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EXPLORING NORTH KOREA'S ASYMMETRIC MILITARY STRATEGY

Mirko Tasic

The United States missed two particularly advantageous opportunities to resolve the problem of a nuclear North Korea: prior to the first nuclear test on October 9, 2006, and after the death of Kim Jong-il on December 17, 2011.[1] The window of opportunity for successful resolution of the North Korea problem is shrinking, and it seems that not much can be done that could halt further development of North Korea's military capabilities in support of its asymmetric strategy. Even Kim Jong-un's recent initiatives in 2018 and 2019 to meet and talk with leaders of the United States and South Korea, and ostensibly to explore a resolution to the nuclear issue, have been received with a great dose of skepticism.

Yet do we really have a clear understanding of North Korea's missile and nuclear programs and all their implications? North Korea is pursuing advanced military capabilities, but its intent may be neither offensive nor defensive. Perhaps the aim of its unconventional approach to military strategy is simply for that strategy to *be* asymmetric; that is, different from that of any of its perceived potential opponents. Such a concept can be understood only within the geostrategic balance of power in East Asia.

Questions such as the following help frame our approach to the North Korea crisis: "How will the standoff over North Korea's nuclear weapons end? Will Kim Jong Un buckle under pressure and roll back his nuclear program, or will he press forward in completing an arsenal that can threaten the whole world? Will Donald Trump make good on his threats to take military action against the North, or will he focus on

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deterring Kim from ever using his nukes?"[2] But these questions reflect our fear of nuclear weapons more than they identify the motivations behind North Korea's military development.

The problem is heightened further by a deep-seated perception of the irrationality and unpredictability of North Korean leaders. How quickly we forget that deception is at the heart of every good strategy. Even if there was doubt before, North Korea over the past several years has proved that it is in fact a rational actor. The North Korea crisis illustrates the complexity of one of the most important geostrategic junctions of the world's most powerful militaries, as well as the failure of the Western world to understand Asian strategic thought.

The first part of this article explores developments in North Korea's military capabilities and strategic thought through a review of existing scholarship on military force structure, capabilities, and provocations. It concludes that North Korea's strategic thought regarding asymmetric warfare has developed in five stages and suggests that the country is preparing itself to wage a possible hybrid war. The second part of the article examines the development of North Korea's asymmetric strategies, exploring further the assumption that North Korea has been preparing for a hybrid war. The existing literature alludes to and assesses North Korea's asymmetric approach but really does not engage the subject of its military strategy. The third part of the article is a deeper exploration of asymmetry as practiced on the seas, which could be critical to a hybrid war on the Korean Peninsula. The article concludes with a call to scholars for further exploration into North Korea's strategic thought and the asymmetric strategies it may pursue.

REASSESSING NORTH KOREA'S MILITARY CAPABILITIES

Scholars have tried to understand the transformation of North Korea's forces, capabilities, and strategies.[3] An *asymmetric strategy* is one that state and nonstate actors engage in to oppose an adversary of greater military power and capabilities and that targets key vulnerabilities or dependencies of that adversary to create a major psychological impact that affects initiatives, actions, or will.[4] However, the scholarly estimates often are constrained by a lack of information and transparency related to North Korea and a vague understanding of the role North Korea plays within the geostrategic balance of power in East Asia.

Strategic thinking is about objectives, concepts, and capabilities and their application to the art of war.[5] A future war on the Korean Peninsula most likely would be a hybrid war, employing both conventional and unconventional methods and means. According to Frank G. Hoffman, in *hybrid warfare* different types of forces become blurred into the same force or are applied in the same battle space. He sees hybrid war as combining irregular and conventional force capabilities, integrated operationally and tactically.[6] A traditional approach

defines a *theater of war* as a defined area in which military effort is conducted under one overall military strategy that covers all subareas, with the term *theater of operations* applying to military effort conducted under the umbrella of the overall strategy within a particular subarea. By contrast, in hybrid warfare the term must be *theater of wars,* with warfare spreading across multiple domains and following not one strategic outline but many, though driven by a common political objective and pursued by both conventional and asymmetric means. In that sense, a hybrid war is more a conglomerate of wars than an amalgamation of military operations.[7] The following paragraphs review the literature on the transformation of North Korea's military capabilities and further developments in its strategic thinking.

The transformation of the Korean People's Army (KPA) began at the end of the 1990s, with a focus on the North Korean Special Operation Forces (NKSOFs).[8] According to the available literature, changes that occurred prior to the 1990s—such as restructuring the army, changing the nature of training in general as well as that of the NKSOFs, and replacing regular infantry troops with light infantry troops along the demilitarized zone—highlight North Korea's transition from emphasizing the waging of conventional warfare to the waging of asymmetric warfare and the increasing threat its forces represent in that mode.[9] For some scholars, the NKSOFs are the most critical of the asymmetric threats that North Korea's armed forces pose. In fact, the U.S. military sees special operation forces (SOFs) as being central to any asymmetric strategy that a weak opponent would employ against a superior military power. Bruce E. Bechtol Jr. projects that prior to and during an all-out war NKSOFs might be deployed to carry out asymmetric operations that would include sabotaging lines of communication and taking over command and control centers within South Korea.[10]

The Korean People's Navy (KPN) and its development began to receive increased scholarly attention around 2010. According to Bechtol, North Korea's naval forces now pose an asymmetric threat because of their ability to carry out conventional actions in a provocative and asymmetric way.[11] In his article "Maintaining a Rogue Military: North Korea's Military Capabilities and Strategy at the End of the Kim Jong-il Era," Bechtol briefly discusses how increases in North Korean forces and advancements in their capabilities suggest plans to threaten South Korea via the seas in the future.[12]

