

North Korean Intelligence and the Making of a National-Security State¹

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The intelligence community of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) lies at the heart of what is arguably the most monolithic national-security state in the world. However, despite the North Korean government's undeviating veneer, the evolution of its intelligence establishment has been anything but linear or rigid. On the contrary, it has developed anarchically since the 1940s, without a consistent or even a reliable master-plan. Its bureaucratic growth and evolving operational doctrine have been shaped by frantic responses to actual or perceived emergencies, which have been either internal or external in nature. Because of the complex factors that shaped it, the current configuration of the DPRK's intelligence apparatus displays a strong structural bias toward high-profile targeted operations. The latter have the benefit of giving the regime political leverage abroad, without requiring substantive financial or infrastructural resources in return.

1. Operational Mission and Traits in DPRK Intelligence

The North Korean intelligence community's operational mission and command structure follow the standard conventions of intelligence practice. Crucially, they abide to the customary division between domestic and external agencies. Internally, the DPRK's intelligence organizations are tasked with counterintelligence, namely neutralizing intelligence operations by foreign agencies. They are also tasked with counterterrorism, with particular emphasis on securing the physical wellbeing of political leaders, protecting the country's economy and infrastructure from sabotage, and organizing civil defense (Bermudez 2005). The external components of the North Korean intelligence community inform decision makers on the regional and national level, by engaging in the multi-platform collection, analysis, and dissemination of

¹ Acknowledgement: The author wishes to acknowledge the invaluable feedback he received while writing this chapter from Katelyn Hodges, of Harvard University, and retired intelligence officer Ian Allen. Stephan Blancke (Editor)

information acquired from abroad. The latter is typically military, political, economic and technical in nature (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2013).

However, alongside conventional practices, the student of the North Korean intelligence community can reasonably expect to encounter a number of operational peculiarities that emanate from North Korea's idiosyncratic political character. Chief among those is the widespread use of informants in the domestic sphere. The latter can be safely assumed to be in line with centrally planned dictatorial regimes of the Cold War, such as communist-era East Germany or Romania. It has been estimated that East Germany's Ministry of State Security (commonly known as *Stasi*), which employed around 95,000 accredited officers, relied on as many as 100,000 informants for a population of 17 million throughout the Cold War (Deletant 1995). In communist-ruled Romania, the Department of State Security (referred to as *Securitate*) relied on over 70,000 informants for a population of just over 20 million (Lide 2005). Given that the current size of North Korea's population is roughly similar in size to those of East Germany and Romania during the Cold War, it can be reasonably inferred that the Asian country's internal intelligence agencies make regular use of tens of thousands of informants. According to one source, the latter could be estimated at nearly 400,000 during the opening stages of the Korean War (Gause 2012). This heavy reliance on informants sharply distinguishes the DPRK's intelligence community from most of its foreign equivalents, even within its immediate geographical region.

In the external sphere, it must be noted that that the DPRK remains officially at war with the Republic of Korea, and that border skirmishes, or even large-scale military action along the Korean Demilitarized Zone and the Northern Limit Line are regular occurrences (Nanto 2003). Consequently, the systematic subversion, or even outright elimination, of the national government in Seoul are central priorities of Pyongyang's military and diplomatic posture, and have been pursued with varying degrees of militancy since 1948. Given that the North Korean intelligence community is an integral component of the country's foreign-policy apparatus, it must be assumed that the goals of subverting or liquidating the government of South Korea form a central part of its operational doctrine (Bermudez 2005).

The student of the DPRK's intelligence community must also take into account the international standing of the country, which is routinely

referred to by its detractors as a “pariah” and a “recluse” (Wha 2007). However, the popular view that North Korea is diplomatically and economically isolated is not supported by scholarly evidence. If anything, outside observers frequently note that “the DPRK has historically displayed flexibility in its approach to foreign policy, while consistently seeking to preserve its political system and diplomatic autonomy [...] in the context of changing geopolitical environments” (Wertz and Kim 2014). It is illustrative to note that as of 2014, North Korea had bilateral diplomatic relations with 162 nations, and maintained offices in the headquarters of the European Union and the United Nations in Brussels, New York, Geneva and Paris (ibid.). However, because of the weak state of its national economy, Pyongyang has found it difficult to sustain extensive diplomatic representations abroad. The country had approximately 40 such diplomatic missions in 2014 (ibid.), a relatively small number in comparison to its southern rival, the Republic of Korea, which operated nearly 200 diplomatic missions around the world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs n.d.). Given that conventional human intelligence (HUMINT) activities typically originate from diplomatic representations situated abroad, it may be safely assumed that North Korea’s HUMINT operations are “problematic as a result of the DPRK’s expanding economic crisis” (Bermudez 2001), especially outside its immediate geographic region. One must consequently infer that Pyongyang makes regular use of its non-diplomatic overseas facilities for intelligence purposes; the latter include travel and transport bureaus, cultural and educational institutions, as well as trade offices and tourism facilities. However, there is no evidence linking the country to a significant history of non-official-cover (NOC) intelligence operations, as is the case with Russia.

2. Organization and Command Structure

It is often suggested that all power in the North Korean intelligence establishment rests with the country’s supreme leader, who is also general secretary of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) —the dominant political institution in the DPRK (Bermudez 2005). That is true in a symbolic sense; however, given the considerable size of the DPRK’s intelligence apparatus, one must assume that there are practical limits to its oversight by a single individual, no matter how powerful. Nonetheless,

it is true that the country's supreme leader is nominally in charge of all three bodies that rule over the intelligence community, namely the WPK, the Cabinet, and the National Defense Commission. Each of these organs commands a number of intelligence agencies with distinct missions.

The Central Committee of the WPK controls the Secretariat in Charge of South Korean Affairs, which is tasked with cultivating friendly relations with pro-DPRK groups in South Korea. Many of these tasks are carried out by the Secretariat's United Front Department (UFD), which largely functions as a public-relations bureau in the DPRK's dealings with North Korean expatriates —such as, for instance, members of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. It also maintains close links with foreign nationals who are supportive of the North Korean regime, among them Alejandro Cao, the Spanish president of the Korean Friendship Association (KFA). The UFD collaborates with the Secretariat's Liaison Department (also known as the Social-Cultural Department) in managing KFA chapters in countries like Norway, Switzerland, Turkey, and the US. However, the UFD is widely seen by South Korean intelligence agencies as an apparatus designed to spot and groom possible NOC agents among DPRK sympathizers living abroad (Suh 2015). This brings to mind the Soviet-led Communist International (commonly abbreviated as COMINTERN) of the interwar years, though clearly with a much more limited global traction. The WPK's Secretariat in Charge of South Korean Affairs also commands a small HUMINT and covert-operation training unit called the Operations Department, about which very little is known (Bermudez 2005).

Along with the WPK's Central Military Commission, the National Defense Commission (NDC) is considered the most powerful administrative institution in the country. That is because it controls the Korean People's Army, which, despite its name, refers to the entirety of the DPRK's armed forces. The NDC is far more powerful than its underlings in the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, who are mostly figureheads within the DPRK's complex government bureaucracy (Fitsanakis 2015). By virtue of controlling the military, the NDC supervises the work of the Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB). The RGB is sometimes described as the North Korean equivalent to the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Suh 2015). That is accurate to the extent that the Bureau is tasked with collecting foreign strategic and tactical intelligence in support of national-security goals. It is also true that the