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14. ABSTRACT On 05 July, 1950, in the first US engagement of the Korean War, Task Force Smith was obliterated by North Korean forces largely due to the lack of joint support. Since that date, US forces have maintained a constant presence in Korea. However, US force numbers in Korea have been in general decline since the end of the Korean War. In 2015, the last US brigade combat team stationed in Korea cased its colors to be replaced by a rotationally deployed brigade. The departure of this brigade was the result of decisions made in 2002-2003 that resulted in the smallest number of US combat troops in the Republic of Korea since 1950. 14 years later, assumptions about the transformation of the Republic of Korea military and assumptions about the threat posed by the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea that led to this decision have proven false. Although the joint capability of the US in Korea remains strong, the US combat ground forces are dangerously weak. A reassessment of these assumptions, as well as a current assessment of the time, space, and force factors on the Korean peninsula reveals the urgent need to return to a force of three US Brigade Combat Teams in Korea. Failure to do so may result in a repeat of Task Force Smith; only this time instead of a ground force with insufficient close air and fires support, the US may significant air, fires, and naval forces with insufficient ground forces to win the fight.					
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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
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**Preventing Task Force Smith:
The Need to Return US BCTs to Korea**

by

David Sherck

Major, US Army

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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12 May 2017

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Paper Abstract

Preventing Task Force Smith: The Need to Return US BCTs to Korea

On 05 July, 1950, in the first US engagement of the Korean War, Task Force Smith was obliterated by North Korean forces largely due to the lack of joint support. Since that date, US forces have maintained a constant presence in Korea. However, US force numbers in Korea have been in general decline since the end of the Korean War. In 2015, the last US brigade combat team stationed in Korea cased its colors to be replaced by a rotationally deployed brigade. The departure of this brigade was the result of decisions made in 2002-2003 that resulted in the smallest number of US combat troops in the Republic of Korea since 1950. 14 years later, assumptions about the transformation of the Republic of Korea military and assumptions about the threat posed by the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea that led to this decision have proven false. Although the joint capability of the US in Korea remains strong, the US combat ground forces are dangerously weak. A reassessment of these assumptions, as well as a current assessment of the time, space, and force factors on the Korean peninsula reveals the urgent need to return to a force of three US Brigade Combat Teams in Korea. Failure to do so may result in a repeat of Task Force Smith; only this time instead of a ground force with insufficient close air and fires support, the US may significant air, fires, and naval forces with insufficient ground forces to win the fight.

INTRODUCTION: ANOTHER TASK FORCE SMITH?

On July fifth, 1950, the US Army encountered the advancing forces of the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) for the first time in the Korean War. The US element was named Task Force Smith and the fight did not go well. One US Soldier, Sergeant Chambers, recalled attempting to coordinate assistance for the beleaguered force. After asking for mortar fire, artillery fire, and close air support, all of which were all unavailable or unable to be reached, the exasperated Sergeant asked if he could at least have a camera to take a picture of the disaster.¹ Over the next week, the DPRK “virtually destroyed two American regiments; some three thousand men were either killed, wounded, or missing in action.”² The US military resolved to prevent this kind of disaster from reoccurring in Korea and, as a result, has continually maintained forces on the peninsula since the disastrous July events of 1950.

There has been a gradual reduction in the US Force in Korea (USFK), particularly in ground combat forces since 1953. The latest reduction, announced in 2003, was completed when the final US Brigade Combat Team (BCT) stationed in Korea cased its colors and departed in June of 2015.³ Task Force Smith failed largely because it was a ground force that was rushed to the fight and unsupported by joint capabilities. The current force in Korea risks a different kind of Task Force Smith. In this scenario the air, naval, and fires capabilities the US has positioned in the region may become ineffective without sufficient US ground forces

¹ David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*, Hachette Books, 2007, Nook Edition, 184.

² Halberstam, 185.

³ Ashley Rowland and Jon Harper, “2ID unit in Korea to deactivate, replaced by rotational force,” *Stars and Stripes*, 06 November 2014, accessed 03 March 2017, <https://www.starsandstripes.com/news/2nd-id-unit-in-korea-to-deactivate-be-replaced-by-rotational-force-1.312557#.WQTCP1QpChB>.

to complete the force. Although there are arguments for the reduced US presence, the current lack of substantial US ground combat forces in Korea represents a significant operational risk.

The US should return to three BCTs in Korea to ensure that the joint force in Korea is effective and capable of meeting the North Korean threat. Assumptions made in 2003, both in forecasted Republic of Korea (RoK) military capability and in decreased DPRK threat, that led the US to reduce its ground forces have proven false. While the RoK does have increasing military capabilities, its professionalization has slowed and does not match predications. The operational factors of time and space on the Korean peninsula reveal that, in the event of conflict, the US will likely be required to conduct swift offensive ground operations and that US ground forces will be essential to success. The combination of these operational factors and false assumptions about RoK military capability and reduced DPRK threat reveal the imperative that these BCTs be returned to, and maintained on the Korean peninsula for the foreseeable future.

