

**THE TRUE  
MILITARY POWER  
OF NORTH  
KOREA**

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# **The True Military Power of North Korea**

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# **North Korea's Military Threat**

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# Summary

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Since the inception of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948, the Pyongyang regime has had two national strategic objectives: (1) the perpetuation of the regime; and (2) reunification of the Korean Peninsula under North Korea's control. Militarism has remained an essential aspect of the DPRK throughout its existence, and the armed forces constitute a central element of the regime. The Korean People's Army (KPA), the name given to all services of North Korea's military, is the core element for the realization of North Korea's national strategy. This strategy calls for giving priority to military issues over everything else and the DPRK constitutes the most militarized state on earth measured by a variety of indicators.

The KPA emerged from guerrilla origins in the 1920s and then evolved into a hybrid force with elements of Soviet and Chinese doctrines and organization. It has adjusted as a result of learning from conflicts waged elsewhere in the world. This tradition embraces the concept of self-reliance and self-sufficiency consistent with the DPRK ideology of *Juche*.

North Korean military doctrine has shifted dramatically away from the doctrine of regular warfare to a doctrine that embraced People's War. Kim Il Sung espoused "Four Military Lines": (1) arm the entire population; (2) fortify the entire country; (3) train the entire army as a "cadre army"; and (4) modernize weaponry, doctrine, and tactics under the principle of *Juche* in national defense. Military doctrine was refined further to incorporate the concepts of "combined operations" and "two-front war." The combined operations doctrine called for the integration of guerrilla warfare operations (small unit) with conventional ground force

operations (large unit). This integrated doctrine probably has been modified to include Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The two-front war doctrine calls for close coordination of conventional frontline operations with guerrilla and special operations deep within South Korea and possibly elsewhere. The First Front traditionally has been the massive conventional KPA force along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), while the focus for the Second Front has been the rear area of South Korea.

To support these objectives and doctrine, since the end of the Korean War the KPA has developed into a massive armed force, 1.2 million strong, with substantial military capabilities — both conventional and unconventional. The KPA is the world's fourth largest military in terms of manpower, with the world's largest Special Operation Forces (SOF) and submarine fleet. Some 40 percent of the populace serve in some military, paramilitary, or defense-related industry and can be mobilized easily for war.

In addition to sizeable conventional forces, North Korea has significant WMD and ballistic missile programs. Nuclear weapons almost certainly were on Kim Il Sung's mind from 1945 onward. He was impressed by the power of the bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, both in terms of their destructive capacity and their value as a political weapon. The DPRK's quest for a nuclear program began in the 1950s. Pyongyang has multiple reasons for keeping the program and no obvious good or compelling reasons to give it up.

North Korea possesses at least enough plutonium to make a handful of nuclear bombs. Still, it is entirely possible that Pyongyang does not have a weapon.

The evidence from the October 9, 2006, underground explosion remains inconclusive, and the authors estimate that the DPRK has anywhere from zero to 13 nuclear weapons. North Korea has good reasons to play a game of "nuclear ambiguity." Nevertheless, prudence demands that

the United States and its allies proceed on the assumption that the DPRK has a nuclear weapon.

Whether or not Pyongyang has an explicit doctrine, it almost certainly has some guiding principles for when and how to employ whatever nuclear devices it possesses. While one cannot rule out a nuclear first strike by Pyongyang, given the extremely small amount of nuclear weapon making material available and almost certain massive retaliation North Korea could expect from the United States, it appears more likely that North Korea's nuclear doctrine is focused on deterring an attack by the United States and as a way to gain leverage at the negotiating table. It is far from certain whether Pyongyang yet has mastered the ability to build a nuclear warhead from its plutonium stockpiles. Moreover, its preferred delivery system cannot be assumed. Its first choice might be ballistic missiles, but this option may be discounted if a warhead cannot be built. Furthermore, there may be grave doubts about the accuracy of the missiles. This may lead to the consideration of other options such as air or maritime delivery.

The DPRK perceives chemical agents more as an operational force multiplier, rather than as a strategic asset. Chemical weapons likely will be used at the outset of any conflict against frontline forces via artillery, against rear area targets on the peninsula via long-range artillery, short-range ballistic missiles, and via unconventional means with the assistance of SOF. Moreover, it is possible chemical weapons could be used against U.S. military assets in East Asia delivered via medium-range ballistic or unconventional means. In short, it must be assumed that if the KPA launches an attack, chemical weapons will be employed.

Pyongyang's biological warfare program is far less developed than its nuclear, chemical, or ballistic missile counterparts. This is true in terms of evolution, capabilities, readiness, and doctrine. Nonetheless, it must be assumed



that North Korea has a significant biological weapons capability, along with the will and means to employ them.

