

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## North Korean Threats: What Washington Should Do

*Bruce Klingner*

North Korea is easy to ridicule. The country is an anachronistic hangover from the Cold War, replete with cartoonish propaganda and over-the-top threats. Its leader could well play the villain in a James Bond or Austin Powers movie. Self-appointed ambassador Dennis Rodman's visit affirmed the image of the reclusive regime as the ultimate reality show. As such, the tendency has been to dismiss all North Korean threats as bluster. That would be a mistake.

North Korea has a massive mechanized army poised along the demilitarized zone and an extensive missile force that threatens its neighbors with chemical and biological agents. Moreover, Pyongyang has a history of conducting acts of war and terrorism against the United States, South Korea, and Japan.

Experts debate whether North Korea has already created nuclear weapons and the missiles to hit the United States or whether that capability is another year or two away. But there is no doubt what path they are on. This is not a theoretical threat.

**Uncharted Territory.** During the past two months, North Korea has issued an unprecedented series of deadly threats. Yes, many of them have been previously declared and not carried out. And there is

circular history on the Korean Peninsula, with tensions ratcheting up every time the U.S. and South Korea conduct military exercises or the U.N. deliberates on new sanctions.

But this is new, more dangerous territory. Pyongyang has made threats not seen before. Had its recommendation for foreign diplomats to leave the country been issued by another country, alarm bells would be ringing. Instead, it has been dismissed by most as yet more bluster.

The regime has also issued very specific threats against South Korean military units and islands in the West Sea, the site of numerous previous deadly clashes. Perhaps most worrisome is that the regime's threat du jour is occurring so rapidly. In the past, Pyongyang would issue a threat and then allow Washington and its allies time to respond, preferably by offering benefits to buy its way back to the status quo ante. The current rapid-fire threats conflict with previous North Korean behavior and reduce the potential for de-escalating the crisis.

Indications that Pyongyang may test launch an intermediate-range missile from a mobile launcher—another technological breakthrough—would trigger another round of U.N. deliberations and further North Korean provocations.

The threat has increased dramatically not only because of the North Korean rhetoric but because of the greater risk of miscalculation. Little is known about North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Will he know when to stop ratcheting up tension, or will he stumble across a red line that triggers an allied response?

**Greater Resolve in Seoul.** And South Korea would certainly respond militarily to another

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attack. The artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010 seems to have been a turning point not only for the South Korean government but, more significantly, the populace. There is greater public support for Seoul to retaliate, which newly inaugurated President Park Geun-hye has vowed to do.

South Korea has already loosened the rules of engagement, pushed the decision to respond to a lower command echelon, augmented its forces, and announced that it will not limit an attack to only the point of origin but will instead strike rear area command headquarters.

**U.S. Caught Flat-Footed.** Also worrisome is that the U.S. appears to have been caught by surprise by North Korea's actions. As an avid basketball player, President Obama should know the dangers of playing catch-up ball. Allowing one's opponent to direct the game and being forced to respond to his strategy is a recipe for disaster.

The Obama Administration directed the construction of 14 additional missile defense interceptors in Alaska and the deployment of a sea-based warning radar. Both of these were reversals of previous Obama decisions to cut or mothball capabilities to defend the United States.

The decisions were blamed on an unexpected, sudden acceleration of the North Korean missile threat. But the threat has been long known. The intelligence community published an unclassified estimate in 2001 predicting that North Korea could be capable of threatening the continental U.S. with an intercontinental ballistic missile before 2015.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the accelerated deployment of missile defenses to Guam and sending nuclear-capable B-2 and B-52 bombers, F-22 fighters, and Aegis destroyers to South Korean military exercises have an air of knee-jerk response. Washington is now trying to reassure its allies that massive defense cuts will not undercut U.S. capabilities and resolve.

Yet the Pentagon had previously warned that sequestration would have a devastating impact on U.S. forces.<sup>2</sup> Recent South Korean polls show that a

majority of respondents advocate either a redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons onto the peninsula or Seoul developing its own nuclear force.<sup>3</sup> Neither scenario will occur, but these poll results reflect rising perceptions in South Korea—which may be reflected among the North Korean leadership—that American security guarantees are in doubt.

#### **What Washington Should Do.**

- **Fully fund U.S.** defense requirements, including missile defense. The Obama Administration's policy reversal and newfound reliance on ground-based interceptors, SBX radar, and F-22 fighters—all systems it curtailed—shows the dangers in cutting defense spending amid rising Asian security threats.
- **Resist the siren song that the U.S.** should re-engage North Korea. Washington and Seoul repeatedly tried diplomatic overtures, but all were firmly rejected by Pyongyang. The Kim regime vowed never to abandon its nuclear weapons nor return to the Six-Party Talks. Another envoy would get the same message.
- **Do not back down on displays of resolve.** Affirming U.S. commitment to defending its allies should be clear and unequivocal. Obama Administration statements that U.S. military moves were partly meant to forestall South Korea from responding to a North Korean attack send the wrong message.
- **Press China to pressure Pyongyang.** Beijing should be told that its reticence to join international pressure on North Korea is triggering the crisis that China seeks to avoid. Pyongyang has only been emboldened to ratchet up tensions still further, pushing Washington and its allies to take necessary military steps that Beijing does not want.

1. National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Missile Developments and the Ballistic Missile Threat Through 2015*, December 2001, <http://www.fas.org/irp/nic/bmthreat-2015.htm> (accessed April 8, 2013).

2. Office of Senator John McCain (R-AZ), "Statement by Senators McCain and Graham on Secretary Panetta's Letter Detailing 'Devastating' Impact of Sequester," November 14, 2011, [http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=PressOffice.PressReleases&ContentRecord\\_id=a4074315-fd3e-2e65-2330-62b95da3b0e9](http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=PressOffice.PressReleases&ContentRecord_id=a4074315-fd3e-2e65-2330-62b95da3b0e9) (accessed April 8, 2013).

3. Jiyeon Kim, Karl Friedhoff, and Chungku Kang, "The Asan Public Opinion Report, February 2013," Asan Institute, March 14, 2013, [http://www.asaninst.org/eng/03\\_publications/report\\_detail.php?seq=100468&ipage=1&nums=0&ca=0](http://www.asaninst.org/eng/03_publications/report_detail.php?seq=100468&ipage=1&nums=0&ca=0) (accessed April 8, 2013).

■ **Implement comprehensive U.S.** sanctions. Despite its bold rhetoric, the Obama Administration has been reluctant to aggressively target North Korean financial assets, such as was done against Banco Delta Asia, or non-North Korean entities violating U.N. resolutions and international law. This should change.

**No Backing Away.** The Korean Peninsula is again in an escalatory cycle triggered by North Korean provocations. This situation has occurred

before many times, and the crisis has always passed. But this time, there is far more doubt that either Korea can back away.

As Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel affirmed this week, “You only need to be wrong once.” Preventing disaster will require a comprehensive strategy of more extensive sanctions and not undercutting U.S. defense requirements.

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