The Forgotten War has become the Forgotten Threat. The Korean Peninsula is a strategic orphan, “usually considered background noise” (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/22/opinion/a-perilous-moment-at-the-korean-border.html) compared to media darlings like Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Islamic State (ISIL), Russia, and even Cuba. The Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College last published a paper (http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/asia-pacific/korea/) on North Korea over four years ago. When commentator Fareed Zakaria lists the four big challenges (http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1508/16/fzgps.01.html) facing the United States in foreign affairs today, Korea does not make the cut. This follows in suit with the collective amnesia about the war that divided the Koreas. One recent book review considers Korea “the neglected war” (http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/Articles/2011summer/BookReviews/Millett_The%20War%20for%20Korea.html). A few weeks ago, bestselling writer Simon Winchester breezily suggested (http://www.commonwealthclub.org/events/2015-11-03/simon-winchester-pacific), “if America had not interfered
and had just let the Soviets come" then "Korea would have been a former communist country, but it would have been united. There would be no division into two countries, no DMZ, no threats of nuclear weapons, no lunatic dynasties like the Kim dynasty of today." When history is forgotten, fiction runs amok.

Which leaves space for Hollywood — and movies matter, commanding public opinion as king to subject. In 2004, a handful of marionettes (and Matt Damon) made North Korea a puppet-led punchline in Team America: World Police. Several recent films (http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20141217-why-north-korea-fears-this-film) have pushed the North Korean threat further into fictionalized territory: Red Dawn (2012), Olympus Has Fallen (2013), and last year's The Interview (2014). It is not hard to see why, as one scholar assesses, most of the world perceives North Korea and its leadership as "crazy." (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00396331003612505) Or, in the plain words of one U.S. senator: "They're nuts." (http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/02/27/top-republicans-call-for-return-to-cold-war.html) North Korea has become more joke than threat.

While Hollywood’s cloud obscures North Korea’s capabilities, there is a silver lining. The North Korean hack (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2014/12/18/the-sony-pictures-hack-explained/) on Sony Pictures in October 2014 is a reminder that even the arts are not safe from America’s most durable, dangerous, and diverse threat. North Korea’s threat spans the entire range of military operations: the big armies and ideologies characteristic of warfare’s past; a nearby nuclear and missile guillotine hanging over Seoul; and diverse challenges ranging from climate to criminality to collapse. Anything is possible with North Korea, and it all threatens to drag four great powers into the muck.

The Cold War continues

Cold War history did not “end” (http://www.amazon.com/The-End-History-Last-Man/dp/0743284550) in Korea. While Berlin’s Wall crumbled, the East Asian Curtain calcified. Even today big armies and ideologies thrive on the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea, much as they did in the 1950s. At the time, in July 1950, journalist Hanson Baldwin wrote, "We are facing an army of barbarians in Korea, but they are barbarians as trained, as relentless, as recklessly of life, and as skilled ... as the hordes of Genghis Khan." These hordes persist: The North Korean air force (http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/North_Korea_Military_Power_Report_2013-2014.pdf) numbers 110,000 people, over 800 combat aircraft, 300 helicopters, and over 300 transport aircraft. The North Korean navy (http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/North_Korea_Military_Power_Report_2013-2014.pdf) boasts 60,000 people, 70 submarines, 420 combat patrol ships, 260 amphibious landing crafts, 30 mine-laying vessels, and 30 support vessels. Both the North Korean “bird” and “whale” are massive.

“Approximately 70 percent of its ground forces and 50 percent of its air and naval forces [are] deployed within 100 kilometers of the DMZ.” This closeness to the DMZ reduces the U.S.–South Korean response time to mere hours and minutes.

Comparison with another threat provides perspective. Consider ISIL (the self-styled “Islamic State”), which seems to occupy a privileged place in the public consciousness. They number around 30,000 troops (http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf), of which “over 12,000 fighters come from at least 81 countries.” Typically employing light weapons, ISIL has acquired some American-made vehicles and heavy weapons left by Iraqi army units fleeing the battlefield. To be fair, ISIL has made rapid tactical gains and controls a sizable piece of geography. But facts are facts. By any measure, in any domain — land, sea, air, cyber — North Korea is exponentially a more powerful threat than ISIL. If ISIL “seems ten feet tall” (http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/30/rating-the-u-s-reaction-to-terror-attacks-paris/) to some, then North Korea is a military Mount Everest.