It is important here to draw attention to the significance of the leadership transition period and the development of the KPN that followed, as Kim Jong-un is believed to have been behind some provocative incidents at sea between 2010 and 2012. Every past North Korean leader contributed something new in terms of the strategic development of the country's military; Kim Jong-un's contribution probably will be to oversee the final transition of its military forces

to hybrid warfare capabilities and to develop a maritime war strategy. The time frame for the development of naval forces in North Korea also is in line with China's announcement at the Eighteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012 of its intention to continue building up a naval force.[13] Bechtol also highlights the potential for North Korea to use the seas for a wide range of offensive measures, everything from delivering a nuclear weapon to using a reflagged commercial vessel or trawler to conduct a small-scale, preemptive attack prior to the outbreak of all-out war.[14] Use of such a vessel would allow the KPN and NKSOFs to bypass the forces of the United States and South Korea. In such ways has the overall development of the military capabilities of North Korea led to the restructuring of naval forces and the transformation of its armed forces toward asymmetry.

The transformation of North Korea's military is reinforced by an examination of the growing asymmetric threat posed by capabilities such as short- and long-range artillery, missiles (of short, medium, intermediate, and long range), NKSOFs, and strategic weaponry (weapons of mass destruction, weapons for electromagnetic and electronic warfare, and cyberwarfare capabilities).[15] Andrew Scobell and John M. Sanford's review of North Korea's unconventional forces and capabilities—including nuclear, chemical, and biological weaponry; ballistic missiles; and medium- and short-range missiles and their use in offensive and defensive capacities—suggests that North Korea's focus on strategic weaponry and their asymmetric uses is relatively new.[16] Artillery and missile systems and nuclear capabilities were the focus of North Korea's military development before 2012, while electronic-warfare and cyber capabilities were the country's focus between 2012 and 2017. During 2017, a new emphasis on the development of electromagnetic pulse weapons for asymmetric use emerged.[17]

These interim events, occurring between 2012 and 2017, reinforce earlier premises that North Korea by 2012 had completed the transformation of its conventional armed forces and had begun the transformation of its other military capabilities. That transformation of the armed forces now can be considered complete, with the proviso that the United States assumes that most opponents "cannot field air forces adequate to counter U.S. air forces [nor] . . . challenge [the] U.S. air-to-air."[18] Most opponents, therefore, would use missiles and air-defense artillery to provide air defense. Some scholars believe that North Korea would counter enemy air forces by using "Scud missiles to deliver persistent chemical weapons to theater air bases."[19]

Chronologically, these developments correspond to North Korea's many and various military provocations. While such have occurred since the 1950s, Taehee Whang, Michael Lammbrau, and Hyung-min Joo provide a particular focus on incidents from 1999 to 2012, and Bechtol discusses incidents in 2002, 2003, 2008,

and 2010.[20] A possible interpretation is that as North Korea judged its capabilities to have increased to closer to what was necessary to conduct a war involving the United States (and presumably to win it), its behavior became less circumspect, and therefore it began to commit more provocations, or more-serious ones, or both.[21] North Korea may have considered that its improved capabilities enabled it more safely to provoke responses from the United States, thereby exposing and learning from those responses. This would be in line with Sun Tzu's principle of "know your enemy"—especially the U.S. readiness and ability to engage directly in a more serious military conflict in the region. The perception of the danger such provocations represented allowed them to create a deterrence effect of their own. North Korea took advantage of this effect to shift its efforts among the various stages in its nonlinear military development as it deemed most advantageous. The synchrony of military transformations with provocative incidents further strengthens the assumption that North Korea is developing a strategic approach to conducting a hybrid war that would combine conventional and asymmetric forces and capabilities.

Several inferences can be drawn regarding the development of North Korea's strategic thought. First, the reorganization and transition of its military forces occurred over the course of three periods, namely of the KPA between 1997 and the early years of the twenty-first century, of the NKSOFs during those same early-century years, and of naval forces between 2010 and 2012. Each transition followed a change of strategic thought from conventional to asymmetric to guide both lines of thinking within the context of a future hybrid war. Second, the final stages of the transition to forces capable of engaging in an asymmetric war occurred between 2010 and 2012. The changes in North Korea's naval capabilities manifest this evolution. Third, the overall changes in North Korean military capabilities, the emphasis on strategic weapons, and the nature of North Korea's provocations point to an asymmetric strategic approach. Nevertheless, the available evidence should be explored further to assess whether North Korea actually is using such an asymmetric approach to test and wargame possible approaches to conducting a future hybrid war, develop operational plans to execute it, and train its forces accordingly.

