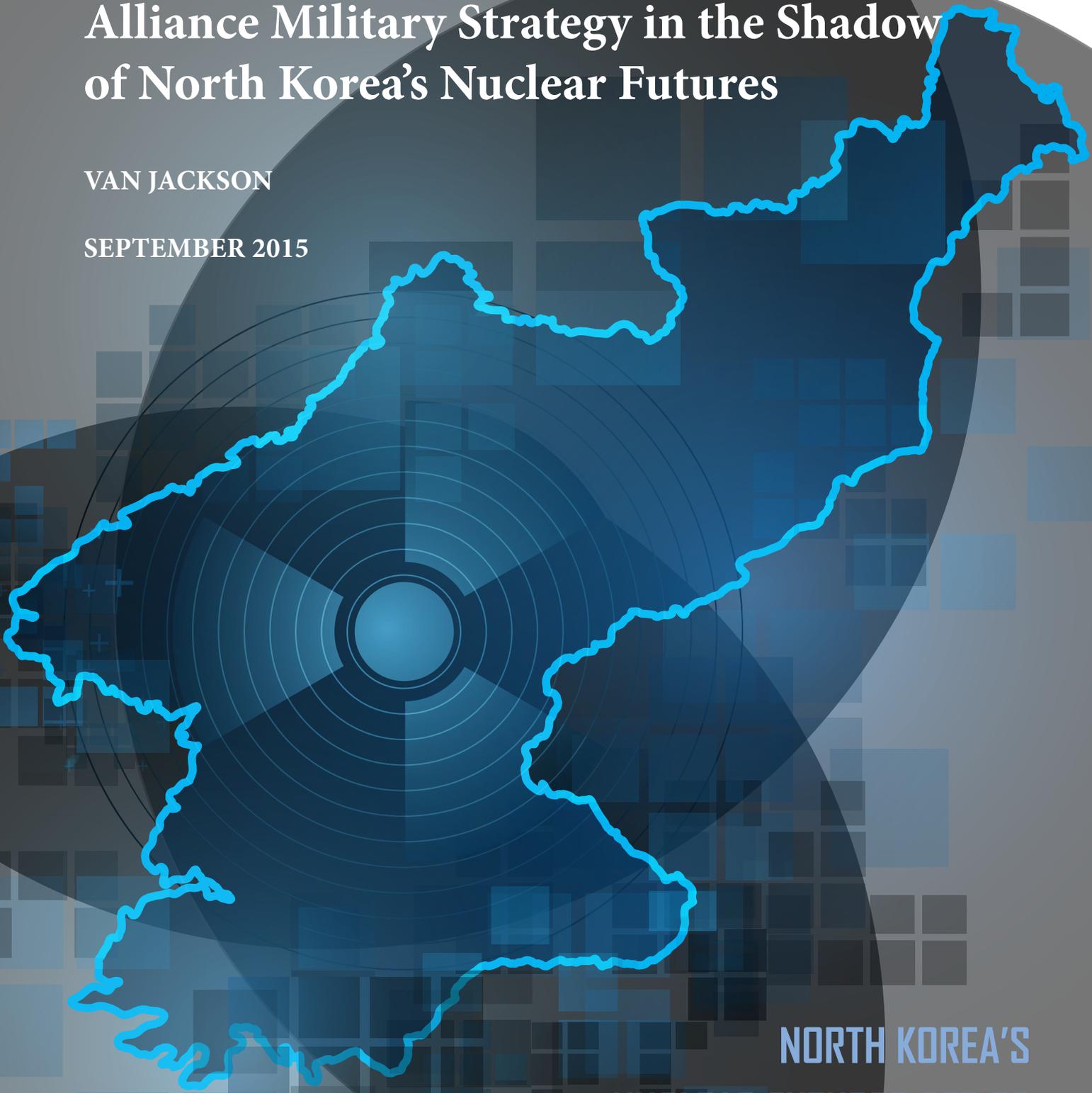


# Alliance Military Strategy in the Shadow of North Korea's Nuclear Futures

VAN JACKSON

SEPTEMBER 2015



NORTH KOREA'S  
NUCLEAR FUTURES SERIES

US-KOREA INSTITUTE AT SAIS

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## ALLIANCE MILITARY STRATEGY IN THE SHADOW OF NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR FUTURES

In the early decades of the Cold War when North Korea maintained only a large conventional force, alliance strategy depended on technological superiority. As North Korea gradually acquired cruise and short-range ballistic missile capabilities in addition to its conventional forces, the US nuclear umbrella and alliance missile defense capabilities took on greater salience. But as North Korea expands and improves its nuclear and missile delivery capability, the abstract promise of the US nuclear umbrella and missile defense may prove inadequate to prevent at least limited war scenarios.<sup>1</sup>