TIME TO GROW UP? THE ARGUMENT FOR A REDUCED US PRESENCE

The current US forces in Korea are largely based on decisions and analysis made from 2002 to 2003. At that time, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld stated that, because of its strengthening military and economy, the RoK had, “all the capability in the world of providing the kind of up-front deterrent that’s needed.”⁴ Supporters of this policy believed that Korea was ready to “grow up” and that the increasing capabilities of the RoK allowed

⁴ Jamie McIntyre, “U.S. reviews Korean, German bases,” *CNN.com*, 06 March, 2003, accessed 03 March 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/03/06/us.trrops.korea.germany/>.

the US to reduce its presence. As one analyst recently suggested, “South Korea is no longer a junior partner, and should strive for a more equal footing with its superpower ally.”⁵

The RoK economy has grown considerably since the end of the Korean War, with particularly strong growth in the last few decades. This success has led to the assertion that “the ROK, with U.S. support, is rich enough to provide a credible deterrent to DPRK aggression.”⁶ Improvements in the RoK military have made it qualitatively superior to that of DPRK. For example, although smaller in raw numbers, the RoK possesses a “tank fleet that is vastly qualitatively superior in equipment and training” and this is a “pattern that repeats itself across the range of forces.”⁷ In 2003, both countries agreed to a “Future of the ROK-US Alliance Policy Initiative” that included provisions for the ROK to “increase qualitative combat capabilities that would entail greater autonomy and responsibility in national defense.”⁸ The hope was that this modernization effort would allow RoK troops to replace US troops in most missions and supporters “theorized that South Korean forces could emerge victorious... with small US reinforcement because of the American military’s overwhelming air superiority.”⁹

The reductions were largely based on a desire to free US forces for other mission in the Global War on Terror throughout the world. This was expressed when “the (2002) U.S.

⁵ Leon Whyte, “The Evolution of the U.S-South Korea Alliance,” *The Diplomat*, 13 June, 2015, accessed 03 March 2017, <http://www.the-diplomat.com/2015/06/the-evolution0-of-the-u-s-south-korea-alliance/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dave Majumdar, “Can South Korea Fight DPRK Without America?” *The National Interest*, 07 January 2016, accessed 10 March 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/can-south-korea-fight-north-korea-without-america-14837>.

⁸ Michael Raska, “RMA Diffusion Paths and Patterns in South Korea’s Military Modernization,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 23, No. 3, September 2011, 377, accessed 25 March 2017, <http://www.kida.re.kr/kjda>.

⁹ Chang-hee Nam, “Relocating the U.S. Forces in South Korea: Strained Alliance, Emerging Partnership in the Changing Defense Posture,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, Issue 4, 623.

defense transformation stipulated the need for the realignment of U.S. Forces deployed in Korea that would be gradually reconfigured toward supporting regional or even global missions rather than addressing a traditional static peninsular defense.”¹⁰ The economic success of the RoK and the desire to free US troops for operations elsewhere, may have led US planners to be over optimistic in their assessment of future RoK military capabilities.

The analysis of the RoK military has largely been in terms of equipment and training for purely defensive roles. Traditional US policy has suggested that the US was, “not confident of winning an offensive war against North Korea without sustaining heavy military and collateral casualties.”¹¹ However, with the growing DPRK threat, there may be a need, no matter how undesirable, to conduct short notice ground offensive operations on the peninsula. Secretary Rumsfeld admitted that the US would accept more risk in Korea by withdrawing forces saying, if North Korea was “counting on us to be risk adverse, they may misjudge us.”¹² While this risk may have seemed acceptable in 2003, the current operational factors in Korea indicate that the current level of US ground forces is insufficient.

AMERICANS & ALLIES: COMBINED AND JOINT FORCES IN KOREA

US Forces in Korea (USFK) face the DPRK, the fourth largest army in the world, yet the number of US forces in Korea has been declining.¹³ Just after the Korean War, the US had more than 350,000 troops deployed in Korea. Throughout the 60’s and 70’s the US

¹⁰ Ibid, 377.

¹¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Military Balance in the Koreas and North East Asia*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/final-review-military-balance-koreas-northeast-asia/>. 462.

¹² McIntyre, “U.S. reviews Korean, German bases.”

