



## The Real Lessons from North Korea's Ongoing Threats by Chung Min Lee

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As Kim Jong Un ratchets up the threat envelope with unprecedented vigor, many are wondering if he is really contemplating a major provocation. Beginning with the December 2012 long-range missile launch, the third nuclear test last February, the unilateral abrogation of the Armistice Agreement, muffling of the South-North military hotline, nuclear threats against the United States, and the de facto closing down of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, Pyongyang seems to be on a fast and furious track. But if Kim Jong Un is truly contemplating a serious military option, he should realize that such a move would signal the end of the DPRK as we know it. Not only because South Korea and the United States would respond immediately and resolutely to any North Korean attack but because North Korea is in no condition to launch a war.

Kim Jong Un and his generals may believe that with nuclear weapons, biological and chemical weapons, special forces, and over 1,000 missiles, North Korea enjoys a strategic edge. This is partially true given that a North Korea with nuclear weapons is an extremely serious threat. But North Korea's overriding war-fighting capabilities have been degraded over the years due to endemic food and fuel shortages, the dwindling of more modern weapons systems from Russia and China, and an extremely corrupt and politicized general staff. Moreover, while the South Korean armed forces were rightly criticized for not taking immediate action against North Korea's provocations in 2010, if Kim Jong Un believes that South Korea's new president, Park Geun-hye, is going to buckle under his threats or sit idly by if South Korea is attacked, he should think twice before pushing the button. Park Geun-hye is known as South Korea's "Iron Lady" and while she is more than willing to engage in dialogue with the North, Kim Jong Un should know that if push comes to shove, she will stare him down.

Despite sequestration and looming budget cuts, the US-South Korea alliance has never been stronger and Kim Jong Un should understand that President Barack Obama isn't going to just send a few drones if he unleashes a new round of military attacks. For someone who was determined to take out Osama Bin Laden, ordered the surge in Afghanistan, and has shown his willingness to take the war on terrorism to a new level, Barack Obama is hardly a pushover. If Kim Jong Un believes that President Obama is going to call him from the Oval Office in order to normalize ties in the midst of the ongoing crisis, he should really stop relying on his intelligence

reports that are strewn with forecasts on just when Washington is going to wag its tail.

Finally, the last and most important hurdle for Kim Jong Un to surmount before he embarks on any serious military attack is the "Great Wall" of China in the persona of President Xi Jinping. The worst scenario for Xi and the newly configured Central Military Commission is to allow Kim Jong Un to undertake a ruinous military venture. While former President Hu Jintao was more aloof and distant from military operations, President Xi's close ties with the PLA and deeper knowledge of military policy means that he is likely to maintain a much tighter grip on monitoring and surveillance activities vis-à-vis the KPA. If Kim Jong Un unleashes another attack like the sinking of the *Cheonan* in April 2010 and bombing of Yeongpyong Island in November 2010, President Xi is highly unlikely to sit on the fence. And it's not because Xi is distinctively more pro-South Korean than his predecessors, but because he will perceive North Korea no longer as a strategic asset, i.e., as a buffer against South Korea and the United States, but as a strategic liability that could help to derail China's own Asia strategy just as Xi begins to earnestly consolidate his grip on power. (For the record, it should be mentioned that according to knowledgeable sources, the Chinese government right after the 2010 *Cheonan* attack had incontrovertible intelligence on which North Korean units carried out the attacks but decided not to pressure Pyongyang or to side with South Korea and the international community in denouncing them).

The Sino-North Korean alliance was forged in the cauldron of the Korean conflict. Chairman Mao Zedong sent "people's volunteers" in the Korean War for three reasons: the specter of a North Korean military defeat on the face of unexpected US intervention, preventing the formation of a unified Korea tied firmly to the Western camp, and embracing a foreign war to bolster domestic support for the then infant PRC regime. Throughout the Cold War, Chinese leaders chose to buttress Pyongyang as a buffer against South Korea, Japan, and the United States; as a finicky but necessary counterweight in the Sino-Soviet dispute; and socialist fraternity forged on blood ties. Today, all three reasons have been superseded by fundamental transformations.