This paper argues that North Korea's nuclear posture complicates alliance military strategy. At the strategic level, Pyongyang's nuclear posture is likely to emphasize assured retaliation, which becomes more credible as it increases delivery options and aggregate numbers of nuclear weapons. During a conflict, there is at least a moderate risk that regardless of North Korea's deliberate nuclear posture, it will shift to one of asymmetric escalation—launching nuclear first strikes to compel the US-ROK alliance to stand down or sue for peace. At the operational level, North Korean nuclear missiles strengthen anti-access concepts of operation (CONOPs) by using nuclear-armed missiles to target air bases and ports in South Korea and Japan. In this emerging strategic and operational environment, extreme military solutions—such as unification by military conquest alone—become even less plausible than they are today.

This strategic and operational trajectory affects the connection between US-ROK military operations and national strategy in a number of ways. First, to minimize operational vulnerabilities in an anti-access campaign, the alliance needs improved basing and port access in and around South Korea. This places a premium on Japan's involvement in any contingency. Second, consolidating the US military presence in Korea into two “enduring hubs” increases the size and reduces the number of targets at which North Korea could aim its nuclear weapons; US and ROK basing resilience is more likely with a geographically dispersed military basing structure. Third, US and ROK aircrafts need to be prepared to fly missions to and from many different bases—US bases, ROK bases and Japanese air bases as well. Fourth, all alliance operations need to be sensitive to the possibility of triggering a nuclear first strike from North Korea if the regime perceives its defeat is imminent or inevitable. Finally, the alliance needs to focus greater attention on limited war campaign scenarios, specifically campaigns with limited objectives that are tailored to avoid sending signals that regime change is inevitable.

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<sup>1</sup> Van Jackson, “Across the Other Pond: Opportunities and Challenges in the Asia Pacific,” Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, February 26, 2015; Van Jackson, “From Political Taboo to Strategic Hedge: A US Perspective on Ballistic Missile Defense,” *The Asan Forum*, March 2015, <http://www.theasanforum.org/a-us-perspective-4/>.

This paper adopts as a point of departure the three nuclear and missile modernization scenarios proposed in *North Korea's Nuclear Futures: Technology and Strategy*.<sup>2</sup> Each nuclear and missile program scenario—minimal growth/modernization, moderate growth/modernization and maximum growth/modernization—makes different assumptions about how far North Korea might go, but even the minimal growth/minimal modernization scenario makes North Korean anti-access operations and a wartime strategy of asymmetric escalation logical. The one part of my argument for which scenario trajectory matters is my claim that North Korea seeks an assured retaliation capability—a nuclear deterrent capable of surviving any alliance first strike. As explained below, North Korea's ability to actually adopt this strategy depends on the survivability of its nuclear arsenal, which in turn depends partly on how many nuclear weapons and delivery systems it develops.

### **Nuclear Strategy in War and Peace<sup>3</sup>**

Vipin Narang suggests that states developing nuclear weapons typically choose from three types of strategies: 1) catalytic; 2) asymmetric escalation; and 3) assured retaliation.<sup>4</sup> A catalytic strategy emphasizes the threat of nuclear weapons for the sake of bringing a patron closer to its nuclear weapon-wielding client. Asymmetric escalation relies on nuclear responses to conventional conflicts or crises as a way of compelling de-escalation or reaping political benefit. An assured retaliation strategy deploys nuclear weapons in a manner that ensures that the state's nuclear force can survive any first strike and launch nuclear second strikes in turn.

North Korea's rhetoric would have us believe it already employs an asymmetric escalation strategy, but its credibility is hampered by the reality that Pyongyang's nuclear and missile forces are insufficient to execute such a strategy as well as by its track record of dubious military posturing and threat making. Narang did not include North Korea as a case in his work on nuclear postures. However, in a separate analysis that focused on North Korea and Iran, he suggested that North Korea is most likely to choose a catalytic nuclear strategy designed to bring Beijing into a conflict on its side, assuming North Korea sees China as likely to do so.<sup>5</sup>

On the first count, there are several problems with assuming that North Korea employs or will employ an asymmetric strategy in peacetime. First, it would seem to subvert North Korea's widely acknowledged primary goal of regime survival. North Korea should want the outside world to believe it is willing to go nuclear first because it might accrue some political benefit through coercion. Perhaps, for instance, the alliance will hesitate to retaliate against a North Korean provocation in peacetime for fear of a conventional conflict escalating to the nuclear level. But should we believe it? For North Korea to actually adopt an asymmetric escalation posture in peacetime (as opposed to bluffing) would risk triggering regime change (the eventuality Pyongyang most ardently seeks to avoid) simply for coercive gain. Second, North Korea has a track record of hyping its military capabilities. Not only are there suggestions that

