



These are the areas likely inside the longest range artillery North Korea has deployed near Seoul. Most of Seoul is not in the line of fire. | Image via Nautilus Institute

As North Korea concludes its own month-long commemorations of the Korean War, Roger Cavazos examines what a renewed outbreak of hostilities would actually look like along the arms-clogged waist of the Korean peninsula. His essay, updated and expanded for SinoNK, recently ran on [East Asia Forum](#) on July 26. Cavazos originally presented the research at an East Asia Security Workshop in Tokyo, Japan, in November 2011; an in-depth, richly-illustrated, and highly-recommended version of the paper was featured on [Nautilus Institute](#) on June 26. Mars is in the house. -- Adam Cathcart, Editor-in-Chief

Korean Peninsula: Distinguishing Rhetoric from Reality

by Roger Cavazos

North Korea occasionally threatens to ‘turn Seoul into a Sea of Fire’. But can North Korea really do this? The short answer is no — but they can kill tens of thousands of people, start a larger war and cause a tremendous amount of damage before ultimately losing their regime. So it does not matter whether they can do it directly, since they are capable of igniting a sequence of events leading to widespread destruction and possibly a regime change in Pyongyang.



Moreover, previous Nuclear Weapon Free Zones (NWFZ) have usually required about three decades to implement after discussions begin during periods of stasis. As this is [a period of stasis between North and South Korea](#), new confidence-building measures should be explored, such as a Korea–Japan NWFZ.

If the North Korean People’s Army (KPA) were to start a doctrinal, conventional artillery barrage focused on [South Korean forces](#), we could expect to see around 3000 casualties in the first few minutes. The casualty rate would quickly drop as soldiers take cover, the surprise wears off and counter-battery fires slow down the KPA’s rate of fire. If the KPA engaged Seoul in a primarily counter-value fashion by firing into Seoul instead of primarily aiming at military targets, it would be a-strategic (no strategy other than to kill many people), which is likely to indicate desperation or a complete leadership breakdown – or both. Such a scenario would likely cause around 30,000 casualties in a short amount of time, with numbers of casualties also dropping very rapidly. Statistically speaking, almost 800 of those casualties would be foreigners, given Seoul’s international demographic. Chinese nationals make up almost 70 per cent of foreigners in Seoul and its northern environs, which means that the KPA might also kill 600 Chinese nationals, of which will include Chinese diplomats, multinational corporation leaders and children of ranking cadres studying in Seoul. While this reality is all very horrible and ghastly, it is unlikely the casualties will approach the ‘millions’ as the current rhetoric predicts.

Three primary factors account for the huge discrepancy between rhetoric and reality. First, only about one-third of Seoul is presently in range from artillery

along the DMZ, and the northern reaches of Seoul that are within artillery range have much lower population densities than its metropolitan area. Second, while the KPA has a tremendous number of artillery pieces, only a certain number are directed at Seoul. The KPA cannot place every weapon near Seoul because the rest of North Korea's expansive border and highly-regarded capital would be unguarded and even more vulnerable. Only about two-thirds of North Korea's artillery will open fire at a time; the rest will remain hidden or in reserve. Third, artillery shelters for 20 million people exist in the greater Seoul metropolitan area. After the initial surprise wears off, there will not be large numbers of exposed people. Even during the initial attack the vast majority of people will either be at work, at home or in transit with some modicum of protection. Few people will be standing in the middle of an open field without any sort of protection available nearby.

There are also three secondary factors that account for the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality. First, the only numbers available to the DPRK and to the rest of the world indicates a dud rate of 25 per cent. Second, shortly after the KPA artillery begins firing and the political decision has been made, South Korean artillery, air force and other military personnel will begin destroying artillery at an historic rate of one per cent per hour. South Korea has had approximately 62 years to locate every North Korean artillery tube using every sense available to man and machine. Finally, in order to move south from the DMZ and place the rest of Seoul at risk, the KPA must expose approximately 2500 thin-skinned vehicles each day along three well-defined transportation corridors. Otherwise, the KPA grinds to an almost immediate halt without any way to transport the fuel, ammunition and spare parts needed to continue moving south. Alternatively, the KPA can save ROK fuel stores and depots from destruction and scavenge fuel from the stores that are not destroyed.

Neither side has been able to unilaterally unify the peninsula, hence the 62-year stalemate, which will likely continue for another decade. But this stasis provides the flexibility for exploring alternative legal, political and economic models. If reunification goes ahead, [a Northeast Asia NWFZ](#) may provide a mechanism for dealing with any nuclear device found after Korean reunification and may assist in resolving many other issues involved in a newly reunified peninsula. At a minimum, discussing these issues now will strengthen existing channels and can create new, carefully controlled channels for interaction.

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