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WHY THE RHETORIC OF TOTAL ANNIHILATION FROM NORTH KOREA IS JUST THAT, AND HOW A CONFLICT IN THE REGION IS LIKELY TO TRANSPIRE

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Exercise Solo Flight

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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WHY THE RHETORIC OF TOTAL ANNIHILATION FROM NORTH KOREA IS JUST THAT, AND HOW A CONFLICT IN THE REGION IS LIKELY TO TRANSPIRE

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is a secretive and complicated nation whose powerful regime rules the population through a campaign of fear. The information that flows into and out of the country is tightly controlled and monitored by the Government and the citizens of the nation have almost no contact with the rest of the civilized world. As a result, the face that North Korea presents to the outside world is often in stark contrast to the reality on the ground. For instance, North Korean broadcasts on their state run television deliberately display stores with shelves full of merchandise and food, yet a famine in the nineties resulted in an estimated one million deaths, and current figures state that thirty percent of the population is malnourished from lack of available food sources.¹ Separating fact from fiction is a challenge given the conflicting information claimed by the Regime, but what is clear is that North Korea has a large armed forces which poses a real threat to stability in the region through the threat of war and use of nuclear weapons. This of course could quickly expand to other nations outside of the Korean peninsula and possibly cause another World War. The rhetoric from the Regime frequently alludes to the complete annihilation of the South, the US, and other powers in the region that support the west, such as Japan. If one were to believe the Supreme Leader, Kim Jong-un, North Korea has the ability to defeat any adversary in battle, and he has threatened other nations with not only war, but their total destruction on numerous occasions since ascending to power. While the risk of such action does exist,

¹ Inside North Korea's Environmental Collapse.
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/next/nature/inside-north-koreas-environmental-collapse/> Last accessed 17 May 2015

the likelihood of such an event is very small. The aim of this paper will be to explain how a conflict involving North Korea is likely to occur, and why the probability of a large scale conflict occurring is slim; it will do so by focusing on three main areas. First is how a large scale conflict is likely to unfold and why North Korea will not succeed in annihilating South Korea and her Allies. Second is how the Regime of North Korea is likely to fair in the aftermath of such an event. Finally, the third area will touch on how China is likely to react to any attempt to re-unify the Koreas.

SABRE RATTLING AND RHETORIC

Kim Jong-un has made many claims in the past regarding North Korea's military might and there is a grain of truth to the rhetoric he spews. The North Korean military has an estimated strength of 1.2 million personnel on active duty, 120 000 of which are Special Forces. They also have a further 5.7 million reservists in the worker's Red Guard, in which service is mandatory until age 60. For a country of only 25 million, this is almost all of their fighting capable population. It is this sheer size of the North Korean military that makes them a threat, even if their equipment is not as modern as it could be.² Their Navy, Air Force and Army are all highly capable of inflicting a great deal of damage to opposing forces in a conventional fight, and this is all before adding in the threat of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (NBC) weapons, all of which North Korea is purported to possess.³ To date, North Korea is not a signatory of the Chemical Weapons Convention and their stock piles of both chemical weapons and chemical agents is of

² North Korean Military "Very Credible Force".
<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=27769>. Last accessed 17 May 2015.

³ Andrew Scobell and John Sanford. "North Korea's military threat: Pyongyang's conventional forces, weapons of mass destruction, and ballistic Missiles." US Government Strategic Studies institute. April 2007.

great concern to the rest of the world. Just recently, reports have surfaced that North Korea has successfully miniaturized its nuclear warheads so that they can be fitted to long range ballistic missiles, capable of reaching targets as far away as the US mainland.⁴ North Korea has stated that its nuclear weapons are for defensive purposes only, but it is not too great of a leap to think that their NBC capabilities could be used if their offensive operation were to stall, or if they were being defeated. To add to their advantage, North Korea would be fighting in their own back yard, and will not have the same long supply chains that the US and any allies will need in order to conduct military operations. It is quite conceivable then that the North could cause a great deal of damage to the South, should Kim Jong-un decide to attempt an invasion, but total annihilation is highly improbable. The challenges he faces though are very daunting, and the opposing forces of South Korea, the US and allies such as Japan make for a formidable Coalition that the North has no guarantee of defeating.

The US and South Korea have a long standing and well-defined partnership when it comes to the defence of South Korea. Since the end of World War II when Japan was stripped of its control of Korea as a colony, the US has maintained a partnership with the South. Initial intentions on behalf of the US and Russia were that Russia would help stabilize and transition the northern part of the country, and the US would do the same for the country south of the 38th parallel. However, as Communism spread from Russia to China and then into North Korea, the US decided to aid of the South when civil war

⁴ North Korea has Technology to make mini-nuclear weapons.
http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pyongyang-says-it-has-technology-to-make-small-submarined-mounted-nuclear-warheads/2015/05/20/0e96d0bc-fec0-11e4-833c-a2de05b6b2a4_story.html. Last accessed 22 May 2015.

broke out in 1950.⁵ With the influence and support of China for the North, and the US for the South, the border moved a great deal over the duration of the fighting, only to settle back near the 38th parallel by the time hostilities ceased. Since then, a Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) has stretched from one side of the peninsula to the other separating the two countries. The DMZ has become heavily defended via minefields and gun emplacements and any incursion by land forces across it are highly unlikely. While the North is known to have constructed large and elaborate tunnels underneath the DMZ,⁶ the ability to surge the large number of troops and equipment into the south to establish avenues for advancement to the south is unlikely.

