony that "Each North Korean special forces unit has been assigned a specific target in South Korea, usually strategic objectives such as missile bases and airfields. The units will be delivered to their targets by parachute or hovercraft."³⁷ Military training by SOF during the winter of 2010-2011 was at typical high levels. According to press reports, "Light infantry soldiers march 20 km for 10 hours with a 35 kg gear bag. On the way to the mountains, they train attacking, ambushing, infiltrating and camping. When they arrive at the assembly place, they would have a martial arts match between units to have actual experience."³⁸

There have been interesting developments in the command and control of North Korean SOF in recent years. According to several reports, Kim Jong-il's long-time friend and close confidant, O Kuk-ryol, was moved from his position as head of the Operations Department (an organization that was roughly a North Korean combination of the KGB and the GRU) to a key position on the National Defense Commission. When he moved, his organization apparently moved with him and combined with the elite Reconnaissance Bureau (a military SOF organization). To quote one press source, "The General Bureau of Reconnaissance which Oh was placed at the head of is a gigantic organization, the result of a merger between the former Reconnaissance Bureau, the Operations Department, of which Oh was formerly in charge, and the No. 35 Office, which previously carried out overseas spy and international terrorist operations." The press piece further summarizes the significance of the change by stating, "Combining the Reconnaissance Bureau of the People's Army with the Operations Department and the No. 35 Office of the Central Committee unifies spy operations, undercover and direct military attacks in one office."³⁹

General O is thus now (either directly or indirectly) in control of North Korean SOF - all North Korean SOF. According to North Korean defector Kim Seong-min, North Korea's 200,000 SOF troops are trained and equipped to "damage South Korea's reputation by creating an internal commotion, and paralyze the country's command structures to facilitate a (Pyongyang-led) forced unification of the Korean Peninsula."⁴⁰

North Korea has also been able to augment the troop strength of its SOF by converting several conventional divisions to light infantry divisions (and thus SOF presumably subordinate to either their geographical corps or the "11th Corps") - and this has occurred since 2006. According to a South Korean military source in 2008, "The North Korean military recently activated several light infantry divisions that are affiliated with frontline and rear corps. . ."⁴¹

Other Recent Military Developments in North Korea

As already discussed, North Korea has focused on modernizing, resourcing, and training its three-headed asymmetric military forces capability - long-range artillery, ballistic missiles, and SOF. The evidence is clear. Each one of these types of forces has increased in numbers, improved its command and control, and modernized its equipment in recent years. And thus, even as some of North Korea's conventional capabilities have slowly eroded because of resource constraints, their asymmetric forces have actually grown in capability.

But even as North Korea has increased the capabilities of its asymmetric forces, the DPRK has also made some important upgrades and acquisitions that improve the capabilities of other forces and create a real threat to the ROK-US alliance. One example of this is the recently confirmed fielding and deployment of the "Storm Tiger" tank, the North Korean variant of the Soviet T-72 system - a significant upgrade over the T-62 tank that the North Koreans had previously fielded in key units.⁴² Another important development has been the fielding of infrared anti-aircraft missiles that can potentially shoot down fighter aircraft, transportation aircraft, and helicopters. In 2011, the South Korean Ministry of National Defense Board of Audit and Inspection revealed that North Korean IGLA ground to air, and AA-11 air to air missiles, use medium-range infrared waves that are not easily diverted by South Korean flares or chaff. The new anti-aircraft missiles can even threaten South Korea's most advanced aircraft - the F15K.⁴³ And North Korea's

newest long-range anti-aircraft missile, known as the KN-06, has a longer range (possibly 150 kilometers), and is more advanced than previous systems.⁴⁴

