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Military Escalation in Korea

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INTRODUCTION

Tensions ran perilously high on the Korean peninsula in the months after the sinking of the South Korean warship *Cheonan* on March 26, 2010, which claimed the lives of forty-six sailors. An international investigation subsequently attributed the incident to a North Korean torpedo attack, prompting both South Korea and the United States to impose new punitive measures on the regime in Pyongyang and to conduct a series of high-profile naval exercises to deter further provocations. These actions elicited an especially vituperative response from North Korea, including the threat to unleash a “retaliatory sacred war.”

Other than a brief barrage of coastal artillery fire and the detention of a South Korean fishing boat that had strayed into its waters, North Korea took no further action and eventually toned down its bellicose rhetoric. South Korea’s offer in September 2010 to dispatch humanitarian aid to the North to help those stricken by flooding, as well as other reciprocated gestures such as the resumption of planning for inter-Korean reunions of divided families, have helped ease tensions. This latest crisis appears to be following the same trajectory as earlier periods of heightened North-South hostility that have erupted and then subsided without serious military escalation.

This pattern of restraint, however, cannot be taken for granted. Further provocations by North Korea as well as other dangerous military interactions on or around the Korean peninsula remain a serious threat and carry the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation. Moreover, changes under way in North Korea could precipitate new tensions and herald a prolonged period of instability that raises the possibility of military intervention by outside powers. The United States has a major stake in preserving peace and stability in Korea and must be prepared to manage new challenges and contingencies that could arise with little or no warning.

THE CONTINGENCY

A new and potentially dangerous crisis could erupt in Korea over the next twelve to eighteen months for at least three reasons.

First, although tensions have subsided in the wake of the *Cheonan* incident, an atmosphere of recrimination and mistrust remains. U.S. and Republic of Korea (ROK) forces are on high alert to respond to potential future provocations. Until a prolonged period of calm returns, the risk of another deadly clash between North Korea and South Korea remains real. Further naval incidents along the disputed Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the Yellow Sea are certainly conceivable and arguably more likely now that South Korea has modified its rules of engagement to permit more rapid response to North Korean incursions. Stepped-up intelligence gathering operations along the periphery of North Korea might also be viewed as intolerably intrusive and elicit a military response, as has happened in the past. Similarly, the interdiction of suspected illicit North Korean goods and materials under the UN sanctions regime might spark another military clash.

Second, North Korea may engage in a renewed campaign of provocative behavior for domestic reasons. The sharp contraction of economic assistance from South Korea and other sanctions imposed by the international community have caused considerable pain to North Korea, pushing it into a deeper—and arguably unhealthy—dependence on Chinese support. As it did with previous nuclear and missile testing, the North may see carefully calibrated provocations against South Ko-

rea, Japan, and by extension the United States, as its only recourse to lessen the diplomatic and economic pressure that has been brought to bear on it. Renewed missile testing and further improvements by North Korea to its nuclear weapons capability—such as increased production of fissile material, weaponization of devices, and operational deployments—would be the more obvious ways for it to intimidate the principal players into making concessions.

Alternatively, various kinds of “external action” may be carried out to support the leadership succession process that is underway in Pyongyang. Kim Jong-Il’s third son—Kim Jong-Un—has emerged as the heir apparent, judging by his “coming out” at the Korean Workers Party conference in September 2010. He is young and inexperienced, however, and many observers believe that his leadership credentials will need to be burnished to strengthen his legitimacy as future ruler of North Korea, especially among the senior ranks of the military on whom he will rely for support. Some have speculated that the sinking of the *Cheonan* was authorized for this very purpose; there have even been reports that Kim Jong-Un personally ordered the attack. Just as his father planned and authorized a series of major provocations in the 1970s while waiting in the wings to assume full power, Kim Jong-Un may do the same. Such incidents might include, for example, more covert submarine attacks; the seizure of an uninhabited but contested island in the Yellow Sea; special forces infiltrations designed to embarrass the Lee Myung-bak administration at critical moments and rattle investor confidence in South Korea; and interference with the operation of the joint Kaesong industrial park.

Third, the succession process may not proceed as planned. Kim Jong-Il could pass from the scene before the designated leadership arrangements have been consolidated. In such circumstances it is not hard to imagine how the new leadership—whether it is Kim Jong-Un in sole charge or as part of a regency arrangement—could be challenged by others in the regime, either out of personal ambition or because of policy differences. Such disagreements might be triggered or exacerbated by other factors, such as an acutely deteriorating economic situation that precipitates an internal competition for scarce economic resources, or a major humanitarian crisis that provokes internal criticism of the new leader’s stewardship.