Ideology fuels the North Korean war machine. Harvard psychologist and public intellectual Steven Pinker counsels (http://www.amazon.com/What-Should-Worried-About-Scientists/dp/006229623X), “It’s natural to worry about physical stuff like weaponry and resources. What we should really worry about is psychological stuff like ideologies and norms.” North Korea is the world’s last truly totalitarian state, controlled completely by the Kim regime. This matters (http://www.amazon.com/What-Should-Worried-About-Scientists/dp/006229623X) because “enormous human costs” are paid “when a state is taken over by a leader with the classic triad of narcissistic symptoms — grandiosity, the need for admiration, and lack of empathy.” These include dramatic public executions: Current North Korean leader Kim Jong Un executed his uncle, and recently ripped his defense minister to shreds (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/13/world/asia/north-korea-says-uncle-of-executed.html) with a high powered anti-aircraft gun at point-blank range. Throw in the 1976 axe-handle murder (http://adst.org/2014/12/the-bizarre-north-korean-axe-murders/) of two American officers near the DMZ, and the resulting painting shows North Korea knows how to use violence to keep unwanted ideas off the canvas and its people coloring within regime-directed lines.

North Korean ideology holds because a powerful strategic narrative underpins it. After the Korean War, a Soviet postwar estimate (http://www.amazon.com/The-Great-Leader-Fighter-Pilot/dp/0670016578) “of American bomb damage in the North found that 85 percent of all structures in the country were destroyed” and that 14 percent of the country’s population died during the conflict. Like a phoenix rising above embers, the Kim family control grew to become the center (http://www.amazon.com/The-Great-Leader-Fighter-Pilot/dp/0670016578) “around which a traumatized society could unify, rebuild, and find direction.” North Koreans are told to this day that to avoid destruction by the Americans and their South Korean allies, all must support the regime. This helps explain why the United Nations and United States are still there, reasons much the same as they were on January 21, 1951, when Lt. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway wrote a memorandum for his soldiers, titled “Why Are We Here?” (http://www.milhist.net/global/whywearehere.html) He noted the conflict centered on “whether the rule of men who
shoot their prisoners, enslave their citizens, and deride the dignity of man, shall displace the rule of those to whom
the individual and his individual rights are sacred.” One could imagine those same words on the pen tip of today’s
Commander, U.S. Forces Korea.

**Dangerous: Seoul under the guillotine**

Noted British physicist Martin Rees worries that “smaller nuclear arsenals might be used in a regional context.” He is
not alone; nor are his worries unfounded. North Korea fits this description perfectly with approximately ten nuclear
weapons-threat-they-pose-peace), and “its Scuds can reach most of South Korea and its Nodongs could hit Japan.”
China recently rang an even louder alarm bell, announcing (http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-warns-north-
korean-nuclear-threat-is-rising-1429745706) publicly that North Korea has 20 warheads, with “enough weapons-
grade uranium to double its arsenal by next year.”

Proximity matters even more with big bullets. South Korea’s largest city, Seoul, is a megacity of well over 10 million
people, and sits within a marathon’s distance of the DMZ. This close range puts the greater Seoul metropolitan area
even within conventional artillery’s distance, intensifying the missile threat and increasing the likelihood that North
Korea can lob terrifying projectiles on South Korea’s center of gravity. North Korea’s “ambitious ballistic missile”
program is quality enough to merit shopping trips from other countries like Iran and Pakistan. Returning to
comparison with ISIL is again informative. ISIL just fired their first “rudimentary chemical warfare shells,”
threatening a few hundred people. North Korea can easily reach and harm tens of millions.