NORTH KOREA'S STRATEGIC THOUGHT

Sun Tzu averred that "all warfare is based on deception. Hence, when we are able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near."[22] A successful strategy leads an opponent to see yet misperceive, while believing he sees and knows. North Korea's strategy is asymmetric not only because of the way it combines and engages

military forces, but also because it has not developed its unconventional capabilities in the conventional way. Since its first nuclear test in 2006, North Korea has conducted its equivalent of the World War II Allies' Operation FORTITUDE, with rubber nuclear warheads instead of rubber tanks.[23] North Korea's asymmetric approach has followed a nonlinear, back-and-forth progression.[24]

The U.S. *Joint Strategy Review* definition of 1999 (still one of the simplest, most concise, and effective) describes *asymmetric military strategy* as an approach that often employs innovative, nontraditional tactics, weapons, or technologies and can be applied at all levels of warfare—strategic, operational, and tactical—and across the spectrum of military operations.[25] "Asymmetric approaches are attempts to circumvent or undermine U.S. strengths while exploiting U.S. weaknesses using methods that differ significantly from the United States' expected method of operations. Asymmetric approaches generally seek a major psychological impact, such as shock or confusion that affects an opponent's initiative, freedom of action, or will. Asymmetric methods require an appreciation of an opponent's vulnerabilities."[26]

With this definition in mind, it is necessary to overcome the negative aspects of modern strategic reliance on the logic of conventional military engagement and to understand the vulnerabilities—in this case of the United States—that North Korea is exploiting with its asymmetric approach. Because of its twin focus on development and application, North Korea's asymmetric strategy appears as neither offensive nor defensive—exactly as it should be to exploit the opponent's main vulnerability: rigid, nonreflective perception and understanding.

Long ago, Thucydides taught that war between maritime and continental powers would end in stalemate.[27] According to Colin S. Gray, for a maritime power to win such a war it requires a "continental sword"—a continental ally. During the First World War, Britain's continental sword was the French army, and in 1940 it was the Soviet Union.[28] In East Asia, by contrast, America's allies hardly can be classified as continental. Additionally, it is not feasible for the United States to expect that it could conduct a successful military engagement in East Asia today, given that contemporary North Korea (and China) are armed with much more than infantry rifles; thus, any analogy with the Korean War of the 1950s would be either obsolete or futile.

If Western powers are failing to recognize correctly the elements of Asian strategic thinking, they are repeating historical mistakes they made previously owing to the application of Western strategic concepts. During the Vietnam War, in the West the political center of gravity was public opinion influenced by daily media coverage, which the leaders of the North Vietnamese army exploited skillfully. On the other hand, the United States did a poor job of determining the enemy's military center of gravity, in part because the North Vietnamese army was so

widely dispersed. Similarly, North Korea's political-military leadership structure today is so pervasive and solidly entrenched that the leadership transition from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un did not affect the stability of the regime. Perhaps North Korea's strategic center of gravity—the hub of all its power—never has resided in North Korea per se, but in its closest ally, China.[29]

The remainder of this article will explore the asymmetric element in North Korea's strategy, often falsely understood as irrational. If in the future we have occasion to see North Korea's strategy unfold, we likely will discover that the problem was in our patchy understanding of North Korea's leaders, and that their actions indeed will turn out to have been rational.

THE STAGES OF NORTH KOREA'S MILITARY DEVELOPMENT

The recent transformation of the military capabilities of North Korea and the current political initiatives can be placed into context by identifying five phases of development of the country's military.

First Stage

The first stage of North Korean military development consisted of a steady linear increase in the numbers of armed forces personnel, continuing from the end of the Korean War to the present. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, in 1985 North Korea was ranked sixth in the world, with 838,000 total armed forces personnel, and in 2015 fourth, with 1,379,000.[30] This buildup was conceived as being defensive in nature, creating a massive protective shield provided by land forces. Status of this stage: accomplished.

Second Stage

The second stage saw the development of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, along with nuclear capabilities. It began with the initiation of North Korea's missile program in 1976 and lasted to the first display of North Korea's intermediate-range ballistic missile, the Hwasong-10, at a military parade in 2010.[31] This missile's range is only 2,500 kilometers (km), which covers only the zone of the first island chain. This stage also is interpreted as being defensive, as well as asymmetrical. Status of this stage: accomplished.

Third Stage

The third stage is the development of nuclear capabilities, along with intermediate-range ballistic missiles. It lasted from the intermediate-range ballistic missile Hwasong-10 test in 2016 to the intercontinental ballistic missile Hwasong-14 test in 2017.[32] The characteristics and purpose of this stage were to be offensive and asymmetrical with the increased missile range, which fully covers the first island chain zone and theoretically the second island chain as well. Status of this stage: accomplished.

Fourth Stage

The fourth stage is the expansion of naval capabilities, along with intercontinental ballistic missiles. It began with the upgrade of training facilities, weapons systems, and special-operations capabilities at the Munchon naval base in 2014. In the same year, commercial satellite imagery identified two new North Korean helicopter-carrying frigates, and the buildup continued throughout 2017 with tests of the Hwasong-14 and Hwasong-15 missiles.[33] The characteristics and purpose of this stage are to be offensive and asymmetrical; the missiles' ranges cover both island chain zones fully. Status of this stage: in progress.

Fifth Stage

The fifth stage is the expansion of the capabilities of the Korean People's Army Air Force (KPAAF), along with the further development of naval weapons systems. Status of this stage: initiated. The 2018 summit between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore, along with South Korean president Moon Jae-in's revival of the Sunshine Policy, marked the beginning of this fifth stage.[34] In this stage, North Korea would have more time and resources and suffer less external political pressure, allowing it to focus on building up conventional military forces, primarily the KPN and the KPAAF.

The sequencing of these stages leads to the conclusion that North Korea's top-down approach to military development has been and is asymmetric, counterintuitive, and somewhat deceptive in its succession from advanced and nonconventional to less advanced and conventional military technologies.

