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North Korean Crisis: Possible Military Options

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Summary

North Korea has confronted the United States with its decision, failing other security accommodations, to pursue production of nuclear weapons. The Bush Administration has stated that, although the situation is unacceptable, it will pursue its resolution through diplomatic means. Military means, however, could be considered at some point and become a serious issue for Congress. This short report discusses the geography and military balance on the Korean Peninsula, presents the range of military options that might be applied there to specific U.S. political objectives, and assesses possible consequences. Military options discussed are: status quo, improved defensive posture, enforce sanctions, preemptive strike against nuclear facilities, and preemptive war. Also see CRS Issue Brief IB98045 on U.S.-Korean relations and CRS Issue Brief IB91141 on North Korea's nuclear weapons. This report will be updated if major changes occur.

Background: Geography and Military Balance

The Korean peninsula lies at a nexus of military, economic, and political concerns with global implications. From North Korea's perspective, it is surrounded by world powers: to the west and north are China and Russia, to the East is Japan, and to the South is South Korea and military forces of the United States. Since the Korean War began in 1950, the North Korean dictatorship has presented continuous military and economic challenges to its neighbors. Recent challenges have included a specter of economic collapse and a threat to develop a nuclear arsenal.

North Korea, with a population of 22 million, maintains a large military force of over 1 million active soldiers and 4.7 million reservists. Its force structure includes some 20 army corps with armor, mechanized infantry, and infantry units; notable enhancements include 88,000 special purpose forces and a range of artillery, rocket, and missile forces (some reportedly capable of delivering chemical and biological agents)¹. Naval forces

¹ Military force statistics from The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military* (continued...)

include some 300 patrol and coastal combatants, 26 submarines, and 66 inshore/coastal submarines for inserting special forces. Air forces deploy over 500 Russian fighter and attack aircraft and some 300 utility helicopters. Detracting from the potency of this large force are the age and obsolescence of many combat systems and low training hours afforded to their crews. Many draftees may reflect weakness stemming from ten years of malnutrition.

Directly facing the North Korean threat is South Korea with some 48 million people. It has 686,000 personnel on active military duty and can muster 4.5 million reservists. The South Korean Army is organized into some 10 corps, with equipment generally better than that found to the North – for example, half of its tanks are comparable to the U.S. Abrams tank. Its fleet of over 350 helicopters includes U.S. AH-1 Cobras, CH-47 Chinooks, and UH-60 Blackhawks. The Navy deploys 26 submarines, 39 principal surface combatants, 84 patrol and coastal combatants, and a 2-division force of 28,000 Marines. The Air Force flies over 530 combat aircraft, including the F-16C/D. The South Korean level of training is considered generally higher than that of North Korea.

Integral to the defense of South Korea is the direct presence of some 37,000 U.S. military personnel. Major units are two brigades of the 2d Infantry Division, combat and support units of the Eighth Army (including Patriot missile batteries), and U.S. Air Force units deploying 90 combat aircraft. Dedicated reinforcement and supporting forces are considerable, including a new Stryker Brigade² and a corps headquarters in Fort Lewis, Washington and the 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii. Powerful Air Force, Marine Corps, and Navy forces (totaling 48,000 personnel) are nearby in Japan, including the Seventh Fleet. Availability of additional Army forces in the near term, however, would be limited by ongoing commitments in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, and other places.³

A unique strength of the defense of South Korea resides in the command arrangements, both joint and combined. A U.S. officer, General Leon J. LaPorte, as Commander of the Combined Forces Command, would command all allied forces in South Korea during wartime, as well as all U.S. forces. A South Korean general would be the ground component commander and have operational control of U.S. ground forces assigned to him by General LaPorte. Higher headquarters integrate both U.S. and South Korean intelligence and operational planning, an area of frequent testing and exercise.

