

Keeping the North Korean Threat in Proportion

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There is no question that North Korea poses a major threat to its neighbors and can drag the United States and potentially China into a serious regional conflict. There also is no little doubt that it has some current nuclear strike capability with air delivered weapons and may already have a marginal capability to deliver missiles with nuclear warheads against city-sized targets in South Korea and Japan. In a period of months to years, it will be able to conduct enough tests to develop a reasonable probability of delivering a moderate fission-sized weapon against an American city with a high chance of success. No one should downplay the threat from the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), or take the proposal that any use of force could escalate to a major war on the Korean peninsula casually.

At the same time, no one should exaggerate the threat to the point of panic, or make North Korea into some kind of towering threat. It may be the most militarized nation in the world, and no one can count on its dictator showing restraint. North Korea has sheltered artillery forces within range of Seoul and they could inflict major damage over time. However, it would take considerable time to do the level of damage some press reports talk about, and the casualties would be far lower, unless Seoul's citizens decide to stay and wait to be targets over day-after-day of bombardment with both South Korean and the U.S. military forces failing to react.

North Korea does have large air and missile forces. However, its air forces and surface-to-air missile forces are aging and far less capable than those of South Korea and the U.S. The DPRK has a mix of aging MiGs and Su-25s, while South Korea has a significant number of F-16s, F-15s, and a growing number of FA-50s. The DPRK has a mix of aging Vietnam-era SA-3 and SA-5 surface-to-air missiles, although it also has some more modern S-200s. South Korea has Patriot PAC-2s, and a large force of upgraded Hawk missiles, plus a growing number of THAADs.

North Korea has no stealth capability, and most of its missiles have limited accuracy and lethality against critical military and infrastructure targets if they are used with conventional warheads. South Korea now has precision guided missiles of its own, and the U.S. can deploy large numbers of cruise missiles and air-launched precision guided systems.

North Korea has enough ground power to pose a serious threat and the initial phase of any serious war would cost South Korea a great deal. Once again, however, much of the North Korea force is far less capable in terms of advanced ground weapons systems. Unless China came to its aid, it could not come close to the initial advances it made in the Korean War. It would take massive losses in any intense fighting, and it would lose over time.

There are good reasons why three generations of "dear leader" have been careful not to escalate too far and to use military threats with considerable skill. For all the threats and rhetoric, North Korea's leaders must realize just how limited North Korea's capabilities for war fighting are, and how vulnerable key aspects of its economy and infrastructure are. Unlike some U.S. and Asian media, they have to know that wars are not fought only at the border, and North Korea will not be allowed to do worst case damage to South Korea's population and economy.

At one level, any conventional deep strike air and missile campaign against North Korea that struck deep and hard at its overall mix of military and civil targets would do far more damage to the small, fragile modern structure of North Korea's military and civil assets than it could do to South

Korea — much less Japan and Guam. At another level, any North Korean use of nuclear weapons would be suicidal. Its comparatively tiny modern industrial sector makes it the most vulnerable nuclear-armed country in the world.

Intelligence analysts and economists caution that there are no accurate and reliable figures on the North Korean economy, but it is remarkably small and fragile. The CIA estimates that North Korea's population is only about 25.1 million, and that it has an economy or gross domestic product (GDP) of only \$40 billion even in purchasing power parity terms. Its estimated GDP drops to around \$28 billion when measured in the official exchange rate terms that reflect the more modern aspects of its economy. The CIA estimates that North Korea had a negative economic and industrial growth rate in 2015 — the last year for which the CIA makes an estimate.

In short, North Korea has long had one of the smallest and worst performing economies relative to a nation anything like its size of any nation in the world. It also has one of the lowest per capita incomes — ranking somewhere below the 200th lowest in the world. Its militarization has come at immense cost in terms of creating a survivable infrastructure and economy. The last CIA estimate of its budget dates back to 2007, but it then was only \$3.2 billion — less than the cost of one new U.S. aircraft carrier and paying for its current military forces and moving towards far higher levels of development would be a challenge even if its budget rose to over \$30 billion.

There is no mystery about the far greater strength and survivability of South Korea's economy. It has 51 million people. It has a \$1.9 trillion economy in purchasing power parity terms, and \$1.4 trillion in official exchange rate terms. Its per capita income and overall level of development is almost certainly at least 10 times that of the DPRK in human terms. It has a national budget of \$297 billion — possibly 10 times that of the DPRK and almost certainly at least five times higher. It has a defense budget of some \$34 billion, almost certainly at least five times higher than that of the DPRK.

The CIA also estimates that North Korea's infrastructure is remarkably fragile for such a militarized power. Only 30% of its population has electricity — 41% in urban areas and far less than that in rural areas. It is critically dependent on a relatively small number of generating plants and hydroelectric facilities for what was only 17 billion kilowatts of power capacity in 2014 — the last year the CIA reports.

North Korea has no oil and gas production and is dependent on an extraordinarily low import level of 70,000 barrels of crude a day, plus some 6,000 barrels of product. This makes its small number of generating plants and oil refineries and distribution facilities remarkably easy to knock out with stealth and precision strike systems. The same is true of many aspects of its communications grid, although its phone service is expanding, and there are about 5 million phones — over 3 million of which are mobile.

It also has a vulnerable transportation grid. It has a large number of air facilities, but limited rail capability and many vulnerable rail and road targets. It also only has limited amounts of paved road by the standards of any country trying to support such massive military efforts. As far less developed U.S. military forces showed in the Gulf War in 1991, and again in 2003, the modern deep strike and precision strike capability of South Korea and the U.S. can do far more devastating overall damage to North Korea far more quickly than North Korea can inflict on South Korea or any other neighbor.

None of this is an argument for war or military options, and while Kim Jong Un's behavior generally seems far more rational than his public rhetoric, his willingness to escalate in a serious crisis remains uncertain. No one who has examined the cost of the Korean War or more modern conflicts can ignore the cost of any serious military engagement, and any major attack on North Korea would hurt its civilians far more than its "dear leader." The fact remains, however, that the level of deterrence is high, that North Korea is the more vulnerable state, and that North Korea has every possible real world incentive to show restraint and avoid any serious form of conflict.

For a detailed analysis of North Korean, South Korean, Japanese, and U.S. military capabilities see the CSIS eBook, **The Military Balance in the Koreas and Northeast Asia**, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/web-book-military-balance-koreas-and-northeast-asia>.