North Korea has also made important advances in its naval capabilities - particularly advances that will enhance its ability to threaten South Korea in waters off the west coast. Pyongyang has reportedly now deployed a new version of its most advanced mini-sub - the SANGO. The newer version has better performance, higher underwater speed, and a body that is five meters longer than the previous version. North Korea has enhanced its mini-sub fleet by added these newer versions, and has conducted drills with them off both coasts of the Korean Peninsula. According to recent reports, another mini-sub, known as the "Daedong-B," is an advanced infiltration submarine with a special ramp to offload Special Forces, and is also equipped with torpedo launch tubes. This submarine was also noted training during 2010.⁴⁵ Perhaps the most ominous new naval development in North Korea is the construction of a new hovercraft base that is less than 35 miles from South Korean islands off the west coast of the Korean Peninsula. The base is said to be able to accommodate up to 70 hovercraft (the new base is being built at a port near the town of Koampo), and each of the hovercraft is capable of traveling at speeds of up to 90 kilometers per hour with a full platoon of elite naval infantry commandos aboard. Once the base is complete, North Korean troops could reach South Korean sovereign territory on the hovercraft in 30 to 40 minutes. The high speed of the naval craft will make reaction by South Korean forces a difficult proposition. North Korea has approximately 130 "Kongbang-class" hovercraft, but they have never before been deployed so close to border areas with the South.⁴⁶

In a development that was likely directly related to the construction of the new naval base at Koampo, reports in September of 2011 indicated that the North Koreans had also deployed approximately 3,000 elite troops from one of their amphibious sniper brigades at nearby Pipagot naval base. During 2011, the troops were detected in combined arms training with both air and naval units, conducting large-scale exercises landing exercises on Cho island (also located near the west coast of the Korean Peninsula). The exercises apparently consisted of both amphibious landings using hovercraft, and para-drop drills using AN-2 aircraft.⁴⁷ Of note, the amphibious troops (naval infantry) - deployed in 2011 to a location where they could easily marry up with the hovercraft

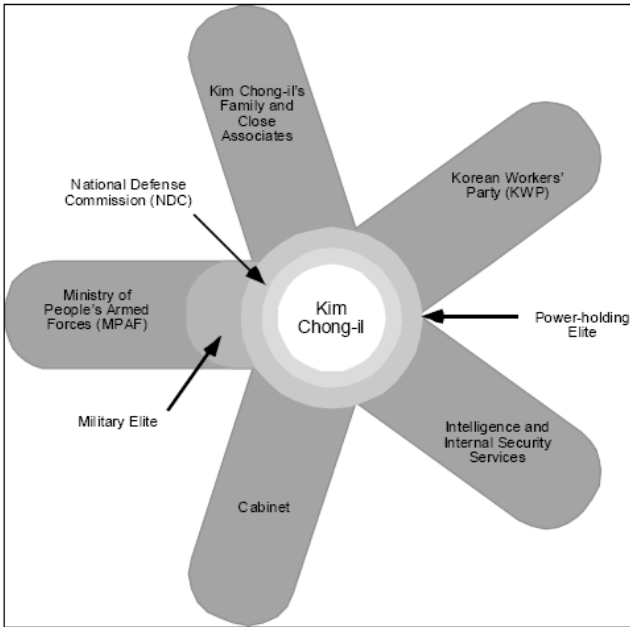
that would deploy from Koampo naval base - are exactly the kind of troops that would be used in an attack on one of the five ROK-occupied islands that sit in or near the Northern Limit Line (NLL). Thus, the threat of a future NKPA SOF attack on one of these islands is very real.

While not commonly thought of as an "asymmetric capability," cyber warfare is something that the North Koreans have now apparently decided to enter. In 2011, the North Koreans were confirmed to have been behind massive cyber attacks that targeted dozens of South Korean government agencies and military entities. The attacks in 2011 were only the most recent (as of this writing) that North Korea has initiated against South Korean government servers and computers. The attacks have been so effective that the South Korean government has actually been compelled to chart out a national cyber security strategy. The effort will reportedly be led by South Korea's most prominent intelligence service, the National Intelligence Service.⁴⁸ North Korea has also been pinpointed as being responsible for the jamming of GPS systems - both military and civilian - in South Korea during 2011. (North Korea has also reportedly offered its GPS jammer system up for sale to nations in the Middle East.)⁴⁹