Major military action on the Korean Peninsula could create a challenge exceeding that recently met by the United States and its allies in Iraq. Some 80% of the peninsula,

¹ (...continued)

Balance, 2002-2003, London, October 2002. A discussion of missile programs and their potential to carry WMD warheads can be found in (name redacted), *North Korean Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States*. See CRS Report RS21473.

² Newly constituted as part of the U.S. Army's transformation initiative. See (name redacted), *Army Transformation and Modernization: Status and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report RS20787.

³ Michael O'Hanlon. "Breaking the Army," *The Washington Post*, July 3, 2003, p.A23. It appears that U.S. contingency plans for a North Korean invasion have called for more divisions than the active Army can provide today. See unclassified extracts of Operation Plan 5027 published in *Tokyo SAPIO*, 28 Feb 96, pp. 17-22.

about the size of Utah, is covered by rugged hills and mountains.⁴ The winters are bitterly cold, while the summers are hot and humid with periodic torrential rains and flooding. Much of the North Korean force is protected by a system of underground caves and tunnels. About two-thirds of the North Korean force is forward deployed along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the northern boundary of South Korea. Complicating military defensive planning is the location of Seoul, the capital of South Korea. Seoul, a metropolis of some 10 million people, sits astride the major trafficable corridor between North and South Korea, as close as 25 miles to the DMZ. In a surprise attack, the North could inflict artillery and missile devastation upon Seoul – referred to by the North as a “sea of fire”⁵ – and possibly reach the city with a coordinated ground and special operations attack.

U.S. Military Alternatives

Should resort to force be deemed necessary, there are several military actions that the United States could contemplate to achieve policy objectives on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea, unfortunately, has a history of unpredictable, and often violent, reactions to even slight provocations. Therefore, even the most modest U.S. military action risks escalation to higher levels of conflict and most analysts agree that no military option should be chosen without full recognition of such danger. Also, a combination of options could be chosen or even anticipated to ensue. U.S. allies and other nations in Northeast Asia are aware of these dangers and the United States would likely undertake some form of consultation with them – their active or passive cooperation could be needed. Some suggest that, in light of potentially large casualties, proceeding without South Korean agreement “would be immoral as well as ill-advised.”⁶

Status Quo. Current U.S. policy involves maintaining a stable military situation while diplomacy proceeds to solve the North Korean nuclear crisis. South Korea and the United States maintain strong defenses along the DMZ. Periodic military exercises elicit complaints from North Korean officials, but, over time, they generally seem accustomed to and respect the existing military situation.⁷ Some have suggested withdrawal or drawdown of U.S. forces, but other analysts believe this could, in a time of tensions, send unintended messages to North Korea or even to one or more of its powerful neighbors. Ongoing studies and negotiations propose to relocate U.S. ground forces and headquarters, primarily by moving the U.S. 2d Infantry Division from the north to the south of Seoul.⁸ Such a move would give U.S. forces greater flexibility to maneuver and

⁴ For a more detailed treatment, see John M. Collins, *Korean Crisis, 1994 Military Geography, Military Balance, Military Options*, CRS Report 94-311, April 11, 1994, (archived, available on request from (name redacted)) 21pp.

⁵ Doug Struck, “U.S. Focuses On N. Korea’s Hidden Arms,” *Washington Post*, June 23, 2003, p. 16.

⁶ John M. Collins. “Nuclear Bees in North Korea,” *Army Magazine*, August, 2003.

⁷ Conducted annually, the large *Ulchi Focus Lens* exercise will take place August 18-29, 2003. “U.S.-S.Korea exercise slated for next month,” *Associated Press*, July 21, 2003.

⁸ Robert Karniol. “Seoul, US to realign basing of troops,” *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, June 11, 2003. Non-military reasons include responding to nationalistic and environmental concerns of the South (continued...)

make them less vulnerable to a surprise attack – essentially lessening the “tripwire” effect of having U.S. forces close to the DMZ. Whether such an action will make the military situation more or less stable could be argued either way,⁹ but the overall effect should not unduly change the military status quo on the Korean Peninsula.