<sup>2</sup> Joel S. Wit and Sun Young Ahn, *North Korea's Nuclear Futures: Technology and Strategy* (Washington, DC: US-Korea Institute at SAIS, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Portions of this section originally appeared in Van Jackson, "What Is North Korea's Nuclear Strategy?" *The Diplomat*, May 28, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Narang's typology is incomplete, leaving out, among others, nuclear latency posture and a bargaining chip posture. For the purposes of military strategy, however, the three postures considered here cover the plausible range. See Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Vipin Narang, "Nuclear Strategies of Emerging Nuclear Powers: North Korea and Iran," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2015): 73–91.

its May 2015 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) test claim was exaggerated,<sup>6</sup> but it has also staged missile capabilities in parades and on television to signal that it is capable of more than it actually is.<sup>7</sup> Third, if North Korea were pursuing an asymmetric escalation posture, we should expect to see some evidence that Pyongyang is developing tactical nuclear weapons—nuclear-armed artillery, land mines, short-range rockets or “suitcase bombs.” Though nuclear-armed ballistic missiles typically serve the strategic purpose of existential deterrence and defense, tactical nuclear weapons are generally considered usable weapons. To date, there is no evidence suggesting North Korea is moving in this direction, though admittedly objective indicators and warnings are far from immediately obvious. Fourth, there is cause for skepticism about North Korea’s claims regarding its nuclear strategy, as well as about the deductions made by outside observers who rely on rhetoric to back their conclusions. For decades, Korea watchers have found it difficult to separate signal from noise when it comes to North Korean threat making, and its recent history of nuclear threats has unsurprisingly proven hollow.<sup>8</sup>

Narang’s argument that North Korean nuclear strategy would be primarily intended to catalyze Chinese intervention in a conflict on its behalf is also problematic. In the context of contemporary Sino-North Korean relations, a catalytic strategy ignores Pyongyang’s history of foreign policy independence from Beijing even as it has tried to extract resources from China;<sup>9</sup> its *juche* ethos, which would be unlikely to allow it to pursue a deliberate strategy of dependence; and its distant contemporary relationship with China, which has grown increasingly strained since Kim Jong Un ascended to power.<sup>10</sup> In other words, just because South Africa once pursued a catalytic nuclear strategy to induce US commitments—the empirical basis of Narang’s catalytic claim—it should not be assumed that North Korea would pursue the same strategy vis-à-vis China. The nature of the patron-client relationship between China and North Korea is simply too different; North Korea does not seek reliance on an outside power for its security.

### *North Korea’s Assured Retaliation Strategy*<sup>11</sup>

Although North Korea lacks sufficient capability for an assured retaliation nuclear posture today, there are several reasons to expect that Pyongyang is making a deliberate move toward such a strategy. First, assured retaliation, especially during peacetime, is the most stable of the various types of nuclear posture because it reserves nuclear use for second strikes while other posture types incentivize first strikes.<sup>12</sup> Second, North Korea has an incentive not to spark a war that would lead to regime change. An assured retaliation capability guarantees that regime change could not be forced from the outside without nuclear conflict. That, in turn, conditions US and South Korean decision makers to weigh the cost of nuclear attacks in pursuing regime change.

<sup>6</sup> James Pearson, “North Korea Modified Submarine Missile Launch Photos, Says US Official,” Reuters, May 20, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Van Jackson, *Rival Reputations: Coercion and Credibility in US-North Korea Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Jackson, *Rival Reputations*.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Perlez, “Chinese Annoyance With North Korea Bubbles to the Surface,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2014 [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/world/asia/chinese-annoyance-with-north-korea-bubbles-to-the-surface.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/world/asia/chinese-annoyance-with-north-korea-bubbles-to-the-surface.html?_r=0).