The North Korean Regime Succession Process: It's Impact on the Military

The North Korean government is dominated by four key institutions - the military establishment, the party, the security services, and the inner circle of the Kim family regime. In fact, when one addresses the government of North Korea and the power brokers within it, it is prudent not to think of a hierarchical system of power sharing (as one sees in democracies or even in other communist governments such as China). Rather, it is better to judge the power system in North Korea as that of several key institutions, all feeding into what has always been one man in power - until December of 2011, Kim Jong-il (see Figure 3). While Kim took advice from trusted leaders in each of these institutions, he wielded absolute power over them. Thus, as North Korea goes through the important process of succession from Kim Jong-il, to his third son Kim Jong-un, it is important to analyze the impact that this is having and will continue to have on the military.

Figure 3: Kim's Power Circle



Source: Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., “North Korea’s Strategic Culture,” Prepared for the *Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Advanced Systems & Concepts Office*, October 31, 2006, URL: [http://www.dtra.mil/documents/asco/publications/comparitive_strategic_cultures_curriculum/case%20studies/North%20Korea%20\(Bermudez\)%20final%201%20Nov%2006.pdf](http://www.dtra.mil/documents/asco/publications/comparitive_strategic_cultures_curriculum/case%20studies/North%20Korea%20(Bermudez)%20final%201%20Nov%2006.pdf)

Within the North Korean system, Kim Jong-il was the Chairman of the National Defense Commission, which in many ways is the de facto most powerful decision making body in the country.⁵⁰ Kim was also head of the party - and ran the party through a key entity known as the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD) - which has offices that even control promotions in the military.⁵¹ The security services within the country are (precisely for security reasons) highly redundant, and, as will be discussed later, also hold a key role in the power broker process in North Korea. Finally, the Kim family inner circle, dominated by Kim relatives and old-time, absolutely loyal family friends, plays a key role. Kim Jong-il conducted a focused effort to bring his third son to power within all of these governmental power-broking institutions.

The power process in North Korea received a substantial jolt when Kim Jong-il died in December of 2011. North Korean television formally announced his death on December 19, 2011.⁵² North Korean media also immediately announced that the military and the people pledged to follow Kim Jong-un's leadership to "carry on the legacy" of the DPRK.⁵³ Kim Jong-un reportedly issued his first "military order" before the announcement of his father's death - ordering military units to cease exercises and return to base - thus signaling his control of one of the key institutions in North Korea (even though Kim Jong-un was not even officially designated the "Supreme Commander").⁵⁴ Since Kim Jong-un took over from his deceased father in December, it is important to consider how that process evolved before Kim Jong-il's death, and how this bodes for the future of North Korea.

The succession process in North Korea occupied a hugely important aspect of North Korean activity since at least 2009 - until Kim Jong-il's death in December of 2011. At the center of the storm sat Kim Jong-un, the "heir apparent," and the individual that propaganda frequently refers to as the "young general." In fact, a defector-based NGO reported in 2010 that a key museum in Pyongyang had even opened up a permanent exhibition on Kim Jong-il's third son - a move (one of many moves) designed to promote his cult of personality (as already existed around his father).⁵⁵ Kim Jong-un was appointed to the powerful post of Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission in 2010 - and some analysts believe that this rapid rise to an important military post was moving much more rapidly than his father's rise during the previous succession process from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il.⁵⁶

Kim Jong-il in some ways "militarized" the party, by placing key military figures in powerful positions within it.⁵⁷ Thus, the fact that Kim Jong-un has been placed in a key military position is extremely important. Military units have reportedly undergone propaganda campaigns designed to tout the "glories" of Kim Jong-il's third son.⁵⁸ Kim Jong-un was also appointed to a key position within the party in 2009.⁵⁹ As in many communist societies, group photos show who is in key positions of power. In an official group photo published by the North Korean media in 2010, Kim Jong-un was placed close to his father - along with his aunt (Kim Kyong-hui) and key military and party members (see Figure 4).⁶⁰ Key appointments during 2010 to positions all over the North Korean government point to those who will both mentor Kim Jong-un, and will be loyal to him. Not the least among these