To add to this, the roughly 28 000 American troops currently stationed in South Korea coming under attack would spark an immediate reaction from the US on any cross border incursions by the North.⁷ While the US has a very strong military, the South Koreans too have formidable and modern armed forces that are currently established at 640 000 active duty soldiers with a further 3 million reservists.⁸ The numbers then for an offensive attack do not favor North Korea, and this does not account for the rapid increase of US or any other coalition troops that would be sent to Korea should the North decide to invade, nor the technological advantage that the US would enjoy. The North therefore does not have the combat power required to conduct such an operation against an opponent who is able to anticipate what may be coming. Kim Jong-un's only hope

⁵ The Korean War, 1950–1953 <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/korean-war-2>. Last accessed on 17 May 2015.

⁶ Is the North still digging tunnels to the South. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/02/world/asia/north-korea-dmz-tunnels/> Last accessed 17 May 2015.

⁷ United States sending more troops and tanks to South Korea. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/08/us-korea-usa-troops-idUSBREA061AU20140108>. Last accessed 17 May 2015.

⁸ South Korea to shrink armed forces by a fifth in next 8 years. <http://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/south-korea-to-shrink-armed-forces-by-a-fifth-in-next-8-years-1.273293>. Last accessed 17 May 2015.

would be to conduct an operation similar to the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and maximize the use of surprise to have any chance of success.

Through the conduct of frequent large scale military exercises near the DMZ, the North could desensitize the South to military activity in the region and secretly build up large forces that were concealed in the mountainous terrain in the area. Once the proper numbers were established, the North Koreans could wait for a major holiday in South Korea such as Chuseok (similar to our Thanksgiving) and then drive into the South on a few main avenues of advance. Under these conditions, the North Korean's may be able to overwhelm the US/South Koreans along the border and continue the advance towards Seoul. If the capital city was captured, the North Korean Forces could dig in and use the local populace and infrastructure as shields to defend against the counter attacks that would be sure to come. It is highly improbable that the North would be able to capture the entire peninsula without assistance from China or Russia, and the likelihood of either of those countries participating in an open conflict is almost nil due to international pressures. However, the North would not rely on solely conventional forces to reach its objectives.

There would no doubt be strikes against various military targets throughout South Korea committed by sleeper cells and North Korea's Bureau 121 cyber-warfare division. While this would have an effect and cause a great deal of communication issues,⁹ the combined effects would still not allow for any military advance much beyond Seoul. North Korea's best hope at this juncture would be to dig in and consolidate gains with the intention of extracting concessions for the return of Seoul and other territories captured.

⁹ North Korea doubles its cyber warfare team to 6000 troops.
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/11329480/North-Korea-doubles-its-cyber-warfare-team-to-6000-troops.html>. Last accessed 17 May 2015.

These concessions would only be granted if the North could effectively repel the inevitable counter attacks. To do this, they would need to cause a great deal of coalition casualties and create a lot of collateral damage to the point where the coalition and the South Korean government acquiesced to demands. Recent conflicts have demonstrated how air power would play a pivotal role in the counter attacks.

The counter attack would most likely draw heavily from the US experiences fighting in Iraq, in that precision guided munitions would be used to limit collateral damage and sap the enemy's will to fight before ground troops entered into the fray. Even with the Air Defence systems possessed by North Korea, the stealth technology and overwhelming air superiority possessed by the US would soon penetrate the Air Defence umbrella and North Korean ground forces would face a similar fate as that of the Iraqi Army during the two Gulf wars. It would be at this point in the conflict that the North would become very dangerous and likely to use its NBC capabilities, especially as coalition forces pushed the North Koreans back across the 38th parallel and threatened to take North Korean territory. It is highly doubtful that any of the newest "miniaturized" nuclear warheads would actually reach the US. Defensive missile systems would provide a security blanket for the continental US, and even if a few missiles did manage to land in South Korea or Japan, the nations would not be wiped of the map. There would be a great deal of damage and suffering, but this would only stiffen coalition resolve. Any use of these types of weapons would also draw the ire of nations such as China. The mindsets in China reference North Korea are already beginning to shift.¹⁰ Its most important ally, biggest trading partner, and once a staunch supporter of the Regime,

¹⁰ Chinese Annoyance with North Korea bubbles to the surface.
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/world/asia/chinese-annoyance-with-north-korea-bubbles-to-the-surface.html?_r=0. Last accessed 18 May 2015.

Chinese Officials are beginning to voice displeasure with the DPRK and guaranteed support in the future is not as solid as it once was.

The likelihood then that North Korea will invade the South is very small. Even if the US did not have a military presence in South Korea, the combat ratios simply do not add up. North Korea cannot logically expect to take and hold any terrain in South Korea, never mind re-unify the two countries, without suffering extremely losses and possibly losing its own territory in the counterattacks.

