North Korean Sony Hack

By: Coleton Sanheim, Jun Bae, Jonny Ngai

Southern Alberta Institute of Technology

Submitted to: Dr. Stuart White PhD.

& Karen Riley BEd. BA (Hons), MEd.

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Abstract:

This essay will outline the North Korea Sony hack and the implications of the event. It will make speculations based on the information available about North Korea’s motivations and the methods that they used in this attack. As well it will be referencing classical thinkers such as Sun-Tzu; where we talk about espionage and relate it to the modern cyberwarfare field. Machiavelli; where we talk about the control of the state and how North Korea controls its citizens using cruelty and fear and how it attempts to control its adversaries. And Clausewitz; where we discuss his ideas about friction and center of gravity and how the attackers understood those ideas in this event. In the end, this essay will provide an answer to how well North Korea did, based on the ideas of these classical thinkers.

*Key Words:* North Korea, Sony, Cyber, Attack, Hack, Sun-Tzu, Machiavelli, Clausewitz,

Outline of the Event / Introduction:

In 2014 Sony Pictures got hit with cyber attacks when publicizing the planned date of release of the movie “The Interview”. The movie depicts a satire where the current North Korean dictator, Kim Jong Un, is assassinated in a humiliating way. In response, the North Korean UN Ambassador, Ja Song Nam, releases this statement "The United States authorities should take immediate and appropriate actions to ban the production and distribution of the aforementioned film; otherwise, it will be fully responsible for encouraging and sponsoring terrorism.”(Ben Beaumont-Thomas 2014) Ja Song Nam said that releasing such a film is akin to an act of war, but these complaints fell of deaf ears as later on Barack Obama stated that “No, I don’t think it was an act of war”(Obama 2014, 13:19-13:22). After some time, a hacker group which was speculated to be North Korean, started to retaliate with mass data clearing, terroristic threats, and extortionate threats. Many of Sony’s movies that had not been released to the public were released online for free, as well internal communications were published for the public to see. These cyber attacks were majorly successful due to the lack of security within Sony Pictures. Many major movie theaters chains were also threatened with terroristic threats relating to 9/11 such as, “the world will be full of fear. Remember the 11th of September 2001. We recommend you to keep yourself distant from the places at that time.”These threats were initially effective and caused Sony and major movie theater chains to not release the movie, but after witnessing how the United States government acted, and hearing the public outcry, Sony did release the movie. They chose to release the movie on a smaller scale, opting to have it go straight to blu-ray, online viewing, and select movie theaters. While these attacks were initially contributed to the hacker groups “God'sApstls” and “The Guardians of Peace” the United States government publicly announced that North Korea was the perpetrator. In an end-of-year press speech, Obama stated that he felt that Sony made a mistake in pulling the film and he lectures to the producers to "not get into a pattern where you are intimidated by these acts''(Obama 2014, 10:52-11:00) he continues saying that "we will respond proportionally and we will respond in a place and time and manner that we choose."(Obama 2014, 13:37-13:45) The hack raised many questions on free speech and the first amendment, how foreign parties can influence free speech, and the responsibility that the U.S.A. has to protect local corporations from foreign attacks. The main question to be asked is based on the teachings of classical military thinker’s such as Sun-Tzu, Machiavelli and Clausewitz, was this attack effective in achieving the goals that North Korea tried to accomplish?

Sun-Tzu and Strategy:

Sun Tzu’s fundamental principles of effective warfare are reflected in the North Korean Cyber Attacks. Though not completely represented, the cyber attack shows pieces of his strategic writings and tactics at work. While the attacks were initially successful in achieving their goals, in the end they did nothing but tarnish North Korea’s, and by association, Kim Jong Un’s, infamous reputation further by showing the world how threatened they felt they were at the possibility of being exposed .Though the North Korean UN Ambassador, Ja Song Nam, did try to reason the negatives of such a film by stating "to allow the production and distribution of such a film on the assassination of an incumbent head of a sovereign state should be regarded as the most undisguised sponsoring of terrorism as well as an act of war."(Ben Beaumont-Thomas 2014) his complaints were not deemed accurate or reasonable. While North Korea did achieve a temporary victory in the beginning it easily gets overshadowed by the motives of the attack in general. Sun Tzu teaches us that a superior general doesn’t get affected by pride based attacks, and one should never get taunted by the enemy because one who is emotionally roused thinks far less and acts based off pride rather than one who is of sound mind which Sun Tzu(1993) reinforces by saying “if your opponent is of choleric temper, seek to irritate him.”(Chapter 1) He is of the mindset that an opponent who thinks less is easier to manipulate and destroy. The cyber attack was initially successful, because of the ways they employed hackers and the tactics they acted upon such as dropping the name of other prominent hacking groups like “God'sApstls” and “The Guardians of Peace” as a diversion to allow wider movement and greater action. Sun Tzu(1993) reinforces this tactic by stating the whole secret lies in confusing the enemy, so that he cannot fathom our real intent.”(Chapter 3) and “all warfare is based on deception.”(Chapter 1) This attack succeeded initially because North Korea attacked Sony Pictures in a place where they themselves weren’t prepared for, they launched an attack upon their company computer systems, left threats and deleted hard drives. Sun Tzu reinforces this method of attack by stating “ fight the enemy where they aren’t,” which means attack an enemy where they aren’t properly protected. These types of attacks were initially very effective as they used many of Sun Tzu’s teachings, but its effectiveness wore off quickly as the United States had already seen the method of infiltration they used and publicly named North Korea for the attack. This allowed Sony Pictures, and many movie theatres, to start releasing the film to the public as they knew that they had the defense of the country behind them. Though the North Korean attack had many effective measures the very attack itself was against Sun Tzu’s teachings as it provided the nation no benefit at all and was motivated by pride “hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush him.” (Chapter 1).

Machiavelli and Cruelty/Fear:

While the initial ways in which the attack was done may have been effective, the reasons behind them and the way that North Korea’s leaders control their state is, according to Machiavelli, done poorly. One thing North Korea does do that Machiavelli (2008) advised is the use of cruelty, as he said “It is better to be feared than loved.” (page 58) When in the business of running a nation, one’s goals can be accomplished more easily if the population has fear for the leader as opposed to love. Machiavelli makes an example of Cesare Borgia, who’s cruelty brought peace and prosperity to Romagna (page 57), this illustrates that Machiavelli advised the use of cruelty, and relates to how the leaders of North Korea run their nation. Likely, this is what this attack is attempting to accomplish. It aims to prove to the citizens of North Korea, and the world at large, that they are a force to be feared, and they hoped that this would further their control over their populace, and the international community. North Korea very clearly wanted to instill fear in the American based company and movie theaters with threats of terrorism and specifially 9/11, the largest terrorist attack ever recorded on American soil. However, while this may have been effective at first, in the end the opposite goal was achieved; Sony still released the movie (albeit in a limited way), some movie theaters still played it and people still went to go see it. If North Korea’s goal really was trying to use cruelty to cause fear to increase their control, then they failed. All this attack managed to accomplish from this perspective is draw more attention to the possibility of a cyber threat, and put America on guard from any possible future attacks.

Machiavelli (2008) did advocate for the use of cruelty and fear, however the way that North Korea uses these ideas is antithetical to what he wrote. For one, Machiavelli displayed that while being cruel and employing fear were effective, it was better to appear to be merciful and generous. “Let me say that every prince must desire to be considered merciful and not cruel” (page 57). From an American perspective, North Korean leaders are infamous for being cruel, and in no way are considered loved or generous, this leads to other nations, especially America, regarding them poorly and their power over international affairs is lessened as a result. Even though they are widely regarded as cruel and fear inducing this worked against them as the American people were so ideologically driven against them that they supported this movie out of hatred for North Korea. This is because North Korea utilizes cruelty incorrectly, Machiavelli described how there is cruelty that can be helpful to a leader and cruelty that can be detrimental to a leader. According to Machiavelli, one who used cruelty briefly and out of necessity, and most importantly for the overall good of the people, is one who has used cruelty correctly (page 33). Those however that use cruelty incorrectly continue to use it or even increase the amount of it as time goes on (page 34), Machiavelli is clear here in his thoughts of when and how cruelty should be used, and North Korea does this poorly. First, perpetrating an attack of this scale not on its adversaries but instead a private company about a movie release that insulted the leader of North Korea, is not a necessity to what Machiavelli described. Second, the cruelty was not brief, it did not stop with the initial attack but instead continued when Sony changed their minds and decided to release the movie, theaters were threatened with terroristic attacks. Finally, the cruelty was not used for the good of the people, but instead to satisfy the ego of Kim Jong Un, the leader of North Korea and who the movie in question personally insulted. If instead North Korea was merciful, allowed the movie or even supported it, then they would have been held in a much more favorable light and their goals, such as increased control over their populace, would have been achieved.

