



An Apocalypse Lurks in the Korean Peninsula

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Summary

The temporary hope of peace returning to the Korean peninsula following North Korea's peace overtures dissipated no sooner than it started when North Korean negotiators walked out of the meeting room at the DMZ in Panmunjam. North Korea refused to take responsibility for the sinking of Cheonan and denied any involvement in the sinking, rejecting a report by a commission of international experts, which concluded that a North Korean submarine fired a torpedo at the Cheonan. China is unable (or unwilling?) to use its leverage to rein in on Pyongyang, leaving the peninsula volatile and peace fragile. Pyongyang's brinkmanship thus continues.

Tension Ebbbed?

After North Korea offered to hold unconditional talks with South Korea, tensions between the two Koreas seemed to be ebbing. But preliminary talks on 9 February 2011 between two military colonels at Panmunjam Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which were intended to lead to higher-level military talks, ended in acrimony as the North Korean negotiators walked out. Both sides failed to narrow differences over the agenda and could not even agree to set a date for a future round.¹

In a statement issued by the military and carried by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), Pyongyang's state-owned media, North Korea called the South "traitors" and "scoundrels", hostile expressions it had refrained from using since 5 January 2011, and blamed South Korea for undermining any chance of resuming the moribund six-nation nuclear negotiations.² The statement further said, they "no longer felt the need to associate with" South Korea.³ Seoul gave no direct response, with Unification Ministry Hyun In-taek only saying "anyway, we're keeping the door open".

Why did the talks collapse so suddenly? The war veterans in their 60s and 70s in South Korea demand retaliation against North Korea for sinking of the Cheonan in March 2010. The younger generation, however, see the ship incident in less threatening terms. The competing reactions in South Korea to the Cheonan incident easily shape the twin currents of South Korea's political divide. One stream views the event as South Korea's 9/11, a constant reminder to the threats that North Korea poses to South Korea. This view is also endorsed by the US and Japan. The other view held by the younger generation with little knowledge of the 1950-53 Korean War suspects the motives of the current conservative government, which it regards as descendants of the military regimes that ruled South Korea before democracy dawned in the country in the 1980s.⁴

South Korea seemed unsure how far to push back in its confrontation with the North. Though there was anger against North Korea, widespread support for a showdown with the North was rather muted. This was evident by the relatively small crowd of about 10,000 people that gathered in a demonstration in Seoul soon after the Cheonan incident, compared to about 60,000 people who went to the street in protest against government's decision in 2008 to import US beef feared to be infected with mad cow disease. The bombing by the North Korean agent in the capital of Burma in 1983 during a visit by President

¹ John M. Glina, "Talks between North, South Korea collapse", Los Angeles Times, 10 February 2011, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-fg-korea-talks-20110210,0,7575933,p...>

² "N.K. says no need for talks with South", <http://www.koreaherald.com/pop/NewsPrint.jsp?newsMLId=20110210000785>

³ "What Next for Inter-Korean Relations?", <http://english.chosun.com/svc/news/printContent.html>

⁴ Barbara Demick, "In South Korea, competing reactions to sinking of warship", 28 May 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/print/2010/may/world/la-fg-korea-mood-20100528>

Chun Doo-hwan that killed 21 people, and the blowing up of a South Korean commercial airliner that killed all 115 people on board with the aim to disrupt Seoul 1988 Summer Olympics and even the Cheonan incident seemed not enough triggers for a military response from the South. Though both the Koreas have frequently exchanged fire across both the DMZ and in the waters around their disputed sea boundaries, both have avoided actions that could escalate into war. Notwithstanding the hard-line public posture of the government in favour of strong retaliation, and strong backing of some sections of the people, South Korea seems to wish to avoid a showdown with North Korea. There seems to be an understanding of the consequences if a conflagration occurs.

The artillery fire at Yeonpyeong Island on November 2010 changed this passivity somewhat in South Korea. When President Lee hardened his government's position following this incident, Pyongyang ducked and came out with peace overtures. In fact, from the first day of 2011, North Korean official media and government agencies started making concerted campaign expressing sincere desires to improve relations with South Korea and restore peace in the peninsula. On 1 January 2011, KCNA carried an editorial stressing Pyongyang's "determined campaign to improve inter-Korean relations" and that "confrontation between north and south should be defused as early as possible". It said, "We are ready to meet anyone, anytime, and anywhere ... We propose discontinuing to heap slanders and calumnies on each other and refraining from any acts of provoking each other". Then again on 8 January 2011, the North's Reunification Committee issued a statement urging "unconditional and early opening of talks between the authorities having real power and responsibility, in particular".