North Korea has had a ballistic missile program for more than 4 decades. The program, created by Kim Il Sung, has been a top national priority from the start. Utilizing technological assistance from a handful of countries, foreign trained technicians and scientists, and reverse engineering, Pyongyang has succeeded in establishing a credible indigenous ballistic missile manufacturing base. The first phase produced short-range missiles for export and domestic deployment; the second phase produced medium-range missiles for the same. In the third — current — phase, North Korea has turned to research and development, and testing — but not yet the production, deployment, or export — of long-range missiles.

Currently, North Korea is thought to possess between 600 and 800 short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. This number is only likely to increase with steady output by the military industrial complex. And if testing continues, the DPRK eventually will produce and deploy long-range missiles capable of reaching Alaska, Hawaii, and some day, the continental United States.

The short- and medium-range missiles originally were produced for defense and deterrence against the United States and South Korea, but the missiles could, of course, be used offensively. Pyongyang recognized that there was a market for missiles and it could profit from exports of ballistic missiles and related technology. North Korea's missile program also became important as a status symbol to bolster the prestige of the regime, both domestically and internationally. By the late 1990s, Pyongyang realized the value of the program for diplomatic leverage.

The missiles could be fitted with WMD warheads. The critical question is whether Pyongyang has the capability to place nuclear (or chemical or biological) warheads on any of its ballistic missiles. It is not clear whether North Korea has

developed the ability to mate a nuclear weapon with a ballistic missile. Nevertheless, one must proceed under the assumption that, at present, Pyongyang can deliver a chemical warhead and, in the not too distant future, will be able to deliver a nuclear warhead on the tip of a short- or medium-range missile.

As impressive as the statistics on North Korean conventional and unconventional forces are, their actual capabilities are less than the raw data suggest, given the obsolescence of most KPA equipment, shortage of spare parts and fuel, and poor maintenance. Moreover, South Korea's impressive strides in the acquisition of modern weapons and sophisticated technology, along with its burgeoning economy, further decreases North Korea's chances of executing successful offensive operations on the peninsula. However, if given the order to attack, the KPA will do so.

Although it is difficult to know North Korea's precise intentions or aspirations, its forces are deployed along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) in such a manner that they could support an invasion of South Korea. Currently, North Korea deploys approximately 70 percent of its military units, and up to 80 percent of its estimated aggregate firepower, within 100km of the DMZ. North Korea theoretically could invade the South without recourse to further deployments and with minimal warning time. But North Korea's armed forces also are positioned in order to deter an attack, being deployed to deliver a preemptive strike against the South if Pyongyang believes that an attack is imminent or to retaliate with overwhelming force if the North is attacked.

While the KPA's capacity to sustain offensive operations beyond days and weeks is questionable, North Korea retains the ability to inflict heavy casualties and collateral damage, largely through the use of massed long-range artillery. In effect, Pyongyang's most credible conventional threat is to

devastate Seoul (and a good portion of South Korea) rather than to seize and hold it.

If North Korea intends to attack when conditions are deemed auspicious, the KPA must rely on certain factors to tip the odds in its favor (e.g., element of surprise, the United States being deployed in a major conflict elsewhere in the world). Just as important — if not more important — than the performance of conventional KPA forces along the DMZ would be the execution of numerous Second Front operations by SOF forces in rear areas.

North Korea continues to develop its nuclear and missile programs. Moreover, questions remain as to North Korea's military intentions. Does Pyongyang intend to use its WMD and ballistic missiles to replace the threat posed by its eroding conventional forces? Or is its intention to use conventional and unconventional forces in what it might view as a winning combination? The answer to these questions are likely to be evident only in time as analysts discern trends in North Korea's conventional and unconventional forces.

North Korea's conventional threat also is sufficient to make an allied preemptive invasion to overthrow the North Korean regime a highly unattractive option. In theory, U.S. forces could carry out preemptive attacks to destroy known North Korean nuclear facilities and missile emplacements, but such attacks could provoke North Korean retaliation and trigger a general conflict. Moreover, Washington and Seoul cannot overthrow the North Korean regime by force or destroy its strategic military assets without risking devastating losses in the process. Meanwhile, North Korea cannot invade the South without inviting a fatal counterattack from the United States and South Korea. Thus, the balance of forces that emerged from the Korean War, and which helped maintain the armistice for more than 50 years, remains in place.

# Introduction

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### Scope and Limitations.

North Korea, or as it prefers to be known officially, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), possesses a massive armed force with substantial military capabilities — both conventional and unconventional. Most experts agree that the Korean People's Army (KPA) is the world's fourth largest military in terms of manpower with the world's largest Special Forces (SOF) component, behind China, the United States, and India (see Figure 1).

Ranks	Nation	Active Troops
1	People's Republic of China	2,255,000
2	United States	1,474,000
3	India	1,325,000
4	North Korea	1,106,000

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance 2005-06*, London: Oxford University Press, 2005.

### Figure 1. World Military Comparisons.

North Korea's military first gained world attention in June 1950 when it launched a surprise attack that started the Korean War (See "Korean War" Box).

