

THE CHOSON CONUNDRUM

SEOUL, MARCH 2019 – War has come again to the Korean Peninsula. The reasons and motivations are several and complex:

- Negotiations to denuclearize North Korea fail. There will be no follow on peace talks or abrogation of armistice.
- Pyongyang provokes Seoul one too many times, fires one too many missiles into the East Sea; tests one too many nuclear devices; finally launches an intercontinental ballistic missile that successfully demonstrates the range to strike Los Angeles... the list goes on.
 - Despite U.S. temperance, Republic of Korea responds with typical disproportionate force when North Korean artillery shells a South Korean island. Tensions mount.
 - U.S. State Department issues “ordered withdrawal” to all American citizens, affecting more than one hundred thousand.
 - Beijing follows suit and nearly a half-million Chinese either flee for ports or hunker in place. Non-combatant evacuation efforts of many countries clog South Korean highways, ports and airfields.
 - In response to North Korean missiles impacting Japanese territorial waters, Japan’s Diet declares Armed Attack Situation. Kongo-class destroyers equipped with the Aegis ballistic missile defense combat system patrol Japanese territorial waters.
 - Washington threatens preemptive strikes on North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction facilities, while a carrier group makes steam for the Yellow Sea.
- The Kim Jong-un regime, either sensing opportunity or that the end is near, launches its version of Gotterdammerung.
 - Thousands of special warfare units infiltrate the South to attack military, government and infrastructure targets, while
 - A surprise attack by Korean People’s Army armored and infantry divisions slices across the demilitarized zone toward Seoul. The first line of defense is breached. Seoul and its environs are threatened, and
 - Tens of thousands of artillery shells and short range missiles rain down on GSMA (greater Seoul metropolitan area) and its twenty-five million inhabitants...



- The North's submarine fleet conducts wide-ranging attacks of South Korean naval ships, commercial shipping, and the KPA Air Force conducts combat air patrols over Pyongyang and the DMZ.

This is Northeast Asia's version of Twilight of the Gods. It is ugly and brutal and branded by atrocities and suffering. But unlike ancient Norse mythology the outcome seems unlikely to result in renewal. Indeed, the outcome may well change things for the worse... much worse.



North Korean multiple rocket launchers

The first week of the war goes badly for the ROK-US Alliance, but then things begin to change. North Korean forces, hampered by communication deficiencies, hamstrung by poor maintenance and low fuel stocks, spend themselves on the South's second line of defense around Seoul and go to ground. U.S. naval superiority begins to diminish the North's undersea fleet, one silent sinking at a time. Soon the KPA Navy ceases as an effective force. Likewise, the KPA Air Force, which never stood a chance from the outset of kinetics, falls from the skies. ROK-US Alliance airpower is decisive, dominant.

Using the Internet and social and international media as conduits, Pyongyang threatens the use of weapons of mass destruction. But the worst of this threat – nuclear weapons – never materializes, although numerous incidents of poison gas attacks are reported throughout the battle space.

Meanwhile, North Korean short and medium range missiles are launched against allied front line and rear area forces. A few "leakers" get through to cause moderate destruction, but most are destroyed in-flight by Patriot and THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Air Defense) intercept missiles.

Incessant counterbattery fire by ROK and U.S. artillery and multiple rocket launchers greatly weakens the North's indirect fire capability. By the end of the second week Pyongyang's artillery and missile forces are reduced by 50 percent. The battlefield has been shaped, prepared for allied counter attack.

Kim Jong Un flees Pyongyang for a remote, undisclosed palace sanctuary.

In a matter of a few days the first line of defense north of Seoul is restored and the vital Kaesong Heights falls to allied hands. ROK infantry and armored divisions begin to push toward Pyongyang while the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division backed up by elements from the U.S. 25th Infantry Division strike north along the eastern littorals of the Peninsula.

ROK Marines storm ashore at high tide northwest of Pyongyang and hammer their way east toward the North's capital. Nearly simultaneously, U.S. Marines come ashore north of Wonson on the east coast. They slog inland to split enemy forces, and carry north along the coast toward Hamhung.

Sending State forces – members of the original United Nations Command in 1950 – begin to arrive, bringing a variety of assets critical to logistics, medical, aviation, and combat support. At the same time the first TPFDD (Time Phased Force Deployment Data) shipments come ashore at South Korean ports and land at its airfields.

Sensing that the threat from the North may likely spread, Japan's Diet authorizes U.S. and Sending States wide latitude to access ports and airfields and use them for the full spectrum of allied missions, including combat sorties by 5th U.S. Air Force.

For seven long weeks the war grinds on, grisly, dirty, costly. Casualties are high on both sides. The KPA loses roughly half its soldiers, succumbed to bombs and bullets and, for some, the fatigue of combat and starvation. South Korean losses number nearly three hundred thousand and U.S. losses top ten thousand. Yet from an allied perspective, the trend is leading toward eventual success.

