

THE GROWING REACH OF REGIONAL UNREST: KOREA, THE UK AND THE EMERGING EURASIA THEATRE



AUTHOR

Major Rocco P. Santurri III
US Army Civil Affairs and
Psychological Operations
Command



CHACR

The Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research is the British Army's think tank and tasked with enhancing the conceptual component of its fighting power. The views expressed in this *In Depth Briefing* are those of the author, and not of the CHACR, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Ministry of Defence, British Army or US Army. The aim of the briefing is to provide a neutral platform for external researchers and experts to offer their views on critical issues. This document cannot be reproduced or used in part or whole without the permission of the CHACR.
www.chacr.org.uk

IT is not embellishment to say that these are troubled times in our world – the relative ‘order’ during the Cold War and the peace dividend after it has long expired. Israel’s military adventure into Gaza continues, escalation with Hezbollah is a distinct possibility, the Houthis continue to target global shipping, and tensions have surged in Mali. Additionally, conflicts persist in Ethiopia, Colombia, Bangladesh and Georgia. While significant, they pale compared to broader conflicts, actualised or anticipated, that represent a global threat. War in Ukraine continues to menace the European continent. A Russian victory, warns Polish President Duda, puts Russia on Poland’s border and might encourage Putin to re-enact previous Soviet incursions against its long-time adversary and propel Europe into even greater turmoil. Putin’s recent remarks regarding the use of nuclear weapons and NATO being “defenceless” certainly have not assuaged fears throughout Alliance capitals. However, lurking amongst these scenarios

is perhaps an even more significant threat: the risk of war on the Korean Peninsula and the implications it could present to the UK and the West.

“We will have no hesitation in annihilating [South Korea] by mobilising all means and forces in our hands.” – North Korea Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un

The prospects of war between North Korea and South Korea, officially the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK), respectively, are frightening for reasons both obvious and less apparent. Technically still at war, the two sides maintain an uneasy armistice that vacillates between shared dreams of unification and vitriolic threats of destruction. China, officially the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Russia and the United States have also played significant roles in events in the region while adding to the threat of a nuclear war between great powers. Currently, tensions are running hot. Kim Jong Un, the DPRK’s ‘Supreme Leader’ and ‘Great Comrade’, has all but abandoned any hope of reunification, recently amending

his nation’s constitution to establish the ROK as his country’s “principal enemy”.

The UK also has a card to play in the region through organisations and treaties; it remains a core member of the United Nations Command, tasked with enforcing the armistice and repelling another DPRK invasion. Additionally, with AUKUS steadily asserting itself, developments in the South China Sea could entangle the UK in unexpected conflict. The recent harrying of a Norwegian ship by a Chinese jet is but a hint of the increasingly contested space in the region. Within the context of that sobering realisation, an analysis of inter-Korean relations is undoubtedly warranted; it would be in the UK’s interest to pay greater attention to the current environment in Northeast Asia, assess the probability of escalation and, ultimately, determine the effects it could have on its interests in the region. While an urgent but seemingly regional inquiry, an even more significant Korea-related threat looms for the UK in an area much closer to home: continental Europe. Currently, developments

in Europe are anything but stagnant. Russia has reinvigorated its relationship with the DPRK to a level unanticipated by the West. Pyongyang has provided Moscow with ballistic missiles and badly needed 155mm artillery munitions that, while plentiful in numbers but dubious in quality, have helped Moscow bolster its current offensive against Ukraine. Meanwhile, Moscow has provided Pyongyang with oil and satellite technology, the latter sorely needed after another recent (and unsuccessful) launch attempt. Putin confirmed Russian assistance; when asked if Moscow would help Pyongyang build satellites, he replied “this is why we have come to Vostochny Cosmodrome” in reference to a Russia-DPRK meeting at the spaceport.

