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North Korean Military Capabilities and Intentions Toward South Korea

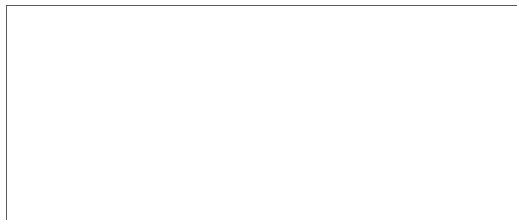


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NORTH KOREAN MILITARY CAPABILITIES AND
INTENTIONS TOWARD SOUTH KOREA

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THE UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD CONCURS, EXCEPT AS NOTED IN THE TEXT, AS FOLLOWS:

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of the estimate:

The Central Intelligence Agency, the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, Defense, and Treasury, and the National Security Agency.

Concurring:

The Deputy Director of Central Intelligence representing the Central Intelligence Agency

The Director of Intelligence and Research representing the Department of State

The Director, Defense Intelligence Agency

The Director, National Security Agency

The Deputy Assistant Administrator for National Security, Energy Research and Development Administration

Abstaining:

The Special Assistant to the Secretary for National Security, Department of the Treasury

The Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation

Also Participating:

The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force

NORTH KOREAN MILITARY CAPABILITIES AND INTENTIONS TOWARD SOUTH KOREA

SCOPE NOTE

This Estimate covers the period through the end of 1975.

KEY JUDGMENTS

The modernization and expansion of North Korea's armed forces in recent years have bolstered its defenses and given Pyongyang an improved and more flexible offensive capability. The North is developing this capability in order to achieve unification through military action should propitious circumstances arise. This intent has been particularly evident in the construction of tunnels in the DMZ, the development of an amphibious capability, and, more recently, in the forward positioning of armor concentrations.

The factors that have restrained Pyongyang from launching major hostilities continue to do so. These are the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, the presence of US troops, the lack of an across the board superiority over ROK forces, especially if they are supported by US tactical air and naval elements, and the need for support from either Moscow or Peking in a sustained, large-scale conflict.

Recent events in Indochina have probably strengthened Kim Il-song's determination to press for removal of US forces. They may also have caused him to question the US commitment to South Korea, thereby increasing the attractiveness of limited acts of force to probe American resolve. But, at least until after the General Assembly vote on the Korean issue, political considerations seem likely to be more important to him than any military move that he believes would portray North Korea as responsible for disturbing the peace of the peninsula.¹

With heightened tension on the peninsula, there is an increased prospect that small incidents, deliberate or otherwise, might escalate into conflict between naval vessels or even aircraft. This is especially likely in the waters around the Western Islands.

¹ The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, the Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy, and the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force believe that these political considerations will not preclude limited but deliberate acts of force designed to probe US and ROK resolve and that such acts are likely within the period of this Estimate.

DISCUSSION

1. The major program adopted in 1970 to strengthen and modernize North Korea's armed forces has bolstered Pyongyang's defenses and given it an improved and more flexible offensive capability.² The North is developing this capability in order to achieve unification through military aggression should propitious circumstances arise. This intent has been particularly evident in the construction of tunnels in the DMZ, the development of an amphibious capability, and, more recently, in the forward positioning of armor concentrations.

2. Pyongyang has also succeeded in reducing its dependence on outside support. How long North Korea would be able to carry on major offensive operations without external logistic support would depend on the nature of the ROK/US response; against ROK forces alone it could be as long as 90 days.

