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# Oceans Are Now Battlefields

## How the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Can Counter North Korea's Navy in an Evolving Age

Alan Cunningham

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**Abstract:** The North Korean armed forces are one of the main threats in the Asian geographic region and consistently have been a thorn in the side of Western allied Asian nations and the United States. In such a conflict with the North Koreans, the United States would, alongside others, take a lead role in countering North Korean naval forces. Taking into account the *Force Design 2030* and *2045* battleplans devised by the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, it is imperative to explore how the United States could work to combat North Korean forces in the near future. With the *Force Designs* and stated modernizations and improvements being performed in sea-based warfare, there is much more to do to make a strong military force that can strike against the North Koreans.

**Keywords:** U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, North Korea, *Force Design*, amphibious operations

### Introduction

Throughout world history, a country's power and might depended on a strong navy. From the ancient world to modernity a strong naval force has always been key in becoming dominant over regional and international commerce and trade, maintaining the upper hand in armed conflicts, and overall showcasing one's military and political might.<sup>1</sup>

While the U.S. Navy is still a formidable naval power, the perception of them being the strongest, greatest naval player around has dwindled in recent years. During the past few years, it has become the view of some military officials

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and academic observers that the U.S. Navy is still “very much a product of the war in the Pacific” continuing to be reliant on aircraft carrier technology while also having superior lift capabilities “[allowing] for the transport of firepower, fuel, food, and other cargo needed to sustain distant combat operations.”<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the Democratic Republic of North Korea’s (DPRK) Korean People’s Navy (KPN) has grown in both size and capability. North Korea’s military in total is the fourth largest in the world with the KPN having a substantial submarine fleet alongside experienced servicemembers if being “under-gunned and largely antiquated.”<sup>3</sup> Naturally, this poses a significant threat to the Republic of Korea (ROK) Navy, a stalwart American ally in the East China Sea region, but also to Japan and Taiwan. While the South Korean Navy will always have their focus on their longtime adversary to the North, they have begun designing their fleet to counter threats in the Sea of Japan and total Indo-Pacific region.<sup>4</sup>

With the problems inherent in the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, including the strategic, personnel, and modernizing issues that have arisen during the past decade and more, it is important for the United States to determine how to best defend their strategic interests and allies against a robust and dedicated enemy naval force.

## **The Capabilities of the KPN**

For most of the KPN’s history, their overall goal has been directed against the South Korean government and military, armed with an overall total goal to reunify the Koreas under one banner, the banner of a totalitarian socialist state. As such, in the past 70 years, North Korea has consistently and continually improved and expanded their military capabilities.

Historically, North Korea’s military forces were considered superior to those of South Korea’s in the late 1950s and into the 1960s though the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a primary economic and military benefactor combined with “decades of accelerated South Korean economic growth” have resulted in the South outpacing the North in most terms of ground, naval, and aerial warfare.<sup>5</sup> The ROK Navy specifically has an extensive surface warfare branch, a well-developed shipbuilding industry, and policies aimed on innovating their forces and bettering their maritime capabilities and, into the twenty-first century, focusing on improving their amphibious warfare and coastal defense operations.<sup>6</sup>

While South Korea’s armed forces, in total, are superior, North Korea’s Navy still has some advantages, namely in their submarine fleet. In 2000, it was the general consensus that North Korea’s submarine fleet was comprised of 35 “decentralized . . . outdated and slow” submarines which were capable of “inshore defense operations” but unequipped for any “sea control or denial and antisubmarine operations.”<sup>7</sup> As of 2020, North Korea has doubled their submarine fleet and, in spite of age, the submarine fleet is highly capable at

“[conducting] secret raids and infiltration missions” while continually improving their ability to launch ballistic missiles (potentially with nuclear capability) from afar.<sup>8</sup> In 20 years, North Korea’s submarine fleet has drastically improved and has become a key part of their maritime strategy to counter South Korean naval forces, civilian merchant vessels, and control the East Sea.

