Preparing for the Silent Surge: Countering North Koreaâ??s Gambit in a Dual Contingency

Description

Strategic planners across the Indo-Pacific must reckon with an increasingly plausible scenario: a dual contingency in which North Korea opportunistically launches a full-scale war against South Korea while China conducts military operations against Taiwan. Such a scenario, discussed in a recent Atlantic Council report, represents an acute test of U.S. extended deterrence and allied defense posture in the region.

Yet, an overlooked dimension of this potential conflict lies not in nuclear escalationâ??but in North Koreaâ??s probable deployment of irregular warfare tactics against U.S., Japanese, and South Korean rear-area targets. While the *Guardian Tiger* simulations emphasized North Koreaâ??s use of tactical nuclear weapons, it remains plausibleâ??perhaps even preferable from Pyongyangâ??s perspectiveâ??to abstain from nuclear use in the opening stages of conflict. North Koreaâ??s regime may remain deterred from nuclear escalation by the United Statesâ?? extended deterrence, reinforced by robust trilateral coordination with Japan and South Korea through mechanisms such as the Camp David Summit agreements and the Nuclear Consultative Group.

Meanwhile, nuclear use could undermine North Koreaâ??s ideological narrative of Korean liberation from â??U.S. imperialismâ?• and alienate potential diplomatic supporters such as Russia or China. Instead, Kim Jong Un may seek to exploit the United Statesâ?? and its alliesâ?? distraction by unleashing asymmetric capabilitiesâ??particularly North Korean special operations forces (SOF)â??to sabotage critical infrastructure, disrupt command and control, and sow social and psychological disruption across both South Korea and Japan.

The Silent Threat: North Korean Special Forces in a Dual War Scenario

North Koreaâ??s SOFâ??estimated at over 200,000 troopsâ??are a formidable unconventional force. Their operational doctrine emphasizes stealth, rapid infiltration, and psychological effect over brute force. Their mission set is extensive: sabotage of civilian infrastructure, disruption of airbase and seaport operations, insertion into urban centers to spread panic, and targeted assassination or abduction of political and military leaders.

Even more concerning is the possibility of dual-front SOF operations, in which North Korean operatives strike not only the South Korean homeland but also critical U.S. and Japanese military installations across Japan, including those operated by U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ), in concert with Chinese aggression towards Taiwan. The United States and Japan jointly developed Concept Plan 5055 â??which later evolved into Operational Plan (OPLAN) 5055â??to define bilateral response options in the event of a Korean contingency. That plan, as noted in a recent interview, explicitly considers the possibility of North Korean special operations forces infiltrating Japanese territory and targeting as many as 135 critical facilities.

North Korean planners are believed to envision two primary infiltration methods. First, operatives disguise themselves as North or South Korean refugees or civilians, potentially arriving in Japan amid the chaos of full-scale conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Second, forces make covert maritime landings using small fishing boats along the Japanese mainland to evade detection. The Japanese Coast Guard is better postured to interdict covert maritime infiltrations, but both scenarios present challenges for planners and defense forces.

North Korean special operations forces are also gaining valuable experience in realistic, modern scenarios. In late 2024, North Korea deployed thousands of military personnel to support Russia in its war against Ukraine. Special operations units such as the Storm Corps operated under Russian command and in Russian uniforms, integrated into Russian brigades, and have engaged in frontline combat during the Kursk offensiveâ??receiving a crash course on modern hybrid warfare in real combat conditions, at the cost of thousands of lives.

Even if their role was limited, such experienceâ??or even secondhand observation through liaison and embedded officersâ??may allow Pyongyang to absorb and adapt new tactics tested through years of conflict in Ukraine. These new tactics include the battlefield use of loitering munitions, mobile encrypted communications, GPS spoofing and jamming, and deep-cover infiltration strategies. The Ukraine conflict may thus serve as a live laboratory for North Koreaâ??s future doctrine innovation and force modernization, especially for its special operations forces.

One could envision North Koreaâ??s strategy as consisting of a two-pronged campaign: a high-tempo conventional invasion aimed at quickly seizing symbolic and strategic terrain north of the Han River, coupled with the simultaneous deployment of special operations forces to South Koreaâ??s rear areas. The conventional thrust would aim to create military leverage near Seoul, while SOF units would create a second front that focuses on infiltration via subterranean tunnels, coastal infiltration using semi-submersible boats, or civilian disguises aboard commercial vessels. Their goals could include sabotaging critical infrastructure, paralyzing logistics, and sowing psychological disruption, maximizing chaos before a coordinated Republic of Korea-U.S. response could be fully mobilized.

Meanwhile, coordinated sabotage attacks on USFJ bases in Okinawa, Iwakuni, and Yokota could delay U.S. reinforcements, distract focus from other regional conflicts, and degrade command and control capacity. Such an approach seeks to create the perception of paralysis across allied rear areas, enabling North Korea to push for a rapid ceasefire and political settlement under a fait accompli framework before U.S. reinforcements arrive from the continental United States.