#### June 1950: North Korea attacks!

The North Korean rapid and overwhelming success startled the United States and its allies. By mid-1950 North Korean forces numbered between 150,000 and 200,000 troops, organized into 10 infantry divisions, one tank division, and one air force division, with 210

fighter planes and 280 tanks. Soviet equipment, including automatic weapons of various types, T-34 tanks, and Yak fighter planes, had also been pouring into North Korea in early 1950. These forces were to fight the ill-equipped South Korean army of less than 100,000 men — an army lacking in tanks, heavy artillery, and combat airplanes, plus a coast guard of 4,000 men and a police force of 45,000 men.

In a matter of days, the KPA had captured South Korea's capital of Seoul. Using seven divisions — in its first wave and five more in its second wave, the KPA moved south pushing the Republic of Korea (ROK) forces before it. Western military experts were stunned by the KPA's battlefield successes.

The U.S. intelligence community was not focused on North Korea in 1950 and knew very little about North Korea or its military. In fact, prior to June 25, the United States had paid very little attention to North Korea at all. Today, in contrast, North Korea is very much a focus of a significant intelligence targeting effort.

Experts also concur that North Korea possesses an extensive ballistic missile arsenal and significant Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) capabilities. However, there is considerable disagreement over the precise number of regular and SOF forces, as well as capabilities and readiness. Moreover, analysts debate about the KPA's doctrine and disposition, especially in regard to the offensive or defensive nature of the KPA.

Over the past 2 decades, due largely to economic decline and lack of financial resources, as well as force improvements and urban build-up in South Korea and the continued presence of U.S. forces in South Korea, North Korea's conventional forces have become weaker, relative

to those of South Korea and the United States. As a result, any North Korean option to invade South Korea has become less credible.

While causing tremendous damage, a North Korean attack on South Korea would most likely be defeated by a U.S.–South Korean counterattack. Nonetheless, the credibility of North Korea’s conventional military forces remains largely intact in terms of their potential to defend the state and to inflict substantial damage on South Korea — especially Seoul — which remains hostage to North Korea’s artillery massed along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

By the same token, options for U.S. and allied forces to launch strikes against selected North Korean military targets are fraught with steep risks. The United States probably could destroy known nuclear and missile facilities in a preemptive strike, but not hidden facilities and weapons that would survive such a preemptive attack. In any event, Pyongyang would regard an attack on its strategic assets as a dire threat to its vital interests (i.e., regime survival) and could retaliate in ways that might escalate quickly to a wider conflict. The United States and South Korea would more than likely prevail in a full-scale war, but the human and material costs would be very high — even if unconventional weapons were not employed. In essence, the military standoff that marked the end of the Korean War prevails 50 years later.

Regarding WMD, while there is general consensus that North Korea possesses a significant stockpile of chemical agents, there is serious debate about the status of Pyongyang’s biological and nuclear programs. Furthermore, there is a range of expert views of North Korea’s ballistic missile programs.

What are North Korea’s military capabilities and intentions? What is the size of the KPA and its SOF component? Is the KPA’s doctrine offensive and how would

we know if it was or not? What is the status of North Korea's WMD programs? What kind of capabilities and doctrines does North Korea possess in terms of nuclear, chemical, and biological programs? What can be said about North Korea's ballistic missile capabilities? How have North Korea's chronic economic difficulties affected these capabilities and/or altered Pyongyang's military strategies or doctrines? Is the KPA's military readiness atrophying because of the WMD programs, whether from lack of economic resources or doctrinal decisions? What main trends are evident in the KPA over the course of its existence?

This monograph will examine the armed forces of the DPRK, both conventional and unconventional. The official North Korean name of all branches of North Korea's armed forces is the *Chosen Inking* or KPA. This monograph will address the following topics: the political context of the military in the DPRK; the origins and evolution of the armed forces; and the KPA's command and control structure and its WMD and conventional components, including doctrines. Pyongyang's capabilities and intentions also will be assessed.

At the outset, it is important to delineate the scope and limitations of this monograph. Perhaps it is best to begin by stating what this is not. The monograph is not an order of battle, tactical primer, or complete military history of North Korea or detailed overview of the KPA. These can be found elsewhere. Nor is this a complete history of Pyongyang's WMD or missile programs — these too have been covered elsewhere.

### **Context and structure: a party-Military-state.**

One of the most important and perhaps least understood topics in this monograph is the politics of the military. Unlike concrete subjects such as the types and capabilities of weapon systems and number of personnel in uniform, it is

an amorphous topic that is difficult if not impossible to quantify or gauge with any statistical precision.

*Institutions: The Party-Military-State (PMS).* The term often used to label a communist regime is “Partystate” since the communist party apparatus of a country tends to be intertwined with and critical to functioning of the governmental apparatus. The ruling communist party in North Korea is called the Korea Workers’ Party (KWP). In fact, “party-state” is a misnomer because it excludes mention of a third key bureaucratic actor: the armed forces. A more appropriate hyphenation therefore is “party-military-state (PMS).” The DPRK also has been labeled a “garrison state.” In such a state, the “consuming focus” is girding for war and “all efforts are directed toward building and supplying a powerful and well-equipped military.” And the highest status and prestige belongs to the soldier.