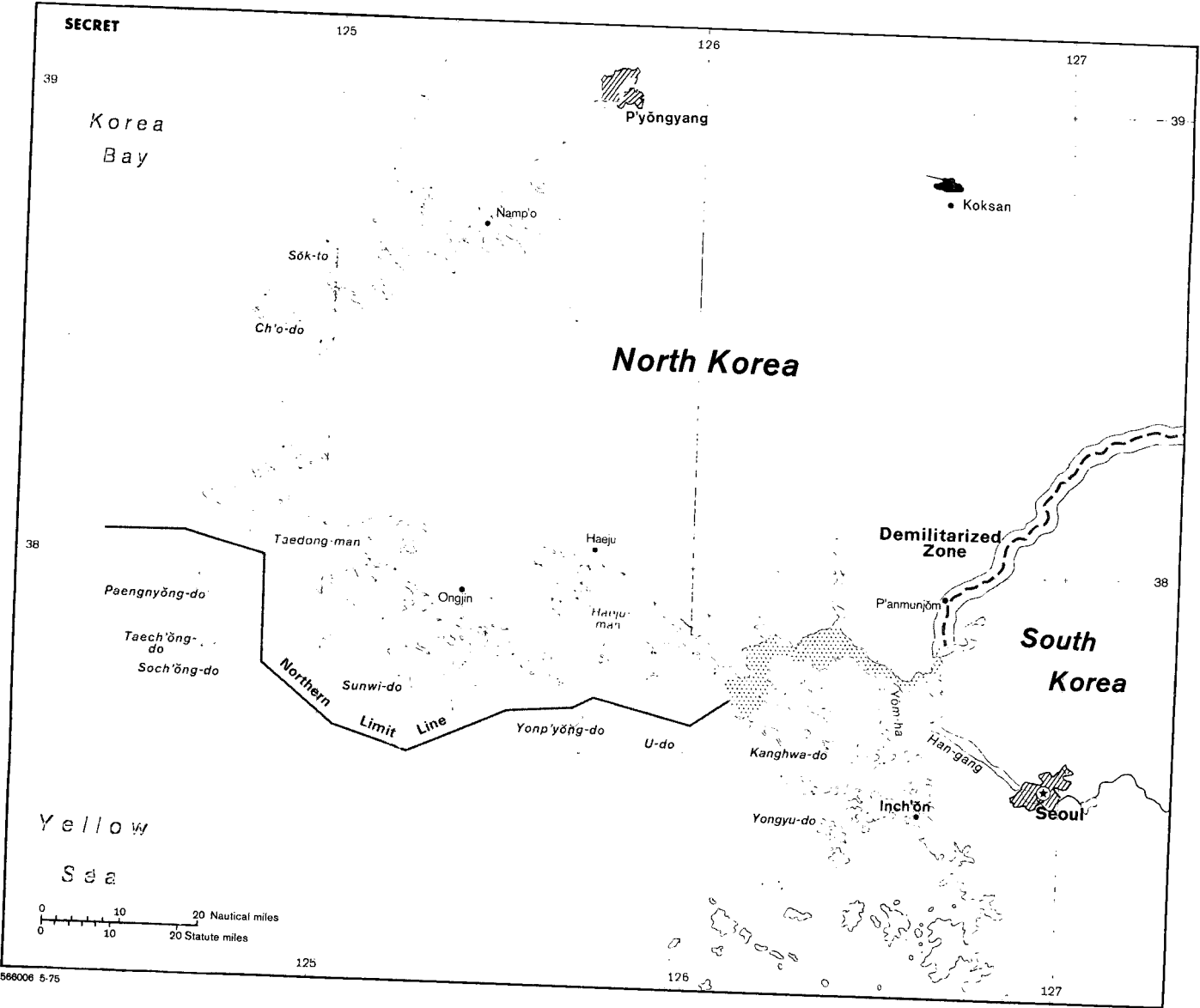
3. The North Korean program has been analogous in some respects to modernizing efforts during the same period in the South. North Korea has emphasized naval construction, but the ground and

air forces have also received new equipment. South Korea's military program is primarily designed to strengthen ground and air defense capabilities. Improvements have tended to offset each other, and neither side has overall military superiority.

