

## **Lessons Learned? Responding to North Korea's Latest Provocations** by John Hemmings and Dongjoon Park

*John Hemmings* [[john@pacforum.org](mailto:john@pacforum.org)] is a resident Handa fellow at Pacific Forum CSIS. *Dongjoon Park* [[dongjoon@pacforum.org](mailto:dongjoon@pacforum.org)] is a resident Kelly fellow at Pacific Forum CSIS. This PacNet is based on the findings of a simulation that took place at a Pacific Forum CSIS conference in Seoul October 14-15, 2011, and can be found at:

[http://csis.org/files/publication/issuesinsights\\_v12n02.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/issuesinsights_v12n02.pdf)

Once again, North Korea is increasing tensions in Northeast Asia. The launch on April 13 is part of a cycle of calculated North Korean provocations. However, it seems that the US, South Korea, and Japan scrambled to respond with the same strategies that have failed them in the past. China's blocking of any meaningful response was as predictable as it was effective.

For Pyongyang, the launch served several purposes. It celebrated North Korea becoming a 'strong and prosperous nation' in 2012. It commemorated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth. The launch also underscores the 'great successor' Kim Jong Un's leadership in front of the party leadership, the Korean People's Army (KPA), and the people. It is an attempt to set the terms of future negotiations with the international community. Finally, and most of all, the launch lets the North set the regional agenda, putting other countries in the region on the back foot.

Given the repetitive nature of this cycle, experts have been predicting such a North Korean provocation for nearly a year. As early as last October, a group of Pacific Forum CSIS Young Leaders convened in Seoul to conduct a simulation based on a hypothetical satellite test (which also went wrong). These young professionals were divided into groups representing the US, South and North Korea, Japan, and China to develop reactions and identify obstacles hindering a coherent and coordinated response. The key lessons from that simulation were as follows:

**China cannot be relied upon:** With its massive investment, aid packages, and resource trade with Pyongyang, Beijing is presumed to have the most influence on North Korea. The US has since the '90s sought China's help in dealing with the North. The simulation found that China will never take the US side: it won't destabilize a regime that it supports, and in which it has so much at stake. Anything that destabilizes North Korea could affect Chinese economic growth, and the Chinese strategy is to preserve the North and eventually lever the US out of the Korean Peninsula. China is, at best, a stumbling block; at worst, part of the problem. Therefore, China should be increasingly sidelined during crises (though not publicly, of course). When China tries to help, it can be acknowledged, but otherwise, it should not, and will not be central to any solution.

**Japan and Korea do not cooperate:** If China cannot be relied upon, the only solution is for the US, South Korea, and Japan to work together on North Korea. Despite their mutual interests in solving the North Korean problem, this is unlikely. There are several reasons, some historical, some geopolitical. They can and must be overcome by the part played by the US.

**Seoul is torn:** Seoul's cultural ties and physical proximity to the North mean that, when it is not under direct threat, it views the North differently from its allies. In cases like the launch, South Korea is more concerned with making sure the situation doesn't spiral out of control than with making the North pay for its provocation. The technology being tested is not, in any case, likely to be targeted at South Korea. With a range of 4,000 miles, these rockets are more likely to be aimed at Japan and the continental United States. South Korea's desire to play a regional balancing role also means that it favors moderation when not directly threatened.

**Japan must be reassured:** While Japan would seem to be less directly threatened by a rogue North Korea, the Japanese have much at stake. North Korea's rhetoric about Japan's historical misdeeds and its past successes in separating and isolating Japan worry policy makers in Tokyo. The debate on reforming Japan's military posture is directly linked to how Japan perceives its sense of security. The US must work to assuage this strategic insecurity to prevent Japan pursuing independent options. The US must push South Koreans to take Japanese insecurity seriously.

**The US needs to lead:** The simulation found that both South Korean and Japanese teams expected the US to lead in a crisis; not to coordinate, but to lead. The US must decide on a goal and lead the other two allies toward that goal. The security perceptions differ too greatly between Seoul and Tokyo, and only Washington has the muscle and the authority to decide on a policy direction. In the course of normal discussions, both Koreans and Japanese may complain about Americans being too assertive or controlling. When a crisis emerges (even a simulated one), they still look to Washington to lead. The US must push Seoul to recognize Japanese security concerns and away from its moderate stances during these occasions.

**North Korea can manipulate the situation with ease:** The strategic calculations of the neighboring countries foster an environment that is vulnerable to North Korean provocations. North Korea reaps maximum benefits through such actions with little or no consequences.

If it wishes to stop North Korean provocations, the US must take three clear steps: One, it should not rely on China to solve the problem. The idea that China would help the US deal with Pyongyang has been disproven in almost every crisis, with even China openly questioning its ability to exert influence. Certainly, Beijing should be consulted, but it should

not be seen as a key to solving problems with North Korea. Second, the US needs to lead its allies during these crises. It is the superpower and should act like it. The US must prioritize trilateral diplomatic and military cooperation. Japan must realize South Korea's reasons for moderation during crises are real and immediate. This may mean breaking its silence on sensitive Korean-Japanese bilateral issues. Third, working with its allies and without China, the US will have to find a way to influence North Korea directly. Previously, it has sought economic punishment as the only non-kinetic tool in its toolbox. This has failed as Chinese investment in North Korea has grown over the last two years.

Sanctions are not the only possibility however. The US has barely touched one of the possible tools in its arsenal: information. The US and its allies must take the initiative and find a non-kinetic way of making North Korea pay a price for its actions. While there are many reasons for the USSR's final collapse, one critical cause was that it lost the war of ideas to the US. This collapse occurred because ordinary citizens could see the inequalities in living standards between themselves and party apparatchiks. This inequality is even more pronounced in North Korea. The US didn't fight the USSR: it fought its ideals and showed them to be false. That same lesson should be applied here.

Given Pyongyang's paranoia about opening up and its desire to control information, it is clear that this is a vulnerability. US intelligence agencies should carry out an information campaign consistently and heavily after every North Korean provocation. Videos containing South Korean television shows, and pop culture could be smuggled in, with the logic that overt political messages are less effective than lifestyle-content. After the Yeonpyong island shelling, Seoul increased such efforts, scattering not only leaflets that introduce the Arab Spring movements, but also everyday products such as medication and clothing. After the first of these campaigns, North Korean leaders would think twice about future provocations, since they would have paid a price for their actions. While sanctions may be a punitive tool in some cases, they have not deterred North Korea because they were a price the regime was willing to pay. Can Pyongyang afford to let uncontrolled information trickle through to its population? We should find out.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*