Political instability of this kind could manifest itself in several unwelcome ways for North Korea’s neighbors. For example, the leadership could stage military provocations to fan an external threat and distract the elites in Pyongyang while also providing the pretext to purge elements threatening to the regime. Kim Il-Sung, the founding father of North Korea, did just that by exploiting a campaign of external provocation in the late 1960s to consolidate his leadership at a particularly contentious time. An internal power struggle could also lead to external appeals for assistance by particular factions, border incidents involving high-level defections, rogue military operations designed to foment a counterresponse against the regime, mass killings, and ultimately widespread civil strife. Depending on either the amount of spillover or level of life-threatening internal unrest, South Korea, the United States, and China would all come under considerable pressure from various domestic constituencies as well as international organizations to intervene and restore order. Should the North Korean regime begin to lose control over the rest of the country, this imperative would likely prove irresistible especially for South Korean leaders, who would likely see it as a historic but possibly fleeting opportunity to reunify the peninsula.

The risk of serious military escalation varies for each of these three scenarios, with the first having the lowest and the third the highest. Although everyone concerned wants to prevent a major outbreak of hostilities—South Korea fears losing its hard-won prosperity and a much weaker

North knows that another war would almost certainly result in its demise—the potential for miscalculation, misunderstanding, and unintended escalation cannot be dismissed. Indeed, a combination of factors could propel a crisis beyond what the principal protagonists might initially expect or desire.

With emotions still raw after the *Cheonan* sinking, the ROK military will certainly not wish to appear intimidated or impotent in the face of apparent provocations, especially if the North's responsibility were strongly suspected. South Korean president Lee Myung-bak will likely also come under considerable pressure—at least from conservative elements in his part—to follow through on his declaration, delivered in a national address, that “From now on, the Republic of Korea will not tolerate any provocative act by the North and will maintain a principle of *proactive* deterrence. ... If our territorial waters, airspace, or territory are militarily violated, we will *immediately* exercise our right of self-defense” [emphasis added]. It is worth noting that the ROK's military capacity and latitude for independent action has expanded considerably since it gained peacetime operational control.

How the North would subsequently respond to retaliation by the South is difficult to predict, especially under the current circumstances. Potential voices of restraint in the leadership could be muted or drowned out by those wishing to avoid any suggestion of weakness or indecision during this sensitive transition period. Some elements in the regime or military may also feel emboldened to engage in brinkmanship with the South, not only because Seoul and its environs remain vulnerable to devastating artillery fires but also because North Korea has now acquired a rudimentary nuclear deterrent. China's unambiguous support of North Korea during the *Cheonan* crisis may also have added to a sense of empowerment. Finally, Pyongyang could miscalculate Washington's resolve to support its South Korean ally in a serious crisis, believing it to be distracted by other military commitments and having no stomach for a confrontation with North Korea that would almost certainly risk aggravating relations with China. The United States, however, remains no less (and arguably more) sensitive to maintaining the credibility of its alliance commitments at this time. Washington also has its own red lines when it comes to North Korean behavior. These are most clearly delineated with regard to the transfer of weapons of mass destruction, especially to nonstate actors. Less clear is U.S. willingness to tolerate potential North Korean “saber rattling” involving its embryonic intercontinental ballistic missile program, especially if it were carried out in conjunction with further nuclear testing.

Management of a serious crisis on or around the Korean peninsula could also be complicated by other factors. Pyongyang's grasp of potentially fast-moving events could be quite limited and slow, given the North's relatively unsophisticated intelligence and communication systems. Furthermore, the limited options for communicating with the North Korean leadership could hinder attempts to bring a rapidly deteriorating situation under control. Since the *Cheonan* incident, the North has shut down the military-to-military hotline established in 2004 for maritime emergencies in the Yellow Sea; it also regularly turns off the UN fax machine communications link at Panmunjon to demonstrate its displeasure. (The United States recently had to use a bull horn to announce planned military exercises.) Other North-South military and intelligence links are evidently ad hoc and not reliable for rapid communications. Likewise, the use of various diplomatic channels, including those through the New York DPRK Liaison office, are likely to be slow given that they are maintained by the North Korean foreign ministry, which would in turn have to relay messages to the leadership.