North Korea’s naval forces have also found much success in running “asymmetrical operations” against the South Korean Navy using a combination of conventional surface warfare vessels and mini/midget submarines alongside locally made civilian ships repurposed for intelligence gathering, coastal defense, or mine warfare.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, given North Korea’s endless search for nuclear superiority, the state’s arming of submarines with nuclear weapons would pose a serious threat to South Korean sovereignty, the whole of the Indo-Pacific, and make the North Koreans’ ability to make war against the South more effective.<sup>10</sup>

In a larger geopolitical and geographical context, however, China clearly would be the most dominant and serious military force. Whether there is a larger or substantial conflict in the South China Sea, the Yellow Sea, or the East China Sea, China would undertake efforts to be seen as a superior naval and military force. Nonetheless, the North Korean Navy, out of their desire to be taken seriously as a major geopolitical power in the region and by the United States, they would pose serious problems for South Korea, not in the sense of an invasion being probable, but rather that any kind of all out naval conflict would likely be prolonged and difficult given South Korea’s reliance on imported fuel and their current lack of an aircraft carrier.<sup>11</sup>

In any kind of conflict in Korean waters, the United States Navy would be a dominant force as history has shown and public statements have confirmed time and time again.<sup>12</sup> It is highly probable the United States would commit a mass of naval forces to defending South Korea from a substantial Northern attack.

## **Redesigning the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps**

From a policy perspective, the United States certainly desires to counter North Korean aggression and operations that threaten regional stability and security.

The *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* produced in February 2023 by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the main organization responsible for integrating all U.S. intelligence activities, the intelligence community as a whole found that North Korea remains a significant geopolitical threat to the United States and its interests by way of improving and expanding their nuclear and missile capabilities.<sup>13</sup> The *2022 National Security Strategy* developed by the Joseph R. Biden administration further advocated for continuing diplomatic overtures with North Korea alongside countering nuclearization and any further missile production.<sup>14</sup> Countering North Korean

aggression and military development remains a key aspect for U.S. policy going forward and the U.S. Navy will be at the forefront of any deterrence strategy.

Since 2020, the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps have been undergoing substantial changes to the way they conduct warfare through *Force Design 2045* (FD 2045) and *Force Design 2030* (FD 2030), respectively. The Marines' FD 2030 aims to "transform [the Corps'] traditional models for organizing, training, and equipping the force to meet new desired ends" in coordination with the Navy's own plans, specifically intending for the Marine Corps to become a "stand-in force [of] small but lethal forces" operating across all areas of maritime defense, being highly mobile, better attuned to existing supply structures, and produce a reduced signature on the battlefields of the sea, air, and land.<sup>15</sup> The Navy's FD 2045 looks to build on the "four foundational priorities [of] readiness, capabilities, capacity, and sailors" envisioning a hybrid fleet "more than 350 manned ships, 150 large, unmanned surface and subsurface platforms, and approximately 3,000 aircraft."<sup>16</sup> The greatest addition to this new battle plan for the Navy is the addition of unmanned surface and subsurface platforms, highlighting and indicating a need to integrate military technology deeper into the armed forces and national defense systems of the United States. Such a redesign is ambitious and not without its criticisms.

Looking first at FD 2030, the greatest concern from prior service leadership and defense experts was that the Marine Corps would back away "from its traditional focus on combined arms and global engagement" in addition that FD 2030 "is too focused on the Western Pacific, undermines traditional combined arms operations, makes the Marine Corps too small, and relies too heavily on unproven operational concepts."<sup>17</sup> This has been best stated in an op-ed piece for *The Hill* by Terrence R. Drake and Charles E. Wilhelm, the former assistant commandant of the Marine Corps and commander of U.S. Southern Command, respectively, who wrote "A nation without the capability to respond globally to emerging threats risks wider wars, not only with peer competitors but with a host of other secondary actors that are intent on attacking United States sovereignty and interests in areas other than the Western Pacific."<sup>18</sup>

As far as being overly focused on global security as opposed to looking at geopolitical threats, in a commentary for *War on the Rocks*, then Commandant of the Marine Corps, General David H. Berger, indicated that China posed the greatest threat and that FD 2030 would work to largely counter the Chinese threat, being mentioned the most in his piece.<sup>19</sup>