Clausewitz and Friction/Information:

“Everything is simple in War, but the simplest thing is difficult” (chapter 7 Friction in War, pg.84). In 2014 a hacker group identified as “The Guardians of Peace'' initiated a cyber attack on Sony Pictures by hacking into their computer systems. The hack released confidential employee information, requested Sony turn over important data, leaked unreleased Sony movies, decimated Sony computer hard drives and demanded that the upcoming movie “The Interview” not be released to the public. The hackers went so far as to issue terrorist threats to theaters across the USA if they decided to premiere the movie. It was quickly discovered that the cyber attack originated from North Korea, and Sony Pictures was left with a decision to make on how to react to the threats.

Due to the severity of the cyber attack, the decision to respond seems simple and obvious. However, Sony needed to consider a variety of factors. If they ignore the hackers’ demands to not release the movie, and give up their data, it could result in bigger threats from North Korea and more attacks on the company. The hackers have already proven they are capable and have the ability to hack into the system and completely lock the computers down holding the data as a hostage and causing immense damage. Even if they listened to the hackers’ demands, there is no guarantee that their data is safe. If Sony yields and decides not to release The Interview, then other nations or companies might think they are weak and will listen to demands made by criminals. While Sony is a private company, the demands made were traced back to the North Korea government. Because of the government involvement, listening and complying with demands such as those that were made could set a precedent that the U.S.A. negotiates with terrorists and criminals and could make their government appear vulnerable.

Another point that North Korea is making is that they are capable of hacking any giant private company or government system and remind them they will execute their plan if there is harm on North Korea’s leader and the country. It tells other nations to be prepared for a plan where North Korea hacks their system and makes serious demands. It shows that anybody could end up in Sony’s situation. “Friction is the only conception which in a general way corresponds to that which distinguishes real War from War on paper.” (Chapter 7, Friction in War, pg.83). Even with massive threats from North Korea, Sony still released “The Interview” for some theatres, straight to blu-ray and for online viewing. North Korea had envisioned a different outcome to their attack. The difficulty of seeing things correctly, which is one of the greatest sources of friction in War, makes things appear quite different from what was expected. On North Korea’s plan blueprint, they would have thought Sony would completely follow North Korea’s demand without any objection.In reality Sony got pressured from governments and other nations observing the situation and inputting their opinions on how they should carry out their actions. Sony was advised not to completely surrender and give in to all demands, so that they could show North Korea is not in control of them. North Korea only saw what would be the most ideal situation they would be in instead of seeing an outcome where they could have made some adjustments on their ransomware plan. Even though the attacks are state sponsored, it felt like the attacks were carried out without much consideration because their goal was probably to stop the movie completely being released, but that failed due to lack of solid information gathering and their lack of setting up the plan considering all the other possibilities. In conclusion, the attacks failed to completely suppress Sony’s release of “The Interview'' despite all the ransomware threats and warnings. The plan might have been executed swiftly and effectively with more preparation, but they did show the world that they wield massive power on cyber ability where they can and will use their power to gain their goals.

Conclusion:

During the initial stages of this attack it would seem that North Korea’s plans were strategically correct; however, near the later stages of the attack flaws started to appear and after a brief inspection of the attack itself, the motive and reasoning that were behind the attack were based purely off the pride and emotions of the state and not for the benefit of it or it’s people. While the attack had elements within that Sun-Tzu would laud, the fact that the main motivation seemed to be keeping the pride of North Korea’s leader intact means that despite sound tactics, the operation as a whole was flawed. Machiavelli advocated strongly for the application of fear and cruelty in the ruling of a state, but the way he proposed it be done is the opposite of what North Korea displays, and the use of cruelty in this attack in particular is done poorly. Finally, with an analysis of Clausewitz’s teachings, the tactics that they use are effective but the overall plan and strategy for this attack is severely flawed. Overall, at first the attack seemed to be effective and utilizing good strategies and demonstrating a healthy amount of planning, but with a deeper analysis of these classical thinker’s ideas it is overwhelmingly clear that this attack was anything but well done.

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