¹³ Curtis Scaparrotti, *Statement of General Curtis M. Scaparrotti Commander, United Nations Command; Commander, United States-Republic of Korea Combined Forces Command, and Commander, United States Forces Korea before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, 25 March 2014, accessed 07 March 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Scaparrotti_03-25-14.pdf, 6.

maintained between 50,000 and 60,000 troops on the peninsula, with those numbers fluctuating between lows of 35,000 and highs of 45,000 from the mid-80s through the early 2000s.¹⁴ Today, the US Forces in Korea (USFK) consist of approximately 28,500 personnel, a reduction of almost a third from the 44,200 troops in Korea in 1990.¹⁵

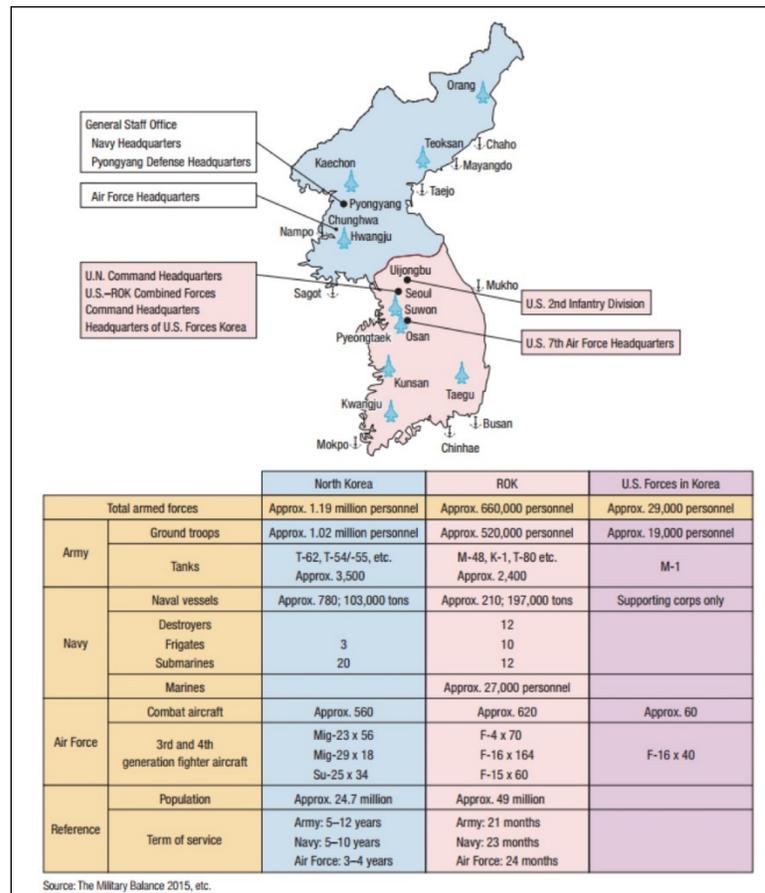


Figure 2: 2015 Estimated ROK, US, and DPRK Forces in Korea.¹⁶

Numbers alone do not tell the whole story of the US reductions. The 2003 reduction announcement was accompanied by a repositioning of US forces that remained in Korea.

¹⁴ Tim Kane, “Global U.S. Troop Deployment 1950-2003.” *The Heritage Foundation*, 27 October, 2004, accessed 15 March 2017, <http://www.heritage.org/defense/report/global-us-troop-deployment-1950-2003>.

¹⁵ US Forces Korea, “Strategic Digest 2015”, *USFK.Mil*, accessed 30 April 2017, http://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/Strategic_Digest_2015_Eng.pdf, 16 and Cordesman, 452.

¹⁶ Cordesman, 454.

According to Secretary Rumsfeld, US forces would move away from the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and “be more oriented toward an air and sea hub with the ability to reinforce.”¹⁷

USFK ground forces in previous decades prioritized combat troops along the DMZ and maintained a heavy proportion of fires and combat brigades. By contrast, the current USFK is prioritized towards the ability to reinforce the peninsula and contains a large proportion of logistics and command and control elements. The current USFK ground combat forces consist of a rotational Armor BCT, a Combat Aviation Brigade, and a Fires Brigade.¹⁸