SOUTH KOREA'S DILEMMA

A dilemma related to South Korea (ROK) has arisen because of the complexity of North Korea's asymmetric strategy, the true intentions of South Korea's military strategy, and the efforts of the entire international community to understand the North Korea crisis. Consider that two of the ROK's three navy fleets are located on that country's west coast; consider the strength of the ROK air force; and consider that the ROK has a large stock of tanks (2,872), some of which are the most advanced in the world. Then consider that most of North Korea's missile-launch facilities are located on the country's east coast, that the KPN's East Sea Fleet is larger than its West Sea Fleet, and that most KPAAF air bases are located in the western part of the country.

If South Korea decides to attack North Korea unilaterally with its First Navy Fleet, it could expose its east coast to a land invasion. Moving the other two fleets would be unacceptable because doing so would expose the west coast to attack and the fleets to easy outflanking by the KPN's West Sea Fleet. Even if the First Navy Fleet engaged in warfare jointly with the U.S. Navy, it would not make any difference. The situation likely would be aggravated further because China could

take part in the conflict, probably sealing the East Sea or even launching a massive naval response across the entire Asia-Pacific region. If the South Korean regime decided to ally with Japan against North Korea, South Korean society most likely would not accept such a step. Moon Jae-in's victory in South Korea's nineteenth presidential elections are seen as the "herald [of] a new dawn for the Sunshine Policy," reflecting the attitude of a South Korean civil society in which "nearly 77 percent of South Koreans believe Seoul should restore dialogue with Pyongyang to help 'resolve' North Korea's nuclear program."[35]

Nuclear deterrence has both psychological and ethical contexts. If North Korea did not use its nuclear weapons first, any nuclear attack on it would be labeled as unethical and condemned by the entire international community. It is quite possible that North Korea will play both the "society" and the "deterrence" cards in the future.[36]

PREPARING FOR HYBRID WARFARE ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

Frank G. Hoffman has written that the twenty-first century may be characterized by hybrid wars, but what exactly they are, the types of warfare they employ, and the actors who participate in them are contested.[37] The U.S. military establishment defines *hybrid warfare* as covert or deniable activities (including nonviolent subversion, covert violent actions, cyber warfare, information warfare, proxy warfare, and conventional warfare), which are supported by conventional or irregular forces, to influence the domestic politics of target countries.[38] What makes them hybrid is the combination of operations and tactics used and the combination of regular and irregular forces performing them, with the combinations among them carried out synergistically to attain operational ends.

Within the context of North Korea, the regular armed forces typically engage in conventional warfare activities, whereas the irregular paramilitary forces or subversive groups typically engage in unconventional or irregular activities. As mentioned previously, NKSOFs are part of the armed forces but would be charged with carrying out paramilitary activities such as infiltration, sabotage, and disruption. Other forces that would be factors in a hybrid war include networked actors spread across the globe, including some members of the global communist network that align with and often take part in propaganda and cyber operations in support of North Korea; North Koreans who reside abroad as foreign workers but remain sympathetic to the regime; and some North Korean defectors who feel disenfranchised and discriminated against by their host countries.

Within hybrid operations, *irregular* and *unconventional* operations are conceptually distinct from each other. The target of irregular operations is the opposing state's population, and the strategic aim is to foment unrest, or even to bring

about radical or revolutionary change, within the targeted society. In contrast, in unconventional hybrid operations the target is the existing power structure and the strategic aim is to capitalize on existing unrest to coerce, disrupt, neutralize, or remove that authority from power. North Korea's state targets for such operations would be the United States and its partners in the Asia-Pacific region (South Korea and Japan) and beyond that any state or global nonstate actors who either support these states specifically or directly oppose North Korea.

In hybrid warfare, targeting is intended to obstruct an adversary's ability to further or achieve its political ends (e.g., South Korean and allied ability to conduct war or surgical strike, the positioning of the terminal high-altitude area-defense system within South Korea, the imposition and maintenance of effective economic sanctions) and to mobilize others in support of its position and efforts. Other segments of the adversary's domestic population would be targeted to attempt to strip the regime of its political and economic support base and to create chaos in such a way that the social or economic fabric of society is disrupted. Possibilities include using high-powered microwave devices to shut down communications in key civilian areas and carrying out cyber attacks on critical national infrastructure that would result in loss of power and the shutdown of banking and financial systems. Additional actions might include attempting to make use of key strategic actors who either are hostile to the status quo or who support positions that serve to disrupt it (e.g., actors calling for war or supporting a surgical strike by playing on domestic tensions or political divisions and corruption scandals); using proxy actors (e.g., by establishing links with and providing either direct or indirect support to political opponents); using physical and virtual networks to mobilize support and disseminate information; and employing psychological operations and perception-management techniques at the domestic, regional, and global levels to maintain favorable information-management flows, or even to attain ascendancy over the adversary.[39]

In conventional operations, the targets include opposing forces themselves and their military capabilities, so as to weaken those forces' morale, degree of commitment, and will to continue. A goal is to exploit gaps in alliance relationships and between military strategies and any other weaknesses in the opposing force structure.

North Korea likely would employ both types of hybrid operations, and, as Hoffman pointed out in a quotation cited earlier, they can be blurred together with conventional capabilities into the same force, or they can be combined in strategic ways to offset South Korean and American advantages and overcome North Korea's own military disadvantages. As the existing literature highlights, what makes hybrid warfare such a threat is the unpredictability it introduces in the use of strategies, operations, and tactics by weaker states and nonstate actors,

as well as the inability of larger or militarily superior states to learn and reorganize as quickly on the battlefield. Therefore, understanding the asymmetric dimensions of hybrid military strategy is critical for twenty-first-century warfare planning.

