DID DETERRENCE AGAINST NORTH KOREA FAIL IN 2010?

Ken JIMBO

The sinking of the Cheonan and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 raised concerns for both the South Korean and U.S. governments that North Korea may no longer be conventionally deterred. The two governments have been reviewing how their basic and extended deterrence policies should be reorganized to adapt to this seemingly new dimension of North Korea’s behavior pattern. In reviewing deterrence, the following four considerations are particularly important:

First, North Korea was certainly not deterred from launching limited strikes against the South not once but twice in 2010. The failure to prevent an adversary from engaging in repetitive acts of aggression derives from the adversary’s perceptions that the cost incurred for the previous attack did not exceed the benefit gained from it.

Looking back at the chronology of events from early summer to fall 2010, North Korea may have perceived that the ROK government’s response was weak especially in terms of mobilizing the international community to take collective actions against North Korea. The July 9 UN Security Council Statement on the Cheonan sinking failed to directly identify North Korea as responsible. International sanctions appeared further weakened as early as August when Hu Jintao met Kim Jong-il and pledged continued support for the North Korean economy. North Korea most likely learned that its attempt to escalate aggression against the South was successful and that there was still a margin for even further escalation.

Second, due to progress in its nuclear weapons program, North Korea may have greater confidence in its capacity to control the level of escalation. Shortly before shelling Yeonpyeong Island, North Korea revealed its new uranium enrichment facility to visiting U.S. scientist Siegfried Hecker and reasserted its nuclear capabilities. These messages of nuclear weaponization were deliberately sent before the shelling of Yeonpyeong as signals to deter large-scale U.S.-ROK retaliation. North Korea seemed to believe that such signals and its nuclear capacity enhanced the effectiveness of mutual deterrence vis-à-vis South Korea and the United States at the strategic level. As far as North Korean perceptions are concerned, the magnitude with which North Korea can conduct conventional armed attacks before inviting major military retaliation had significantly increased.

Third, there exists a certain logic of restraint and escalation control by both Koreas and the United States. South Korea retaliated in response to the Yeonpyeong shelling by firing about 80 shells at North Korean barracks, command structures and artillery near the border. There was no significant military escalation from North Korea despite its verbal attacks. South Korean F-16 and F-15 jets were also rushed to
the area, but they did not provoke North Korean targets. More importantly, the United States did not take joint action directly on initial counter strikes. In terms of the range of escalation, the offensive exchanges in the Yeonpyeong case were relatively low in intensity.

We can reach a tentative assessment that deterrence failed in 2010 and is likely to fail again, but that escalation control succeeded. Along with the above two factors of North Korea’s cost-benefit analysis and mutual deterrence, escalation control indicates a “stability-instability paradox” on the Korean Peninsula. This paradox characterizes a decreasing probability of a major war but an increasing probability of low-level conflicts. North Korea assumed that South Korea and the United States did not want the minor conflicts to escalate into a major one, making it safe to engage in the former.

Fourth, the role of China in deterring North Korean aggression is increasingly important. As deterrence consists of sets of action to convince a party to refrain from initiating harmful action, it is not necessarily determined only by opponents but also by supporters. China has two options in regard to deterrence on the peninsula. China can weaken deterrence by exerting efforts to persuade South Korea and the United States to not pressure North Korea. China can also increase its anti-access and denial capability to encourage North Korean military operations. For example, Chinese objection to the U.S.-ROK Yellow Sea naval exercise in July 2010 can be interpreted as an attempt to deny U.S. engagement access in a Korean contingency.

China also has the capacity to augment deterrence. North Korean fear of abandonment from China continues to grow as indicated by the frequent visits by Kim Jong-il and other high-ranking officials to China. Given the stability-instability paradox, the role played by China in terms of deterring low-intensity aggression and supporting escalation control seems pivotal. China’s unusually active, intense and public degree of engagement after the Yeonpyeong incident showed how alarmed Beijing was by crisis escalation.