WARNING INDICATORS

Divining North Korea's intentions is widely considered to be one of the hardest intelligence challenges in the world. Nothing illustrates this more than the *Cheonan* incident and its aftermath. There were evidently no prior indications to suggest an elevated risk of an attack, while North Korea's subsequent public declarations of intent have gone more or less unfulfilled. The task is not hopeless, however. Although preparations for covert actions would for obvious reasons be difficult to detect in advance, South Korea and the United States should be mindful of particular dates on the calendar—notable Korean anniversaries, birthdays, planned exercises, and major political events—when a provocation might resonate positively in the North or negatively in the South. Certain kinds of provocative behavior such as missile and nuclear tests are also usually detectable days if not weeks in advance. Significant changes to the alert status and operational readiness of major military units are difficult to hide and can provide important if not always definitive evidence of intent. Signs of impending political instability in the North may also be discernable from a host of indicators such as an exodus of refugees, high-level defections and sudden promotions, violent swings in the price of basic goods, the disappearance of prominent officials, announced purges and “accidents,” conflicting or rapidly changing propaganda, public agitation, and the introduction of new security arrangements in the capital. Nevertheless, it will still be difficult to judge on the basis of these indicators whether potential instability is likely to be a temporary phenomenon or the beginning of fundamental change, including systemic collapse.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

The United States has much at stake if future provocations and other military incidents on or around the Korean peninsula escalate militarily, threatening the stability of northeast Asia. Serious military escalation would immediately endanger the lives of U.S. servicemen and women (currently numbered at around 25,000) deployed to defend South Korea as part of the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty. Also at risk are over 50,000 U.S. civilians working and living in South Korea, of which 30,000 are believed to reside in Seoul and thus immediately vulnerable to North Korean military action. South Korea is also a major trading partner of the United States and a global economic player. A serious emergency on the peninsula could do great damage to investor confidence in South Korea and possibly trigger a major financial crisis that could resonate regionally if not globally.

Further deadly or destabilizing provocations by North Korea would also further strain U.S. and allied relations with China—Pyongyang's principal patron and protector—at a particularly sensitive time. China's uncritical posture toward North Korea in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* incident and its condemnation of subsequent U.S.-ROK naval exercises became the source of considerable friction. Another similar incident would deepen the rift with China and undermine cooperation not only on North Korea but also on a host of other important issues. Renewed conflict on the Korean peninsula and potential U.S. and ROK military intervention into North Korea would clearly pose more serious risks to relations with China, including even the possibility of direct clash. However, should North Korea initiate hostilities against the South or collapse in a way that opens the door to peaceful reunification, these risks should not dissuade intervention. In the meantime,

the primary U.S. goal in Korea should be the avoidance of war.

U.S. PREVENTIVE OPTIONS

Several different policy options are available to the United States and the ROK to lessen the likelihood of further dangerous incidents in and around Korea. Elements of each are already being pursued but the relative emphasis could be shifted in the future.

Deterrence and Containment

The United States and the ROK can continue with their efforts to deter further provocations through measures designed to reduce, on the one hand, Northern opportunism and, on the other, the likelihood that such acts would succeed. These include enhanced surveillance of disputed or sensitive areas, upgrades to ROK antisubmarine warfare capabilities, increased patrolling, and rapid military response capabilities. Since not all types of potentially provocative behavior would be addressed by such measures, the threat of additional punitive actions for any transgressions would also act as a further disincentive. Without necessarily being specific, such threats could suggest intensified economic pressure and even proportional military retaliation. Other initiatives to limit exposure to possible coercion by North Korea, such as preemptively closing the Kaesong industrial park, could also be undertaken.

The potential effectiveness of this policy approach must be carefully balanced against the risks, namely that it will intensify the North's hostility and paranoia, potentially increase the danger of deadly interactions and accidents, and further alienate the Chinese and Russians. Such concerns could be alleviated by a less assertive deterrent posture—for example, eschewing major exercises and aggressive patrols in disputed areas as well as intrusive intelligence-gathering operations close to North Korea. At the same time, to avoid any misunderstanding of allied resolve, the United States can privately reiterate to the leadership in Pyongyang and Beijing that any initiation of major hostilities will inevitably bring about the demise of North Korea.

Detente and Coexistence

The United States and the ROK with China's active facilitation could embark on a deliberate and coordinated effort to defuse tensions on the peninsula. A sequence of diplomatic moves could be orchestrated to rebuild trust and promote peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas, including, in some reciprocated order: a statement of regret if not an apology by the North for the loss of the *Cheonan*; a temporary suspension of sanctions and resumption of some economic assistance or humanitarian aid by the South; a deferment of large-scale military exercises in disputed areas; a moratorium on nuclear testing and long-range missile launches; international arbitration of the NLL; return of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to the main North Korean nuclear facility at Yongbyon; the resumption in some configuration of nuclear disarmament talks; and discussion of a new peace regime including security guarantees to replace the current UN armistice arrangements.