Scholars have alluded to North Korea's pursuit of an asymmetric warfare strategy and have discussed extensively the threat that asymmetric capabilities pose, but they have not made strategy itself a central focus. This, as Bruce Bennett highlights, is because the lack of regime transparency makes it so difficult to know exactly what types of weapons are being developed and what strategy and concept of operations are being put in place.[40] Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that any strategy North Korea would employ would be asymmetric, as that would be the only way it could gain a strategic advantage over its more powerful adversaries.

The psychological component noted earlier in this section is what separates hybrid warfare from asymmetric warfare. Asymmetric strategic objectives are primarily psychological, not military or political; the aim is to win and keep the hearts and minds of supporters and sympathizers.[41] Success for an asymmetric approach will be determined not by one strategy but rather by the synergy created from the deployment of an array of strategies, operations, and tactics in a manner that maintains the element of surprise and has the greatest psychological impact. Failure is more likely when the weaker state cannot retain its asymmetric approach employing the variety of tactics that constitute hybrid warfare because it is forced to focus on conventional operations. If its opponent can turn the conflict into a full-scale conventional war, the stronger party gains the upper hand.[42] The next section explores North Korea's asymmetric strategy in relation to its capabilities.

NORTH KOREA'S ASYMMETRIC STRATEGY

The asymmetric military strategy is not linear but layered; it does not advance along the directional line of action, but rather disperses effort to different theaters of asymmetric military operations (TAMOs). This requires combining the efforts of the different service branches into an effective and operationally autonomous military whole.[43] In addition to adopting its asymmetric *strategy,* North Korea has transformed and developed its forces into an asymmetric *military*. The linear approach to transforming and developing a military normally involves a bottom-up approach. For example, both the Napoleonic corps system and the German panzer division system practiced bottom-up agglomeration of smaller units into bigger and more complex ones. In contrast, North Korea has approached the transformation of its military in a top-down, nonlinear fashion.

At the time of Kim Jong-un's takeover of the reins of government in December 2011, the country experienced economic hardship and troop morale dropped, but there was little impact on the integrity of the KPA or on its modernization efforts.[44] Bechtol stresses the need for North Korea to adjust its strategy for the sake of North Korean military competitiveness in the future. In doing so, he raises important questions: (1) "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?" (2) "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?"[45]

Bechtol suggests that the answer to these questions is the asymmetric approach. However, his treatment fails to define asymmetric military strategy in general and to explain the North Korean version. According to Lieutenant General Wallace "Chip" Gregson, USA, "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."[46] That more favorable playing field is exactly what has changed since 2012. Some South Korean officials consider North Korea's asymmetric forces to represent a serious threat to the South Korean military, as stated in a 2010 government report: "[A]n additional attack by the North using its asymmetric strength is the most serious threat as of now."[47]

Even though some may have recognized the threat, few have attempted to grasp the full context of North Korea's asymmetric strategy. North Korea has conducted a top-down, asymmetric transformation of its military through five stages of military development to prepare itself to conduct an asymmetric, nontraditional offensive founded on disruption, sabotage, and interstate insurgency, with the prospect of conducting a long-term hybrid war in East Asia. Yet, in order to understand this asymmetric military strategy better, it is necessary to clarify it in relation to different political objectives (offensive/defensive), and different types of actors (state/nonstate).

An asymmetric military strategy deployed as a means of achieving a defensive political objective is not offensive. But nor yet is it defensive; while it aims at creating deterrence and security dilemmas, it does not enhance defense in any way. Being deceptive is a double-edged sword: if the deception is exposed, its implementation can be affected and the political objective compromised.

An asymmetric military strategy deployed as a means of achieving an offensive political objective is clearly offensive. The asymmetry is reflected in the nontraditional organization of the military forces and the nontraditional conduct

of military operations. Guerrilla warfare, terrorism, sabotage, and insurgency all can fall under the umbrella of an asymmetric military strategy. If it is nonstate actors who employ the asymmetric military strategy, the political objective, by definition, would be considered offensive. When traditional actors (i.e., states) use an asymmetric strategy, such use can be deceptive, and accordingly a means of achieving a defensive political objective.

North Korea's ballistic-missile program is seen as being driven by the regime's desire to enhance deterrence and defense and to increase the country's ability to conduct limited attacks against South Korea.[48] However, contrary to this view, a military technology that increases speed and agility, such as missiles, favors the offense. There is no rational purpose for a missile attack if it is not part of a larger military operation that aims to eliminate the opponents' offensive and disable their defensive capabilities.[49]

Daniel A. Pinkston emphasizes that "North Korea's ultimate strategic goal is to unify Korea on DPRK terms and maintain one-party rule under the Korean Workers' Party." The regime is a dictatorship that uses coercive diplomacy and asymmetric strategies to achieve its political objectives. Before 2013, these objectives tended to be limited to "survival, sovereignty, and relevance."[50] But the leadership changes in North Korea along with the country's military advancements indicate an expanded scope of objectives.

While there may be uncertainty about North Korea's political objectives, there is no doubt about the nature of its military strategy. Whether it is openly or deceptively offensive, it is certainly asymmetric. North Korea's asymmetric provocations and limited military engagements suggest that it is preparing for a possible hybrid war. The key to any such future hybrid war in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific will be the seas. Therefore, it is important to explore the types of offensive maritime strategies that might be employed.

