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Intel experts: N. Korea a 'hard target'

By [Jeremy Kirk](#), Stars and Stripes

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SEOUL — As the United States looks for ways to improve intelligence collection, one of the target countries — North Korea — remains a sealed, difficult challenge, experts say.

The Bush administration is studying its intelligence capabilities and how it collected information on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Also being studied: North Korea. The report is due in March 2005.

U.S. military officials express confidence in existing intelligence. During a February Internet discussion, U.S. Forces Korea commander Gen. Leon LaPorte was questioned about the accuracy of intelligence on North Korea in light of the failings in Iraq. LaPorte ticked off a list of what the United States knows about the North Korean military: 70 percent is poised south of Pyongyang; it has the world's largest special operations force; it has an "asymmetrical threat" including biological and chemical weapons.

But, analysts say, a lack of on-the-ground operatives and satellite photo limitations make it hard to learn if North Korea's trump card — likely a handful of crude nuclear weapons — is functional or close to being complete. It's a guessing game made difficult by a regime that's shut itself off from the outside world, a clever leadership that knows it's being watched and knows how to deceive.

"Most recent assessments emphasize that North Korea has assembled weapons," Susan A. Squassoni, a specialist in national defense, wrote for the Congressional Research Service last month. "Information about North Korea's nuclear weapons production has depended largely on remote monitoring and defector information, with mixed results."

But well-documented is North Korea's ability to infiltrate South Korea. With expert passport forgeries, midnight runs in mini-submarines and tunnels under

the Demilitarized Zone, agents have pierced South Korean society.

A hard target

The United States never has had a consulate, let alone an embassy, in North Korea, as the two countries have had no formal diplomatic relations. Intelligence experts call it a “hard target.”

From a spying standpoint, lack of the U.S. facility is a real disadvantage. Even during the Cold War, the United States never would have pulled out of its Moscow embassy because of the post’s value, said Carol Medlicott, a former intelligence research specialist who worked for the FBI on North Korean issues from 1987 to 2000.

“That’s always been a real weakness,” said Medlicott, who now works for the Centre for Counterintelligence and Security Studies and teaches at the University of California Los Angeles. “We need the window there, and we need the diplomatic channel for dialogue.”

Third-party countries with embassies, such as former Soviet-bloc countries, can be fertile opportunities. Someone on the ground must confirm satellite imagery taken from overhead, as items seen from the air can be much different. The North Koreans are known for their ability to create dummy missiles and conceal military facilities.

Mark Fazio was a former linguist with the U.S. Army who used to ride in slow reconnaissance propeller planes along the Demilitarized Zone, collecting signal and imagery intelligence. At night across North Korea, there would be scant activity — a few vehicles moving across a large, dark landscape — he said.

The North Koreans know they are being watched. In fact, Fazio said, they occasionally turned on their anti-aircraft radar to let U.S. planes know that they knew they were being watched.

“I have to believe that they probably have ways to move equipment without us noticing,” said Fazio, now a foreign exchange banker in Boston. “They are moving stuff. We just can’t see it.”

It reinforces the need for human intelligence, an area the U.S. has acknowledged is a weakness.

“The problem is it’s almost impossible to get a legal traveler in North Korea,” said a retired former U.S. Army intelligence official who worked in South Korea

for 10 years. “It’s hard to identify people who travel back and forth to North Korea.”

U.S. intelligence has not had much success in befriending North Koreans living in Japan and belonging to nationalist groups such as the Chosen Soren, the official said. The few North Koreans allowed to travel abroad have high loyalty and merely string along Western officials seeking to use them, the official said.

CIA Director George Tenet, who has come under fire for the U.S. failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, cited North Korea as an intelligence victory in a February speech at Georgetown University. “It was patent analysis of difficult-to-obtain information that allows our diplomats to confront the North Korean regime about their pursuit of a different route to a nuclear weapon that violated international agreements,” he said.

The best intelligence, many experts say, is merely “open source,” the term for easily found unclassified media that can be mined for details about the regime. South Korean media sometimes has fine detail about North Korea that would be classified information in U.S. circles, Medlicott said.

Spying on U.S. bases

South Korean authorities have admitted for years that North Korea has a network of “sleeper agents” in the South — up to thousands of low-level operatives who feed information back to the regime. A few years ago, base officials stopped a Korean man working in a tailor shop in a 2nd Infantry Division camp who was pacing off distances between buildings, Fazio said. When they went to his shop, they found the man was creating artillery grids on maps, he said.

And when investigators checked out a North Korean mini-submarine in 1998 off the South’s east coast, they found high-quality passports and documents, said Fazio, who saw the material.

The U.S. military publishes rafts of information on its tactics and doctrine, all of which can be tapped by the other side, Garrett said.

“The U.S. military is not very good about hiding its capabilities,” Garrett said.

But in the end, it means little for the Korean situation. North Korea has enough conventional weapons to threaten Seoul and can launch a pre-emptive attack that would turn Seoul into a “sea of fire,” as North Korea once threatened, Medlicott said.

“We are really kind of held hostage by North Korea,” she said.

And the spy game never provides clear answers, just more pieces of a puzzle that grows larger, especially so with North Korea.

“The reality with intelligence is sometimes you are going to be right and sometimes you are going to be wrong,” Garrett said.

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