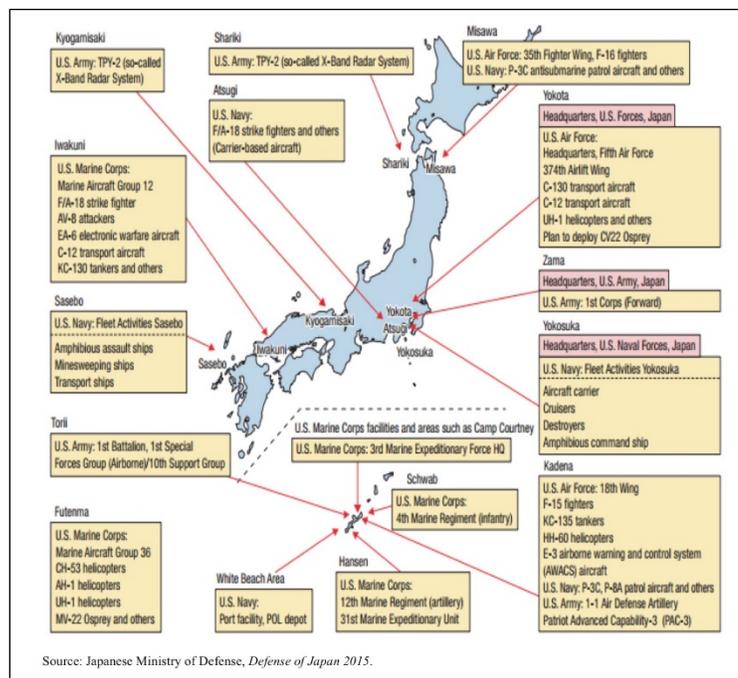


Figure 3: US Forces in Japan¹⁹

The US forces stationed in Japan that are in easy striking and supporting distance of Korea and would almost certainly play a role in a conflict on the peninsula. Like the USFK, the US forces in Japan consist mainly of aircraft, air defense, naval, and logistics forces,

¹⁷ Jamie McIntyre, “U.S. reviews Korean, German bases.”

¹⁸ Cordesman, 452.

¹⁹ Cordesman, 469.

although they do include ground forces in the form of Marines on Okinawa.²⁰ This Marine element can rapidly project a scalable Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTAF) to Korea which, at its largest size, can rapidly add an infantry brigade and artillery brigade to USFK.²¹ While these Marine units can rapidly reach Korea, they are significantly lighter, less mechanized, and possess less firepower than their Army equivalents.

The RoK military dwarfs the US in terms of raw numbers available in the theater at the start of a conflict. As can be seen in Figure 3, the RoK provides the bulk of the combined force numbers in almost every category. However, even with the combined RoK-US numbers, these forces are at a significant numerical disadvantage compared to DPRK forces. The DPRK numbers advantage particularly resides in three key ground combat areas; main battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, and artillery. These numbers also show the tiny contribution the US makes to the ground combat force by comparison to multi-role fighters and bombers, where the US contributes about a third of the force. The numbers of ground forces might not be a problem if the RoK ground forces can fill the same role as the departed US forces however, this is not likely the case.

²⁰ Ibid, 468-469.

²¹ III Marine Expeditionary Force, III MEF Website, accessed 22 March 2017, <http://www.iiimef.marines.mil/>.

Platform	ROK Total	ROK-US ¹²⁸³ Total	DPRK Total
Multirole Fighters	400	686	74
Ground Attack and Bombers	70	103	162
Attack Helicopters	60	94	20
Main Battle Tank	2,414	2,483	3,500
Armored Combat Vehicle	220	1,163	2,500
Expeditionary/Fighting Vehicles	2,850	2,912	560
Towed and Self-Propelled Artillery	11,038	11,108	21,000

Figure 4: RoK, RoK-US, DPRK Platform Comparison²²

In response to the reduced US forces announced in 2003, the RoK embarked on a military reform program, designated the Defense Reform Plan (DRP), to modernize its forces by 2020.²³ The DRP describes two different types of ground force capabilities. The first is “Forward Defense.” Forward Defense is defined as “stopping the ground component of the invasion in the forward area,” and includes those defensive tasks traditionally associated with stopping a DPRK invasion.²⁴ Forward Defense has been the traditional role of RoK ground forces in the RoK-US alliance. The second capability is “Territorial Offensive.” Territorial Offensive is defined as “offensive operations designed to recover captured RoK territory, secure the adversary’s territory, and find and destroy the adversary’s major military threats.”²⁵ Traditionally, this role has been filled by US ground forces in the RoK-US Alliance.

²² Cordesman, 456.

²³ Bruce Bennett, “A Brief Analysis of the Republic of Korea’s Defense Reform Plan,” Santa Monica: *RAND Corp, National Defense Research Institute*, 2006, accessed 22 March 2017, https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP165.html, iii.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 10.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

The 2003 DRP was based on the premise that the threat from the DPRK would decline by 2020, which would allow a smaller, more professional RoK military.²⁶ This premise has proven false, which manifested in the “Defense Reform Basic Plan” of 2009. This plan coupled continued conscription with a slower professionalization of the RoK Army (RoKA). While this plan differed from the DRP in retaining conscription, it did move ahead with many elements of the equipment modernization as originally planned.²⁷ The result is a problematic combination in the RoKA of modern equipment with a conscript military that may not be able to fully employ those advanced arms.

Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment noted in 2016, that “modern maneuver and net-centric warfare require highly trained, capable, and motivated soldiers, which the RoKA is unlikely to achieve with traditional conscription.”²⁸ Although the RoK ground force possess more modern equipment, it is still only capable of filling its traditional role of “Forward Defense” and lacks the ability to conduct the highly synchronized offensive maneuver required of “Territorial Offensive” operations. Meanwhile, the US has continued to reduce the US BCTs, which are the only forces in Korea capable of such offensive operations.

The RoKA’s inability to conduct territorial offensive operations can also be seen in the delayed transfer of operational control of the RoK military to Korean control. In 1950, the US took operational control of the RoK military, a situation that remained until the peace time hand over of control to the RoK in 1994.²⁹ As part of the professionalization and

²⁶ Cordesman, 315.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 318.

²⁸ IHS Jane’s: Defence & Security Intelligence Analysis, “Jane’s World Armies: South Korea,” *HIS Jane’s*, 27 November 2017, <http://www.janes.com>: Quoted in Cordesman, 153.

²⁹ Choe Sang-Hun, “U.S. and South Korea Agree to Delay Shift in Wartime Command,” *The New York Times.com*, 24 October, 2014, accessed 05 April 2017, <http://nyti.ms/1pHlagU/>.

modernization outlined in the DRP, the RoK was to assume wartime operational control of its military. Korean President Roh requested this change in the alliance structure and the US agreed to the request in 2007 with a target date for transfer of 2012.³⁰ Slow progress in RoK professionalization led to the transfer date being delayed, first to 2015 and then, at the RoK request, delayed to an unspecified date sometime in the mid-2020s.³¹ According to the statements by the US and RoK Defense Secretaries, the delays were “to ensure the combined defense posture remains seamless.”³²

The decision to reduce US ground combat troops and the decision to transfer operational control to the RoK were based on the same projected professionalization of the RoK military. Justifying the delay in operational control transfer, the US and RoK issued a joint communique that stated that the transfer would be delayed until “the security environment on the Korean Peninsula and in the region is conducive to a stable operational control transition.”³³ This statement and logic is equally applicable to the RoKA assumption of traditional US combat ground force offensive roles. Despite the delay in operational control transfer, and the fact the RoKA units cannot fill the territorial offensive role filled by the US forces, the reduction of forces proceeded anyway, which has created a critical capability gap in USFK.

SEOUL AND SEA: SPACE & TIME CHALLENGES

An analysis of the operational factors of space and time in the event of conflict on the Korean peninsula reveals the need for the capability to conduct quick offensive operations

³⁰ Bennett, 31-32.

³¹ Choe Sang-Hun. “U.S. and South Korea Agree to Delay Shift in Wartime Command.”

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

and the challenges in rapidly moving a force capable of such operations from elsewhere. A key space-time challenge is the position of Seoul in proximity to the DMZ and the damage DPRK could rapidly do to that city. The space-time challenge in rapidly moving ground forces from elsewhere comes from both the vast distances of the Pacific Ocean and the increasing ability of DPRK to complicate US movement in the Sea of Japan.

The RoK capital, Seoul, is located a mere 40 kilometers from the DMZ.³⁴ In 2003, General Scaparrotti, then Commander of USFK, described the importance of Seoul, noting that it is a city of more than 23 million inhabitants, including more than 50,000 American citizens.³⁵ He also warned that the DPRK has a large military and “has incrementally positioned the majority of this force within 90 miles of the DMZ, where they are postured for offensive or defensive operations.”³⁶ Although most US forces and logistics nodes have moved south, out of the range of most DPRK artillery, the exposed position of Seoul cannot be changed.

The DPRK possesses an array of artillery systems, several of which only a few types can range Seoul. Currently, the Koksan 170-mm self-propelled artillery, and the 240-mm and 300-mm multiple launch rocket systems can reach Seoul proper, however, much of the rest of DPRK’s artillery can still reach the sprawling Seoul suburbs. This gives DPRK the ability to rapidly “shock South Korea by causing significant civilian casualties and damage to economically critical infrastructure.”³⁷

³⁴ Cordesman, 462.

³⁵ Statement of General Curtis M. Scaparrotti before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 25 March 2014, 6.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 6.

³⁷ STRATFOR, “Assessing the North Korean Hazard,” *STRATFOR*, accessed 18 April, 2017, <https://www.stratfor.com/article/assessing-north-korean-hazard>.

