The Yeonpyeong Shelling: North Korean Calculations

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Let me make a few comments on the North Korean artillery shelling of a South Korean island, the Yeonpyeong Island, which happened on November 23rd, just 18 days ago. I know how horrible the artillery bombardment is as I experienced such shelling 60 years ago—on September 28, 1950, to be exact. On that day, the U.N. forces were trying to recapture Seoul from the retreating North Korean forces. The U.S. and South Korean forces, after landing in Inchon, advanced to the southwest of Seoul and bombarded some parts of the city. As the bombs, American bombs I should say, began to hit our neighborhood, we scattered around outside when I, a nine-year old boy then, was hit by a small, finger-sized shrapnel of an artillery shell on my hip. I was bleeding badly, but my parents managed to stop it with a long cloth. The wound healed with the shell fragment still embedded in my body as it was war time and no hospital was around to do the surgery. I still carry the war souvenir with me, with the effect of sometimes triggering the airport metal detector.

This is a long way of saying that artillery shelling is terrible at the receiving end, especially when it is directed against civilian targets. I can only imagine the kind of hell the residents of Yeonpyeong must have gone through. I mention this story to ask a few simple questions. What are the motives, indeed calculations, of North Korea in perpetrating such an act, which is being denounced all over the world? Why does China refrain from joining the international community in chastising North Korea? What are the repercussions and implications for regional and international relations?

Many commentators mention domestic politics—such as establishing Kim Jong-un’s mettle as the dynastic successor, solidifying and galvanizing the elite and the population, and shoring up the “military first” policy—as the main reason for North Korea’s premeditated attack on South Korea. Others speculate that North Korea intended to “provoke” the United States and South Korea so that they will take North Korea seriously and make concessions to North Korean demands. According to Andrei Lankov, a Russia-born professor at Kookmin University in Seoul, North Korean leaders are sending a message saying, “We are here, we are dangerous, and we cannot be ignored. We can make a lot of trouble, but also we behave reasonably if rewarded generously enough.”
It is quite possible that both of these motivations—domestic needs and message sending—do exist, indeed do cause North Korea to act the way it does. But my sense is that North Korea’s calculations are much more complex than simply going after one or the other, or both of the objectives mentioned above.

In addition to the two objectives, North Korea intended to achieve (and did) a third objective, which was to intimidate the South Korean population and discredit the South Korean government of President Lee Myong-Bak. By bombing and killing civilians, North Korea has demonstrated that the South Korean population is vulnerable to North Korean attack and that the South Korean government cannot protect its own population. North Korea is willing to act in an inhumane way in order to prove that it can hurt the South Korean population with impunity.

On the international front, the North Korean action is forcing China to take a position that will necessarily disappoint and frustrate the United States and South Korea. Military clashes in the Yellow Sea/West Sea are likely to bring the U.S. naval exercises into the area, which in turn will aggravate Chinese relations vis-à-vis the United States and South Korea. All this can further contribute to creating an alignment structure which places China and North Korea on one side and the United States, Japan and South Korea on the other, a situation that suits North Korea just fine.

North Korea could have had another motive that is related to the Northern Limit Line (NLL), established by the United Nations at the end of the Korean War in 1953. The NLL now serves as a demarcation line on the sea between North and South Korea—a line that North Korea disputes and is attempting to nullify. By causing trouble in the area, with military means when possible, North Korea is trying to make the area the site of military clashes and keep the issue alive.

These were probably the maximum gains North Korea could hope for. Needless to say, there were risks that something might go awry and some or all of the objectives could not be achieved. For example, the actions could provoke a formidable counterattack by South Korea (one supported by the United States) and strengthen the South Korean and United States allied posture. There were also likely costs—the cost of adverse international opinion, and rising anti-North Korean sentiments in South Korea. But North Korean leaders are by far not the risk-avoiding type. In fact, they thrive on risk taking. Furthermore, they must have concluded that any cost of the operation, including counterattack by South Korea, was worth the gains they were expecting from the attack.

When a government such as the D.P.R.K. takes a decision to attack a South Korean island, there are factors/conditions that “cause” it to take the decision and factors/conditions that “permit” such a decision. The above four objectives are “causative” factors—motivations if you will. What factors “permitted” North Korea to take such a venturesome act—opportunities if you will?

First, South Korea had inadequate, if not negligible, defenses against North Korean artillery attack. The South Korean defense posture was primarily concentrated on dealing with possible amphibious landing and naval clashes in the area, and not directed toward artillery shelling. Counter-artillery guns were few and not fully operational. By contrast, North Korean artillery is well concealed and protected. Furthermore, South Korea, with its burgeoning economy, sophisticated social fabric, and peace-minded populace, was not in a position to launch a large-scale retaliatory attack. The country cannot afford to risk escalation and expansion of the military conflict and thus is susceptible to being held hostage by North Korea.

Second, North Korea took action when South Korea gave it an opportune excuse with its naval shooting exercise close to the border that separates North and South Korea. It gave the pretext for North Korea to claim that they were merely acting in self-defense in response to a South Korean attack. “Blaming the Victim,” is the title of a book William Ryan wrote forty years ago. That’s what North Korea
did sixty years ago, when they invaded South Korea in an all-out war claiming that South Korea had attacked first. They are doing it again this time.