Indeed, the KPA is the fourth largest military in the world in terms of men and women in uniform, with possibly over 1.2 million personnel. But this statistic does not reflect adequately the size of the armed forces relative to the size of North Korea. If measured in terms of soldiers per thousand population, the comparative size of the KPA readily becomes more apparent. At 44.3 per thousand population, North Korea is by far the largest military in the communist bloc past or present, not to mention in the larger contemporary world.

In addition, North Korea has almost 7 1/2 million paramilitary reserves. This means that some 40 percent of the populace serve in some military or paramilitary formation. In short, the DPRK is undoubtedly the “most militarized state on earth.”

The military in a PMS is a highly-privileged institution usually possessing prestige and resources on a par with the Party. Indeed, it is sometimes described as “state within a state” to the extent that it is often “buffered” or protected from domestic or foreign shocks. The KPA’s situation in



North Korea appears to be an extreme instance of a military's power and influence. The exalted and central position held by the armed forces in the DPRK appears unparalleled in the annals of an established communist regime. While the power of the military invariably is high during a communist movement's struggle for power and in the early years of a communist regime, this usually lessens over time. In North Korea, the power and influence of the KPA has only increased in recent years and may have replaced the KWP as the dominant political force in the DPRK. This is the result of a concerted effort by North Korean dictator, Kim Jong Il, to rely heavily on the armed forces at the expense of the KWP. Since 1998, the so-called "Military-First" Policy has resulted in the KPA becoming "the most significant political actor" in the DPRK with top priority for resources.

*Dictators and Marshals: Father and Son.* In party-military-states, the dictator seeks to maintain close — often hands-on — control of the armed forces. This was true in countries such as the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and remains true in China and Cuba. It also is true in North Korea. Like Stalin, Mao, and Castro, Kim Il Sung undertook purges of military leaders and promotions of those faithful to him, all to ensure the loyalty of generals to him personally. In each case, the supreme political leader took the ceremonial and official position as the commander in chief of the armed forces. But Kim Il Sung took it a step further than Stalin, Mao, and Castro — he had himself declared a Marshal (similar to a five-star general or General of the Army status), and it was in this capacity as commander of the KPA that he signed the Korean Armistice on July 27, 1953, along with Peng Dehuai, commander of the Chinese People's Volunteers, and Mark W. Clark, commander of the UN Command. Moreover, Kim Il Sung went even further than his Soviet and Chinese contemporaries by controlling the assignment and promotion of every senior

military officer. Kim's son, Kim Jong Il, had the title of Marshal conferred upon him when he was appointed deputy chairman of the National Defense Commission (NDC) in 1992. The NDC is the highest war control and military command organization in North Korea.

*Party-Army Relations: Structure vs. Mindset.* In 2007, the organizational model of North Korea's armed forces is a hybrid of Soviet and Chinese models and modified to peninsular objectives and refined with lessons learned from recent global conflicts. But more important are the distinctly Korean Partisan characteristics that emerged from the guerrilla origins of the armed band led by Kim Il Sung in Manchuria in the 1930s and 1940s (see "Origins and Evolution" in the Conventional Forces section). Indeed, psychologically, the KPA is very much an indigenous force that considers itself to be heir to the tradition of Kim Il Sung's Partisans. Officially, the KPA traces its roots back to the band of communist fighters founded by Kim on April 25, 1932.

This tradition embraces the concept of self-reliance and self-sufficiency consistent with the ideology of *Juche*. But the reality is one of multiple military traditions and considerable arms and technical assistance from abroad, especially from the Soviet Union and China. Significant numbers of the soldiers who formed the first KPA force in the late 1940s trained and fought with Chinese communists while others — including Kim Il Sung in the years from 1941 to 1945 — trained and fought with the Soviets. Nevertheless, KPA leaders are indoctrinated to believe they are 21st century Partisans. North Korean military leaders therefore are imbued with intense nationalism combined with significant distrust of foreigners and foreign governments, including Russia and China.

Military politics appears to have evolved through three models of communist types. During the period prior to the establishment of the communist regime in Pyongyang in

1945, the model of civil-military relations was “Partisan,” in which the party and the army leadership were one and the same. During the period from the establishment of a Pyongyang regime to the Korean War armistice in mid-1953, the KPA approximated the “Soviet” model whereby military and civilian leaders worked closely together. But by the end of the Korean War, Kim Il Sung had purged many military (and civilian) leaders, hence ensuring that relations between the top KWP leadership and KPA leadership were much closer and similar to the symbiotic relationship characteristic of the “Chinese” model to become a hybrid or distinctively “Korean” model.”