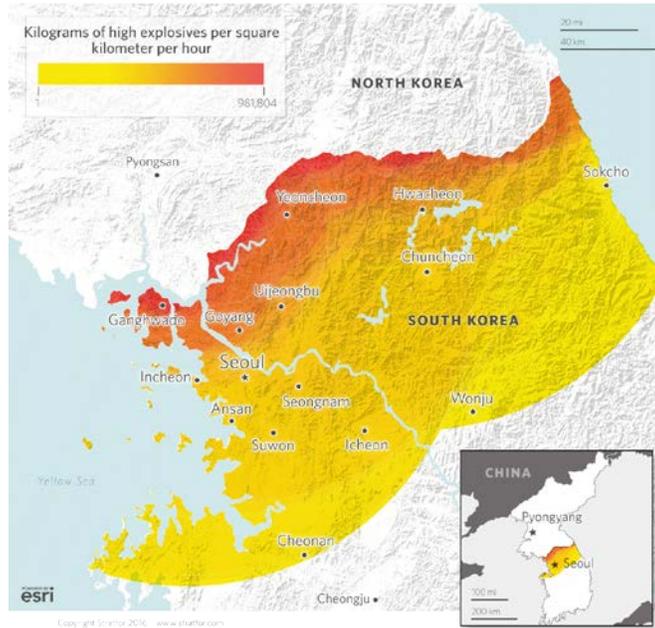


Figure 5: DPRK Artillery Delivery Concentration³⁸

The DPRK artillery threat to Seoul will be a perennial aspect of operations on the Korean peninsula. DPRK’s focus of forces to threaten Seoul is likely more than just posturing, and it is likely they will conduct a strike on Seoul in response to a variety of US actions. This threat will have to be accounted for in any operational plan, no matter what the US operational objective. This is critical as even “a limited preemptive attack runs the risk of North Korean retaliation.”³⁹ The time it will take to remove the threat to Seoul and the ability to remove it quickly is a key operational consideration.

Air power is a tempting solution to this dilemma as US air power in and around Korea is vastly superior to that of DPRK. However, the DPRK possesses “a dense and interlocked air defense network” that will significantly challenge the use of non-stealth

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Cordesman, 476.

aircraft in the opening days of a conflict.⁴⁰ While stealth aircraft may penetrate the DPRK air defense, their limited numbers in comparison to the amount of DPRK artillery that would need to be targeted reduces their effectiveness. Many analysts agree that using primarily air power, “even a surprise US-led attack would not be able to prevent significant artillery bombardment of Seoul.”⁴¹ A US ground force must be added to rapidly push the DPRK artillery safely away from Seoul.

The size of the Pacific Ocean presents a daunting challenge to getting this force rapidly to Korea. In his testimony to Congress, General Scapporatti expressed his concern about movement of reinforcements to Korea saying that “any delay in the arrival or reduction in readiness of these forces would lengthen the time required to accomplish key missions in crisis or war, likely resulting in higher civilian and military casualties.”⁴² The nearest US Armor BCT to Korea is located at Fort Bliss, Texas, nearly 6,500 miles from Seoul. Add to together the time it will take equipment to move from Texas to west coast ports and then movement time across the Pacific and the result is weeks, if not months, before these forces are ready to be employed.

⁴⁰ STRATFOR, “Assessing the North Korean Hazard.”

⁴¹ Cordesman, 462.

⁴² Statement of General Curtis M. Scaparrotti before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 25 March 2014, 17.

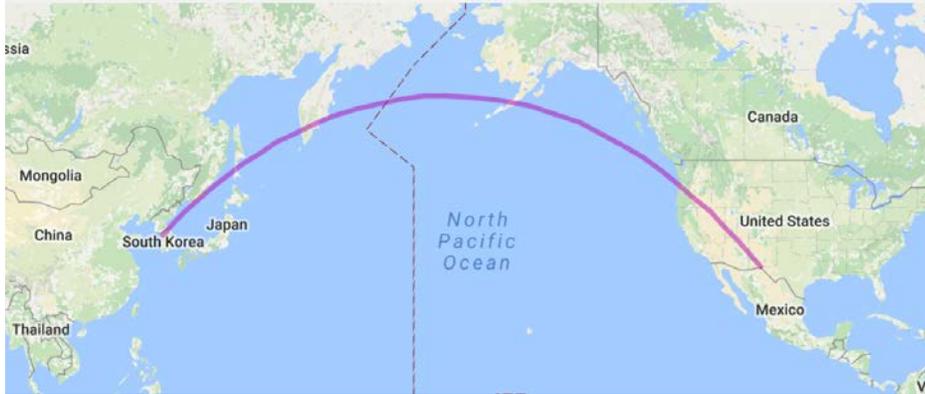


Figure 6: Fort Bliss, TX to Seoul, RoK; approx. 6,500 miles

While the vast expanse of the Pacific presents the challenge of size, the confined Sea of Japan presents the challenge of moving these forces through confined spaces. As reinforcing US forces enter the Sea of Japan, it is likely that they will face a threat from DPRK submarines. The DPRK is continuing to expand its large submarine force and, although this force is largely made up of older and less capable models, it has had some successes. This includes the suspected sinking of the RoK Corvette *Cheonan*, in the Yellow Sea and the insertion of commando teams and agents into the RoK.⁴³ Despite its technological inferiority, the DPRK submarine force could disrupt US movement using mine laying or direct action. The number of DPRK submarines and their successes in penetrating RoK waters indicates that they could present a challenge to US sea deployment.