ASYMMETRY ON THE SEAS

States tend to focus on the prospects for traditional, symmetric wars and how to fight them, rather than on asymmetric wars. At the time of their creation, some of the military concepts and tactics that are most well-known today were either neglected or misperceived. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Napoleon successfully used the military corps formation and the principle of "march divided, fight united" to wage war against multiple opponents simultaneously. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, Prussia defeated Austria and France and unified the German states by employing jaeger (rifle-armed infantry) units and new mission-type tactics known as *auftragstaktik*. In the mid-twentieth century, Nazi Germany invaded most of Western Europe and was quite successful in the opening

stages of Operation BARBAROSSA against the Soviet Union using the panzer division as a new combined-arms formation and blitzkrieg (lightning war) tactics.

There is a small body of literature dedicated to asymmetrical maritime war.[51] It focuses primarily on terrorism and piracy at sea by nonstate actors; the legal classification of incidents at sea and the gaps in international law; historical and contemporary international legal distinctions between, or the status of, belligerency and insurgency; and historical and contemporary use of naval mine warfare and the international legal instruments covering its use by state and nonstate actors.[52] Importantly, none of the existing literature looks at asymmetric maritime war in relation to North Korea. The seas are vital to any future hybrid war, which means they must be central to North Korea's battle plans. Given the limited amount of information and lack of scholarly focus on North Korea's naval capabilities, only an incomplete exploration of the subject is possible, yet performing it is necessary.

Kil-joo Ban has written about the future role of the ROK navy, focusing on the development of its naval strategies. He argues that the ROK navy should emphasize preparing for asymmetric naval warfare and sea insurgency, given that navies increasingly play roles in carrying out operations aimed at combatting nontraditional security threats (e.g., insurgents, terrorists, pirates). He also takes into account the nature of the ROK's alliance with the United States and the opportunities available for the ROK navy to deploy overseas through that alliance.[53] However, his analysis does not contemplate North Korea practicing naval insurgency operations within the context of interstate war.

A *sea insurgency* "refers to the type of violence used to overcome power gaps at sea in an attempt to allow the weak actors to attain their goals from global insurgency."[54] This definition of weak actors and the literature in this area mostly refer to nonstate actors rather than state actors; they do not even contemplate state actors that are known for preparing for and engaging in asymmetric warfare strategies, operations, and tactics, such as North Korea. Yet in the lead-up to and during any future war on the Korean Peninsula, sea insurgency operations would be most advantageous for North Korea.

Drawing on the existing literature that focuses on traditional naval tactics employed by states, plus the literature on the operations conducted and tactics used by nonstate actors such as Al Qaeda and the Sea Tigers, it is possible to gain an understanding of the type of asymmetric maritime objectives North Korea might set and the strategies and tactics it might employ leading up to and during a war. For example, Paul A. Povlock's examination of the Sea Tigers case covers the range of operations in which insurgents can engage and state responses to them.[55]

North Korea has been preparing for asymmetric warfare in general since it reorganized its military; its maritime warfare strategy is not likely to be anything

other than asymmetric. In the discussion that follows, we must consider maritime asymmetric warfare operations in two contexts: during the lead-up to war and during war itself. These different contexts affect the planning of operations and the strategies and tactics to be applied.

Tactics employable as part of sea insurgency operations include the sabotage of vessels and sea cables; mine warfare; use of improvised explosive devices; cyber attacks (to target, disrupt, and take over command and control systems); Global Positioning System jamming (to facilitate deviation from navigation patterns, enable sabotage or hijacking operations, or encourage collisions between both commercial and military vessels); and suicide attacks (to damage vessels, demoralize military personnel, and sap societal morale).[56] A combination of these tactics would be employed to further different strategies.

One strategy for sea insurgency operations consists of mobilizing state units abroad and nonstate actors to carry out media, disinformation, and propaganda campaigns in support of North Korea and its operations. This might include deflecting domestic, regional, and global attention from the development of military programs in general or the transportation of SOFs in particular.

Sea insurgency operations would be conducted both prior to and during war. Those carried out prior to war would seek to further defensive political objectives by weakening opposing forces, including their morale. They also would facilitate the transition into asymmetric military operations in pursuit of offensive political objectives. Oscillating between operations in pursuit of defensive and offensive objectives keeps opponents off balance and makes it harder for counterinsurgency strategists to understand the logic of the sea insurgency operation as it unfolds and harder for them to predict the strategies and tactics they will encounter.

Any assessment of North Korea's asymmetric and maritime military strategy conducted strictly from this traditional perspective would be inadequate owing to the country's unique geostrategic location. Sabotage and sea insurgency in pursuit of defensive political objectives do not require direct engagement within the theaters of asymmetric military operations—but invasion does.

The standard approach to analyzing North Korea's military strategy is insufficient because North Korea intentionally has created a security dilemma. Supposedly, while North Korea's general approach is unpredictable and its actions generally offensive, its policy objectives are limited to achieving survival, sovereignty, and relevance. But too many in the international and scholarly communities see the ongoing modernization of North Korea's military capabilities only in the context of a threat to the ROK-U.S. alliance, rarely reflecting on North Korea's asymmetric approach within a wider geopolitical framework.

North Korea's asymmetric strategy cannot be labeled simply as nontraditional. It is not linear but layered. It does not enhance the directional line of action; rather, it disperses it. North Korea has followed this asymmetric approach in its expansion of its military capabilities, keyed to its unique geostrategic location and its geopolitical positioning.

