

# **Policy Forum 07-036: The Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea: Conventional or Hybrid Military Threat?**

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The Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea: Conventional or Hybrid Military Threat?

By Brian P. Duplessis

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## **I. Introduction**

Brian P. Duplessis, a Major in the United States Marine Corps with 17 years service, writes, "For too long, military thought has almost exclusively focused on the DPRK's sizeable conventional forces and WMD capabilities while giving short shrift to irregular warfare capabilities and disruptive activities. In order to successfully blunt a future DPRK military attack, this trend must be reversed."

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The views in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the U.S. Marine Corps or the United States Government.

## **II. Article by Brian P. Duplessis**

- "The Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea: Conventional or Hybrid Military Threat?"

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### Problem Defined

*Recent conflicts highlight the need to always remember that the enemy is a human being...he has a vote in the competitive process we know as war and does not have to play by our rules. (1)*

Frank G. Hoffman and LtGen James N. Mattis USMC

When military professionals contemplate the armed might of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) the most common visualization is of a conventional foe heavily supported by artillery and mechanized and armored forces. This picture is a manifestation of our overarching tendency to "mirror image" our adversaries and focus upon those areas we understand and/or have in common. We cling to this approach at our own peril as has been vividly demonstrated in Afghanistan and Iraq. Recently, however, Frank Hoffman, Lieutenant Colonel, USMCR (Ret.), has defined an emerging type of threat that is neither entirely irregular nor entirely conventional. These so-called 'hybrid' threats blend symmetric and asymmetric capabilities in accordance with the foe they face and the results they desire to achieve. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the armed forces of the DPRK and determine if they have the capabilities and potential to conduct hybrid warfare in accordance with Hoffman's emerging concept. In order to achieve this analysis, hybrid threats are defined and examples are presented. Following this introduction, the DPRK's military capabilities are presented and compared with the characteristics of hybrid threats. This paper concludes with a determination of whether the DPRK's military is able to conduct hybrid warfare.

### Hybrid Threats

The wars of tomorrow will not neatly fall into the respective boxes of conventional or irregular warfare.(2) Tomorrow's hybrid adversary will employ combinations of traditional, irregular, catastrophic, and disruptive tactics, techniques, and procedures in order to achieve tactical, operational, and/or strategic success.(3) Hybrid actors are not focused upon kinetic actions alone; information operations and the use of global media outlets are often equally important, in some cases more important. The hybrid foe, first and foremost, seeks to avoid overwhelming conventional combat power. The combination of tactics, techniques, and procedures selected will coincide with perceived United States' weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The tactical, operational, and strategic approaches chosen are unpredictable, unexpected, and ruthless (in accordance with our morals and traditions).(4) Lastly, urban settings will become the hybrid foe's battleground of choice.(5) This

environment negates United States' advantages in conventional firepower, reconnaissance, and tactical mobility. Additionally, combat in these population centers raises the specter of collateral damage which the hybrid foe will seek to leverage and exploit through world media outlets.

Hoffman's chief example of an emerging hybrid threat is the Lebanon-based Hezbollah, a violent non-state actor who combines conventional, state-like military capabilities, such as short range rockets and advanced anti-tank weaponry, with irregular methods to include terrorism and information operations.(6) In accordance with hybrid warfare theory, which posits that the hybrid foe will seek to overcome conventional military superiority by exploiting weaknesses, Hezbollah recently experienced limited success against the vaunted and world-respected Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Complete victory, as Hezbollah would like to claim, was not attained, but Israel did not emerge clearly victorious either. As Hoffman states, "Claims about a victory...are a bit dubious, but...the IDF's credibility was weakened."(7) In order to continue this analytical essay and determine if the DPRK is capable of conducting hybrid warfare, one must first examine the nature of the DPRK's military forces.

### The Korean Peoples Army

The Korean Peoples Army (KPA) includes all armed forces, not just the army. The KPA presents an impressive array of conventional combat power. A ground force of seventeen corps (9 infantry, 4 mechanized, 2 artillery, 1 armored, and the Pyongyang Defense Command) represents the chief striking power of the KPA.(8) The KPA fields an air force of approximately 1,700 (mostly outdated) aircraft and a small coastal navy. (9) The DPRK also possesses large stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The KPA regularly trains in the employment of WMD.(10) Ballistic missiles also comprise an important element of the DPRK's arsenal. Holdings range from the short-range Free Rocket over Ground (FROG) 7 to the long-range Taepo Dong. The last important piece of the DPRK's military capabilities is its special operations forces (SOF). The DPRK fields 22 brigades and 7 separate battalions of SOF.(11) These highly-trained, ideologically-focused fighters can infiltrate via land, sea, and air and are capable of executing strategic, operational, and tactical missions.(12) Military power is further buttressed by multiple disruptive activities to include computer hacking,(13) currency counterfeiting, and narcotics sales.(14) Although the DPRK has not committed an overt terrorist act since the 1983 attack on a Republic of Korea delegation in (then) Rangoon, Burma, it remains capable of reentering the active terrorist arena at the time and place of its choosing.(15) Despite this lack of active participation, the DPRK is, however, labeled as a supporter of state terrorism largely due to its dealings with international terrorist organizations. If the DPRK was to initiate terrorist actions, SOF are the likely agents provocateur.