Not so for the North Korean population at large. Food distribution systems no longer function in urban areas and are problematic in rural enclaves. Spring planting is disrupted; the fall harvest, when it comes, will be meager. Disease begins to spread and medicines are in shorter and shorter supply. Electricity, always a sketchy utility, becomes non-existent. People labor in darkness; fighting becomes fiercer by day. Most people cling to their home villages, but many flee for the presumed sanctuary of the Sino-North Korean border where the best they will find is disappointment.

Reaction by the international community is varied, but trends increasingly toward cessation of hostilities and negotiation of some sort of ceasefire and plan for peace. The U.S. and Japanese people are roughly split between support for continuation of the war and stopping the fighting. China, against the war almost from the start, proposes a peace plan that is supported by Russia and is gaining support in Japan. Diplomatic exchanges flood back and forth between principals on classified cyber pathways.

In the meantime, China, mindful of the stability and refugee situation along its frontier with North Korea, positions People's Liberation Army forces in assembly areas by the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. Russia and China send naval forces in the vicinity of North Korea's Rason Economic Development Zone and port facilities at Rajin-Songbong on the East Sea – ports that are managed and operated by a collection of Russian, Chinese, and Swiss interests.

We come now to a critical juncture in events.

China and Russia and to a large extent Japan, support cessation of hostilities and a joining of major regional powers at the peace table. Interests vary, however. China wants preservation of a North Korean state, with or without Kim Jong-un and his regime. Russia seeks to thwart U.S. goals, but is otherwise ambivalent. Japan wants the KJU regime replaced. Both the U.S. and Japan want WMD eliminated either forcibly or in a verifiable, non-reversible way. South Korea, by contrast, wants to continue the war to a successful conclusion that results in unification of the Korean Peninsula.

In addition, South Korea declares that no other countries – especially China – shall enter North Korea under any pretext. Seoul proclaims: "No Chinese boots on the ground" in Korean territory.

By contrast, Beijing has made it clear that PLA forces will enter North Korea if the stability and humanitarian relief situation warrant intervention, particularly in Hamgyong Bukto, the North's far north province by the Tumen River.

The government in Seoul further declares that its Constitution requires unification of the two Koreas, but the document is ambiguous on whether the use of force to do so is permissible. Since they are already at war, ROK leadership decides that use of force is permitted by their law. They want to press on, conclude the war on their terms, unify the Peninsula and begin the process of reconstruction, for which there exists an extensive plan – a plan which has only recently been briefed to its U.S. ally.

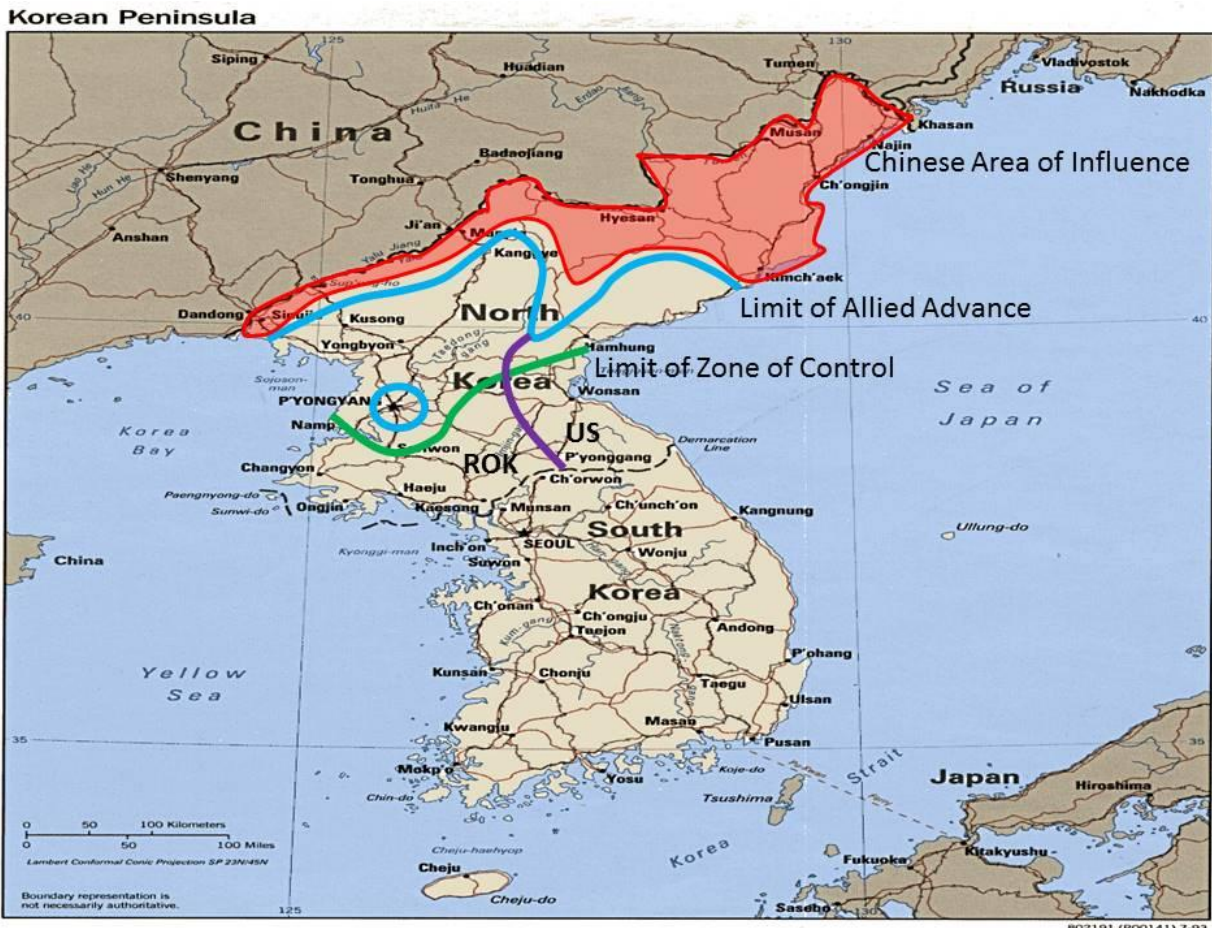
The United Nations points out that when both North and South Korea became member states that this conveyed sovereign status to each and that to forcibly unify North and South is a violation of international law.