The existing literature highlights North Korea's asymmetric approach to conflict but does not explore the development of its strategic thought, the nature of its asymmetric strategy, why such a strategy is necessary, and how it might be used in a future war. There has been no exploration of North Korea's strategic thought, owing to a lack of information, especially access to military documents. Nonetheless, we can derive some inkling of it through contemplation of how the country has developed its military capabilities and force structure. This article has sought to lay a foundation for a new field of inquiry; however, additional studies need to be conducted to tease out potential strategies further. War will become only more complex in the future. In some previous cases, a failure to think outside the box has contributed to the failure of past strategies, yet any strategist will state proudly that the ability to do so is the hallmark of strategic thinking.

NOTES

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1. All Korean expressions appearing in the text are translated using the Korean Romanization Converter with McCune-Reischauer Romanization, available at roman.cs.pusan.ac.kr/.
2. Uri Friedman, "Here's How U.S.–North Korea Crises Typically End," *The Atlantic,* February 7, 2018, www.theatlantic.com/.
3. Joel S. Wit, "North Korea's Nuclear Futures: Implications for Peace and Security, Project Final Report," Calhoun: NPS Institutional Archive, 2016; Soon Ho Lee, "Military Transformation on the Korean Peninsula: Technology versus Geography" (PhD dissertation, Univ. of Hull, 2011), p. 25, available at hydra.hull .ac.uk/.
4. David E. Long, "Countering Asymmetrical Warfare in the 21st Century: A Grand Strategic Vision," *Center for Contemporary Conflict,* July 1, 2008, calhoun.nps.edu/.
5. Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013).
6. Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2009), p. 36.
7. Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operations,* Joint Publication 3-0 (Washington, DC: October 22, 2018), sec. GL-16.
8. Homer T. Hodge, "North Korea's Military Strategy," *Parameters* 33, no. 1 (2003), pp. 68–81; Andrew Scobell and John M. Sanford, *North Korea's Military Threat: Pyongyang's Conventional Forces, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Ballistic Missiles* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2007); Axel Berkofsky, "North Korea's Military—What Do They Have, What Do They Want?," *ISPI Analysis: Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale* 161 (March 2013), pp. 1–6; Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., "Understanding the North Korea Military Threat to the Security of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia: Declined or Evolved?," *Korea Observer* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2009),

pp. 115–54; Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., "Planning for the Unthinkable: Countering a North Korean Nuclear Attack and Management of Post-attack Scenarios," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 23, no. 1 (March 2011), pp. 1–17; Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., "Maintaining a Rogue Military: North Korea's Military Capabilities and Strategy at the End of the Kim Jong-il Era," *International Journal of Korean Studies* 16, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2012), pp. 160–91; Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., "Developments in the North Korea Asymmetric Threat: Missiles and Electronic Warfare," *International Journal of Korean Studies* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2012) pp. 107–29.

9. Taehee Whang, Michael Lammbrau, and Hyung-min Joo, "Detecting Patterns in North Korean Military Provocations: What Machine Learning Tells Us," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (2016), pp. 1-28; Bechtol, "Understanding the North Korea Military Threat"; Bechtol, "Maintaining a Rogue Military."

10. Bechtol, "Developments in the North Korean Asymmetric Threat."

11. Ibid.

12. Bechtol, "Maintaining a Rogue Military," pp. 160–82.

13. Cary Huang, "China's Military Is Mighty, but Diplomacy Is Still a Weak Spot," *South China Morning Post,* October 14, 2017, www.scmp .com/.

14. Bechtol, "Planning for the Unthinkable," pp. 1–7.

15. North Korean missiles provide a defensive strategic buffer as much as, or better to say as little as, tanks, airplanes, and other offensive weapons.

16. Scobell and Sanford, *North Korea's Military Threat*.

17. Rachael M. Rudolph and Nhan Tran, "An Electronic and Cyber Warfare Doctrine to Contain North Korea's Provocations," *International Public Policy Review,* July 3, 2017, ippreview.com/.

18. Bruce W. Bennett, Christopher P. Twomey, and Gregory F. Treverton, *What Are Asymmetric Strategies?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999), p. 3.

19. Ibid., p. 4.

20. Bechtol, "Understanding the North Korea Military Threat"; Bechtol, "Maintaining a Rogue Military"; Whang, Lammbrau, and Joo, "Detecting Patterns in North Korean Military Provocations." They conclude that North Korea tends to emphasize its history of military struggle, Japanese occupation and colonization, and U.S. imperialist actions; criticize the present behavior of the United States, Japan, and South Korea prior to an impending conflict or military provocation; boost its people's morale; and show the international community that it will not back down.

21. When it comes to the military development of North Korea, China should also be taken into account. It seems that North Korea and China have a "good cop / bad cop" routine. While North Korea threatened and developed its unconventional military programs in the east, China modernized their navy (aircraft carriers) and air force (Chengdu J-20), and gradually strengthened its position in the South China Sea. Now that China has assumed the role of a bad cop, acting in a more aggressive and decisive manner, North Korea has taken the role of a good cop by initiating peace and stability talks in East Asia, presumably with the intention to restore its economy and to support the further development of its conventional capabilities.

22. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War,* trans. Lionel Giles (London: Luzac, 1910), paras. 18–19.

23. The allusion is to the Allies' military deception efforts in 1944 as part of the preparations for the invasion of Normandy.

24. The adoption of an asymmetric military strategy led to the development of new military capabilities, instead of the development of military capabilities leading to the adoption of a new asymmetric military strategy. More succinctly, it can be described as: land forces pave the way for nuclear weapons, nuclear weapons for missiles, missiles for navy, and navy for air force. This progression is described more completely in the section of the article describing the five stages of North Korea's military development.

25. Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Strategy Review 1999* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999), p. 2.

26. Ibid.

27. Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War,* ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York: Free Press, 1996), p. xix.
28. Colin S. Gray, *War and Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 87, 132.
29. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War,* eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Perret (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007).
30. World Bank, "Armed Forces Personnel, Total," *International Institute for Strategic Studies,* 2016, data.worldbank.org/.
31. Lorenzo Mariani, "Assessing North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programmes: Implications for Seoul and Washington," *Istituto Affari Internazionali* 17, no. 11 (March 2017).
32. Ibid.; "The North Korean Missile Threat," *MDAA Country Brief—North Korea,* December 2017, missiledefenseadvocacy.org/.
33. Kim Gamel, "North Korea's Naval Forces Get 'Serious' Upgrades," *Stars and Stripes,* September 2, 2016, www.stripes.com/; Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., "New North Korean Helicopter Frigates Spotted," *38 North,* May 15, 2014, www.38north.org/; "The North Korean Missile Threat."
34. The summit between Russian president Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un held on April 25, 2019, suggests that in the coming years North Korea most likely will begin to modernize its MIG-29 fleet and purchase the SU-35. Abraham Ait, "Is North Korea's MiG-29 Fleet Growing?," *The Diplomat,* November 29, 2018, thediplomat.com/.
35. Troy Stangarone, "Does Moon Jae-in's Victory Herald a New Dawn for the Sunshine Policy?," *The Diplomat,* May 10, 2017, thediplomat.com/; Ian Bremmer, "South Korea's Moon Jae-in Is Meeting with Donald Trump. Here Are 5 Things to Know," *Time,* June 30, 2017, time.com/.
36. This, somehow, reminds one of the Ems Dispatch that brought the southern German states into a coalition with the Prussian-led North German Confederation.
37. Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," p. 38; Andrew Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017).
38. Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics,* pp. 5–6.
39. Andrew Korybko, *Hybrid Wars: The Indirect Adaptive Approach to Regime Change* (Moscow, Russia: Institute for Strategic Studies and Predictions, 2015).
40. Bennett, *Documented Briefing,* p. 2.
41. Ibid.
42. See the cases of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and their naval division, the Sea Tigers, who were active particularly during the Sri Lankan civil war.
43. The theater of operations, as a standard military concept, refers to the territory of operations not to military branches involved. The theaters of asymmetric military operations (TAMO) are defined in relation to both the characteristic of the territory and military branches involved.
44. Anthony H. Cordesman and Aaron Linn, "The Changing Military Balance in the Koreas and Northeast Asia," *Center for Strategic and International Studies,* March 25, 2015, www.csis.org/, p. 135; Gamel, "North Korea's Naval Forces Get 'Serious' Upgrades."
45. Bechtol, "Maintaining a Rogue Military," pp. 163–64.
46. Wallace "Chip" Gregson, "Statement for the Record by Wallace 'Chip' Gregson, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian & Pacific Security Affairs, Department of Defense," Submitted to the Senate Armed Services Committee, September 16, 2010, as quoted in Bechtol, "Maintaining a Rogue Military."
47. "'N.K. Overwhelmingly Superior to S. Korea in Asymmetrical Forces': Gov't Data," *Yonhap,* December 5, 2010, english.yonhapnews .co.kr/.
48. U.S. Defense Dept., *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea 2012* (Washington, DC: 2012), p. 7; Sico van der Meer, "States' Motivations to Acquire or Forgo Nuclear Weapons: Four Factors of Influence," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 17, no. 1 (2016).
49. Conducting a limited attack can enhance deterrence, but it is not correlated in any way to defense. The concept of *deterrence* does not imply merely enhanced defense but an enhanced perception of security; it simply

connotes that one's opponents are not willing to attack. Thus, if an opponent does launch a retaliatory attack, one's defensive capabilities would be neither lower nor higher than they were before.

50. Daniel A. Pinkston, "The North Korean Ballistic Missile Program," *Strategic Studies Institute,* February 2008, p. 2, ssi.armywarcollege.edu/.

51. Vincent Bernard, ed., "War and Security at Sea," *International Review of the Red Cross* 98, no. 902 (2016), pp. 383–723; Rob McLaughlin, "The Law Applicable to Naval Mine Warfare in a Non-International Armed Conflict," *International Law Studies* 90 (2014), pp. 475–98; Paul A. Povlock, "A Guerilla War at Sea: The Sri Lankan Civil War," *Small Wars Journal,* September 9, 2011, smallwarsjournal.com/; Kil-Joo Ban, "The Clash of David and Goliath at Sea: The USS Cole Bombing as Sea Insurgency and Lessons for the ROK Navy," *Asian Politics & Policy* 2, no. 3 (2010), pp. 463–85.

52. Ban and Povlock were the only two authors within the reviewed literature, however, who focused specifically on the concept of sea insurgency in the contemporary context.

53. Ban, "The Clash of David and Goliath at Sea."

54. Ibid., p. 464.

55. Povlock, "A Guerilla War at Sea," p. 2.

56. The aim of many of these tactics is to disrupt trade; provoke a disproportionate response from the ROK or the United States; create a diversion that facilitates the delivery of both legal and illegal cargos, such as weapons or special operation forces en route to carrying out operations in ROK coastal waterways or seaports; and otherwise to make both military and commercial vessels unavailable.