<sup>11</sup> Portions of this section appear in Van Jackson, “Why North Korea Wants Mutually Assured Destruction,” *The Diplomat*, June 4, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> It is, of course, possible to have an assured retaliation capability and be willing to launch nuclear first strikes. But as a strategy for achieving a political effect, that would equate to an asymmetric escalation strategy, only with a more secure and survivable foundation.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, while we lack “smoking gun” evidence about North Korea’s intentions, Pyongyang has made multiple observable decisions that we would associate with a state moving toward an assured retaliation strategy. Survivability of a nuclear force has several requirements, among them are geographically dispersed weapons locations, multiple types of nuclear delivery vehicles and a sufficiently large inventory of nuclear weapons. The most likely capability that assures nuclear survivability for North Korea is mobile missile launchers, which it has already developed. Generally, the capability that best assures nuclear survivability is a submarine-launched ballistic missile because of its mobility and difficulty of detection. All of these conditions fit with North Korea’s current trajectory. North Korea’s expected delivery vehicles for nuclear strikes include various types of ballistic missiles from multiple missile garrisons, KN-08 road-mobile transporter-erector launchers (TELs), the IL-28 bomber, Soviet-era submarines and surface ships. Its navy is making investments in SLBM technology and modernization of its submarine fleet—a highly expensive undertaking. And its nuclear facilities are not consolidated but spread across at least six locations around the country.<sup>13</sup>

While SLBMs may represent a “gold standard” for nuclear survivability, it may be possible to achieve that with ground-based mobile TELs as well. There is no consensus threshold in the nuclear literature for when survivability is achieved, and the nuclear-capable KN-08 may make North Korea’s nuclear force as survivable as SLBM systems. Even in a minimal growth/modernization scenario—which assumes no more than 20 nuclear weapons—North Korea may have a sufficient quantity of nuclear weapons to ensure survivability depending on the intended delivery vehicles.

### *Asymmetric Escalation Risks*

While there are both logical and evidentiary reasons to believe that North Korea is pursuing an assured retaliation strategy to the extent its capabilities allow, there are also reasons to expect that North Korea might adopt an asymmetric escalation posture during periods of conflict. In the middle of a conflict, North Korea would have at least two types of incentives for being the first to use nuclear weapons.

One type of incentive is, as Keir Lieber and Daryl Press have argued, tantamount to “use or lose.”<sup>14</sup> Nuclear weapon employment is completely rational in a mindset of fear-based desperation, interpreting US and South Korean political-military objectives as unswervingly to compel regime change in North Korea. This type of incentive for nuclear first use could derive from deliberate strategy prior to the outbreak of conflict, but would more likely be an adaptation to circumstances that arise in a conflict scenario. In the case of North Korea, the closed, non-pluralistic nature of the ruling Kim regime makes it unlikely that authority to launch nuclear weapons would be pre-delegated to subordinate military units; the ruling center cannot trust its functionary periphery with such power. Even if nuclear command, control and communications (C3) reside solely with Kim Jong Un, any alliance attacks that risk disrupting North Korea’s nuclear decision making also risk disrupting its survivability, making a “use or lose” situation even more likely.

<sup>13</sup> Nuclear map of North Korea facilities, Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), [http://www.nti.org/gmap/nuclear\\_north\\_korea.html?/](http://www.nti.org/gmap/nuclear_north_korea.html?/).

<sup>14</sup> Keir Lieber and Daryl Press, “The Next Korean War,” *Foreign Affairs online*, April 1, 2013; Keir Lieber and Daryl Press, “Coercive Nuclear Campaigns in the 21st Century: Understanding Adversary Incentives and Options for Nuclear Escalation,” Report for the Project for Advanced Systems and Concepts for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2013).

Another type of incentive for nuclear first use during conflict is the operations, maintenance and logistics constraints North Korea would face during any sustained military campaign. The US Office of the Secretary of Defense's annual report on North Korean military capabilities and the threats they pose describes an increasingly feeble North Korean military.<sup>15</sup> The problems of North Korea's aging equipment, much of which dates to the early decades of the Cold War, are compounded by budget-driven training and readiness reductions, as well as difficulties with weapons maintenance because of both cost and challenges with sourcing replacement parts while UN sanctions remain in place.

Rather than increasing readiness through training, many reports suggest parts of the Korean People's Army (KPA) are routinely diverted to agricultural, resource extraction and industrial—in other words, fundamentally economic—applications of their time and labor.<sup>16</sup> Although elements of the KPA and North Korea's citizenry would be capable of fighting a localized, long-term insurgency within its own borders, it is difficult to see how North Korea's ability to sustain an actual war footing with the United States and South Korea—with a unified force and intact command-and-control network—would exceed a couple months at most. This lack of sustained operational capacity creates strong incentives to de-escalate or close a military campaign as quickly as possible. Desperation, in other words, may compel North Korea to launch nuclear first strikes, even with an assured retaliation capability.

### **The Korean Peninsula as an Anti-Access Environment**

Whether assured retaliation or asymmetric escalation, each type of North Korean nuclear strategy leaves considerable room for how it is implemented. Because the CONOPs for any military campaign are likely to be planned and executed by the KPA, it, like all militaries, is likely to plan for military campaigns that achieve maximum effectiveness. Given the large and diverse inventory of missiles the KPA continues to refine and invest in, we might then expect that conventional and nuclear-tipped missiles will be relevant as a “force multiplier” in its operations.