The apparent failure of deterrence on the Korean peninsula in 2010 has had a significant impact on Japanese perceptions of basic and extended deterrence and raises important questions regarding the role of U.S. security alliances in Northeast Asia. First, there is the question of whether North Korea believes that an increased level of aggression against Japan might also go without significant repercussions and costs. Although the thresholds are high for North Korea to conduct missile attacks or vigorous guerilla activities against Japan, the Japanese government should pay greater attention to provocative behavior such as low-level and asymmetrical maritime assaults. Second, U.S. extended deterrence to Japan and South Korea should be equally strengthened in order to increase the cost of North Korean aggression. Bilateral security cooperation between Japan and South Korea should be given more importance since both countries share mutual interests in Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance activities. Third, U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation must be upgraded to enhance the impact and credibility of U.S. deterrence in the region. The three countries must take concrete actions in line with the joint plans outlined in the foreign ministers’ statement of December 2010 in order to build a renewed and sustainable foundation for trilateral cooperation on North Korea and other regional challenges. This effort must also include joint steps to strengthen coordination with China as a rising regional power based on the common goal of Northeast Asian peace and stability.

Ken JIMBO is Associate Professor at Keio University.

NEWS & EVENTS

JULY 26, 2011—USA IR SPECIAL OPERATIONS SCHOOL—HURLBURT FIELD, FL
THE KOREANs: HISTORY OF A SHATTERED PENINSULA
The USA IR Special Operations School will hold a special lecture on the Korean peninsula as part of its PACOM Theatre for Special Operations Forces Course series. Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy Director, will serve as guest speaker. This event is closed to the public.

JULY 30, 2011—GLOBAL RESOURCE SERVICES—TUCSON, AZ
THE ROAD TO RECONCILIATION
Global Resource Services will hold its annual symposium on North Korea, entitled “The Road to Reconciliation.” Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy Director, will moderate a panel on economic development.

AUGUST 5-6, 2011—CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AND UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA—LOS ANGELES, CA
PLANNING FOR THE LONG TERM
CSIS will hold its second meeting on Korean unification as part of its Korea Project, led by Victor Cha, CSIS Korea Chair, and David Kang, University of Southern California. Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy Director, will serve as a U.S. participant. This event is closed to the public.
SEPTEMBER 15-16, 2011—CENTER FOR U.S.-KOREA POLICY AND UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

NORTH KOREA IN TRANSITION
The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy will hold a closed-door workshop on North Korea’s transition as part of a joint project led by Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy Director, and Kyung-Ae Park, Director of the Center for Korean Research at the University of British Columbia. This event is by invitation only.

PUBLICATIONS


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VIEWS ON THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

“The Republic of Korea and the United States share common values and mutual trust, and our two countries are maintaining the strongest alliance relationship ever.”

--Kim Sung-hwan, ROK Foreign Minister, Remarks after meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Washington DC, June 24, 2011.

“While we remain open to direct engagement with North Korea, we remain firm in our resolve and our shared position that Pyongyang must improve its relations with the Republic of Korea.”

--Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State, Remarks after meeting with ROK Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan, Washington DC, June 24, 2011.

“Thanks to the strong alliance and our robust combined defense posture, Korea has emerged from the ashes of the Korean War and developed into a full-fledged democracy and thriving economy.”

--Min Dong-seok, ROK Vice Foreign Minister, Remarks at Korea America Friendship Night, Seoul, June 30, 2011.

“Because of the hard work of so many people this Alliance is not only deterring and ready to defeat any North Korean threat but it is also helping restore and maintain security around the world.”

The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy aims to deepen and broaden the foundations for institutionalized cooperation between the United States and South Korea by promoting a comprehensive U.S.-ROK alliance partnership on emerging global, regional, and non-traditional security challenges. A project of The Asia Foundation, the Center is based in the Foundation’s Washington DC office.

The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to the development of a peaceful, prosperous, just, and open Asia-Pacific region. Drawing on 50 years of experience in Asia, the Foundation collaborates with private and public partners to support leadership and institutional development, exchanges, and policy research.

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This newsletter is produced by the Center for U.S.-Korea Policy to provide updates and analysis on current policy issues related to the U.S.-ROK alliance partnership. All views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s).

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