*Military Industrial Complex (MIC)*. Consistent with the prominent role of the military in the DPRK with the highest priority for national resources, the core of North Korea’s economy is controlled by the KPA, managed by the Second Economy Commission, and directed towards supplying the needs of the armed forces. The top economic priority afforded defense in the DPRK is not surprising. But what is surprising is that North Korea’s Military Industrial Complex (MIC) is far more sizeable relative to its economy than any other in a communist PMS. Indeed, a leading expert has declared that the DPRK has the “most militarized economy on earth.”

Most analyses of North Korea’s defense sector estimate that defense spending constitutes between one-quarter and one-third of all government spending. As of 2003, according to the International Institute of Strategic Studies, North Korea’s defense budget consumed some 25 percent of central government spending. In the mid-1970s and early 1980s, according to figures released by the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, between 32 and 38 percent of central government expenditures went towards defense. Moreover, one economic expert estimates that between 20 and 40 percent of North Korea’s economic output is produced by the KPA.

The MIC has its origins some half century ago, in the aftermath of the Korean War (what the DPRK officially calls the “Fatherland Liberation War”), when Pyongyang struggled to make itself self-sufficient in armaments production through the development of an indigenous defense industry. The outputs include artillery, munitions, missiles, etc. Moreover, production is not just to satisfy North Korea’s own defense needs but for export to earn hard currency. For example, over the years, North Korea has been one of the leading proliferators of ballistic missiles. In addition, the KPA is believed to manage the illegal production and export of counterfeit brand name cigarettes and pharmaceuticals, counterfeit foreign currencies, and illicit narcotics.

*Control and Command.* North Korea is a totalitarian, cult-centered, nepotistic, and crony-dominated regime that focuses on the interests of its elite rather than national interests. While the regime is eroding, it still is ruled by an all-powerful dictator who exerts strict control over his regime and the North Korean people. The populace lives in a condition of terror under the thumb of an extremely repressive coercive apparatus with a centralized economy, and the regime exerts almost a total monopoly over mass communication. Thus, it might be better to rank *control* before *command*.

All political, governmental, and military control within North Korea begins with Kim Jong Il, who is simultaneously Chairman of the NDC (the NDC also is Kim Jong Il’s wartime command vehicle), General Secretary of the KWP, and Supreme Commander of the KPA (a unified armed force consisting of the ground, navy, and air forces). The effectiveness of this control and command to support high tempo warfare, combined arms, or combined operations is suspect. As the NDC Chairman and supreme commander of the KPA, Kim Jong Il directly controls the military.

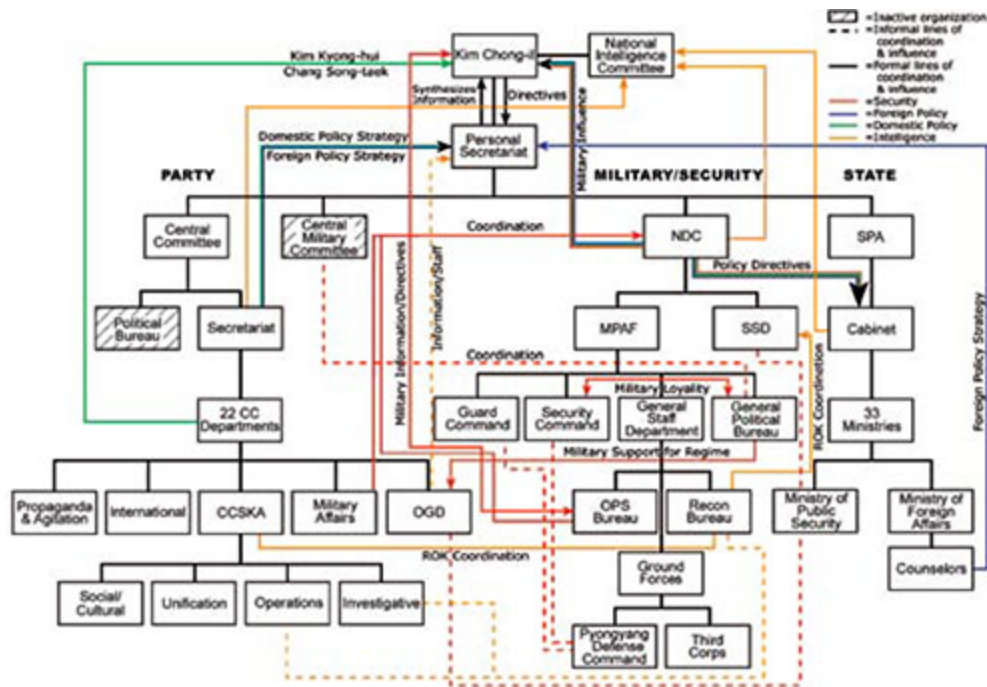
By elevating the status of the NDC in 1998, Kim Jong Il harnessed the expertise within the senior leadership critical to national security decision-making. Under Kim Il Sung, control and command of the armed forces was exercised through the KWP. The information flow was directly through the chain of command: the KPA to the Central Military Committee (CMC) to Kim Il Sung. With the restructuring of the regime in 1998, Kim Jong Il has engineered a more direct relationship with the military. Information travels through various channels from the KPA and security forces directly to Kim's office via his personal secretariat. This gives the high command several avenues through which to gauge Kim's thinking on a particular issue and then exert influence, while allowing Kim to detect if someone in the chain is hiding or altering information.

