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An Exercise in Logic

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Dear Peter,

Is North Korea a self-confident, ferocious bulldog? Or merely a frightened cat, vicious and backed into a corner? In either case it is a worrisome creature. But preserving peace with each animal may require a different strategy. The facts do not offer a clear answer. But it would be tragic to close off opportunities for peace in Korea by mistaking one animal for the other.

The weight of opinion falls heavily on the side of the bulldog argument and some interpretations of the facts make Pyongyang look extremely sinister. The most damning bit of evidence is the huge army just north of the DMZ that seems ready to pounce south at a moment's notice. North Korea has less than half the population of the South, but its army is about 20% bigger, with about 750,000 men. It has 70 or 80% more armor, and its numerically larger airforce is only balanced by more sophisticated American planes in the South. The North has poured a staggering 20 to 30% of its GNP into military preparations.

Military analysts argue that North Korea's forces are "patently offensive." One can only understand them as meant to fight and win a war. They march around at surprising times close to the DMZ. They dig tunnels under it. They occasionally fire across it. They practice parachuting, as though they intend to land behind enemy lines. They hide their armor in underground bunkers. And they occasionally are caught trying to sneak into South Korea, and often end up dead that way.

In March this year, the North's army went on a high state of alert that had some sober observers frightened. The North seemed to be preparing its civilian population for the rigors of a wartime economy. Health care workers would receive extra training and women would have to take their husband's jobs while men went to the front.

The North's remarkable increase in fighting ability came as a real shock in 1979 when American military analysts pieced together their fragmentary data and reassessed estimates. Until that time, most had assumed that a rough balance existed. The South had a larger army, while the North had more armor. The higher intelligence estimates gave President Carter the excuse

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he needed to call off his planned withdrawl of American forces from Korea, a plan that drew heavy fire in Washington, not to mention Seoul.

News of the military build-up seemed to fit together into a disturbing pattern. In the late 1960s, the North tried to foment a Vietnam-style guerilla war in the South, and tried several times to assassinate then-President Park. The most dramatic attempt resulted in a bloody shootout just north of the Presidential palace. But Pyongyang failed to light a prairie fire. South Koreans were not interested.

Having failed at subversion, the argument runs, the North began to plan a direct invasion, quietly manufacturing tanks and guns. Quietly training more men. The United States, bloodied in Vietnam, would not savor a fight to defend Seoul. President Nixon announced that the United States would draw down its forces in Asia, and take them out of Korea. (President Carter's withdrawl policy was not original.) The opportunity to crush the South would arise sooner or later. The North would be ready.

There was a disturbing consistency between the virulent, strident ideology of Kim Il-sung and the enormous military machine created to protect and enforce it. Kim Il-sung staked his claim to lead, made his appeal to Korean nationalism, by vowing to reunify his homeland, as his critics point out, "on his own terms." His own terms meant socialism throughout Korea and no compromise agreement that would imply that two sovereign states would coexist on the Korean penninsula. The North loudly repeated this position enough times to leave outsiders pessimistic about reaching any compromise. For any North Korean leader to suggest compromise would, presumably, undermine his position. The North Korean's have shown an ability to sacrifice a great deal economically to maintain their military machine. They may be willing to sacrifice a great deal more to reunify Korea.

In Seoul, a fairly indefensible 40 miles from the DMZ, North Korea's posture looks frightening. The North looks extremely uncompromising, dangerous, and unpredictable. Kim Il-sung has gradually elevated his son Kim Jong Il to positions of greater authority, and plans to pass the entire baton before too long. Many analysts have suggested that the younger Kim will have to prove himself with an even more militant approach to reunifying the penninsula.

The picture made by drawing lines between these dots of information, analysis, and supposition is extremely bizarre, and has convinced many that North Korea is a kind of outlaw nation, a mad dog with a dangerous bite. At home the North Koreans are rigid, disciplined, doctrinaire, uncompromising and aggressive. Yet abroad they have captured headlines for smuggling, bribery, brawling, shoplifitng, and alleged sex crimes. From the viewpoint of the U.S. government, civilian and military, the portrait is very disturbing. The U.S. has seen its main purpose as preventing war and stopping North Korean military dominance of the South. These seem to be reasonable, moderate goals and the North's behavior is both incomprehensible and threatening.