A little appreciated feature of the ROK-US defense treaty is that the U.S. is obligated only to *defend* South Korea. It says nothing about following up a successful defense of the South with offensive operations to achieve unification. Many on the U.S. side are now arguing that the defense has been successful and that combat operations, according to the terms of the treaty, can now stop.

Finally, with much of North Korea in the hands of ROK and U.S. forces, repatriation and reconstruction operations have already begun in North Korea's southern provinces, and IGOs and NGOs (international government and non-governmental organizations) have begun to enter South Korea and filter north into the reconstruction zones to provide humanitarian relief. ROK turns a blind eye to these organizations.

They are on their own. China refuses access to areas along its frontier with North Korea. The U.S., ever the provider of humanitarian aid in a crisis, feels obligated to provide some security to IGO/NGO elements.

The map below represents this current situation on the Peninsula.



It is time now, in this war fought so miserably, to consider policy choices and the alternate paths they may signify.

The Allies

- Will the ROK-US Alliance hold up?
 - Will the U.S. continue to support ROK efforts to forcibly unify the two Koreas?
 - Or will the ROK Government bend to U.S. pressure to stop fighting and engage in UN-sponsored peace keeping?
 - Should the ROK-US Defense Treaty be renegotiated to allow U.S. support for forcible unification?

- Will the ROK Government stick to its position that there can be no Chinese boots on the ground in North Korea? If China does intervene, if only in Hamgyoung Bukto in the north, what will ROK do? Can the U.S. or UN do anything to keep conflict between ROK and China from occurring?
- If ROK and U.S. governments cannot reach accommodation, what is the result? What alternate paths can ROK and U.S. pursue to maintain an alliance in function if not in fact?

China

- Will China intervene in North Korea? If so, what are its motivations, objectives?
 - Restore and maintain stability?
 - Provide humanitarian aid?
 - Search and secure WMD sites?
 - These three above are publicly stated reasons.
 - Keep Russia from exerting undue influence?
 - Protect critical infrastructure in which China has invested, developed?
 - Secure a buffer zone or buffer state (a North Korean rump government) as a hedge against ROK-US?
- Or, will China welcome unification on a South Korean model because it means eventual economic development and prosperity for its northeast provinces?
- Will China adhere to its Treaty of Friendship with North Korea, or denounce it based on North Korean aggression?

North Korea

- Will the KJU regime sue for peace? Or will it use WMD as a last gasp effort to achieve peace talks and a ceasefire?
- If the above, what is the KJU regime prepared to concede?
- How best to provide HA for the North Korean people? Can cooperation of a multinational force under a UN umbrella accomplish this? What are the alternatives?
- There is potential for tens if not hundreds of thousands of North Korean refugees. How shall they be handled?

The list goes on: What is Russia's position and what choices will Moscow make? And Japan? And the IGOs/NGOs? And the international community at large?

The foregoing discussion is not fantasy, but represents the very real concerns of U.S. Forces-Korea and U.S. Pacific Command as expressed in periodic U.S.-only and combined exercises – exercises that explore the questions but do not yet arrive at answers.