The main criticism about FD 2045 has been focused largely on cost. Some have found that other plans (developed by the Hudson Institute, labeled the "Hudson Proposal"), which built off FD 2045 were "more affordable than the Navy's plan by gradually rebalancing the fleet to incorporate more smaller, less-expensive ships and fewer large multimission combatants."<sup>20</sup> From a stra-

tegic perspective as well, the Hudson Plan's proposed fleet of unmanned and manned vessels

would generate more numerous and diverse effects chains compared to today's Navy, improving the force's adaptability and imposing greater complexity on enemy decision-making . . . would deliver more offensive munitions from vessels and aircraft over a protracted period, and defend itself more effectively using distribution, shorter-range interceptors and electric weapons . . . [and enhance] the fleet's amphibious, logistics and strategic sealift capacity . . . [resulting] in a Navy that can help the joint force prevail across a range of potential scenarios, including the most challenging ones such as an attempted Chinese attack on Taiwan.<sup>21</sup>

Elected officials have also noted the lack of budget consistency in FD 2045 as well as arguing that the plan should be able to rapidly integrate unmanned vessels "to support maritime intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, bring more munitions to a given theater, and fulfill a variety of other missions."<sup>22</sup>

With further updates to both the FD 2030 and the FD 2045, it is apparent that the design overall intends to better counter geostrategic threats in the Indo-Pacific region, moving away from conventional and accepted strategic thought processes, and better be able to interact with the modernizing, technologically changing world.

### **External and Internal Challenges Facing the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Redesign**

While the FD 2030 and FD 2045 deals with the strategic areas of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, improving supply systems, reorganizing the fleet in total, and better improving readiness, it is also important to note the external and internal challenges beyond these strategic, strictly military affairs, that pose roadblocks to how the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps implement FD 2030/45.

Naval officers, active duty and retired alike, have called attention to their belief that the United States has lost command and strategic superiority of the world's waterways.<sup>23</sup>

The Council on Foreign Relations has described in detail how China has engaged in a decades-long modernization of their naval forces, now becoming the largest naval force in the world and posing a serious threat to American and international security efforts.<sup>24</sup> Official U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) studies showcase the heavy strategic challenges the U.S. Navy faces from China while experienced Naval officers and academics highlighted the Chinese threat to American and Taiwanese security.<sup>25</sup> Finally, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) and numerous others have highlighted the serious sustain-

ment and more general national defense problems plaguing the entire military Service, including a lack of qualified personnel and training to budgeting and derelict aircraft.<sup>26</sup>

The recruiting crisis being experienced by the entire U.S. armed forces also has been affecting the U.S. Navy in particular, while the “nominations and promotions” of hundreds of military officers severely damages military readiness, posing massive internal struggles to any national defense and military readiness strategy.<sup>27</sup> Some of these, namely the desire to counter China, better defend America’s waterway superiority, and better sustain forces in the field, are being addressed by the *Force Designs*, even though this may not have appeared readily apparent when the plans were first initiated.<sup>28</sup> But other factors, such as the recruiting and retention crisis and the political challenges to U.S. military appointments, are still factors that serve to harm the U.S. military and the national defense framework of the United States.

On top of this, a new U.S. Navy and Marine Corps force must be willing and able to counter any threats from North Korea’s brown water navy against South Korea and Japan.

### **Countering North Korea amid *Force Designs* 2030/2045**

The benefit with both FD 2030 and FD 2045 is that they make a strong push and focus on the Indo-Pacific region. While FD 2030 focuses largely on countering Chinese aggression, this is quite understandable given China is the primary near peer adversary in the region and is substantially more advanced (economically, militarily, cyberspatially) than the North Koreans.