To carry on this exercise in logic, however, it is possible to use the same set of facts to create a rather different portrait of the North. Ideology, most observers agree, is the source of the North's rigidity and aggressiveness. But as we have seen in virtually every other communist nation, ideology is a pliable creature.

Imagine, for a moment, that you live in a small country of 18 million people. Your enemy next door has over twice as many citizens and an even larger per capita GNP. Troops from the world's most powerful nation are stationed across the border, and your enemy's big brother has more or less threatened to blow you apart with nuclear weapons if you step too far out of line. You will have imagined, of course, part of what it would feel like to live in North Korea.

Let's continue this counter portrait. When American analysts look at the military balance in Korea, they include men and equipment stationed on the penninsula. By this tally, the North far outweighs the South. But only a fool in Pyongyang would exclude American air, naval, and ground forces stationed elsewhere in Asia and throughout the world. The U.S. has a security treaty with Seoul. For Pyongyang, the Korean War was a nasty lesson on how outside forces could determine the outcome of a war.

Then, it was China that jumped in to pull the chestnuts out of the fire, and save the Pyongyang government from extinction. Would China do it again?

China entered the war in 1950 not to save Korean socialism, but to protect itself by keeping American troops a comfortable distance from its borders. Chou En-lai's statements at the time implied that China could have lived with purely South Korean forces stationed on the other side of the Yalu River. Then, China believed the United States might have serious aggressive designs against it. Now, despite frictions between the two nations, China apparently feels little threat from the United States. Then, the U.S. had little appreciation for China's security concerns. Now those concerns are far better understood. In the Viet Nam War, Americans learned how to avoid stepping too heavily on China's toes.

Curiously, the build-up of North Korean forces coincides with the thawing of Sino-American relations. Although Pyongyang hailed the Shanghai Communique as a victory for China, it saw the normalization of U.S. China ties as a sell-out for China, coming at a time when China was backing off from the extremes of Maoism. Perhaps Pyongyang realized that China had less to fear from American domination of Korea.

China's flexibility and pragmatism are illustrated by its decision to send a high level delegation to Seoul to obtain the return of a hijacked civilian airliner in May. China quickly patched things up by sending it Foreign Minister to Pyongyang. But the meaning cannot have been lost on Pyongyang--China will act flexibly to protect its own interests. China's interests

may not encourage it to sacrifice thousands of men and put more red ink on the national budget to save a government that has successfully played it off against its most bitter rival--Moscow. If war should break out in Korea, Pyongyang may have to face South Korean and American forces alone.

Most everyone agrees that war in Korea is possible, whether sparked by misunderstanding stemming from a serious border incident or by some rebellious general stationed on the 38th parallel. If war is possible, somebody in Pyongyang must reason, we ought to prepare for it.

But military analysts in the West counter that the North's military build-up far exceeds its defense needs. Their military preparations are offensive in character.

Undoubtedly the experts are right in the narrow sense. But an offensive capability may or may not reflect an offensive intent. Military historians are not kind in their treatment of purely defensive strategies. The strategies look good until the outbreak of war. But once combat heats up it is the generals with imaginative offensive strategies and the capabilities to match them who win. If war is possible, Pyongyang might reason, why not prepare to win it?

Would any nation reason differently if the stakes were national extinction? A defeat in war would spell the end of the North's well-entrenched political and economic system. It may be an unattractive system to outsiders, and many insiders as well, but it is not hard to understand why North Korea's leaders would go to extreme lengths to insure their survival.

Why won't the North negotiate to reduce tensions if it wants to insure its survival? Negotiations, too, have risks. The North clearly wants to be in a strong position when it sits down to talk. The North has talked with the South, but talks have never led anywhere. In 1973, Kim Il-sung followed through on his threat and broke off talks when President Park proposed United Nations admission for North and South Korea as separate nations. In the chaos following Park's assassination in 1980, the North proposed talks again. Many saw these talks as Pyongyang's attempt to take advantage of the South while it was weak. But Pyongyang went so far as to use the official titles of government officials in Seoul, sending a telegram to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Korea. A decision to use these titles could not have come lightly. After the Kwangju tragedy, in which hundreds of Koreans died in a mass anti-government uprising, the North has adamently refused to talk with the "butcher of Kwangju." The North would still find it embarrassing to back down, despite repeated offers for unconditional negotiations coming from Seoul.