Although anti-access operations are most often associated with China in US security discourses, most of Asia's militaries have been investing in capabilities and reorienting doctrine to emphasize blunting the power projection capabilities of others.<sup>17</sup> North Korea seems to also be capitalizing on this trend, which has largely been enabled by the region-wide availability of precision-guided munitions.<sup>18</sup> Several relatively inexpensive North Korean capabilities seem designed for anti-access CONOPs. Drones can be used as missile and long-range artillery decoys, or to divert alliance air defense resources in order to give North Korea's anemic air force a fighting chance at an offensive mission. Undersea mines, combined with anti-ship cruise missiles, can create significant barriers for US and ROK naval forces. Nodong missiles can be used to target air bases and ports in South Korea and Japan. And depending on its ability to steal, procure or simply reverse engineer Chinese missile capabilities, a North Korean anti-satellite

<sup>15</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Terence Roehrig, “The Role and Influence of the North Korean Military,” in Kyung-Ae Park and Scott Snyder (eds.), *North Korea in Transition: Politics, Economy, and Society* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Van Jackson, “The Rise and Persistence of Strategic Hedging across Asia: A System-Level Analysis,” in Ashley Tellis, Abraham Denmark and Greg Chaffin (eds.), *Strategic Asia 2014–15: US Alliances and Partnerships at the Center of Global Power* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2014): 316–42.

<sup>18</sup> Amy Chang, Ben FitzGerald, and Van Jackson, *Shades of Gray: Technology, Strategic Competition, and Stability in Maritime Asia* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2015).

capability is not inconceivable; technology transfer, licit or illicit, has always given North Korea a lethal advantage. All of North Korea's modern capabilities and projected threats have roots in technology transfer: the KN-08 TELs from China;<sup>19</sup> anti-ship cruise missiles modeled on the Russian Kh-35 Uran; the Nodong medium-range ballistic missile based on Scud technology; nuclear knowledge from Pakistan; drone technology from China's commercial sector; and cyber capabilities from China, which also occasionally serves as a location for launching North Korean cyberattacks.<sup>20</sup>

North Korea's growing emphasis on missile diversification—even as its ground forces get diverted into non-military activities and the “air gap” between its air force and the South Korean air force expands—incentivizes the country to follow the military-technical trend in Asia favoring anti-access CONOPs. For decades, studies of the KPA suggested it would rely on special operations forces to try to infiltrate behind South Korean lines for the purposes of sabotaging alliance bases, ports and petroleum, oil and lubricant facilities prior to or at the beginning of any conflict.<sup>21</sup> But the North's missile and rocket force can perform this task more assuredly, faster and potentially at less expense. Such attacks counter the local sources of alliance power projection in South Korea and Japan. If successful, they would delay or altogether prevent alliance and coalition partner force flow (including logistics and ammunition) from outside the Korean peninsula. Moreover, by targeting bases and ports, the KPA would remove locations for aircraft (and ship) recovery and maintenance.

A North Korean anti-access CONOP would prioritize conventional and nuclear missile use for four major purposes: delaying or preventing the large-scale flow of US and coalition partner forces into the broader Korean operating area (including United Nations Command rear area facilities in Japan); preventing surface ships from approaching close enough to North Korea's western and eastern coasts to launch amphibious assaults; eroding alliance air superiority by preventing recurring air sorties for both strikes and surveillance from air bases and aircraft carriers; and disrupting the logistics that support and sustain alliance ground forces that would move forward into North Korean territory. Using missiles to meet these operational objectives makes air bases, naval ports and surface ships critical target priorities. In essence, the US way of war requires projecting sustained power onto North Korea by multiple means; the North's missiles are best used to block or erode the alliance's ability to project power locally.

### **Adapting Alliance Military Strategy**

The previous sections introduced several challenges to how the United States and South Korea might conduct combined operations in a military conflict with North Korea, yet certain military challenges would exist regardless of how North Korea's nuclear and missile program develops. Thousands of rounds of long-range artillery would still target Seoul from advantageous elevations and hardened locations. North Korea would likely retain a large number of special operations forces capable of guerrilla activities behind US and South Korean lines. US officials expect chemical weapons to be used early in a conflict.<sup>22</sup> And North Korea would retain superior numbers of conventional ground forces. Moreover, North Korea's mountainous terrain and poor

<sup>19</sup> Nick Hansen, “North Korea's New Long-Range Missile: Fact or Fiction?” *38 North*, May 4, 2012, <http://38north.org/2012/05/nhansen050412/>.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Haas, “China a Likely Factor in North Korea Cyber Prowess: Experts,” *Agence France-Presse*, December 26, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., *North Korean Special Forces* (London: Jane's Information Group, 1988).