In spite of the criticisms laid upon the FD 2030 and 2045, both serve to put an emphasis on the Indo-Pacific that will affect how the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps would respond to a North Korean incursion or attempts to control the waterways and heighten tensions around South Korea. Some have found that, under FD 2030, the Marine Corps would become better able to share intelligence and information with Indo-Pacific allies and, using smaller reconnaissance units with unmanned trucks equipped with antiship missile launchers, could offer “new means of disruption.”<sup>29</sup> Writing in the Asian focused security magazine *The Diplomat*, the author, a research intern with the Stimson Center, found that in the context of Japanese maritime and geopolitical security against China

the USMC’s means of diverting enemy forces for fleet maneuvers is innovative and complements Japan’s capabilities [as well as] developing naval components of one of the United States’ most capable allies in the region, given shared concerns over amphibious operations and protection of Japanese island territory . . . *Force Design 2030* focuses on

balancing the power of an increasingly capable China with allies that complement U.S. strategy by taking opportunities to expand cooperation . . . [it] is both innovative and necessary for the unique challenges the U.S. and its allies face in Indo-Pacific region and elsewhere.<sup>30</sup>

While this piece focuses on Japan in the context of a Chinese threat, this can readily be applied to North Korean activity against both Japan and South Korea. The entire purpose of FD 2030 is to enhance global cooperation with allies in the Indo-Pacific and better improve information sharing operations among the United States and its allies. This would better allow the South Korean military and government access to timely, up to date, and accurate intelligence on North Korean activity in addition to Chinese activity in the region. As well, given North Korea's contesting of islands under the control of both South Korea and Japan, some of FD 2030's recommendations for refocusing the Corps on smaller reconnaissance units equipped with new antiship technologies would prove effective in countering North Korea's lesser naval force.<sup>31</sup>

This being said, both FD 2030 and FD 2045 provide plans and a framework in which North Korea could also be countered. This is one of the benefits of *Force Design 2030* and *2045* in that the focus on Indo-Pacific and countering China actually serves to improve relations with the South Korean and Japanese governments and their militaries and can help to counter North Korea's aggression along the waterways.

However, it cannot be understated that this policy of using military weapons and increasing a presence against the North Koreans should be taken with care. It is well shown that taking a hard military line against the North Koreans without any kind of diplomatic overture or policy is ineffective and would only serve to push the North Korean government away and increase nuclearization and tensions between the two nations.<sup>32</sup> The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, in going forward with FD 2030 and 2045 should take note of this and heed that the "preemptive use of military force . . . be considered only when there is high confidence that a large-scale attack by the North is imminent."<sup>33</sup> In a time when North Korea is also actively forcing military encounters, it is important that the United States respond tactfully and in consideration with all aspects of their policy to counter North Korean activity.<sup>34</sup>

Instead, actively containing nuclearization efforts, putting human rights and humanitarian aid at the forefront of any North Korean policy, and maintaining an open diplomatic dialogue as well as formulating a military policy of deterrence against the North Koreans is perhaps the only way in which to ensure stability in the region and work in concert with American interests in the Indo-Pacific geographic region.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

The intent and aims to modernize, innovate, and adapt the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps to the changing world is a valiant and important mission. As the world sees military technology innovate on a level and scale unparalleled in human history and witness, U.S. adversaries develop their own methods for obtaining serious equipment and weaponry. It is important that the United States defend its own borders, keep up to date on military equipment, and defend our neighbors and geostrategic risks as possible.

With North Korea, the country is innovating militarily and continuing their decades-long desire to be taken seriously and seen as a formidable power in the Indo-Pacific and more localized geographical region. This likely will not stop under a new leader or government and will continue. As such, a policy of containment, denuclearization, and strong diplomatic policy must be continued alongside a form of military deterrence against North Korean activities.

FD 2030 and FD 2045, in spite of much of the well-meaning and valid criticism laid against these force designs, would serve to help the United States in countering North Korean aggression and serving as a beneficial deterrent to North Korean naval action against South Korea or other American allies in the region. In this new age of geopolitical conflicts and crises, which takes a radically different stance from previous U.S. military engagements focusing on counterterrorism and insurgencies, these force designs would serve the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps well in countering North Korea. But it must be performed in a way that “[takes] stock of those changes and ensur[es] that the U.S. Marine Corps [and U.S. Navy] has enough depth and flexibility to respond to a wide range of contingencies.”<sup>36</sup>

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