Third, in the course of diplomatic massaging during the past few years, North Korea has succeeded in convincing China that it is in its best interest to play the role of a guardian for North Korea—in order to assure the continued existence of North Korea and to maintain a modicum of influence there. This, despite the fact North Korea continues to engage in and expand its nuclear activities—now extending to a full uranium enrichment program—and perpetrate aggressive actions against South Korea. In the event, China not only refrained from chastising North Korea but instead counseled both Koreas to refrain from provocative actions and to return to negotiation tables such as the Six Party Talks.

Fourth, the United States, being bogged down in Afghanistan following struggles in Iraq, is in no mood to open a new military front against North Korea even if North Korea seriously provokes it. In fact, military response was ruled out early in dealing with North Korea’s nuclear issue even when the “red line” was crossed time and again. Furthermore, the United States is well aware of South Korean reluctance to escalate or expand military conflict in Korea and it would not want to go against South Korean wishes even if it was provoked by North Korea to do so. North Korea could count on the fact that the United States was not going to use force or the threat of it to coerce North Korea to do something it did not wish to do.

Fifth, in the wake of the Cheonan incident which took place about half a year ago in the same waters, the international community, in particular the UN Security Council, failed in sending a clear-cut message to North Korea that their provocation, if repeated, would not be tolerated. In other words, Pyongyang has received a signal from the lukewarm reaction of the Council, whose permanent members include both China and the United States, that they could get away with another military provocation on South Korea.

On the basis of the calculations conducted with the factors and circumstances described above, risk-taking and desperate North Korean leaders would well nigh decide to attack Yeonpyeong Island, military and civilians alike. Given the factors at hand and their mentality and style, the North Korean leadership most probably calculated that they would come out ahead in plusses and minuses with their decision to attack the Yeonpyeong Island.

The question remains as to how to deal with North Korea and tackle with its aggressive and dangerous behavior. The answer probably lies in our (meaning the rest of the world) ability to change the contents of the inputs that go into North Korea’s calculations, especially the “permissive factors.”

South Korea should upgrade its ability to defend itself against a variety of attacks from North Korea and strengthen its retaliatory will and capabilities. China has to seriously think about the consequences of North Korea continuing with and stepping up its aggressive and dangerous behavior vis-à-vis South Korea and the rest of the world.

The United States and China have to coordinate their policies, not only toward North Korea’s venturesome behavior, but regarding the contingencies related to the evolvement of the North Korean situation. The international community, particularly the United States and its allies including Japan and South Korea, should make it clear to North Korea that there are limits to which North Korea can indulge in aggressive and risk-taking behavior.

The key to all these efforts seems to be to persuade China to lean more heavily on North Korea to change its behavior. But the problem is that China has decided, on the basis of strategic calculation, to reassure North Korea about its security rather than rein it in. Hence, China takes a more permissive attitude toward North Korea’s aggressive behavior and nuclear activities.

In the United States and South Korea, there are three views as to how to induce China to use its
influence over North Korea. One is reassurance, the second is persuasion, and the third, pressure. The reassurance view argues that China should be told that North Korea will not be weakened and neither China’s nor North Korean interest—security, economic and otherwise—will be compromised even if North Korea gave up its nuclear weapons and refrain from aggressive behavior. The persuasion school argues that, in fact, China’s own interest will be enhanced by cooperating with the rest of the world by reigning in North Korea. The pressure school suggests that China should be made to understand that it will face more pressure such as the increased military presence of the United States off China’s borders in the Yellow Sea with the continuation of North Korea’s mischievous behavior.

In fact, the North Korean attack on the Yeonpyeong Island might have provided the Chinese leadership with an opportunity to do the strategic recalculation regarding the value of North Korea. For two obvious reasons, I guess that after the unprovoked attack on South Korea, Pyongyang could be seen more as liability than asset by Beijing.

First, China lost much face because of North Korea’s conventional provocation as well as the revelation of the UEP. To put it differently, Beijing’s strategic efforts to lead Pyongyang onto the Chinese path of reform and opening, especially through the two visits of Kim Jong-il this year, have proved to be futile.

Second, the North Korean military action has led to the strengthening of not just the Korea-United States alliance but also the trilateral ties of Korea, United States and Japan. As evidenced by Beijing’s vocal opposition against the joint Korea-U.S. military exercises in the Yellow Sea, which would not have taken place without Pyongyang’s military provocations, the North Korean military adventurism incurred strategic cost to China.

While this kind of strategic reassessment might be the case, China is unlikely to be either willing or able to use its influence over North Korea. Nonetheless, it is important, not only for the United States and South Korea, but also to China as well, that they find a joint and cooperative approach in dealing with the North Korea problem, its nuclear problem, aggressive behavior, and future evolvement.

The concerned countries including China, the United States and South Korea have gone too far—China being too reluctant to condemn North Korea and the United States and South Korea urging China to rein in North Korea—for China to now turn around and suddenly start placing overt pressure on North Korea. But the situation is so serious that China cannot afford not to do something to restrain North Korea from engaging in another provocation. During the past two decades, at critical points, China has played a constructive role for peace on the Korean Peninsula. China does it in ways that it considers feasible and effective. The usual way is to do it in a discreet way without publicity. The present situation calls for China to play that kind of a role again. I hope that China will have another success this time around.