<sup>22</sup> “US Warns China of North Korean Chemical Weapons Threat,” *Associated Press*, September 10, 2013.

transportation infrastructure—there are very few functioning roadways outside Pyongyang—amplify its ability to deflect or seriously slow any invasion into its territory.

As described in the previous section, however, North Korea's nuclear and missile capability uniquely enables an anti-access approach designed to counter US and South Korean power projection. Adapting alliance military strategy to this changing operational reality draws attention to several priorities for alliance military posture and how it might approach a conflict with an anti-access oriented North Korea.

Some changes, well recognized by Combined Forces Command and US Forces Korea, are already being pursued. These include improved anti-submarine warfare capabilities, which are crucial against SLBMs and surprise attacks like those against the ROK naval ship *Cheonan* in 2010; enhanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets and coverage to enable precision targeting of missile sites and launchers; and multilayered missile defense. Such improvements have been publicly affirmed in alliance Security Consultative Meetings dating back to at least 2010. The uncertainty about these capabilities simply centers on whether they can be improved and fielded quickly enough to meet the trajectory of North Korean missile developments. But other alliance changes that are not being undertaken—and are not necessarily even recognized today—should be considered as well. Discussed below are priorities for countering an anti-access, war-fighting CONOP, which emphasizes nuclear and conventional missiles.

#### *Diversified Ports and Air Bases*

To minimize operational vulnerabilities in an anti-access campaign, the alliance needs optimized basing and port accesses in and around South Korea to facilitate power projection. At present, there are seven naval ports in South Korea and only one US-designated naval base at Chinhae that coordinates ship visits but does not host any US naval assets. The South Korean navy has long aimed to establish a new navy base on Jeju Island, but progress has been slowed by a combination of domestic opposition and budget priorities favoring South Korean ground forces.<sup>23</sup> US air presence in South Korea is considerably greater than its naval presence, with two permanent air bases at Osan and Kunsan hosting 29 fighter squadrons. Additionally, the South Korean air force operates 11 bases in addition to aircraft at the two US-designated air bases.

It would be easy to recommend the construction of more landing strips for aircraft in South Korea, but the country's rocky topography does not allow for it. Similarly, much of South Korea's coast consists of shallow shoals of less than four meters in depth in some parts, making the construction of new naval ports impractical. Nevertheless, three policy decisions would improve the situation:

- First, the South Korean navy should expedite base construction on Jeju Island. Its rear area, offshore location is tactically useful, and the base would provide added diversification of locations where US, ROK and coalition partner ships could dock.
- Second, US air bases and ports located in Japan should offer capacity for not only US but also South Korean air and naval assets. There is a high risk that early in any conflict North Korean missiles would destroy at least some naval and air facilities—especially

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Yeo, "Back to the Future: Korean Anti-Base Resistance from Jeju Island to Pyeongtaek," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 9, issue 32, no. 3, August 2011.

the Osan and Kunsan air bases, and the port of Busan—even though alliance ships and aircraft might still be intact. Having more diversified facilities minimally requires utilizing United Nations Command–flagged rear area bases in Japan, yet South Korea has not grappled with this eventuality. While having more bases and ports would not make South Korea immune from attack, of course, it would further complicate North Korean targeting and improve alliance options.

- Third, deploying carrier strike groups takes considerable time, and given their city-sized presence, adversaries learn of their approach well before arrival. The United States should consider maintaining a continuous carrier presence in Northeast Asia in order to leverage additional mobile takeoff and landing locations. The presence of carrier strike groups in Northeast Asia now typically occurs only as part of military exercises, freedom of navigation assertions and show of force demonstrations as an occasional political signal of commitment or coercion. Because carrier strike groups consist of many naval assets in addition to the carrier,<sup>24</sup> which adds costs, the United States might explore the possibility of Japanese and South Korean ships partially constituting the non-carrier assets in the strike group.

### *Resilience through Dispersal*

Another imperative in adapting military strategy to an anti-access CONOP is to effectively do the opposite of the current US-South Korea plan to consolidate the US military presence through the Yongsan Relocation Plan (YRP) and Land Partnership Program (LPP) initiatives. These initiatives, launched during the George W. Bush and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, are intended to shrink the US military footprint on the Korean peninsula, from approximately 104 US installations to 47, organized in two large, dense hubs—one in the Pyeongtaek area southwest of Seoul, and the other in the southern portion of the peninsula.<sup>25</sup> Whatever the original rationale, consolidating the US military presence in South Korea into two “enduring hubs” increases the size of and reduces the number of targets that North Korea needs to attack with nuclear weapons. North Korea does not even need to make major advances in precision-guidance to cause large-scale counterforce damage; it would merely need to aim in the general direction of two densely packed, wide-area targets.

