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No. 052/2013 dated 2 April 2013

South Korea's Security Predicaments: Preparing for 'Hybrid Conflict'

By Michael Raska

Synopsis

South Korea's defence planners have traditionally placed importance on three key constraints in defending South Korea: geographic, quantitative, and political. In the increasingly "hybrid conflict" spectrum on the Korean Peninsula, Seoul now has to prepare for conventional all-out war scenarios as well as low-intensity and asymmetric warfare.

Commentary

NORTH KOREA's announcement on 30 March 2013 that it had entered a "state of war" with South Korea has once more raised the question of Seoul's state of readiness for asymmetric forms of warfare which Pyongyang may employ to offset the South's qualitative military superiority. Indeed, South Korea's security predicaments have become progressively more complex.

In addition to conventional threats, South Korea is facing a hybrid conflict spectrum — the amalgamation of asymmetric, low-intensity, and non-linear security challenges. These include two extreme threats — on one end is North Korea's continuously advancing ballistic missile programme coupled with its WMD (nuclear, chemical, and biological) capabilities. On the other end of the threat spectrum is North Korea's spectre of a failed state.

From conventional to 'hybrid' conflict spectrum

South Korea's national security strategy is based on three mutually reinforcing pillars of defensive deterrence, alliance with the United States, and forward active defence. The strategy has remained relatively constant for more than six decades. Its key premise is that South Korea lacks strategic depth, which precludes any type of "elastic defence" that trades space for time. This also limits South Korea's early-warning options. In geographical terms, the distance between the DMZ and Seoul is only approximately 40 kilometres, making the densely populated capital city highly vulnerable to a North Korean ground or artillery attack.

Moreover, the highly mountainous terrain and complex topography around Seoul poses constraints to manoeuvrability, targeting, communications, logistics, and fires. In this setting, the extremely small, but highly populated combat radius around Seoul, amplifies the risks of high collateral damage and major socio-economic disruptions in any type of crises or conflict scenarios.

At the same time, North Korea's conventional forces have relatively significant numerical superiority over South

Korea's army in terms of manpower, armour and artillery equipment. Notwithstanding its prolonged economic hardships, supply shortages, lack of new equipment, and declining readiness, North Korea has been able to sustain and even expand its conventional forces to the fourth largest in the world - with over 1.1 million KPA (Korean People's Army) personnel serving in active service (compared to South's 506,000).

Notwithstanding the age and obsolescence of many North Korean combat systems coupled with the fact that their crews cannot match US-ROK capabilities, their potency and risks to inflict significant damage against South Korea should not be underestimated. In this context, North Korea's military strategy and operational doctrine has traditionally emphasised the primacy of the offence. In theory, North Korea's "Five-to-Seven" strategic plans – dating back to the 1980s – envision reaching Seoul in five days and the rest of South Korea in seven days.

The combined employment of KPA forces, called mixed tactics, would follow three phases: (1) breaching the defences along the DMZ, confusing the US-ROK command centres, disrupting and destroying the first echelons of the US-ROK forces; (2) isolating Seoul, securing terrain, and consolidating gains; and (3) pursuing and destroying the remaining forces throughout the depths of the battlefield, occupying the remainder of the peninsula, and defending North Korea – ideally prior to the ROK mobilisation and the arrival of US reinforcements.

US-ROK strategic adaptation

The combined effect of both asymmetric and geographic constraints has essentially shaped the third and perhaps most important category of conditioning factors that defined South Korea's traditional geostrategic predicaments, which are political. In particular, these are the difficulties in ascertaining North Korea's intentions, which has amplified security uncertainties and risks of potential miscalculation; the excessive costs of any pre-emptive actions or military initiative by South Korea or the US in striking at North Korean force concentrations before they could counterattack; the prohibitively high socio-economic costs of building up a preclusive type of defence or a force strong enough to defeat North Korea's invasion at the onset, before serious damage could be inflicted on the Seoul area.

Over the past decade, the conventional security template on the Korean Peninsula has increasingly shifted its emphasis toward asymmetric and low-intensity threats. North Korea now relies on strategies of asymmetric negotiation aimed to counter US-ROK qualitative military superiority.

In the increasingly "hybrid conflict" spectrum, US-ROK forces now have to prepare for conventional all-out war scenarios - responding to North Korea's surprise attack as quickly as possible; defending the capital and rear areas; and defending territorial sea and air simultaneously. In addition, they have to provide effective defence against possible long-range artillery, ballistic missile attacks, rear-area infiltrations, cyber attacks, and other forms of low-intensity and asymmetric forms of warfare.

Joint proactive deterrence

The widening operational requirements have propelled the rationale for comprehensive force modernisation of South Korea's forces in areas of air-defence, strategic and tactical surveillance, early warning, command, control, communications, computer and information (C4I), battle management, target acquisition, stand-off precision-strike, and network-centric warfare.

Moreover, US-ROK forces have focused on better 'synchronisation' to maximise the operational effectiveness of the US-ROK alliance and prepare for a wider range of contingencies. From the "Strategic Alliance 2015" base plan, signed in 2010, to the latest 2013 Combined Counter-Provocation Plan, the key emphasis in US-ROK defence strategy is on "joint proactive deterrence" aimed at deterring future North Korean provocations.

In the past, South Korea has refrained from more active and direct responses to North Korea's military provocations. Changes in the US-ROK strategic thought, integrated force posture, training, and operational conduct, however, indicate a greater resolve and readiness for a retaliatory action. With the changing strategic realities and continuing tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the question is whether these concepts may be soon tested.

Michael Raska is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.