The NDC was designated a separate organization in the 1992 revision of the constitution, and under the 1998 constitutional revision, the NDC became the primary organ of power in the state, to which other branches of power are now subordinate. It is an independent entity in charge of overall decision-making and guidance for defense projects, with the MPAF under its control. Figure 2 provides one view of the lines of power, influence, and control during peacetime. The NDC and, more importantly, the Supreme Commander (Kim Jong Il) has the power to declare war, issue mobilization orders in an emergency, promote senior military officers, and guide the armed forces and defense construction work.

The NDC membership also is unique in that its membership does not appear to be linked to ceremony, but the members of this commission are there because they have a particular competency or have a responsibility for a critical security-related portfolio.

The CMC (of the KWP) is next in order of seniority and guides development and production of munitions and has command and control over North Korea's armed forces, that

is, the day-to-day running of the military. Since the 1998 restructuring and the elevation of the NDC, the CMC no longer plays a vigorous role in military policy. Nevertheless, the CMC plays an important role on three levels: (1) propagates the party line on military policy; (2) is critical to regime security in that it is populated with essential personnel and plays a role in power politics within the regime; and (3) on the policy side, it ensures that the KWP apparatus fulfills its defense-related responsibilities.



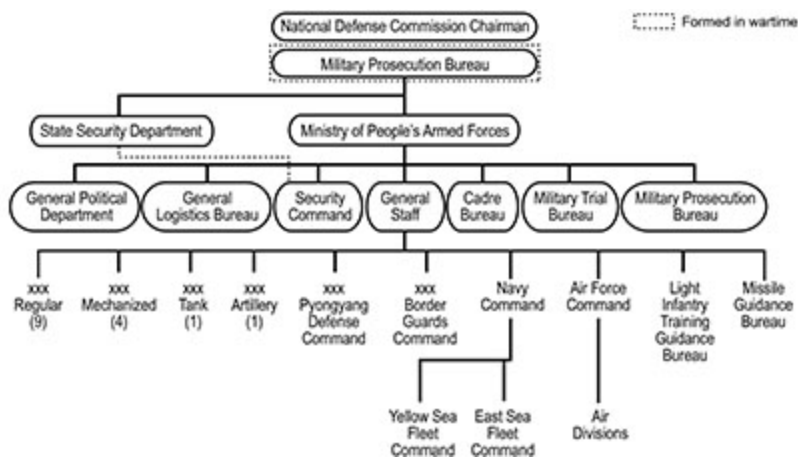
Source: Used courtesy of Ken Gause, Director of the Foreign Leadership Studies program, CNA Corporation, Alexandria, VA.

**Figure 2. Information, Influence, and Coordination Within the North Korean Leadership Structure.**

North Korea employs a highly inflexible Soviet-style military doctrine which emphasizes decisions being made at the top and carefully scripted war plans (which no one outside of North Korea has seen), discouraging operational flexibility and initiative. Hence, we deliberately list *control* before *command*.

*Minister of People's Armed Forces (MPAF)*. The MPAF is responsible for management and operational control of the armed forces. Prior to 1992, it was under the direct control of the president, with guidance from the NDC and the KWP Military Affairs Department. The 1992 state constitution shifted its control to the NDC. The minister of the PAF officially comes next in the chain of command of North Korea's armed forces after the NDC, but his office has no control over policymaking or decision-making in the KPA. See Figure 3 for this peacetime command and control structure.

The MPAF, in peacetime, has responsibility for matters such as the procurement of weapons, defense research and development, intelligence-gathering, and military training. Foreign exchanges and liaison is the province of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The armed forces have little input into this area, although they are consulted. Even when direct military talks occur between North Korea and another state, the military participants are closely briefed as to what they may say by the KWP hierarchy.



Source: Ken Gause, *North Korean Civil-Military Trends*, September 2006, p. 19.

**Figure 3. North Korean Military Command and Control.**

North Korea's military structure combines elements of those of China and the former Soviet Union, with the General Staff organizationally under the command of MPAF; functionally, however, the two are separated. In peacetime, MPAF takes charge of military administration, while the General Staff is responsible for operational command. During wartime, the Supreme Commander would exercise both military administration and operational control directly through the General Staff, bypassing MPAF. This dual chain of command ensures that only Kim Jong Il in his capacity as Supreme Commander is able to take the military command at anytime, regardless of peacetime or wartime.