Rather than making the verifiable and irreversible disarmament of North Korea's nuclear weapons program the primary diplomatic objective on which all subsequent relaxation of tensions

rests—an increasingly unrealistic prospect—capping the size and operational readiness of the existing arsenal would become the main objective. To avoid compromising larger nonproliferation goals, however, North Korea’s proclaimed status as a nuclear power would not be recognized nor would the ultimate goal of a denuclearized peninsula be abandoned. In effect, nuclear disarmament would be deferred as the price of promoting short-term stability and preventing further modernization of the North’s arsenal. The implicit hope would be that over time, more favorable conditions for nuclear reversal would emerge.

Coercion and Destabilization

The United States, ROK, and Japan could collectively pressure North Korea to desist from destabilizing behavior, including the continued development and proliferation of nuclear weapons. More aggressive sanctions would be imposed, particularly on sources of financial support to the North Korean leadership. Strategies employed to delegitimize the regime and stir public unrest—such as propaganda and other forms of political warfare—would also be expanded to take advantage of the North’s growing openness to external sources of information through cell phones, Internet access, and cross-border trade. Various covert actions involving cyber attacks and discrete interference with the operation of vital infrastructure and valued regime assets could also be employed to signal to Pyongyang that the United States and the ROK could apply even more pressure if pushed to do so. However, the efficacy of an active campaign of coercion and intimidation is dubious and potentially counterproductive. Besides antagonizing China, and probably Russia too, the North Korean regime may view such tactics as a precursor to a larger assault on its very survival. Rather than cowing the regime, it could make it even more belligerent, causing it to accelerate the development of nuclear weapons and associated delivery systems, as well as engage in other provocative behavior. The net effect would make the peninsula more, not less, susceptible to renewed conflict.

U.S. MITIGATING OPTIONS

In the event of a serious crisis that threatens to escalate militarily, the United States and the ROK have the following options to mitigate the risk of major conflict.

Disengagement and Restraint

Short of unambiguous indications of the North’s preparation for full-scale offensive operations, the United States and ROK could deliberately stand down their forward-deployed forces and desist from activities that might trigger further escalation. However, rear-area defensive preparations could be initiated to hedge against the North’s failure to reciprocate. Similar restraint could also be shown in the face of pressures to intervene under various domestic turmoil/collapse scenarios in the North. Instead of asserting the unilateral right to intervene, which some contend the ROK constitution permits, South Korea and the United States would only act with full UN Security Council endorsement, thereby lessening the likelihood of international friction, particularly with China.

A posture of deliberate restraint in an acute crisis would clearly risk North Korea viewing it as a sign of weakness rather than prudence. Restraint would doubtless also invite domestic political criticism inside South Korea, especially if it required absorbing a particularly painful or humiliating

loss in order to avoid an even greater calamity. Likewise, remaining passive to the plight of fellow Koreans in the North and their potential calls for assistance during a collapse contingency would also be difficult, especially if the opportunity to reunify the peninsula beckoned. Suspicions about Chinese motives in such circumstances would further increase criticisms of passivity. Therefore, active reassurance from the United States would likely be crucial in both instances.

Mediation and Crisis Management

South Korea and the United States could immediately appeal for international assistance to help manage a major crisis on the peninsula. However, the options are limited. Given that both countries constitute the UN Command in Korea, the United Nations will not be viewed as an impartial mediator. Nor is the principal Asian regional organization—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—likely to offer much help, given its lack of crisis management machinery. If the Six Party nuclear disarmament process restarts and acquires a regular and semi-institutionalized pattern of interaction, then it may be able to help manage a potential crisis, but this is not realistic at present. In the short term, China represents the best bet for assistance since it has the greatest leverage to restrain North Korea and a strong interest in maintaining stability on the peninsula. A prior and candid discussion with Beijing on potential sources of instability, prevention of military escalation, and the procedures for rapid trilateral communication in a crisis would be desirable to avoid potential snafus. China can also be enlisted to help improve North-South emergency communications links.

Brinkmanship and Escalation Dominance

The United States and the ROK could try to intimidate the North into backing down in a crisis by credibly demonstrating a willingness to inflict an unacceptable price on the leadership in Pyongyang if the North continues to escalate. The same set of coercive measures described above to make the North think twice before initiating provocative actions could, in principle, also be used to force it pull back militarily in a crisis. However, besides the risks that such coercive signaling will be misinterpreted and cause the North to accelerate rather than deaccelerate its use of force, the United States and the ROK remain at a fundamental disadvantage in trying to achieve escalatory dominance because of the vulnerability of Seoul to retaliatory action.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The danger that a future crisis on or around the Korean peninsula might escalate militarily cannot be responsibly discounted given the prevailing levels of mutual distrust and the current confrontational posture of forces in such close proximity. Nor should the reality of a divided Korea be viewed as immutable. The transition to new leadership in Pyongyang has begun with uncertain prospects of the outcome. The United States has a strong and abiding interest in ensuring that another Korean war not be ignited through miscalculation or misunderstanding. Accordingly, the United States should take the following steps to lessen the risk of unwanted military escalation in Korea.