appointments were U Dong-chuck, who is the first deputy director of the powerful State Security Department (one of the key security services), and Chu Sang-song (who leads the arguably equally powerful Ministry of People's Security - another one of the key security services). Chu was appointed as a full member of the Politburo, and U was appointed to the Central Military Commission, where he will sit with Kim Jong-un. Both individuals are considered to be mentors of Kim Jong-un, and were absolutely loyal to his father. Kim Jong-il's aunt - Kim Kyong-hui - and her husband, Chang Song-taek, were also given important new positions during 2010 (in addition to the positions they already held), and both are considered mentors and loyal guardians of Kim Jong-un in the succession process.⁶¹

Figure 4: North Korean Leadership Photo, September, 2010



Source: KCNA

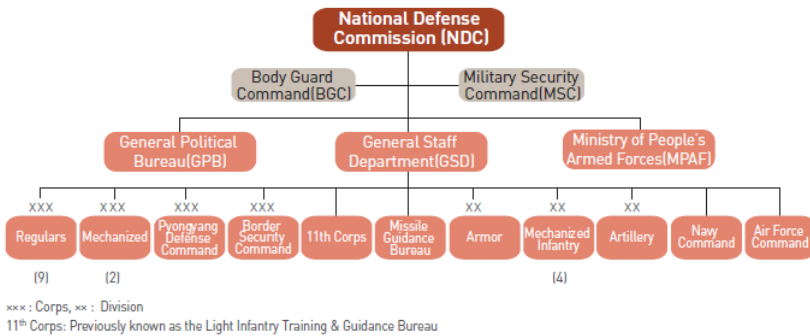
Further evidence that the propaganda campaign supporting Kim Jong-un's military leadership abilities was ongoing were revealed in 2011, when a military document proclaiming his role in the planning of

the attacks on South Korean forces (the sinking of the *Cheonan* navy ship and the artillery attack on Yonpyeong island) was discovered in China and given to the South Korean press.⁶² And in an important development that was reportedly revealed during an intelligence briefing to the South Korean National Assembly in 2011, Kim Jong-un was said to be occupying a key position of power within the State Security Department - one of several key security services (as discussed earlier), and a key player among the institutions that wield power in North Korea.⁶³ Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un's supporters were said to be filling mid-level posts in government in order to help with a smooth transition of power. According to South Korean National Intelligence Chief Won Sei-hoon (as reported in the South Korean press), "Kim Jong-un took the director position of the North's Ministry of Public Security and others, including the son of O Kuk-ryol, vice chairman of the National Defense Commission, are filling up positions under Jong-un. They are Jong-un's core of power."⁶⁴ An elite group of children of North Korea's highest leadership are said to occupy key areas of the North Korean government. This new, younger group is known as "Bonghwajo," and are said to be in positions within the General Bureau of Reconnaissance, the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, the Central Prosecutors' Office, and other key entities.⁶⁵

The military in North Korea has been just as affected by the disruptions and shuffling of positions of power - perhaps more - as the other key institutions in the country. As has been the case for the entire life of the North Korean regime, family name means everything. The sons of well known and powerful former or retired leaders in the North Korean military continued to be appointed to powerful positions within the military infrastructure during 2010 and 2011.⁶⁶ Top military officers also continued to dominate the security services in 2010 and 2011 - another key institutional power base vital for controlling the government. General Lee Myong-su (a member of the most powerful military entity in the country - the NDC) was selected to lead one of the key security services, and was also seen with Kim Jong-il conducting on-site inspections a few months before the "Dear Leader" passed away.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, in August of 2011 North Korea's Defense Minister, Kim Yong-chun, was sidelined in the succession process from father to son according to members of the South Korean government who reported the results of an intelligence briefing to the press (although Kim Yong-chun was not relieved of his position and thus the report is unconfirmed).