North Korean Military Capabilities

4. Deployments observed since 1973, but increasingly evident in 1974 and 1975, have significantly enhanced North Korea's offensive capability. An armored division has been formed in a strategically located position about 40 nm above the DMZ. Additional hardened artillery positions as well as multiple rocket launcher sites have been constructed in forward areas along the DMZ. Two new jet capable airfields nearing operational status will permit air patrols of longer duration near the DMZ and the UN controlled offshore islands.

5. During the past few years, North Korea has emphasized national stockpiling programs, particularly of POL, the construction of underground shelters for air and naval craft, and the development of a diversified industrial base that can satisfy the full range of needs for ground armament and munitions. Present output includes naval vessels, tracked amphibious carriers, trucks, artillery, infantry weapons, multiple rocket launchers, and ammunition of all calibers. North Korea is also be-



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lieved to be producing limited numbers of medium tanks.³ However, it continues to rely on the PRC and the USSR for sophisticated weapon systems as well as electronic and fire control equipment. It is completely dependent on Moscow and Peking for aircraft and on Moscow for air-to-air missiles.

6. The North Korean capability for offensive naval action is based on its 8 submarines, 18 guided missile patrol boats, 2 destroyer escorts, and a sizable torpedo boat force. Since 1971, new construction has been focused on the development of an amphibious landing and fire support capability. Three classes of indigenous-built boats, all capable of supporting amphibious assault operations, have been introduced into the naval inventory. These are the Chaho-class fast fire support boats, the Chongjin-class motor gunboats, and the Nampo-class fast personnel landing craft. The navy has participated in large-scale joint service exercises involving amphibious landings and is continuing to refine its amphibious capability.

7. The number of vessels in the fleet, which now includes 370 combatants, has grown about 25 percent annually since 1972. The most ambitious domestic production program to date—the construction of R-class submarines—could have begun as early as 1972 [redacted]

[redacted] As this construction progresses, R-class submarines will be based on both coasts and North Korean anti-shiping capabilities will be improved. Other new classes [redacted] since early 1974 include a small guided missile boat patterned after the Soviet Komar, a small submarine chaser, and a fire support motor gunboat which will provide an expanded capability for shore bombardment in support of an amphibious landing.

8. The North Korean navy continues to display a high state of both materiel and operational readi-

³ The Defense Intelligence Agency believes that while North Korea has the technological capability to produce most if not all medium tank components, reports of actual production have not yet been confirmed. The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army shares this view.

ness. Since 1973, patrols of the southeast coast have routinely reached some 40 to 50 nm offshore and have extended at times to 100 nm. Since late 1973, the North Koreans have extended their patrols below the Northern Limit Line and around the west coast islands that are under the jurisdiction of the UN Command (UNC). Coordination in training operations between naval units and aircraft has also been stressed. Such joint training contributes to effective coastal defense and also enhances offensive capabilities against the South.

9. The North Korean army has an estimated personnel strength of 408,000;⁴ within 72 hours an additional 172,000 men could be mobilized for action from paramilitary training units. Since about 1970 the army has given particular attention to upgrading its armor forces and its mechanized infantry capabilities. Increased inventories of armor have led to the formation of additional tank regiments and tanks have been introduced into infantry division armor battalions to replace or augment less effective assault guns. Some of the new armor may be located in the new division located north of the DMZ.

10. Although North Korea has been unsuccessful in attempts to build a guerrilla network in the South, it has been strengthening its unconventional warfare forces in the past two years. These currently number about 40,000, many of them trained for airborne and amphibious assaults. The bulk of these forces are organized into 11 light infantry brigades. Although trained for deep penetration, these forces could also be employed to support conventional operations. The completion of a number of secondary airfields in the southern part of North Korea will enhance Pyongyang's capacity for airborne unconventional operations in the South.