Improve Defensive Posture. Recognizing that the current situation is unusually tense, the United States and South Korea could adopt a policy of temporarily increasing military preparedness to deter a North Korean military strike,¹⁰ improve allied odds to defeat such a strike, or reinforce diplomatic firmness. The least provocative action might be to add more robust intelligence and warning activities, both those based in South Korea and those using space assets and adjoining air and sea access. Other options include: upgrading and testing alternate command headquarters, including those underground, as well as information and communications networks; adding more air and missile defense assets to protect additional key government and military facilities in South Korea and Japan; and, strengthening unit reception plans and facilities for reinforcements. In so far as the North Korean crisis is recognized as a priority military challenge to the United States, the measures above are, in some cases, underway, according to recent press reports.¹¹ Although possible, it is unlikely that North Korea would attack solely in response to such gradual, defensive measures. It might, however, feel greater pressure to either reach a diplomatic solution or expend more resources on its own military establishment.

Calling up South Korean reservists or moving additional U.S. combat forces into the Peninsula might also be considered. Unless done in response to overtly hostile North Korean actions or intentions, such actions would most likely be construed as a serious provocation or possibly a prelude to an allied attack. North Korean sensitivity is illustrated by statements of concern even when temporary U.S. buildups and exercises are held in Okinawa.¹²

Military Enforcement of Sanctions. Should North Korea attempt to export weapons of mass destruction, longer range missiles, or the materials to create such things, interception on the high seas or in the air by military forces might be considered.¹³ U.S. and international policy objectives would be to enforce nonproliferation goals and, perhaps secondarily, to restrict hard currency gains from such transactions. Such a “blockade,” “quarantine,” or “containment,” to be effective, would require large,

⁸ (...continued)
Korean public.

⁹ Sang-hun Choe. “Redeployment from DMZ would alter Korean political climate,” *Associated Press*, June 6, 2003.

¹⁰ Admiral Fargo, Commander of U.S. Pacific Command, recently told the House International Relations Committee that, “I believe the chances of war are low, but the consequences would be very high.” *Associated Press*, June 26, 2003.

¹¹ Hans Greimel. “Wolfowitz: More mobile force needed to counter N. Korea threat,” *Associated Press*, Tokyo, June 3, 2003.

¹² “N.K. Concerned About U.S. Military Build Up in Japan,” *Seoul Yonhap*, May 30, 2003.

¹³ Steven R. Weisman. “Plan To Block North Korean Nuclear Shipments Gains Support,” *New York Times*, June 18, 2003, p A5. Note. Discovering or proving such activity is difficult.

dedicated U.S. Navy and Air Force participation, and at least some Coast Guard assets. It would require the cooperation of other nations and international organizations, not least being a commitment from China and Russia to actively seal their land, sea, and air borders from penetration by North Korean conveyances and those of their customers.

Risks for such an operation are that innocent trade and other activities of many nations could be inconvenienced; North Korea might circumvent even sophisticated intelligence and interception operations; and, since a blockade is considered an act of war, North Korea might respond with military action.¹⁴

Preemptive Strike on Nuclear Facilities. The Administration's National Security Strategy reserves the option for the President to order a preemptive strike to forestall a weapons of mass destruction attack against the United States, its military forces, or its allies.¹⁵ In this case, the possession of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles could threaten, now or in the short term, U.S. forces and allied populations in South Korea and Japan. In the longer term, a few observers are concerned that North Korea could threaten more distant targets, to include parts of the U.S. homeland.¹⁶ There is also the possibility that North Korean nuclear materials and weapons could be exported to third parties – terrorist groups or rogue states – that might wish to harm the United States. In any event, a policy option would be to destroy identified weapons and materials and associated production facilities in North Korea; it would be complicated by the North Korean's ability to hide or protect such targets, often deeply underground.