So why does North Korea possess a dangerous nuclear and missile program? For one, there is possession prestige:
This puts North Korea on at least one “top ten” (http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21645840-despite-
optimistic-attempts-rid-world-nuclear-weapons-threat-they-pose-peace) countries list. More importantly, this is an
effective, enormous deterrent. One might reasonably conclude that one of the “lessons” of the Iraq War was that while
countries will not attack an adversary with nuclear weapons, the prospect is more feasible when an adversary does
not. North Korea’s fiery trump card is the ability to turn Seoul into a “sea of fire.” (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00396331003612505) As strategist David Kilcullen notes
(http://www.amazon.com/Out-Mountains-Coming-Urban-Guerrilla/dp/0190239967), the threat to densely
populated cities is growing and Seoul certainly counts. Moreover, 80 percent of South Korea lives in cities
(http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/08/05/428102390/tired-of-the-seoul-sucking-rat-race-koreans-flock-to-
farming). This proximity to population, coupled with North Korean capabilities, forms a potent offensive weapon.

**Diverse: Anything is possible**

North Korea’s threat vistas are limitless, from the climate to criminality, to commotion and collapse. North Korea is
currently experiencing its “worst drought in a century,” (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/18/world/asia/north-
korea-says-its-facing-its-worst-drought-in-a-century.html) which may destabilize the regime. North Korea has a
For almost forty years, North Korea has exhibited extensive involvement in transnational criminal smuggling networks. It has been involved in activities including: the production and trafficking of various drugs, including narcotics and amphetamine-type stimulants; the creation of the world’s best counterfeit currency; trafficking of endangered species products; and the reported production of counterfeit goods ranging from cigarettes to pharmaceuticals to brand-name watches and shoes.

Military arms employed for political (or economic) ends. To set aside their massive military armaments “would relegate North Korea to being a third-rate country,” on a par with Mozambique or Uganda.” Multiple estimates put North Korea’s per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) around $1,500. This figure is somewhere between 15 and 40 times higher in South Korea, a disparity many multiples greater than the 3:1 gap between West and East Germany prior to reunification.

Which is why many believe collapse is likely. Former Central Intelligence Agency analyst Sue Mi Terry finds it “the most plausible” of the potential options. Others focus on the negative impacts of a sudden fall. The Brookings Institution’s Michael O’Hanlon sees potential for Chinese intervention, and a resulting military race against American and South Korean forces to secure nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. This race might create “inadvertent escalation due to miscommunication, or the assertive actions of local commanders.” These scenarios are why some posit the world has more to fear from weak states than strong. Whereas “purposeful challengers” would seek to inflict harm directly, other just as deadly threats can develop “in the absence of hostile purpose.” These “threats of context” include “pervasive criminality; economic and security failures; and natural or human disaster,” which promise to trigger uncontrolled human insecurity. Weapons of mass destruction in a collapsing North Korea could take on many forms, from the “relatively benign,” to a desperate dash to halt disaster. Even rudderless, North Korea might inflict harm.

**Remember Me, North Korea**
Historian Allan Millett considered the Korean War a prime example that wars avoid neat categorization. That war defied definition, as does today’s North Korean threat, which is still America’s most durable, dangerous, and diverse. For a soldier assigned to Korea, the entire spectrum is perilously possible, a fact recognized by U.S. Pacific Command’s commander, Adm. Harry Harris, who observes, “our most volatile and dangerous threat is North Korea.” And Sir Lawrence Freedman reminds us “deterrence works; until it doesn’t.” This tenuous situation guided the United States and South Korean armies to organize and establish the Combined Division, building upon the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division, to “share common doctrine and procedures,” enhancing the “overall interoperability” between the two forces all the way down to the tactical level. While few others pay attention, those assigned to the Combined Division never forget the North Korean threat just across the DMZ — they practically share the same area code.

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This essay is an unofficial expression of opinion; the views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division, U.S. Forces Korea, Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or any agency of the U.S. government.


Commentary

THE POVERTY OF LIBERTARIAN THINKING ABOUT THE U.S.–KOREAN ALLIANCE

Analysis

NORTH KOREA IS NOT IRAN
Hasty Ambush

CONFIGURING THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE FOR A CHANGING ASIAN SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

LEAVE A REPLY
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