To be sure, South Korea would respond with layered, coordinated defense across multiple domains, limiting the long-term impact of North Koreaâ??s two-pronged strategy. Nevertheless, the initial stages of such an assault would be deeply disruptive, especially in the information domain and civil infrastructure. The risks of public panic, strategic delay, and political pressure for ceasefire make this a serious and urgent threat that conventional force posture alone cannot deter.

A Trilateral Response: Integrating Irregular Warfare Countermeasures

To mitigate this risk, U.S., Japanese, and Republic of Korea planners must transcend traditional combined arms paradigms and systematically integrate irregular warfare (IW) countermeasures across joint and multinational planning. This effort could begin with the establishment of a standing Trilateral Special Operations Coordination Cell, preferably co-located with U.S. forces in Okinawa or at Camp Humphreys, to facilitate intelligence fusion, flexible response options, and high-fidelity mission planning tailored to rear-area sabotage scenarios.

Second, the three allies should conduct recurring IW-focused command post and field exercises utilizing red teams modeled on North Korean SOF tactics. These exercises should simulate coordinated, multi-domain attacks on soft targets such as urban subway systems, water treatment plants, media broadcast centers, and hospital networks, integrating cyber-physical threats and information warfare effects.

Third, national-level civil-military resilience mechanisms must be elevated to strategic priority considering potential rear-area sabotage and covert attacks by North Korean special operations forces. In both Japan and South Korea, operators of critical infrastructureâ??especially in the energy, telecommunications, and transport sectorsâ??must be integrated into national defense drills that simulate SOF-led attacks, cyber-physical disruption, and disinformation.

Governments should establish public-private coordination frameworks to support rapid threat dissemination, infrastructure hardening, and continuity of operationsâ??particularly in sectors like energy, telecommunications, and transportation where private operators play a critical role. Models such as Japanâ??s Basic Act on Cybersecurity, which mandates coordination between the National Center of Incident Readiness and Strategy for Cybersecurity and key infrastructure companies, and

South Koreaâ??s Act on the Protection of Information and Communications Infrastructure, which provides the legal basis for incorporating private entities into cyber-physical resilience planning, offer valuable precedents.

At the municipal level, Japanâ??s Tokyo Metropolitan Government has conducted integrated disaster response and cybersecurity exercises with Tokyo Electric Power Company and NTT Group. In South Korea, while wartime-specific drills remain limited at the local level, city governments are increasingly engaged in public-private coordination for emergency communication and infrastructure resilience. Municipalities across both countries should build on these models to rehearse citizen alert protocols and emergency response, drawing on Cold War-era civil defense concepts while adapting them to the realities of modern hybrid threats.

This emphasis on resilience aligns with the argument advanced in *Winning Without Fighting: Resilience as National Security Imperative*, which proposes resilience as a fifth pillar of national power, alongside the traditional diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments. The authors contend that in an era defined by persistent geopolitical competition, climate disasters, pandemics, and technological shocks, the ability to endure and recover from crisis is as vital to national security as battlefield strength. In this view, resilience is not merely reactive but constitutes a form of strategic deterrenceâ??enabling societies to withstand disinformation campaigns, infrastructure sabotage, and irregular warfare without collapsing under pressure while raising the costs of an aggressorâ??s actions. For frontline democracies like Japan and South Korea, institutionalizing resilience is no longer a luxury but a strategic imperative.

Fourth, to ensure operational readiness, the U.S. and its allies should consider adapting existing prepositioning and joint-use frameworksâ??such as APS-4 in Korea and Japanâ??to irregular warfare needs. This could include forward-deploying defense kits tailored for tactics associated with irregular warfare, including comprising swarm drone counters, electronic warfare gear, and SOF detection tools near critical infrastructure nodes. While not yet standard practice, such adaptations represent a logical extension of current force posture amid growing irregular threats.

Finally, given the psychological and disinformation dimension of irregular warfare, the three nations must develop a trilateral information operations strategy to inoculate civil society against fear and misinformation. This strategy should include a unified crisis communication framework, joint public service messaging capabilities, and contingency plans for countering fake news, deepfakes, or manipulated casualty reports disseminated by adversaries during the opening stages of conflict.

Building Irregular Resilience Before Itâ??s Too Late

North Koreaâ??s most dangerous asset may not be its nuclear arsenal, but its ability to wage irregular warfare in the shadows of a broader regional conflict. As China draws U.S. attention toward Taiwan, Pyongyang may calculate that a fast, asymmetric strike against Japan and South Korea could shift the strategic initiative. The consequences of failing to prepare for such a scenario would be dire: strategic delay, domestic confusion, and allied disunity.

Only a unified, integrated response by the United States, Japan, and South Koreaâ??built around irregular warfare resilience and real-time operational coordinationâ??can blunt the effects of such a silent surge. The time to build that network of irregular resilience is nowâ??not in an emergency.

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Views expressed in this article solely reflect those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton Universityâ??s Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

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