MPAF has a single command system: the Chief of the General Staff has direct command over the Ground Forces corps (artillery corps, tank corps, and light infantry), the Naval command and the Air Defense command. In order that no high-ranking military officer can conspire with another to topple Kim Jong Il, the present structure forces each one to stand alone and to take control and punishment from the supreme commander.

To ensure political control, a secondary control and command path extends down via a separate chain-of-command to the lowest-levels of the KPA. The General Staff's Department's Operations Bureau is responsible for all operational aspects of the KPA, including broad-spectrum planning for the Air Force and the Navy, as well as paramilitary units. It is in direct contact with KPA Supreme Commander Kim Jong Il, and in the event of emergency, Kim can bypass the chain of command and issue orders directly to the Operations Bureau.

Two secondary paths exist to ensure political control of the KPA. The first extends through the KWP Central Committee to the Central Military Committee and to the General Political Bureau subordinate to the NDC. From the General Political Bureau, it extends down via a separate chain-of-command to the lowest levels of the KPA. The



second extends from the NDC to the State Security Department. This department controls the MPAF's Security Command, which also maintains representatives to the lowest-level of the KPA.

If North Korea exercised its mandate of unifying the peninsula under the military option, the MPAF probably would establish two or three army commands to control corps combat operations. These army commands could be responsible for East Coast, West Coast, and Central offensive operations crossing over the DMZ.

MPAF has been relegated to managing the peacetime administrative and logistic functions of the KPA, while the NDC is the wartime command and the General Staff Department probably would run the war, all lead by Kim Jong Il.

*WMD Weapon Control and Command.* Information concerning the specific control and command of WMD is vague and unclear due to the newness of this aspect of the KPA. The control and command of chemical and nuclear weapon usage probably falls directly under of Kim Jong Il for the initial application of these weapons through the General Staff of MPAF. Subordinate to the General Staff is the Nuclear-Chemical Defense Bureau, which is responsible for nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons (NBC) defense within the KPA and the production, distribution, and storage of chemical weapons and defensive equipment.

North Korea's military control, command, and communications system consists of extensive hardened wartime command facilities, fiber-optic cable, and digital switching stations. This network is supported by redundant communication systems, which are believed to be largely separate from systems supporting other sectors of North Korea such as industry and government.

# Conventional Forces

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*Origins and Evolution.* The 20th century history of Korea is essential to understanding North Korea's national objectives. Until the end of World War II in 1945, Korea remained a single, ethnically and culturally homogenous — but not independent — country for over 1,000 years. Korea initially was divided on a “temporary” basis by the United States and the Soviet Union along the 38th parallel to facilitate the surrender and demobilization of occupying Japanese forces in Korea. The separation of the Koreas resulted in a split between communism and democracy/capitalism, both tempered by fighting the injustices from the colonization of Korea by the Japanese.

The origins of the KPA are a fusion of Koreans fighting in China for the Chinese Revolution and against Japanese aggression (Yanan faction); the Koreans fighting the Japanese in Manchuria under the control of the Soviets (Kaspan faction); and the Koreans fighting Japanese colonialism on the Korean peninsula as well as each other for control in Korea after the Korean War.

The birth of the KPA can be established probably in 1936 when the Korean Fatherland Restoration Association (KFRA) was established to create a united front organization of anti-Japanese Koreans operating in Manchuria. On June 4, 1937, Kim Il Sung led a small group of partisans subordinate to the KFRA on a raid against a small border village in Korea and defeated a small Japanese police detachment. This much-celebrated victory subsequently became the source of the Kaspan faction's name and the beginning of Kim Il Sung's legendary military career.

In 1939, the Korean Volunteer Army (KVA) was formed in Yanan, China, to support Mao Zedong and fought with the

Chinese Communist forces in World War II and the Chinese Revolution. In April 1946, the KVA was absorbed by various area commands which ultimately evolved into the newly forming Korean Peace Preservation Corps moving into northern Korea. Eventually, even this Corps was diluted by further officer transfers and reorganizations and eventually passed out of existence. However, the legacy and history of the KVA continued to be used probably for security and morale reasons.

In 1942, Kim Il Sung commanded a company of the Soviet Far East Command's Reconnaissance Bureau's 88th Special Independent Sniper Brigade and received a significant amount of training and experience in his future development of special purpose forces for the KPA.

The KPA was established formally by Kim Il Sung on February 8, 1948, the day after the Fourth Session of the (NK) People's Assembly agreed to separate the roles of the military and those of the police. The origin of the KPA certainly is rooted in the anti-Japanese guerrilla armies in general that operated under Soviet and Chinese military control. For 30 years, the KPA commemorated its birth on February 8. Then in 1978, North Korea changed the commemoration date to April 25 to correspond with the date in 1932 that Kim Il Sung allegedly organized his Anti-Japanese Guerrilla Army. By this act, Kim Il Sung was extolling the Korean-ness of the KPA, while dismissing the combined influences of the Soviets and the Chinese Communists upon the establishment of the KPA.