THE END OF THE KIM DYNASTY

Such a failure on the part of the North Korea's military would shatter the image that Kim Jong-un and his father and grandfather before him have indoctrinated the people of North Korea with. There are clear division with the North Korean elite and the Armed Forces, and it is only through a campaign of fear that Kim Jong-un has managed to consolidate and hold onto power. He has accomplished this by executing anyone he sees as a threat to his rule. As recent example saw a top General in the DPRK Armed Forces executed through the use of an Anti-Aircraft gun.¹¹ Since 2011 and his rise to power, Kim Jong-un has purged half of the General Officers in the Armed Forces, including his Uncle, in a movement reminiscent of Joseph Stalin in Russia. The charges have been just as fabricated as those used in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, such as watching South Korean soap operas and failing to pay proper respects to the Supreme Leader. The executions of more than sixty military officials that have been order by Kim Jong-un is a clear sign that there at least some basis to the fact that his grip on power is not absolute.

¹¹ North Korea defence chief reportedly executed with anti-aircraft gun. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/13/north-korean-defence-minister-executed-by-anti-aircraft-gun-report>. Last accessed 23 May 2015.

A failed military campaign may be just the nudge required to have someone else in the reclusive country attempt to seize power through assassination.

The media too will play an important part in ending the rule of Kim Jong-un, especially if the State Controlled media can be taken off air and propaganda videos from the South were to make it into the homes of the North. North Korea is the most corrupt country in the world according to the 2011 corruption index from Transparency International,¹² and exposing this and other types of revelations may turn the tide from blind supporters to active revolutionaries on the part of the civilian population. So too as the US experienced as they advanced through Iraq, many of the soldiers of North Korea may decide to defect instead of fight. The simple provision of food and health care as the coalition advances north may be enough to cause a rebellion to rise up and overthrow the current Regime. China will undoubtedly have a mixed reaction to such a scenario.

MAINTAINING A MILITARY BUFFER

North Korea is to China, as the Ukraine is to Russia. In Europe, the Ukraine provides a military buffer between Russia and the NATO, and especially the US. Russia has intentionally kept the Ukraine destabilized to prevent it from joining NATO and giving the US a foothold right on Russian's doorstep. China sees the same thing in North Korea, as does Russia, because they share a boarder with North Korea. Should the Koreas ever succeed in reunification, the close alliance the South enjoys with the US will then pave the way for even more US forces to be on the doorstep to China. Current US bases in Japan and in South Korea are already a political issue for the Chinese and recent plans by the US to place missile defence systems in South Korea have caused tensions to

¹² 2011 Corruption Index. <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/dec/01/corruption-index-2011-transparency-international>. Last accessed 18 May 2015.

rise.¹³ China therefore has an interest in seeing North Korea remaining as a distinct nation, separate from the Western allied South. However, as previously mentioned, the relationship between Pyongyang and Beijing is not as strong as it once was. On the other hand, it is doubtful China would sit back and watch North Korea fall into the hands of the South. China has a vested interest in preventing the North from military action, as it will almost certainly fail. It is more likely that China will undermine the Regime of Kim Jong-un, just as the US wishes, and replace him with someone more in line with China's goals and ambitions for the region. China will no doubt use her influence through economics and other "soft power" means to get what it wants.

CONCLUSION

The likelihood of North Korea actually following through on any of its rhetoric about the annihilation of South Korea or the US is extremely small. While the DPRK possesses a large armed forces, their equipment is aged in comparison to the superior technology of the South and her US ally. While sheer numbers are impressive, the North simply does not have the combat power to penetrate the DMZ, and drive the South Koreans and the US from the peninsula. Their best hope is to use a massive surprise attack to capture as far south as Seoul and then consolidate gains before negotiating for concessions. The South Koreans, the US and the rest of the world are hardly likely to let this happen and will use methods as witnessed in Iraq to root out the North, while limiting the collateral damage sustained. Even with sleeper cells, Special Ops and Cyber warfare, the North cannot hope to be successful in their mission. North Korea does

¹³ US, China face off over South Korea missile plan.
<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/03/23/asia-pacific/u-s-china-face-off-over-south-korea-missile-plan/> Last accessed 18 May 2015.

possess NBC capabilities, but they will most likely only use this in the defence, or if a failed operation looks like it will result in the Regime losing control over the country. Here too, while there may be some nukes that get through the missile defence, South Korea will not be “erased from the map” as Kim Jong-un has threatened. Any failed military actions by the North will most likely result in the end of the Kim dynasty as there appears to be no shortage of generals and eager officials who wish to usurp the Supreme Ruler. It has only been through a campaign of fear that Kim Jong-un has managed to stay in power and control the population. China’s position on any actions from the North will be tempered; while the Chinese are becoming annoyed at the actions of Pyongyang, they certainly do not want the US to have free reign right on their door step. It is for all of these reasons that North Korea may continue to make outrageous claims, but this is certainly a case where the bark is worse than the bite.

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