“We highly appreciate that the DPRK is firmly supporting the special military operations of Russia being conducted in Ukraine, expressing solidarity with us on major international issues and maintaining the common line and stand at the UN.” – Russian President Vladimir Putin

The scale and scope of this budding partnership were made undeniably transparent by a rare Putin state visit to Pyongyang this month, which concluded with a flurry of diplomatic, economic, military, cultural and social agreements. Most notably, Russia and the DPRK agreed to assist each other militarily if either were attacked. While policy experts continue to decipher the articles of the Russia-DPRK agreement to understand its practical applicability, the fallout has already begun. Moscow wasted no time in threatening the ROK over its growing arms sales to NATO members; in response, Seoul’s hawkish government quickly countered, threatening to arm Ukraine. While there has been ongoing debate about the state of affairs on the Peninsula,



the new agreement all but ensures heightened tensions, with many pundits hailing it as a significant development in the region; the lines separating the European and Pacific theatres are further blurred, making developments on the Korean Peninsula even more impactful upon the UK and its interests.

South of the military demarcation line separating the Koreas, an increasingly concerned US looks to the North with greater apprehension. Washington has repeatedly called the Russia-DPRK agreement “a grave concern”. For more than 70 years the US has steadfastly supported the ROK despite several rough political patches. Nevertheless, US assistance is rock solid; the largest American military base outside the continental US is in Pyeongtaek, South Korea, not continental Europe. Robust integration between the two is frequently displayed during bi-annual exercises that grow each year in scope and scale in the air, at sea, on land and in cyberspace. Anchoring the ROK-US relationship is a combined headquarters that helps institutionalise this partnership against changes in political winds, whether blowing in Seoul or Washington.

The 28,000-soldier-strong US footprint on the Peninsula is undoubtedly warranted when analysing the combustibility of the region and the history of tit-for-tat provocations and responses. In a

constricted and tense environment of opposing states possessing massive conventional and nuclear armaments, a low-level provocation might explode into a conflict of enormous destructive potential. Such a conflict would test the operational and logistical limits of the US war machine; exposed by the current conflict in Europe, the US has struggled to backfill its stockpiles of critical armaments thinned by two years of support to Ukraine. With the UK a core member of the UN Command, which recently renewed its vows to beat back another invasion attempt from the DPRK, a diminished US war machine could have a trickle-down effect on the UK’s role in conflict on the Peninsula. The previous Korean War from 1950-53 cost the UK 1,078 killed and 2,674 wounded. With all sides boasting vastly superior forces than they did in the 1950s, renewed conflict could have severe ramifications for the UK and NATO despite the seemingly minimal amount of attention paid to such a contingency. A stretched US and UK in Korea means a stretched NATO in Europe, as both countries play outsized roles in the Alliance given their military and nuclear capabilities. Such a development demands consideration of how hostilities on the Peninsula could threaten UK interests in continental Europe and how prepared the UK is for such a contingency.

“Eventually, the Korean War will be understood as one of the most

destructive and one of the most important wars of the twentieth century.” – Bruce Cumings, The Korean War; A History

Memories of the destructive nature of the Korean War make many believe that stalemate will persist on the Peninsula; both Koreas lay in ruins afterward while ending the conflict almost precisely where it began. As former ROK President Moon Jae-in pleaded: “We can’t afford to lose all that we have built from the ashes of the Korean War.” External parties also have interests that make preserving stalemate their priority in the region. These communal interests have created a ‘Goldilocks Zone’ in which all parties see their interests best served by stalemate, not war, peace or reunification. Pyongyang’s reasons are the most straightforward. While many consider the Hermit Kingdom an enigma, the driving force behind Kim Jong Un’s motivations is not; regime survival remains the foundational priority upon which all else rests, like his father and grandfather. Launching another war against the ROK all but ensures the end of his regime; unlike counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq, large-scale combat operations would allow the UK and the US to unleash the full might of forces designed explicitly for such a conflict. While the dictator’s trap might be in play in Pyongyang, Kim Jong Un would unlikely ignore the lessons of his forebearers. Stalemate keeps him and his family in power, in the international spotlight, and in a position of leverage with the PRC and Russia; war, peace or reunification do not.