### Analysis

In order to determine if the DPRK has the potential for conducting hybrid warfare, one must identify the traits and characteristics of hybrid warfare and see if the DPRK has the ability to match these traits and characteristics. The chief aspect of hybrid warfare is the use of various combinations of conventional, irregular, catastrophic, and disruptive actions.(16) In order to take this approach, a potential hybrid actor must possess all or a part of these capabilities. The DPRK boasts all four in spades. As previously alluded to, the DPRK fields large numbers of conventional forces to include a sizeable artillery park and ballistic missile inventory. The DPRK also has an established tradition of irregular warfare; its founding father, Kim Il Sung, was a noted anti-Japanese guerrilla. Additionally, during the period of 1966 to 1969 the DPRK waged a significant irregular campaign against the Republic of Korea and its American allies.(17)

Currently, SOF represent the chief irregular warfare capability of the DPRK. Catastrophic capabilities are resident in the form of large stockpiles of WMD. Lastly, illicit activities such as

counterfeiting, illegal drug sales, terrorism, and computer hacking can yield disruptive effects.

Hoffman stated that the chief battleground for the hybrid foe would likely be within urban centers. This is due to the perception that urban terrain negates our advantages in conventional firepower, mobility, and reconnaissance. The DPRK is also likely to choose such settings for its battles of the future. Due to experiences in the Korean War, the DPRK respects and wishes to avoid the conventional firepower of the United States; one method of negating this capability is to fight within cities where the threat of collateral damage is likely to inhibit the liberal use of heavy firepower. Additionally, South Korea is a largely urbanized state; nearly everything of value, domestically and internationally, is situated within urban areas. Many of these facilities would undoubtedly be targeted in time of war with potentially catastrophic results. For example, a disruption of Posco Steel for any length of time would have worldwide repercussions.

Information operations and use of world media outlets constitute another key pillar of hybrid warfare. The DPRK has a long tradition of using propaganda to support its national strategy. In the event of war, one can expect the DPRK to attempt to use every possible form of media to support its efforts. In particular, world media, willingly or unwillingly, will be used to paint Combined Forces Command's (CFC) actions in the most negative light possible and those of the DPRK in the most positive light.

Tactical, operational, and strategic approaches employed by hybrid foes are unpredictable and unexpected. This characteristic dovetails with Sun Tzu's famous dictum that, "war is based on deception."<sup>(18)</sup> The DPRK, a Confucian society, is influenced by Sun Tzu and, consequently, one can readily find manifestations of his maxims within the operational art of the DPRK. Hybrid foes also exhibit a ruthlessness that is anathema to the United States. The DPRK has a long history of such ruthlessness including, but not limited to the starvation of its populace, kidnapping of Japanese nationals, and the shoot down of an unarmed reconnaissance plane in international air space in 1969.

In some capacity, the DPRK possesses nearly all characteristics and capabilities attributed to hybrid foes. Furthermore, it is highly likely that senior DPRK military leadership has closely examined Hezbollah's recent military confrontation with Israel. This is attributable to the fact that the IDF closely mirrors the United States military in terms of equipment and doctrine, particularly a heavy reliance on armor and airpower. Those tactics, techniques, and procedures which proved effective against Israel are likely to prove effective against the United States under similar circumstances. Furthermore, due to North Korea's close ties to Hezbollah's chief supporter, Iran, and the fact that North Korea built tunnels for Hezbollah, the likelihood of military to military contacts and the sharing of information is highly probable.<sup>(19)</sup> Lastly, Hezbollah ran a highly effective media campaign which created a perception of victory and lowered the prestige of the IDF. It is further likely that the DPRK has taken note of this success as well and has developed plans to leverage media in the same fashion should the opportunity present itself.