Just after World War II and during the Soviet Union's occupation of the portion of Korea north of the 38th Parallel, the Soviet 25th Army Headquarters in Pyongyang issued a statement ordering all (North Korean) armed resistance groups in the northern part of the peninsula to disband on October 12, 1945.

Two thousand Koreans were allowed to briefly enter into Korea but were returned to Manchuria. There were several

possible reasons as to why these Koreans were not allowed to stay in Korea. The Soviets may have been concerned with sending a trained armed force into a country it would occupy, possibly giving the Soviets trouble regarding insurgency. Many of these Korean soldiers actually had lived in Manchuria and were just returning to their homes. Finally, most of these soldiers actually were raw recruits and, rather than repatriating them, perhaps they were encouraged to return to the Chinese Eighth Route Army so that, after a period of seasoning, they might return to Korea to become a core element in the nation's future armed forces.

Two thousand Koreans with previous experience in the Soviet army were sent to various locations around the country to organize constabulary forces with permission from Soviet military headquarters, and the force was created on October 21, 1945. The Headquarters activated a separate unit for railway security on August 15, 1945, to supervise existing security forces and to create the national armed forces. After the North Korean military was organized with facilities to educate its new recruits, the Constabulary Discipline Corps was reorganized into the North Korean People's Army Corps Headquarters.

The State Security Department, a forerunner to MPAF, was established as part of the Interim People's Committee on February 4, 1948, with the formal creation of the KPA being announced on February 8, seven months before the government of the DPRK was proclaimed on September 9, 1948. In accordance with Kim Il Sung's stated aspirations to "build a powerful modern military," the task continued in earnest, as the army's first tank unit — the 105th Armored Battalion — was established. With the growth of the military to some 60,000 troops, the KPA Headquarters created two additional ground divisions.

In 1949, after the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) took control of China, the CCF released tens of thousands of

combat-hardened ethnic Koreans from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for duty with the KPA.

In 1950, KPA was a well-trained and modern force, carefully constructed along Soviet lines. For over 2 years, hundreds of Soviet advisers had molded the army. The Russians also had generously supplied it with arms. Each KPA division, for example, was equipped with 12 122mm howitzers, 24 76mm guns, and 12 45mm antitank guns. All were recent World War II vintage. The Soviets also provided the KPA with tanks. Each infantry division had organic tanks, and there was also a separate tank division. The 105th Armored Division boasted 120 modern T-34 main battle tanks.

The Korean War provided the KPA with some lessons learned that they have attempted to correct to this day. First, they fully understand the value of the intervention by the United States. History shows that had the United States not intervened, success for the KPA would have been virtually assured.

Critical defects concerning the KPA were identified: (1) the KPA's infantry-centric organization was unsuited to the Soviet's armored/mechanized infantry doctrine (attributed by the KPA as the primary cause of its failures); (2) its strategic plan was inadequately developed to destroy its opponent; (3) its cadre was poorly trained in military doctrine and tactics; (4) its reserve forces were sparsely fielded; and (5) its logistical system was insufficient to supply the army's needs. Further weaknesses included leaders who were inadequately versed in strategy and tactics and operational/tactical inefficacy.

By 1960, ground forces may have totaled fewer than 400,000 persons and probably did not rise much above that figure before 1972.

*KPA Modernization and Reorganization.* Beginning in the late 1970s, North Korea began a major reorganization and modernization of its ground forces. This was probably a

reflection of the lessons learned (sudden attack, quick victory, and role of a guerrilla struggle to supplant conventional capabilities) from observing the Vietnam War and other regional conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli wars.

During the 1980s, doctrine and organization were revamped to increase the lethality, speed, and combat power of the attack. The shifting of the majority of the North Korean ground forces closer to the DMZ offered the potential for a more rapid advance and minimizing the time of detection of intent. The reorganization of Pyongyang's exploitation forces in the 1980s suggested that initial attacking forces will be reinforced by heavier and more mobile units to exploit any breakthroughs.

The KPA was not uniformly successful in its 1980s efforts to modernize its forces in support of a high-speed offensive strategy; more needs to be done to update the army's mobility, artillery, and air defense elements. North Korea increased its tank fleet, but incomplete information suggested that it remained based largely on dated Soviet technology with retrofitted indigenous improvements.

KPA artillery systems appeared to have made the most of the limited technological base. The KPA increased the artillery force while maintaining relative quantitative and range superiorities over its potential southern adversary and improving force mobility. The technological level of Pyongyang's industrial base appeared to ensure that, with the possible exception of narrow areas of special interest, built-in obsolescence will be unavoidable, regardless of how undesirable. Pyongyang appeared to be quantitatively increasing the amount of systems with larger caliber weapons but qualitatively, these weapons did not include modern evolutionary advances such as computerized targeting, radar guided munitions, etc.

Between 1984 and 1992, the army added about 1,000 tanks, over 2,500 APC/infantry fighting vehicles, and about 6,000 artillery tubes or rocket launchers. In 1992 North