Moscow also prefers the current environment, which allows it to check its regional rivals (and ‘friends’) while still committing significant resources to its ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine. Additionally, Russia will receive increased military

support from the DPRK per their recent agreement. The agreement also signals to the PRC that Russia remains a global power in Asia even while prosecuting a war in Europe. Peace on the Peninsula makes it more difficult for Russia to substantiate a growing presence in the region; conversely, a regional conflict that could lead to global escalation certainly does not serve Russian interests, given the personnel and material it continues to haemorrhage in Ukraine. Furthermore, war on the Peninsula would severely stretch the Russian war machine, which has experienced severe logistical issues throughout its war in Ukraine. These concerns and the added benefit of checking Chinese ambitions in the region make a significant change in Moscow's regional approach seem unlikely, especially one that upsets the current stalemate, which conveniently underpins its interests in Asia and Europe.

While the ROK has improved its military capabilities, how it would fare in a war against the DPRK is debatable. Seoul's proximity to the 38th parallel all but assures it would be devastated by a pre-emptive artillery and missile strike on the capital. A better course of action is keeping matters with the DPRK within the zone of competition or the occasional crisis, but not conflict. To this end, the US and UN Command play a pivotal role, as does the status quo. Without question, the presence of the US and UN Command is a massive deterrence to the DPRK and comes at a fraction of the cost for the ROK versus replicating a similar capability on its own. Peace and a corresponding US and UN Command exit is a potential triple blow to the ROK. Its deterrence is severely degraded while becoming more vulnerable to the DPRK's military, as well as PRC and Russian influence. All three issues

“A FRIGHTENING SCENARIO BECOMES NIGHTMARISH IF CHINA, RUSSIA, IRAN AND NORTH KOREA, CURRENTLY MORE CARTEL THAN COALITION, EMPLOY A COORDINATED GLOBAL STRATEGY THAT SYNCHRONISES THEIR REGIONAL OPERATIONS.”

are avoided by the continuance of the status quo, making the ROK another state that benefits from the current state of affairs.

The status quo has clear appeal to the Americans as well. With the PRC as its pacing threat, the ongoing tensions with the DPRK offer US policymakers justification for the large military footprint in the region, specifically the South China Sea. While these forces are nominally positioned to support the ROK, a more significant strategic purpose is deterring Chinese aggression in the region. The elimination of the DPRK threat makes it much more difficult for any US President to substantiate a large and expensive US military presence in the region; this set of circumstances could become even more problematic if it coincides with midterm or presidential election cycles in the US. Conversely, an entrenched status quo substantiates the heightened American commitment to the region.

“There is no avoiding war; it can only be postponed to the advantage of others.”
 – **Niccolò Machiavelli**

Nevertheless, how long can the status quo go forward? The current Goldilocks Zone in the region offers a rarity in geopolitics: a perpetually imminent state of tension that might spike with a low-level provocation but consistently returns to a status quo that favours all involved. However, in the original tale of *Goldilocks*, the end was not a happy escape but a horrific death by immolation and impalement. Furthermore, throughout the history of international relations, emotion has more than once gotten the better of logic within strategic decision-making; this runs a more significant risk when one ruler's emotions can dictate a nation's direction and the fate of millions. A possible albeit unlikely cause of renewed conflict on the Peninsula could be internal in origin; dissent from the military and the elites against Kim Jong Un, backed by civilian dissent and outside powers, could produce a wag-the-dog scenario in which the Supreme Leader resorts to launching a conflict to unite his country against an external threat and save his regime. Countless other scenarios are plausible,

but the result is more important than the method; regardless of how it might start, the onset of war in Korea would have global trickle-down implications for many states.

