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Increasing Risk of North Korean Tactical Attack on South Korea: What U.S. Needs to Do

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North Korea routinely threatens to annihilate South Korea, the United States, and Japan. After its recent successful long-range missile and nuclear tests, Pyongyang now claims it already has the capability to target U.S. bases in the Pacific and the American homeland with nuclear weapons.

As frightening as these warnings are, North Korea would more likely conduct another tactical-level attack to achieve its objectives rather than risk national suicide through a nuclear strike. Discerning bluster from actual North Korean intent is always difficult, but recent actions suggest greater potential for another attack—perhaps imminent—on South Korean military and civilian targets.

The danger of North Korean miscalculation has increased further with new North Korean leader Kim Jong-un emboldened by recent nuclear and missile test successes and the knowledge that Seoul and Washington have never struck back in any significant way after previous deadly attacks. But South Korea is now more likely to strike back after another North Korean assault.

Banging the War Drum. Menacing North Korean invective is a fact of life in South Korea. Pyongyang routinely threatens to turn Seoul into

a “sea of fire” and obliterate its enemies. Indeed, countless threats are never carried out and are meant as much to bolster the North Korean domestic audience as well as intimidate its neighbors. Yet North Korea has also repeatedly attacked allied military and civilian targets, including attempting to assassinate the South Korean president, blowing up a civilian airliner, shooting down a U.S. Air Force plane, and seizing a U.S. Navy ship.

A North Korean attack would most likely occur in the West Sea, the site of several deadly naval clashes. In 2010, North Korea sank the South Korean naval corvette Cheonan just south of the maritime boundary and attacked Yeonpyeong Island with artillery. Pyongyang claims that allied military exercises—such as those currently underway—are provocations that justify North Korean attacks. Three months before the Yeonpyeong Island attack, Pyongyang declared that South Korean military exercises were a “military invasion into [our] territorial waters,” so Pyongyang “decisively resolved to repress it with powerful retaliation.”¹

During the past month, North Korea nullified the Korean War armistice and all inter-Korean non-aggression agreements and ramped up its threats, particularly against South Korean islands in the West Sea. Pyongyang deployed long-range artillery and multiple rocket launchers from rear bases in Fourth Corps to front-line units just across from Baengnyeongdo Island.² North Korea told the residents of the South Korean islands to evacuate, warning them of “devastating consequences.”³

In mid-March, Kim Jong-un oversaw live-fire exercises near the West Sea border, extolling artillery units to “strike and wipe out the enemies on

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[Baengnyeong] Island.” He assigned them the mission to “blow up the headquarters of the [South Korean] Sixth Marine Brigade,” adding that the islands “are the biggest hotspot where a war can break out right now.”⁴

Kim directed the artillery commander “to photograph enemy’s positions engulfed in flames and blown up during a battle.”⁵ He was accompanied on his visits by General Kim Yong-chol, head of the General Reconnaissance Bureau, who directed the attacks on the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong Island. On March 26, North Korea put all of its artillery and rocket forces on the highest state of wartime alert.⁶

North Korea provocations are usually initiated when they have the greatest potential to garner attention and advantage; raise sufficient concerns of escalation to force opponents to not respond, contain the crisis, and seek resolution; and enable Pyongyang to deny or deflect responsibility.⁷

Growing Risk of Clash. Newly elected South Korean President Park Geun-hye has vowed to respond forcefully to the next North Korean attack. The South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff warned in March that it would respond to a North Korean attack by “forcefully and decisively striking not only the point of origin of provocation and its supporting forces but also its command leadership.”⁸ A Ministry of Defense official explained that, in the case of a tactical artillery strike in the West Sea, Seoul might attack the Fourth Corps regional command headquarters rather than simply targeting a few artillery batteries.⁹

Even prior to Park’s inauguration, South Korea had, after the Yeonpyeong Island attack, loosened the rules of engagement, pushed the decision to take action to a lower command echelon, and augmented forces in the region.

White House Undermines Its Own “Asia Pivot.” Seoul *should* counter-strike the next time North Korea attacks. U.S. and South Korean reticence to respond to repeated North Korean attacks only emboldened the regime to continue its heinous behavior. But U.S. and South Korean policymakers should be aware that Park’s policy, though welcome, does carry a commensurate increased risk of conflict escalation. On March 22, Washington and Seoul signed a Combined Counter-Provocation Plan to counter North Korean tactical-level attacks. The plan provides for a “strong and decisive combined South Korean and U.S. response.”¹⁰

But friends and enemies are questioning U.S. ability to deliver on its security promises. Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter traveled to Asia in mid-March to address rising allied concerns that massive cuts to the U.S. defense budget have weakened President Obama’s “Asia Pivot” strategy and U.S. military capabilities. Carter’s reassurances were at odds, however, with earlier Pentagon statements of the devastating impact of sequestration, including Carter’s own March 12 speech that the cuts could reduce the naval ship and aircraft operations in the Pacific region by one-third, force four carrier air wings to stop flying, and leave gaps

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 4. North Korea Leadership Watch, “Kim Jong Un Inspects Artillery Unit, Islet Defense Unit and Visits Fish Farm,” March 12, 2013, <http://nkleadershipwatch.wordpress.com/2013/03/12/kim-jong-un-inspects-artillery-unit-islet-defense-unit-and-visits-fish-farm/> (accessed March 27, 2013).
 5. KCNA, “Kim Jong Un Inspects Islet Defence Detachment,” March 11, 2013, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2013/201303/news11/20130311-31ee.html> (accessed March 27, 2013).
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 8. Choe Sang-hu, “South Korea Pushes Back on North’s Threats,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2013.
 9. Kim Kyu-won, “Seoul Pledges Retaliation to North Korea’s Threat to Cancel Armistice Agreement,” Hankroyeh, March 6, 2013.
 10. U.S. Department of Defense, “Officials Sign Plan to Counter North Korean Threats,” March 24, 2013, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=119615> (accessed March 27, 2013).

in the availability of Marine Amphibious Ready Groups.¹¹

Even prior to sequestration, the Obama Administration's bold rhetoric on its Asia Pivot strategy was not backed with sufficient resources. Claims of the U.S. being "back in Asia" were undermined by a budget-driven defense strategy that left the military shortchanged and U.S. credibility and resolve in doubt.

Resolve and Resources Needed. The time frame for North Korea's next military incursion is uncertain but potentially imminent. As such, both

the U.S. and South Korea should devote sufficient forces and budget resources to ensure sufficient deterrent and defense capabilities. The Obama Administration's reversal of its previous elimination of 14 ground-based missile defense interceptors is a proper, if belated, acknowledgment of the security dangers North Korea poses. Washington should take similar steps to reverse defense budget cuts, particularly to naval and air force procurement plans.

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11. Matt Burke, "Budget Cuts Cancel Deployments of More Navy Ships," *Stars and Stripes*, March 26, 2013, <http://www.stripes.com/news/budget-cuts-cancel-deployments-of-more-navy-ships-1.213540> (accessed March 27, 2013).