Clearly the North prefers to wait until its position is stronger before talking. It doesn't see much point in negotiating with an unpopular government in Seoul. It doesn't feel any need to add legitimacy to a rigidly anti-communist government that came to power in a military coup. It may think it will have an

easier time dealing with other elements of South Korean society, elements currently out of power. Why not wait? In fact the strongest inducement for North Korea to negotiate would be the emergence of a stable, popular government in Seoul. In that case, the North would have nothing to gain by waiting.

This is, of course, an exercise in logic. Even within the North Korean government opinions undoubtedly differ. Some leaders may harbor more aggressive intent than others. But the policy of military build-up in an isolated nation highly suspicious of its enemies, as well as its communist allies, is likely one that many segments of the political spectrum can agree on.

And, of course, just because some people in the North Korean government may be motivated by defensive rather than offensive considerations, all those troops, tanks, armored personnel carriers, guns, planes, and ships look no less frightening when you sit down to count them. No matter what the intent, it is the reality of North Korean capabilities that military planners in the South must take into account.

Still it may be prudent for American military and diplomatic personnel to consider how they might reduce, rather than heighten, North Korean suspicions that war is likely or inevitable. North Korea has already entered a period of leadership transition. Why not encourage moderate opinion by giving the North an incentive to be moderate?

In March and April of this year the United States and Korea held their annual "Team Spirit" joint military exercises in and around the Korean penninsula. As it turned out, "Team Spirit '83" was the largest military exercise in the non-communist world since World War II. Of course, the military may have had sound reasons why it needed such large maneuvers, but it isn't hard to see that North Korea might take a dim view of them. At the very least the North is bound to think that somebody wants to intimidate it. Pyongyang could also see the exercises as a first step to war. We have never given North Korea much reason to trust in the good intentions of the United States or South Korea.

The North responded by putting its troops on a high state of alert and preparing its people for war. It rather successfully showed that it would not be intimidated. If Pyongyang actually feared an attack, it probably concluded that it had successfully deterred it. In any case, it is difficult to see the North Korean alert as aggressive in intent. After all, if it intends to attack the South, why do it when American reinforcements from all parts of the globe are already on the scene? The net effect of Team Spirit and the North Korean reaction may have been to convince many North Koreans of the wisdom of their military preparations. This can hardly have been the American intent.

Last year, when Secretary of the Army, General Meyer, visited Seoul, he spoke of the possibility that the U.S. would decide to use nuclear weapons in Korea. The statement had many South Korean's wondering about it ally. It is hard to know how the North could view it as other than a threat.

General Robert Sennewald, commander of the Republic of Korea-United States Combined Forces Command, has also been speaking out lately. In June, he told a luncheon meeting of the American Chamber of Commerce in Korea that "We are here to fight to win and I think they (the American forces) will do a super job." Several days later he told journalists in a press conference of American plans to carry a war behind lines to the heartland of North Korea. Of course he meant that they would do so only in response to an attack from the North, but how is North Korea supposed to understand these statements except as a direct threat?

Perhaps there is some limit that the U.S. should set for itself if it tries not to offend the North Koreans more than necessary. But there may be some way of letting Pyongyang know that Washington means business without sounding as though there is nothing it would like better than to have the North Koreans ground into the earth. The North has already shown it will endure great sacrifice--perhaps greater than any nation on earth--to keep its military strong. Why encourage them?

Near-term prospects for a breakthrough in Korea look dim. But many changes will take place in North Korea as well as the South in the coming decade. The wheels of history turn in unexpected ways. If an opportunity for peace arises it would be tragic to miss it by assuming only the worst about North Korea, and encouraging Pyongyang to make only the worst assumptions about American intentions.

Best,

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