Talks failed. Why?

Why did the talks then fail? The factor that led to the failure of the talks was North Korea's refusal to take responsibility for the sinking of the Cheonan. South Korea goes by the 400-page report prepared by a commission of Korean and international experts which concluded that a North Korean submarine sank the Cheonan. Further, Pyongyang justifies the artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, claiming that Seoul provoked it with live-fire drills into North Korean waters.

The collapse of talks on 9 February 2011 is worrying for the region. President Lee seems convinced that North's strategy has been to stir up tension between the two and later return to the bargaining table as a way to secure food and financial aid for the struggling regime. Such a strategy seems to have run its course as South Korea hardens its stance.

Imperatives for Peace

The imperatives of restoring peace and stability in the Korean peninsula need not be overstated. South Korea's top priority has always been to maintain peaceful relations with the North. But North Korea has escalated tensions by showing belligerence and

armed provocations and undermined the importance of Seoul's economic aid. After killing a South Korean female tourist in the vicinity of the Mount Gungang tourism zone in July 2008, North Korea sank corvette Cheonan, killing 46 South Korean soldiers and then shelled Yeonpyeong Island on November 2010, which claimed the lives of four South Koreans, including two civilians.

Tensions escalated to dangerous levels when the South Korean navy joined the US navy to hold naval exercises at the end of 2010 and challenged Pyongyang should it decide to strike a third time. Good sense prevailed, when Pyongyang did not react and a limited tit-for-tat South Korean response to either the Cheonan or the Yeonpyeong provocations passed off peacefully. President Lee Myung-bak approached President Barack Obama to reiterate the alliance relationship, and the conflict became quickly internationalized when another confrontational element to relations between Washington and Beijing gained prominence. As expected, China took an unusually strong public stand against the joint naval exercises between South Korea and the US in the West Sea. The chances of a major conflagration looked suddenly extremely high.

Luckily Pyongyang retreated after China cajoled the North. The US dispatched Republican Senator Bill Richardson to Pyongyang in December 2010 and called for restarting the Six-Party Talks unconditionally as well as beginning North-South defence talks. However, even as the possibility of the resumption of talks remain low, the annual massive joint US-South Korean military drill in March 2011 is likely to raise tensions in the peninsula further.⁵

Did Pyongyang's overture mean that the peninsula was no longer a dangerous place and peace had finally returned? This was not the case as the aborted talks of 9 February proved. South Korea has always maintained, and with adequate justification that each time Pyongyang indulges in provocative acts it denies responsibility for such provocations, followed by peace overtures. Therefore, North Korea's latest call for dialogue fell into a repetitive behavioural pattern: provocations followed by peace overtures. South Korea maintains that it is a typical North Korean tactic to heighten tension before coming to talks and demand for further concessions and this time seemed no different. Therefore, Seoul interpreted Pyongyang's latest peace overtures as a tactical move rather than a real change of mind. Seoul maintained that if North Korea wanted to make its peace offer credible, it must have demonstrated its sincerity first by accepting the full responsibility for sinking of the Cheonan and artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island. Seoul further put the condition that Pyongyang must make clear an unambiguous commitment that it will desist from further provocations in future. A statement issued by the South Korean embassy in New Delhi on 20 January 2011 and made available to the author read as

⁵ "North Korea Blames South for failed talks", 10 February 2011, http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print_friendly.php?ID=nw_20110210_9624

follows: "North Korea also must renew its commitment to denuclearize the Korean peninsula and give up its nuclear program which has been casting a dark cloud over the peace and security of Northeast Asia and has seriously dented the credibility of global non-proliferation regime. These North Korea's commitments to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula must be confirmed in the first place through the inter-Korean dialogue. Only then could multilateral dialogue be meaningful and instrumental in carrying forward the process of peace and reconciliation, and denuclearization of the Korean peninsula."

The very fact that North Korea's offer of holding dialogue came almost two months after the deadly bombardment of the Yeonpyeong Island raised eyebrows of Korean watchers. South Korea wanted concrete steps and commitment by the North Korea if real progress could be aimed. South Korea's Vice Unification Minister Um Jong-sik said for dialogue to take place, "it must be guaranteed that it can be constructive and beneficial".

Who gives the guarantee?

