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The Pentagon's Favorite Demon

by Carlton Meyer

In 1991, as pressure was mounting in the U.S. Congress to cut the Cold War-era military budget, Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staffs General Colin Powell said: "I'm running out of demons. I'm running out of villains. I'm down to Castro and Kim Il Sung."

North Korea is still touted as a major threat to the United States, yet that conflict persists because of a refusal of the United States to agree to North Korea's demand that all foreign troops leave the Korean peninsula once an armistice is signed. As some U.S. troops are withdrawn from Iraq and Congress looks to cut budgets, generals are busy exaggerating threats.

North Korea's million man army is mostly a collection of conscripts with old weaponry who spend most of their time harvesting crops. Its millions of "reservists" are nothing more than men who once served in the military. Most of its tanks and aircraft are not operable and the remainder lack fuel supplies to operate more than a few hours. On the other hand, the 700,000 man South Korean army is well trained, equipped with modern equipment, and backed by over 5,000,000 well-trained reservists who can be called to duty within hours. South Korea has twice the population of the North, 40 times its economic power, and spends four times more on its military each year. South Korea has a massive industrial capacity and billions in foreign currency reserves to sustain a war, while North Korea has no industry and no money.

If North Korea attacked South Korea, the South Koreans would fight from mountainous and urban terrain which heavily favors defense, and complete air superiority would shoot up anything the North Koreans put on the road. Their old tanks would not be able to advance through the mountainous border since the South Koreans have fortified, mined, and physically blocked all avenues. North Korean infantry and engineers could not clear road paths while under heavy artillery fire.

The North Korean military could gain a few thousand meters with human wave assaults into minefields and concrete fortifications. These attacks would bog down from heavy casualties and a lack of supply. Thousands of South Koreans would suffer casualties from North Korean

artillery and commando attacks. Nevertheless, the North Korean army would not break through and its soldiers would soon starve.

A major North Korean objective would be to kill Americans. This is not difficult as American troops and their families are located at easily targeted bases that would be pummeled by North Korean SCUD missiles. If millions of Koreans start fighting, the 28,000 American troops in Korea would make no difference – only 4,000 are combat troops. Therefore, Americans who truly “support the troops” should demand that they be removed from Korea where they are just pawns who face death should a conflict erupt.

It is important to remember that the last Korean War involved Chinese forces with the latest Soviet equipment and supplies. China and Russia no longer aid North Korea, while South Korea has become a major trading partner. If North Korea employed a crude nuclear weapon, that would invite instant nuclear retaliation from the United States. North Korea lacks the technical know-how to build an intercontinental ballistic missile, despite the suggestions to the contrary from the National Missile Defense proponents in the United States.

If South Korea is truly concerned about the North Korean threat, it has the resources to expand its military and buy the latest military equipment from the United States, yet it spends a smaller portion of GDP on its military than the United States. Its government supports a large U.S. military presence since that provides thousands of jobs and billions of dollars in economic activity courtesy of the American taxpayer. North Korea’s government is unpredictable, but that is a problem for South Korea and its neighbors to address. Should fighting erupt, North Korea would quickly lose while an irritated China may seize its capital to remove its hermit leaders.

If South Koreans do not want to defend their nation, why should Americans? The United States should not play a major role in Korea, lest America becomes involved in a military conflict. The American people have as much at stake in Korea as the people of Brazil. The best way to defend America from potential North Korean terror attacks is to stop provoking their leaders with demands and threats. If Asian nations can’t resolve their differences and armed conflict erupts, the United States can buy manufactured goods elsewhere.

Promptly withdrawing American troops from Korea is the best option for peace, and may lead to Korean unification. This would save the United States billions of dollars a year and remove American troops and their families from a potential war zone. Americans should recall the logic of President Lyndon Johnson who said in 1964: “We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing themselves.”

Carlton Meyer is a former U.S. Marine Corps officer who participated in military exercises in Korea.

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