North Korea's intrinsic value as a buffer may have made sense when China was weak and fractured due to the Great Leap Forward and the Great Cultural Revolution. Today, China's longer-term prosperity and stability hardly depends on bolstering one of the poorest, isolated, and dangerous countries in the world. If North Korea was a strategic asset for China during the Cold War, the world's remaining totalitarian dynasty is fast becoming a significant liability for China. Consider the fact that Seoul's annual trade with Beijing is expected to top the \$300 billion mark by 2015 whereas Pyongyang continues to be critically dependent on Chinese

aid. Ironically and disturbingly, North Korea has paid back Chinese good will and matching economic support by developing nuclear weapons and stretching China's patience to the extreme. Even for a civilization that built the Great Wall, however, there are limits to seemingly endless political largesse.

With the exception of its W.M.D., North Korea is a morally bankrupt, an economically ruined, and a politically isolated, failed state. Kim Jong Un rightly believes that given his rise to power without any formal military training and matching experiences, he has to demonstrate his military credentials to the very elite that keeps him in power: the Korean People's Army (KPA). Kim Jong Un like his father Kim Jong Il and his grandfather Kim Il Sung were all glued at their hips to the KPA. The main difference, however, is that the KPA's respect *and* fear of the Kim Dynasty was highest under Kim Il Sung but has ebbed ever since.

The KPA gained key dividends by supporting Kim Jong Il such as their own hard currency operations, funneling of resources to a nuclear weapons program, and a "military first" policy that began to outshine the power and privileges of the Korean Worker's Party (KWP). As Kim Jong Il expedited Kim Jong Un's rise to power following his stroke in the summer of 2008, the KPA leadership went along only because there was no one among their ranks who could rival the aura and "legitimacy" of the Kim Dynasty and not because they believed in the innate leadership qualities of Kim Jong Un. What Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il have unwittingly created is an army that is so central to the maintenance of the Kim Dynasty that Kim Jong Un's official titles notwithstanding, the Young Marshall is more of a figurehead than a head figure.

It is precisely this Achilles heel that has triggered Kim Jong Un to act ever more defiantly. In the eyes of the North Korean military, Kim Il Sung is the only true military leader of the Kim Dynasty since he had revolutionary credentials and fought a war with South Korea and the United States, as ruinous and costly as that conflict was. While Kim Jong Il never had the battlefield experiences of his father, he did manage to cut his military teeth through major terrorist attacks such as the 1983 Rangoon bombing that killed 18 members of then South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan's entourage and the 1987 bombing of a Korean airliner that killed all 115 passengers and crew. The 2010 attacks on the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyong Island were allegedly masterminded by Kim Jong Un but since those attacks occurred when Kim Jong Il was still alive, the Young Marshall has yet to truly show his own military credibility.

This is the reason why North Korea's propaganda organs have been working overtime to prove that Kim Jong Un is every bit the military genius as his predecessors. Pictures and videos of the KPA's senior leadership fawning over the Young Marshall's commands, jotting down his on-the-spot military instructions, and mesmerized adulation of his military brilliance are reminiscent of Saddam Hussein's generals who praised him as the reincarnation of Alexander the Great. Kim Jong Un has walked into a self-made trap; namely, that he has to show his people and his generals that he really deserves to be the Young Marshall who can lead his nation to new

heights. By rattling his sabers and almost daring South Korea, the United States, China, and Japan to take him on, Kim Jong Un feels that he can earn his military stripes, even though he spent his teenage years at an exclusive boarding school in Switzerland and has lived as a *de facto* diety, unlike the absolute majority of his countrymen who have lived in fear and hunger.

But as Carl von Clausewitz reminds us, "any complex activity, if it is to be carried out with any degree of virtuosity, calls for appropriate gifts of intellect and temperament. If they are outstanding and reveal themselves in exceptional achievements, their possessor is called a 'genius.'" Clausewitz's dictums were written nearly 200 years ago but they're as relevant as ever because Kim Jong Un doesn't have the intellect or the temperament of being a true genius. This is the first lesson that we should draw from North Korea's unprecedented antics and bellicosity.

Thus, the message to Kim Jong Un must be unequivocally clear: if you rock the boat and a major conflict breaks out, South Korean and US forces will suffer heavy casualties but in the end, they will prevail. And when that happens, the DPRK will cease to exist. The second lesson is that history is *not* on the side of Kim Jong Un or North Korea but on the side of freedom, democracy, human rights, and liberty. The South Korean government must understand that this is the real reason why they should never buckle under North Korean pressure or as the late Margaret Thatcher told President Bush when Iraq invaded Kuwait, "this is no time to be wobbly."

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