If Pyongyang's "unconditional" dialogue offer is sincere, can it be "guaranteed" that it will be "constructive and peaceful"? The truism is that after the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong shelling, the year 2011 still leaves the peninsula a terribly dangerous place.⁶ There is no clear sign on what will be the next move, what the next game plans are and therefore doubts remain if there will be any stable outcome. Despite Pyongyang's desire to talk, South Korea does not trust the North. North Korea continues to be opaque and unpredictable and uses this quality as its arsenal. There could be a curious mix of its internal and external policy goals that has been driving its militancy and this arouses doubts in Seoul to take a kinder stand.

The expectations in some quarters of the Western world who want stability in the peninsula may be belied because of North Korea's behaviour. Can we then blame South Korea not to warm to Pyongyang's offer of talks? Some argue that as the world's seventh largest exporter, President Lee seems to lack a specific goal and a strategy as the signals from Seoul are mixed and therefore no different from what Pyongyang offered.

It is a strange turn of history that the peninsula continues to remain divided for over six decades despite continuous talks for reunification. Both have stood their ground on their respective positions. President Lee too puts conditions that the North must eschew military adventurism and denuclearize. South Koreans see the people of the North as their prodigal brothers and continue to hope that they will embrace each other some day. But it is a tumultuous journey. While the condition to give up militaristic provocative acts has universal support, the condition to denuclearize is too complex a subject and ready-made solutions do not seem on the horizon.

⁶ Aidan Foster-Carter, "The Two Koreas: Talking peace, with menace", 23 January 2011, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/01/23/the-two-koreas-talking-peace-with-menace/print/>

Yet, the urge for reunification remains while the route to achieve this remains bumpy. The South Korean leadership equally seems unprepared to shoulder the burden of meeting the economic costs, though President Lee says the 23 million North Korean people have a right to live with happiness and enjoy freedom. If an opinion poll is taken in the whole of South Korea, the majority may support reunification but may have no suggestion on how to achieve it. Therefore, any talk of reunification seems premature now and seems destined to remain so for many more years to come. South Korea would not like its economic prosperity to be jeopardised by such an "apocalypse". South Korea hopes that a marriage between its high technology and trained human resources and North Korea's untrained labour can make a unified Korean peninsula a highly industrial and prosperous nation. The North Korean leadership rejects this scenario.

If Kim Jong-Il determines that the South is unprepared for a confrontation, there is no reason why he will feel deterred from repeating what he did twice in 2010 – Cheonan and Yeonpyeong. But Pyongyang will face huge risks if it strikes a third time and there is no guarantee that South Korea would not retaliate massively. The challenge, therefore, for both the Koreas and other stakeholders is not to raise the threshold so high that a major conflagration becomes inescapable.

Defanging Pyongyang is as arduous a task as convincing Seoul to soften its stance. It is unclear if majority of people in South Korea will continue to support President Lee's hard-line policy towards Pyongyang. While most would want peace and stability in the peninsula, there could be different voices on the style of approach that the ruling Grand National Party (GNP) has chosen to adopt towards the North. Public opinion remains volatile on such sensitive issues and it may swing against Lee if the people see his policy measures towards the North as not meeting their interests. Lee will be in office for another two years.

The GNP has another stalwart in Park Geun-hye, daughter of former dictator Park Chung-hee (1961-1979), who is equally a hardliner like President Lee. When elections are due in two years' time, she may be a strong contender for office. The difference between Park and Lee is that the former knows the foe first-hand, having even dined with Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang. Can she make a difference if she succeeds Lee? The present mood in South Korea suggests that no major dilution of the hard-line approach of the GNP can be expected. On the other hand, South Korea is likely to toughen its stance on the North and should Pyongyang launch another misadventure, South Korea would launch massive retaliation and hope to crush the North. That is the message that one gets while talking to the South Koreans. This is not to suggest that the people of South Korea do not love the people of the North. In fact, there is a lot of love between the two peoples. South Korea is only against the regime in the North.

The mutual suspicions and distrust between the two Koreas are all pervading. A closer look at the recent crisis and the current mood in Seoul and Pyongyang gives little ground

for optimism. Both North Korea's strategic calculations⁷ and South Korean assumptions about ways to handle its uneasy neighbour could bring the crisis back with a vengeance.