⁴³ Kyle Mizokami, "North Korea's Submarine Fleet: A Big Threat or a Big Joke?" *The National Interest*, 22 April 2017, accessed 30 April 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/north-koreas-submarine-fleet-big-threat-or-big-joke-20300?>

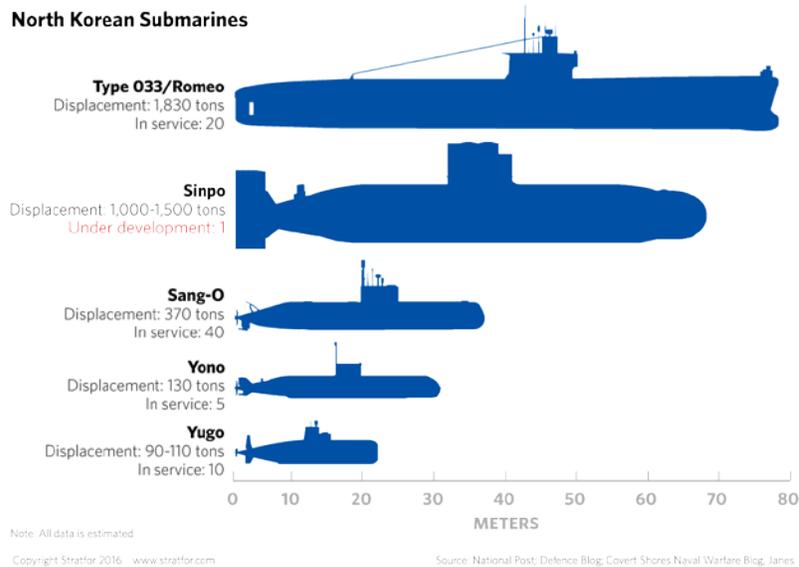


Figure 7: DPRK Submarine Capability.⁴⁴

DPRK submarines are not fast, but they would not have to travel far to concentrate on a small number of ports. Only one port in the RoK, Ulsan, is rated as “very large,” while for comparison, Japan has six ports rated as “very large.”⁴⁵ The lack of ports increases the vulnerability of sea borne reinforcements and deployment timelines. Additionally, the increase in DPRK nuclear weapons may be aimed at preventing the US from introducing reinforcements to a Korean conflict. A potential DPRK strategy would be to use its nuclear threat to limit US involvement. A leading Korea think tank representative testifying before congress suggested that, “by holding US cities hostage, the DPRK could work to impede the ability of the US to flow forces and material to critical nodes and bases in defense of South

⁴⁴ STRATFOR, “Assessing the North Korean Hazard.”

⁴⁵ World Port Source, “South Korean Ports” *World Port Source.com*, accessed 02 May 2017, <http://www.worldportsource.com/ports/KOR.php>.

Korea and Japan.”⁴⁶ This suggests that, unless US forces are already in Korea, they may be challenged to arrive in a timely manner.