The UK would bear a substantial brunt of the ramifications in Asia and the inevitable fallout in Europe. Upon the resumption of conflict in Korea, the US and the UK, by way of membership in the UN Command, would be engaged in direct action against the DPRK. A less-capable NATO would have to deter Russia in Europe, with two of its most potent members fully engaged in a conflict sure to produce massive losses in both personnel and material. NATO's remaining strongest militaries would have to mitigate this catastrophic loss of capability. While France, Italy and Poland possess competent militaries, believing they could cover the loss of US and UK capabilities is folly. A frightening scenario becomes nightmarish if the PRC, Russia, Iran and the DPRK, currently more cartel than coalition, employ a coordinated global strategy that synchronises their regional operations. In such a scenario, the PRC and Russia make good on their treaty agreements with the DPRK and join the fight on the Peninsula. At the same time, Moscow, sensing an advantage in Europe with the UK and US embroiled in Asia, presses its advantage against Ukraine and eyes a return of the Baltics to





The CHACR's Director, Major General (ret) Dr Andrew Sharpe, at the Demilitarized Zone on the border between North and South Korea

its control. Concurrently, Iran ties down US assets in the Middle East as it escalates tensions with Israel and directs its proxies to conduct land and sea attacks against Western allies and international shipping, further straining global supply chains.

However, even without such global escalation, the Ukraine/Korea scenario is quite alarming in its own right. War on the Peninsula forces the US to divert vital funding for Ukraine to its Korean war effort. By far the largest donor in all of NATO, the decrease or loss of US funding would have concrete ramifications on the Ukrainian battlefield. With the US and UK fully engaged in Korea, Russia presses westward as the Ukrainians, valiant of heart but short on ammunition, see their prospects of victory at best, stalemate at worst, become an unlikely reality. For those hopeful that the US and UK could sustain both efforts, there is an historical comparison to consider: both struggled to fund and fight a multi-theatre, counterinsurgency-centric battle during the Global War on Terror against relative

lightweights Afghanistan and Iraq; how would it fare against near-peer adversaries in the PRC and Russia?

"We may, however, wake up one day lamenting the loss of the order that the Cold War gave to the anarchy of international relations." – **John J. Mearsheimer**

The interwoven web that the geopolitical world has evolved into has made viewing conflicts through a parochial lens obsolete. The age of globalised foreign policy is well upon us; regional considerations often fail to stay containerised, but instead, they inflict second and third-order effects thousands of miles away. Regional political, economic and military factors can quickly escalate into strategic-level matters. The inherent centrifugal forces of conflict have become grander in scale and scope in our increasingly interdependent and networked world, even inspiring some to claim a direct line between the strategic and tactical levels. Conflict on the Korean Peninsula has not and will not be a regional affair; the array of

forces there and worldwide are slowly but steadily forming into two blocs, making a regional appraisal inadequate at best and a recipe for disaster at worst. The rising middle states such as the DPRK and ROK, increasingly self-aware of their capability to shape global events, make the world stage even more crowded and less predictable. Geographic distance has become a geopolitical fool's gold; the 7,000 miles that separate London from Pyongyang betray the undeniable and intrinsic relationship between the European and Asian theatres. Indeed, the nagging Korean 'problem' is a microcosm of global affairs. The world has gotten smaller, the weapons deadlier and the prospects for another world war likelier. Ignoring these developments ensures the owner of such sentiments experiences a tense present and an uncertain future in which the lack of preparation could lead to catastrophic consequences. Trickle-down warfare, whether political, economic or military, affects all corners of the globe, even if a state does its best to remain out of harm's way.

For the UK, the realities of a diminished empire and international standing have long been accepted; it has smartly carved out for itself a slow burning 'empire afterglow' that has kept the UK in a position of power and influence on the world stage. The US might not share a similar sentiment toward their own state of affairs. However, it is difficult to deny that the sun is setting on the American Empire, whether Washington cares to admit it or not. The UK should face head-on the realities of a diminished United States, all but inevitable given the political division and spiralling debt visible for all to see across the pond. Embracing an interconnected and worldly perspective that connects regions into an overarching global operating environment best serves UK interests; Korea is a microcosm of the perils one risks by having a regional outlook. Instead, evaluating the war in Ukraine and the potential for war in Korea through a combined perspective is necessary in an increasingly chaotic world, one that is vastly different from the relative predictability of the Cold War.