Improving the resilience of the US presence on the peninsula in view of North Korea’s growing nuclear arsenal would be aided by a geographically dispersed military basing structure. Dispersal is one of only a limited number of ways to enhance the survivability of important forces and facilities that enable power projection, which is a crucial task in countering anti-access campaigns.<sup>26</sup> A major alternative to dispersal—hardening—might be possible if facilities were targeted by cruise missiles with small payloads, but hardening becomes nearly impossible against nuclear-armed missiles. YRP and LPP improve the political sustainability of the US military presence in South Korea by reducing US military real estate in Seoul—one of the most expensive real estate markets in the world—and by geographically concentrating areas where US military and South Korean civilians are likely to interact. That should reduce opportunities for political friction and military accidents that affect the host nation population. Thus, it would seem that

<sup>24</sup> In addition to any logistics and supply ships, carrier strike groups routinely include a cruiser, two destroyers or frigates, and submarines.

<sup>25</sup> R. Slade Walters, “US Forces Korea Transformation Update,” US Army Public Affairs, January 12, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Sam J. Tangredi, *Anti-Access Warfare: Countering A2/AD Strategies* (Newport, RI: Naval Institute Press, 2013).

a decision to reverse YRP and LPP is an instance in which political and military strategy may contradict one another.

### *Readiness for Unpredictable Flight Patterns*

Given the vulnerability of fixed bases to North Korean missile strikes, US and ROK aircraft need to be prepared to fly missions to and from many different bases—US bases, ROK bases and Japanese air bases as well. During combined military exercises, it would improve realism to direct US and South Korean aircraft not to take off and land from their assigned bases, but to treat all bases in South Korea and Japan as a single, large theater basing network, adapting where specific aircraft and squadrons physically end up based on assumptions about “suddenly” inoperable bases during exercises. This is much more difficult to do, in part because of logistical complications associated with maintenance and refueling support for specific types of aircraft, but it more closely replicates the circumstances alliance aircraft would face in a contingency.

### *Tailored Operations for Assurance Signaling*

The traditional template for US war fighting, as Lieber and Press argue,<sup>27</sup> needs to be tailored to take into account inadvertent signaling about alliance objectives. Because the North Korean leadership fears decapitation, there is a high risk of it launching nuclear first strikes during a conflict if it believes the alliance intends to change the regime. If, as a conflict unfolds, the alliance decides it does not wish to compel regime change but rather aim for a more limited objective, all alliance operations need to be sensitive to the possibility of triggering a nuclear first strike from North Korea. This implies that large-scale amphibious assaults, destruction of North Korean air defense systems, and bombing runs against either Pyongyang or nuclear and missile sites need to either be avoided or conducted with a conscientiousness about messaging to North Korean leadership. Stealth aircraft have thus become especially valuable for precision targeting, as have special operations forces. Many types of ground force capabilities, such as counter-artillery fires, could also be employed without posing any kind of imminent risk to the North Korean regime.

Three critical rejoinders to this discussion are possible. First, one might point out that the alliance is likely to pursue regime change in any conflict scenario, so the issue of tailored operations and assurance signaling is moot. While it may be true that the alliance could seek regime change in a conflict, it makes eminent sense to use military feints that avoid conveying such a worst-case inevitability to North Korea; pursuing regime change would lead to the very nuclear escalation the alliance seeks to avoid. Second, there is also a possibility that North Korea will believe the alliance seeks regime change in any contingency; signaling limited scope intentions may not be possible. This might be true, but there is at least a possibility that it is not, and if there is an opportunity to avoid a total nuclear war, policymakers have an obligation to try. Third, some may question whether the alliance can fight and win a war under limited conditions in which the alliance exercises self-restraint. At present, the alliance probably cannot wage a limited conflict effectively, but the reason is not self-restraint—it is a lack of training and equipping for that possibility. Whether the alliance can “win” depends on how victory is defined. If victory amounts to regime change or the destruction of Pyongyang, then victory is almost impossible against a nuclear North Korea because either of these actions is likely to trigger nuclear conflict. If victory amounts to conflict de-escalation, avoidance of nuclear conflict and a restrained North Korean

<sup>27</sup> Lieber and Press, “Coercive Nuclear Campaigns in the 21st Century.”

foreign policy in the future, then victory is eminently possible, though it may demand a different way of thinking about and preparing for conflict than the way those are approached today.