The United States has the ability to deliver both conventional and nuclear weapons against some underground targets, and is studying “robust nuclear earth penetrators.”¹⁷ Some targets could presumably also be neutralized with special forces operations. A risk with a preemptive strike option is that all identified targets, if they do exist, might not be accurately located and that some may be deeply or effectively protected against U.S. weapons.¹⁸ Surviving capabilities might be used in retaliatory strikes, possibly creating calamities that U.S. policy was trying to prevent. U.S. strikes would undoubtedly be considered acts of war, and North Korea could attempt to launch selective or massive conventional attacks against South Korea in response.¹⁹ It is, therefore, unlikely that South Korea would support a preemptive strike option under most circumstances.

¹⁴ Doug Struck. “N. Korea Vows to Fight Any Blockade,” *Washington Post*, June 18, 2003, p. A21.

¹⁵ The White House. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., September 17, 2002, p. 15.

¹⁶ See (name redacted), *op. cit.*

¹⁷ See Jonathan Medalia, *Nuclear Earth Penetrator Weapons*, CRS Report RS20834.

¹⁸ CIA. “We continue to monitor and assess North Korea’s nuclear weapons efforts which, given the North’s closed society and the obvious covert nature of the program, remains a difficult intelligence collection target.” Report to Congress on the Acquiring of Technology Related to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Weapons, January-June 2002.

¹⁹ See Doug Bandow. “Wrong War, Wrong Place, Wrong Time: Why Military Action Should Not Be Used to Resolve the North Korean Nuclear Crisis,” CATO Institute Foreign Policy Briefing, May 12, 2003, 13 pp.

Preemptive War. Initiating general war with North Korea is an unlikely option for the United States, as South Korea would be unwilling to sustain the resultant, huge costs on its population without extreme provocation. In theory, however, two policy objectives might be met. First, should regime change in North Korea become a priority policy objective, a military march to Pyongyang might be the only sure means available. Second, should a major North Korean attack south appear imminent, the policy of preemptive attack might offer advantages: the initial allied targeting and assaults could reduce North Korean capabilities to destroy Seoul, WMD could be destroyed or captured, and allied commanders would be able to execute their plan with nonattritted forces – a particular advantage if the United States followed a doctrine of rapid, joint, and coordinated attacks throughout the depth of North Korea.

In considering a war option, certain assumptions and risks would need to be assessed. First, international support for the war would be desirable, given U.S. reliance on global communications and transport; China's reaction would be key – at the minimum it would have to be neutral. Next, it would be difficult to mask attack preparations by U.S. and South Korean forces. North Korea could launch its own preemptive attack, possibly creating some of the adverse consequences U.S. policy was trying to circumvent. Also, timing is a problem – due to heavy commitments in Iraq and many other places, the U.S. Army is currently stretched very thin, and would find it difficult to contribute the major ground forces needed.²⁰ To sustain such an operation, it is likely that many Army National Guard and Army Reserve units not already on active duty would have to be mobilized, as well as considerable numbers of individual reservists to fill out units and replace casualties. It is likely that much of any post-war occupation of North Korea required could be accomplished by South Korea.

Finally, American public acceptance of a more difficult and protracted war than it might expect based on recent, quick U.S. military victories in Southwest Asia and the Balkans may be a requisite. In addition to geographic problems highlighted above and a larger enemy force that has possibly learned through observation how the United States fights, the North Korean soldier may not surrender easily. The Korean War of 1950-1953 is a cautionary example: one U.S. veteran of that conflict said, "I'd rather fight the Chinese any day than the North Koreans, who were more tenacious, more fanatical, and more disciplined."²¹ Others would point out that today's North Korean soldier is physically weaker, may resent state oppression, is severely outclassed in weaponry and experience with modern warfare – and the current limits of his tenacity are not known. Should a military option be deemed necessary, the Executive would be expected to consult with appropriate congressional bodies.

²⁰ O'Hanlon, *op. cit.* Note. *In extremis*, both sides retain the option to resort to nuclear warfare.

²¹ General Robert Kingston, U.S. Army, Retired, Oral History, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1995. In context, it must be noted that Chinese soldiers were also tough opponents.

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