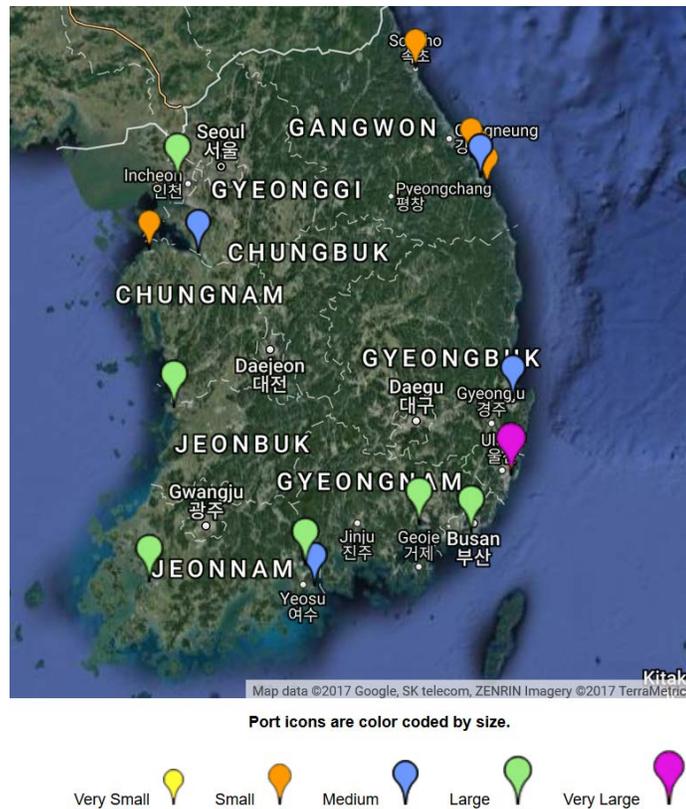


Figure 8: Major Ports in the RoK⁴⁷

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION: US GROUND FORCES AS THE MISSING PIECE:

The slow professionalization of the RoKA prevents them from assuming the needed ground offensive roles. An underestimation of DPRK submarine capability and neglect of the threat of nuclear escalation makes moving ground forces from the US more difficult than planners have anticipated. The time needed to move these reinforcements is based largely on

⁴⁶ Victor Cha, “Countering the North Korean Threat: New Steps in U.S. policy: Statement before the House Foreign Services Committee,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 07 February, 2017, accessed 05 March 2017. www.CSIS.org, 3.

⁴⁷ World Port Source, “South Korean Ports.”

the assumption that the RoK military can hold back DPRK attacks with US joint support. While the ability of the RoK military to repel an invasion is accurate, the need for ground forces to launch offensive actions to protect Seoul has not been fully accounted for in US operational considerations.

Some believe the threat of conventional DPRK attack on the Korean peninsula is unthinkable due to the superiority of the RoK military in the defense. However, the DPRK could inflict serious damage without ever crossing the border and may do so in response to a variety of US actions. Paul Davis noted that “often, however, the weak attack the strong even though the weak knows itself to be weak.”⁴⁸ The US needs to be prepared to fight in Korea, both to defend US interests and to defend the against DPRK retaliation for offensive US operations.

Any scenario which results in conflict on the Korean peninsula must consider the operational factors of time, space, and force. An analysis of these factors shows that the US will require offensive ground power in any future conflict on the Korean peninsula. The US possess robust artillery, air force, and naval capabilities in the region, but the lack of ground forces to synchronize and exploit these joint capabilities represents a serious risk. Failure to fill this capability gap may result in a repeat of Task Force Smith, this time with air force, artillery, and naval assets needlessly expended without a capable ground force. To prevent this the US should return three army BCTs to Korea to ensure that the joint force has a

⁴⁸ Peter Davis, Peter Wilson, Jeongeun Kim, and Junho Park. “Deterrence and Stability for the Korean Peninsula,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* Vol. 28, No. 1, March 2016, 13, accessed 27 March 2017, <http://www.kida.re.kr/cmm/viewBoardImageFile.do?idx=20209>.

capable division size ground force to launch complex offensive operations and to fully synchronize and utilize the US joint capability.

FINAL REMARKS: GEOPOLITICAL AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

This analysis has sought to avoid the geopolitical and strategic to focus on operational concerns; those factors of space, time, and force in the event of conflict in Korea. Despite this, these higher-level implications are inextricably linked to the operational level of war. Some analysts, such as Doug Bandow suggest that “Korea has lost its geopolitical significance” and that “the south needs to bear both the costs and benefits” of its relations with DPRK.⁴⁹ This may have had some substance in 2002 however, the situation in Korea has fundamentally changed. What was viewed as a regional issue has increasingly become a potentially existential US issue as DPRK capabilities have advanced. Victor Cha pointed out in 2016 that “between 1994 and 2008, DPRK conducted 17 missile tests and 1 nuclear test. However, in the past eight years those numbers have increased to 62 missile tests and 4 nuclear tests, including 20 missile and 2 nuclear in the past year alone.”⁵⁰ This forces the US to regard the DPRK as more than a regional threat.

The cost of forward basing US ground forces in Korea is high however, the cost of the inability to respond to DPRK threats may be greater. The inability of the RoKA to fill the offensive ground force role that will be required in a conflict creates a critical need for the US to reposition sufficient ground forces to the RoK to provide operational, and by extension strategic, options to the US in facing the DPRK threat.

⁴⁹ Doug Bandow, “It’s Time for America to Cut South Korea Loose: The First Step to Solving the North Korean Problem is Removing U.S. troops from the Middle of it,” *Foreign Policy*, 13 April, 2017, accessed 30 April 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/13/its-time-for-america-to-cut-south-korea-loose-north-trump-nuclear-weapons/>

⁵⁰ Cha, 3.

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