First, though tensions are subsiding on the peninsula from their high point over the summer,

the United States and South Korea should continue to maintain their heightened vigilance through enhancements to their surveillance and intelligence-gathering capabilities. Particular attention should be given to anniversaries or upcoming events that could conceivably prove tempting for the North to conduct provocations. Both countries should also initiate a joint effort to consider the likely warning indicators associated with various unstable succession scenarios and whether current intelligence-collection and analysis capabilities would be able to detect and identify them in a timely fashion.

Second, the United States should continue to reassure South Korea of its alliance commitments and also help it to fix certain defensive weaknesses identified in the wake of the *Cheonan* investigation. This includes unambiguous statements that the United States remains a steadfast ally, active participation in defensive exercises, and the provision of military assistance deemed necessary to fill any short-term gaps. At the same time, however, the commander of U.S. Forces Korea in his role as commander, U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC), must be especially sensitive to potential U.S. and South Korean military operations that may inadvertently goad or intimidate North Korea. Joint planning to manage a range of contingencies besides full-scale war should be upgraded. Much progress has been made in recent years to improve cooperation and transparency in this regard, but there are evidently still significant gaps. There is also understandable reticence to include Japan in certain kinds of contingency planning relating to Korea, but this is shortsighted. Japan not only has legitimate reasons to be engaged in such discussions but also much to offer operationally. The U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Coordinating and Oversight Group (TCOG) that used to meet regularly but lapsed in 2004 should be reactivated for this and other trilateral discussions on North Korea.

Third, a concerted diplomatic effort should be made to reduce tensions on the peninsula and to contain North Korea's pursuit of additional nuclear weapons and long-range missile capabilities. China is pivotal to this effort given its special relationship with North Korea. Encouraging Beijing to restrain Pyongyang's provocative behavior in the interests of regional stability must continue. This entails being clear to the leadership in China about how much of a strategic liability North Korea will become if its support for Pyongyang remains unconditional. Although China has resisted engaging in discussions of potential contingencies in North Korea—which is not likely to change—there is still value in the United States sharing its concerns to lessen misunderstanding in a crisis while also conveying a vision of a united Korea that is reassuring to Beijing. Various official and unofficial forums can be used for this purpose. Moscow should also be actively engaged with the same goals in mind as part of the larger “reset” in relations. At the same time, the United States should be realistic about the prospects that North Korea will verifiably dismantle its nuclear weapons program. While disarmament should remain a goal, it should not be a precondition for progress in other areas of arms control that are of value to the United States. Constraining the North's production of additional fissile material, capping its development of an operationally ready nuclear arsenal, and slowing down its possession of long-range ballistic missiles are worthwhile objectives. Without precluding bilateral discussions, the Six Party Talks are still the most viable negotiating framework for pursuing these more limited goals. They also provide a de facto regional consultative arrangement in the event of sudden change in North Korea.

Mission Statement of the Center for Preventive Action

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) seeks to help prevent, defuse, or resolve deadly conflicts around the world and to expand the body of knowledge on conflict prevention. It does so by creating a forum in which representatives of governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, and civil society can gather to develop operational and timely strategies for promoting peace in specific conflict situations. The center focuses on conflicts in countries or regions that affect U.S. interests, but may be otherwise overlooked; where prevention appears possible; and when the resources of the Council on Foreign Relations can make a difference. The center does this by

- Issuing Council Special Reports to evaluate and respond rapidly to developing conflict situations and formulate timely, concrete policy recommendations that the U.S. government, international community, and local actors can use to limit the potential for deadly violence.
- Engaging the U.S. government and news media in conflict prevention efforts. CPA staff members meet with administration officials and members of Congress to brief on CPA's findings and recommendations; facilitate contacts between U.S. officials and important local and external actors; and raise awareness among journalists of potential flashpoints around the globe.
- Building networks with international organizations and institutions to complement and leverage the Council's established influence in the U.S. policy arena and increase the impact of CPA's recommendations.
- Providing a source of expertise on conflict prevention to include research, case studies, and lessons learned from past conflicts that policymakers and private citizens could use to prevent or mitigate future deadly conflicts.