AIPS Opinion Poll

In a recent poll, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (AIPS), an independent think tank, conducted a nation-wide opinion poll in South Korea on national security in which only 1,000 adults were questioned.⁸ In the poll, 80 per cent of South Koreans said they would support a military retaliation in the event of a fresh North Korean attack. The conservatives' viewpoint was even stronger with as much as 87.6 per cent wanting massive military retaliation, while supporters of the current government accounted for 85.5 per cent. 40.5 per cent said the government should launch stronger military operations while preventing a full-scale war if North Korea launches another provocation. Other opinions were strong punishment by mobilising all possible military strength (25 per cent), diplomatic action in order to secure the national economy (16.4 per cent), and negotiations with the North (15 per cent). While 65.2 per cent said that a full-scale war should be prevented in the case of future conflict between the two Koreas, 33 per cent wanted stronger military action to be taken, even if such an action meant risk of a full-scale war. As regards North's ongoing development of nuclear weapons, 43.3 per cent blamed the Sunshine Policy of the previous two Presidents, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, as responsible for the current North Korean behaviour, 35.4 per cent blamed the current government's hard-line policy. This demonstrates that President Lee's GNP has a massive domestic support base to continue his hard-line policy. The change of the public mood can be deciphered from the fact that when nine months ago, a North Korean torpedo sank the Cheonan in March 2010, killing 46 sailors, a AIPS poll showed that merely 30 per cent favoured a military option. However, a survey of mere 1,000 adults cannot reflect the nation's mood.

The question that arises is, would North Korean leader duck a fight at any cost despite belligerent talk? If a way out is not found, another round of military and diplomatic standoffs could be more dangerous than usual as Seoul is unlikely to buckle with its newly acquired belief in the power of counter-strikes.

What Can China do?

China, Pyongyang's only ally, seems to be frustrated by Pyongyang's continuous adventurist posture and has begun tightening the screws by stopping the oil pipeline, thereby cutting off North Korea's lifeline. China has also suspended grain aid, adding

⁷ Andrei Lankov, "How to stop the next Korean war", 19 December 2010, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/12/19/how-to-stop-the-next-korean-war>

⁸ "More S. Koreans harden against N.K. after island attack: Survey", <http://www.koreaherald.com/national/Detail.jsp?newsMLId=20101129000864>

pressure on the regime to look for alternative sources to feed its starving people. It is believed that Pyongyang has approached India for supplying some amount of grain in this distress situation.

North Korea faces a chronic food shortage. An estimated 1-million ton grain shortage was also caused by major flood. Pyongyang lifted restrictions, imposed in 2007, on exports of coal and other mining resources in the second half of 2010 to buy Chinese rice and corn for the starving population. The move to import more food may be an attempt to placate public dissatisfaction to ensure a smooth transition of power to Kim Jong-un.⁹ The US stopped sending food aid two years ago. South Korea reduced aid shipments because of tension on the peninsula. Pyongyang is sending diplomats around the world to beg for food. Unfortunately, there is a global food crisis, and no one is responding to Pyongyang's requests.¹⁰

China is virtually North Korea's economic lifeline. Chinese trade, aid, and investment are critical to North Korea's social stability and economic productivity and a key source of technology and hard currency. Chinese financial investments in North Korea are geopolitically significant in terms of Chinese strategic interests. It is also to checkmate South Korea's aspirations to unify the peninsula. "Efforts by the international community to isolate North Korea and to impose sanctions in response to its efforts to develop nuclear weapons and its other provocative behaviors are complicated by the economic relationship between China and North Korea."¹¹

Why has China shown some change of heart at this time? Is North Korea no longer relevant in China's strategic calculations which have shaped China's North Korea policy till today? Is China prepared to handle the influx of refugees from North Korea in the event of regime collapse? Is survival of the present regime no longer a factor in China's strategic thinking? Will China play the role of a catalyst for the reunification of the peninsula and if so, will it serve its interests? These are some key questions to which there are no ready-made answers.

But the fact that China welcomed the agreement between the two Koreas to hold working-level military talks showed that China does not want peace and stability in the Korean peninsula to be seriously disturbed. Even that hope now gets buried with North Korean

⁹ Daisuke Nishimura, "N. Korea lifted ore exports limit to buy food", 10 February 2011, <http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201102090212.html>

¹⁰ "North Korea is Frantically Begging For Food Donations", 10 February 2011, <http://www.businessinsider.com/north-korea-food-crisis-2011-2>

¹¹ Drew Thompson, "Silent Partners: Chinese Joint Ventures in North Korea", February 2011, A Report by The U.S.-Korea Institute at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, John Hopkins University

officials walking out. Despite China's possible hidden strategic calculations and its long-term ambition to expand power, it is unprepared at this moment to derail its economic growth if there is a conflict in its neighbourhood. Neither would it rejoice at the prospect of simmering domestic unrest that might take advantage and get intensified if China's attention gets diverted in the event of a crisis erupting across its border. For the moment at least, advocating and urging the parties in the peninsula to resolve their differences through dialogue and consultation and seek cooperation and reconciliation seems to be the appropriate strategy.