### *Limited War—Fighting with What You've Got*

Finally, related to the previous recommendation, the alliance needs to focus greater attention on limited war campaign scenarios. Specifically, the alliance should devise limited objectives tailored to avoid not only precipitating nuclear escalation, but also sending signals that regime change is inevitable. During the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1993-94, the North Koreans told US diplomats that they had studied the US way of war during the 1990-91 Gulf War and that they were aware of how “flexible deterrent options” equated to massing large-scale US forces immediately outside the operating area before launching the invasion. The North Koreans claimed they would never allow this to happen and vowed to strike first if the United States started massing forces just outside the Korean theater of operations.<sup>28</sup>

As part of exploring limited war scenarios and developing limited war contingency plans, two considerations become crucial to adapting alliance military strategy: ammunition stockpiles and the possibility of fighting North Korea without follow-on forces. Keeping up with the pace of a military campaign, as well as quickly shifting fortunes on the battlefield, may require immediate access to vast stores of ammunition. The Korean War is instructive of how much ammunition the United States and South Korea might need in a conflict. During a single battle in the Korean War, US and South Korean forces fired more than 300,000 artillery rounds in only seven days, illustrating how quickly forces can expend ammunition.<sup>29</sup> Ammunition superiority actually helped offset North Korea's superior numbers of conventional forces. Stockpiles are thus a tactical consideration that can generate strategic consequences.

Sufficient local ammunition stores are one variant of a larger theme for how to adapt alliance military strategy to an anti-access campaign: fighting without follow-on forces. If North Korea expects the United States to amass forces in staging areas just outside the Korean theater of operations prior to a conflict that decapitates the regime, then the US “way of war” risks triggering a North Korean nuclear first use. By only, or at least primarily, deploying within-theater forces—that is, those troops and weapons systems already on the peninsula or at bases in Japan—US decisions to destroy even sensitive targets, such as North Korean air defenses, are less likely to be perceived as a step toward regime change. This, in turn, suggests optimizing the composition of the US 28,500-troop commitment to South Korea to perhaps emphasize fewer ground forces (which South Korea can primarily provide) in favor of mobile air, naval and amphibious forces. It may further be unrealistic to expect that ballistic missile defense, such as the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system, could be withheld and deployed only during a crisis.

### **Conclusion**

North Korea is on a trajectory to have a larger, more lethal nuclear arsenal with time. There is some basis to assume that by 2020, North Korea will possess 20 to 100 nuclear weapons and that its diverse missile force will be capable of greater range and precision than today. This paper has argued that North Korea is already pursuing those measures necessary to secure an assured

<sup>28</sup> Jackson, *Rival Reputations*, ch. 6.

<sup>29</sup> James A. Houston, *Guns and Butter, Powder and Rice: US Army Logistics in the Korean War* (Cranbury, NJ: Susquehanna University Press, 1989): 160–62.

retaliation capability; in the meantime, the North will continue to bluff that it has an asymmetric escalation nuclear posture. Regardless of its deliberate posture, however, in the midst of conflict there is considerable risk that North Korea might resort to nuclear first strikes out of desperation. Even at the most modest levels of Pyongyang's predicted nuclear development, the alliance will be faced with a strategic dilemma, for there can be no forced regime change or unification without expecting North Korean nuclear use, whether as a first strike or retaliatory (because an alliance first strike could not fully disable North Korea's nuclear capability). Once conflict of any kind has started, nuclear use may occur because of inadvertent signaling.

In order to cope with these changing circumstances, I have argued that alliance strategy should take steps to expand and diversify bases and port accesses, conduct tailored operations to avoid inadvertent nuclear escalation, find ways to fight a limited conflict without out-of-theater force flow, and leverage Japan more than currently envisioned in any Korean contingency. There are many reasons, mostly political and fiscal, why these changes have not already taken place. Forward stationing an aircraft carrier in Northeast Asia would almost certainly be read as a threat by China, though so would most capabilities. Diffusing, rather than concentrating, the US military footprint on the peninsula unwinds a decade of work and expense associated with YRP and LPP, though sunk costs should not serve as a rationale for continuing any policy. Also, building a South Korean naval base on Jeju Island has already generated civil society opposition—a not uncommon reaction to any proposed military base construction.

There is, in other words, no shortage of explanations for why alliance strategy today is not optimized for fighting an anti-access, nuclear-capable North Korea. But if North Korea's nuclear and missile trajectory is permitted to reach even the most modest of levels projected, alliance strategy will be forced to adapt along the lines described in this paper, or risk one of two unpalatable options: North Korean nuclear use, or defeat in a limited war campaign.





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