11. Since 1971 air force tactical capabilities have been enhanced by the acquisition of MIG-21/Fishbed J, SU-7/Fitter and MIG-19/Farmer aircraft. It has also acquired additional AN-2/Colt light transports and, most recently, 16 IL-28s from China [redacted]

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in December 1974. Air Force combat units now have 86 IL-28 jet light bombers and about 450 jet fighters, of which about 120 are all-weather capable. The location of important South Korean targets only a few minutes flying time from North Korea enhances Pyongyang's ability to launch a surprise attack.

12. Since 1973 overall air force flight activity has increased. Ground attack training has been emphasized and ground controlled intercept capability improved. Patrols off both coasts have been extended and in 1975 aircraft operated beyond the Northern Limit Line for the first time.

13. The two tunnels discovered under the DMZ in November 1974 and March 1975 are reportedly part of a large-scale construction program that began as early as 1971. [redacted]

[redacted] The tunnel system was probably intended to be used to place troops behind the ROK's forward defenses during the initial phase of hostilities in order to neutralize key defensive positions along the critical avenues of approach to the South. The system could also have been used to facilitate commando and guerrilla movements into the South and to provide yet another avenue for infiltrating subversive agents and aiding dissident elements in the South. The insertion of a large force through such tunnels in support of a frontal attack across the DMZ could give the North significant offensive advantage.⁵ The advantage, however, has obviously diminished with the tunnel discoveries.

Prospects

14. Pyongyang's capacity to carry out a variety of military options has been enhanced by the modernization and expansion of the North Korean armed forces. In our judgment, however, the factors that have restrained Pyongyang from launching major hostilities continue to do so. These are the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, the presence of US troops, the lack of an across-the-board su-

⁵ Through the two tunnels thus far discovered, the North Koreans could have put one or two regiments in an hour or so.

riority over ROK forces, especially if they are supported by US tactical air and naval elements, and the need for support from either Moscow or Peking in a sustained large-scale conflict. The Chinese treatment of Kim Il-song's visit indicates that Peking has not abandoned its preference for continued stability on the peninsula.

15. Recent events in Indochina have probably strengthened Kim's determination to press for removal of US forces from Korea. He is probably counting on victories at the Non-Aligned Conference in Lima this summer and at the UN this fall to increase the international pressure on the US to end its presence. His principal mission in Peking last month may have been to induce the Chinese to give more unequivocal support to his position on the troop issue. Hanoi's victory may also have caused Kim to question the US commitment to South Korean defense, increasing the attractiveness of limited acts of force intended to probe US determination, and to point up for the American audience the dangers of this continuing commitment. But, at least until after the General Assembly vote, political considerations seem likely to be more important to Kim than any military move that runs the risk of portraying North Korea as responsible for disturbing the peace on the peninsula.⁶

16. Even without deliberate provocations, with heightened tension on the peninsula small incidents may produce sharper exchanges than either side has been willing to permit in the past three or four years. Seoul is already deeply concerned lest it fail to respond vigorously to any North Korean probe. And the North Koreans for their part will be more interested than previously in testing the limits of ROK (and US) forbearance.

⁶ The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, the Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy, and the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force believes that these political considerations will not preclude limited but deliberate acts of force designed to probe US and ROK resolve and that such acts are likely within the period of this Estimate. These North Korean probes could take the form of hit-and-run attacks in the DMZ, deliberate seizure or sinking of ROK fishing or small naval craft, or even the attempted seizure of one of the less heavily defended Western Islands.

17. The prospect for incidents is particularly great in the waters surrounding the five UNC-controlled Western Islands. Not only does North Korea claim the waters around these islands, but also the fishing fleets of both Koreas operate there. Incidents involving fishing boats have been frequent in the past. There is now greater danger that these could produce clashes between naval vessels and even aircraft.

18. If the General Assembly votes for termination of the UN Command, Pyongyang could well claim the islands. From the North Korean point of view, this would be a low risk way of challenging the ROK, testing the limits of the US commitment, and possibly placing new strains on ROK-US relations. Beyond this, with success in the General Assembly behind it, one factor that now inhibits North Korea from aggressive probing action against the South will have been removed.

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