According to an official (who declined to be named), "I believe Minister Kim's weakening position is due to generational conflicts and rivalries between his forces and Kim Jong-un's younger loyalists within the military."⁶⁸ Key figures believed to be supporting Kim Jong-un's succession (and now his "leadership") are General Ri Yong-ho (the Chief of Staff of the North Korean People's Army), and Kim Yong-chol, an SOF general who probably answers directly to O Kuk-ryol (who sits in the NDC). Both are said to be personally close to Kim Jong-un.⁶⁹ Kim Jong-gak (first vice-director of the powerful General Political Bureau) is also an individual who reportedly is helping Kim Jong-un to consolidate his power base.⁷⁰

Figure 5: North Korea's Military Command Organization



Source: "Defense White Paper," *Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea*, 2010, <http://www.mnd.go.kr/>

It is important to note that, within the North Korean military there are not one, but two separate organizations that are political in orientation. The first is the General Political Bureau (as shown on figure 5), which (operating in a separate chain of command) has political officers in units at every level in the North Korean People's Army, from corps all the way to battalion. The second (also seen on figure 5) is Military Security Command (MSC). The MSC comes directly under the State Security Department and also has military officers monitoring activities in nearly every military unit in North Korea.⁷¹ Thus, in the North Korean military there are literally three separate chains of command, and a commander in any unit does not have one political officer looking over his every move - but two. This highly controlled,

very rigid system of monitoring everything that every officer does can be explained by Professor Toshimitsu Shigemura of Waseda University in Japan who states in part, “. . . North Korean military personnel are divided into two groups: field soldiers that engage in combat operations and political soldiers that supervise field soldiers. Political soldiers are tasked with providing ideological education to field soldiers as well as detecting a planned coup d’etat.”⁷² Cheong Seong-chang, a scholar at the Sejong Institute in South Korea, expands on this when he states, “Military commanders are not even allowed to congregate in small numbers of threes or fours, lest they plan for factional power.”⁷³ Thus the constant shuffling of officers within key positions in the military brings about the possible scenario of eventual instability. It should be noted that "Bodyguard Command" is essentially the "palace guard," and also answers directly to the NDC.⁷⁴

As the disruptions and shuffling in military positions occurred in the military during 2010 and 2011, they also occurred throughout the government - again, raising the potential for instability in the future as the leadership is forced to change because of Kim Jong-il's death. Executions in 2010 tripled in number over the previous year, and many of these executions (at least 60) were public executions. Border guards have reportedly been given orders to shoot to kill as defectors try to cross into China, and those caught reading South Korean propaganda leaflets (South Korean NGO's routinely send over leaflets via balloon) were punished to the extreme (including some executions).⁷⁵

Several senior North Korean officials began dying under mysterious circumstances beginning in 2010. Park Jung-sun, the First Vice Minister of the OGD (the most powerful entity in the party) was reported to have died of lung cancer in 2011 - though he was not previously known to have been ill. Lee Yong-cheol, another high-ranking party official, died in a mysterious "car crash," in 2010, as did Lee Jeh-gang, another powerful party official. Lee Jeh-gang was noted for having been in a powerful struggle with Kim Jong-il's brother in law, Chang Song-taek - adding to the mystery of the deaths.⁷⁶ Two senior officials - Kim Yong-sam and Mun Il-bong - were executed in 2010, both it appears as "fall guys" for failed economic and security policies. In 2011, Ryu Kyong, a high ranking official in the powerful State Security Department, was purged - again perhaps because of succession issues, and the perception that he was not absolutely loyal to those who backed Kim Jong-un. Finally, in what also appears to be a move related to the succession

process, at least 30 officials who participated in talks between the two Koreas were either executed or killed in "traffic accidents" during the 2010-2011 timeframe.⁷⁷ And at least some of this appeared to be related to a focus on putting younger men in key positions within the security services, the military, and the party.⁷⁸