## Conclusion

*Our conventional superiority creates a compelling logic for states...to seek some niche capability or some unexpected combinations of technologies and tactics to gain an advantage. (20)*

Frank G. Hoffman and LtGen James N. Mattis USMC

One can reasonably argue that the DPRK has the potential to conduct hybrid warfare. As such, our thinking with regard to the DPRK must evolve. For too long, military thought has almost exclusively focused on the DPRK's sizeable conventional forces and WMD capabilities while giving short shrift to

irregular warfare capabilities and disruptive activities. In order to successfully blunt a future DPRK military attack, this trend must be reversed. Some Korean security issues analysts have recently emphasized the large-scale and potentially lethal asymmetric capabilities of the KPA in a debate that continues to exist regarding how the ROK-US alliance can best counter Pyongyang's evolving ability to threaten the Peninsula and the region.(21) Furthermore, it is important to note that these asymmetric forces could be used to set the conditions for the DPRK's degraded, but still dangerous, conventional forces to conduct effective offensive operations.(22)

Hezbollah vividly demonstrated how a militarily weaker foe, short of winning a traditional military victory, can effectively employ a blend of conventional, irregular, and disruptive warfare in order to bloody and embarrass a world class military foe. If we fail to grasp the lessons learned from Israel's recent campaign and effectively apply them to our view of war against the DPRK, we could be the next world class military power to suffer a black eye at the hands of a conventionally inferior foe employing hybrid warfare. The DPRK's long history of innovation combined with a penchant for violating international laws and acting in a ruthless manner in order to achieve its objectives mark this rogue state as a likely future hybrid foe.

### III. Notes

(1) Frank G. Hoffman and James N. Mattis. "Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars," *Proceedings* Vol. 132, No. 11 (November 2005): 18.

(2) Frank G. Hoffman. "Preparing for Hybrid Wars," *Marine Corps Gazette* , Vol. 91, No. 3 (March 2007): 57.

(3) Hoffman and Mattis. 19.

(4) Hoffman. 58.

(5) Hoffman. 58.

(6) Hoffman. 58-60.

(7) Hoffman. 59.

(8) Joseph S. Bermudez Jr. *The Armed Forces of North Korea* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2001) 56.

(9) Ken E. Gause. *North Korean Civil-Military Trends: Military-First Politics to a Point* . (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2006): 37.

(10) Bermudez. 222-235.

(11) U.S. Marine Corps Intelligence Activity. *North Korea Handbook* (Quantico, VA: Dept. of Defense Intelligence Production Program , 1997), URL: <http://www.dia.mil/publicaffairs/Foia/nkor.pdf>

(12) *North Korea Handbook* , URL: <http://www.dia.mil/publicaffairs/Foia/nkor.pdf>

(13) North Korea is reputed to have up to 600 trained computer hackers who focus on conducting cyber war against the United States, South Korea, and Japan. These hackers were possibly involved in cyber attacks against South Korea's National Assembly in July, 2004.

(14) Dick K. Nanto. "North Korea's Economic Crisis, Reforms, and Policy Implications" in Young

Whan Kihl and Hong Nack Kim eds. *North Korea, the Politics of Regime Survival* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2006): 133- 134.

(15) "Significant Terrorist Incidents, 1961-2003: A Brief Chronology," *United States State Department* ., URL: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/5902.htm>

(16) Hoffman and Mattis. 19.

(17) For a detailed account of this period see Daniel P. Bolger. *Scenes from an Unfinished War: Low-Intensity Conflict in Korea 1966-1969* (Washington, D. C.: U.S. GPO, 1991).

(18) Sun Tzu. *The Art of War* (Translated by Samuel B. Griffith). (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963): 106.

(19) For more analysis on North Korea's relationship with Hezbollah and Iran and the tunnel building capabilities provided to both, see: Con Coughlin, "North Korea to Help Iran Build Secret Missile Bunkers," *Daily Telegraph* , December 6, 2005, URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/06/12/wnkor12.xml&sSheet=/news/2005/06/12/ixnewstop.html> and "Report: North Korea Supervised Building of Hezbollah Underground Facilities," *East-Asia-Intel.com* , September 13, 2006, URL: [http://www.east-asia-intl.com/eai/2006/09\\_13/12.asp](http://www.east-asia-intl.com/eai/2006/09_13/12.asp)

(20) Hoffman and Mattis. 18.

(21) For more analysis on North Korea's asymmetric capabilities and the threat this poses to the ROK-US alliance, see: Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., "Changes to Wartime OPLAN: Challenges for the ROK Military." *Chosun Ilbo* , March 7, 2007, URL: <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200703/200703070029.html>

(22) Bechtol, 2007.

### **III. Nautilus invites your responses**

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