Because of the shuffling of positions, purges, and appointments of younger officials to key positions throughout the North Korean government, the potential for instability now that Kim Chong il is dead is very real - including in the military. In fact, Sohn Kwang-ju, a scholar at the Kyonggi Research Institute in South Korea, has contended that the succession process was far inferior to the one that occurred when Kim Jong-il inherited power from his father. Oh Gyeong-seob of the Sejong Institute addressed the military's role in the succession process - and stability - when he stated, "Kim Jong-eun's most important political foothold will be the military and it will only be through reliance on military force in the same manner as his father that his regime will be stabilized."⁷⁹ But most analysts see Kim Jong-un's power (at least for now) as being far weaker than his father's, and thus, now that Kim Jong-il is dead, his chances of holding on to power - or even maintaining stability in the country - are, at best, questionable. As Yoo Ho-yeol, a professor of North Korean Studies at Korea University, states, "The abrupt emergence of Kim Jong-un is directly linked to Kim Jong-il's health, and chances are that a situation that the 27-year-old successor cannot cope with will soon develop."⁸⁰ This statement was made in October of 2011. Now that Kim Jong-il has in fact passed away, hopes that he would hang on for several years - and thus enhance the succession process - have faded away.

So what does all of this uncertainty mean for the future of North Korea and ultimately the North Korean threat? In the summer of 2011, South Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin told reporters in South Korea that "Inner society is not in a normal condition and anything could happen."⁸¹ According to a source in North Korea reporting to an NGO in the South, the purging of many high-level officials (and others) has caused unrest in the DPRK's "cadre society." Sections of the elite thus felt increasingly betrayed because of the large number of purges and even executions that had occurred - presumably because of succession issues.⁸² Many analysts agreed that North Korea's ability to bring about a stable succession process depended on Kim Jong-il's health - and how long he was able to hang on. Kim suffered a stroke in 2008, had chronic

renal failure from diabetes, and was believed also to suffer from cardiovascular disease. His death in 2011 brought about even more uncertainty.⁸³ As long as Kim was alive, many expected that he would rule - even if bedridden (not a sound formula for stability). Now that he has died, some experts expect a ruling combination (despite the public showing of Kim Jong-un as the absolute leader) of his third son, Chang Song-taek, Kim Jong-il's sister Kim Kyong-hui, and perhaps the military.⁸⁴ Whether a "ruling combination" or a gradual move to absolute rule by Kim Jong-un is the plan, there is no doubt that the transition to power for him is much more difficult than it was for his father following the death of Kim Il-sung - and that was no cake walk (Kim Jong-il did not actually take over all positions of leadership formally until 1997.)⁸⁵

Conclusions

Since Kim Jong-il is gone, his third son stands at best a 50-50 chance of holding the country together – and, because of the one-man rule, the country has always been under, he is the main chance North Korea has for continuing to exist as a nation-state now that Kim Jong-il has died. As Kim Yong-hyun, an expert at Dongguk University in Korea, has been quoted as saying, "Should Kim Jong-il be able to maintain his health and continue to lead the state affairs for the next three to five years, chances are that the succession scheme will become quite stable." Kim Yong-hyun's statement continued in scope and detail by adding, "But, should his health deteriorate rapidly, there could be instability which stems from the possible conflict within the elite group in the North and other influence from outside to shake up the succession process."⁸⁶ Professor Kim's statements point to current events - since the "Dear Leader" is now dead. In fact, Kim Jong-un may be able to hang on for a few months or a few years, but the chances are very good that the country could collapse as the military splinters from purges and resource constraints, and the party and security services vie for power because of a lack of strong central authority. Thus, it is important when one considers the threat from North Korea as it stands at the end of the Kim Jong-il era, to consider it a two-headed threat; a military that clearly managed to adjust to resource constraints and has been able to "re-invent itself" as an army focused on asymmetric forces, and a government (including the military) that in many ways was fighting to stave off instability, striving to avoid collapse, and, ultimately, absorption by the South. It is these two threats that the ROK-US alliance has had to prepare for - and both threats

(attack from the North or collapse of the DPRK) present compelling challenges for military planners.

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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