

# North Korea's Provocation and Escalation Calculus: Dealing with the Kim Jong-un Regime

Ken E. Gause

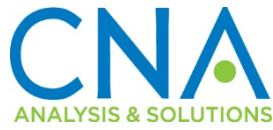
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**Cover Photography:** Top left: Kim Jong-un in the war room. Bottom right: a North Korean military parade. Photos taken from North Korean television programming.

**Approved by:**

**August 2015**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "JSchroden".

Jonathan Schroden, Director  
Center for Stability and Development  
Center for Strategic Studies



## Preface

*The 2010 Cheonan sinking and Yeonpyeong-do artillery bombardment were indications of how difficult it is to deter “low-level” North Korean provocations. These incidents elicited U.S.-ROK reaffirmation of their strategic deterrence commitment as well as a ROK declaratory policy shift toward “proactive deterrence” and “manifold retaliation.” Despite these reactions, strengthening deterrence of “low-level” provocations while minimizing risks of potential rapid conflict escalation remains a central dilemma as was demonstrated in the reaction to North Korea’s alleged hack of Sony in order to prevent the release of the movie “The Interview.” This paper, which builds from an earlier paper written on covert versus overt provocations for the 6<sup>th</sup> CNA-KIMS workshop, examines North Korea’s provocation and escalation calculus, as well as the timing inherent in its brinkmanship decision-making. It contains information up through the end of May 2015.*



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# Introduction

One of the questions that has perplexed the Pyongyang watching community since Kim Jong-un came to power at the end of 2011 is when and under what circumstances will North Korea return to its customary brinksmanship strategy that has underlined its foreign policy for decades. In 2013, the rhetoric coming from Pyongyang during the Foal Eagle/Key Resolve exercises was in many respects unprecedented. Pyongyang moved up the escalatory ladder with bold strokes that included closing down the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a joint venture of North and South Korea, and threatening to launch nuclear strikes against the United States. For some Pyongyang watchers, it seemed like “a dress rehearsal” of things to come.

In the lead-up to the 2014 Foal Eagle/Key Resolve exercise, there were concerns in both South Korea and the United States that North Korea would respond with provocations—nuclear and missile tests on the low end of the spectrum, and more violent measures reminiscent of 2010 on the upper end.<sup>1</sup> When the U.S./ROK exercises began, North Korea responded with rhetorical fervor and launched numerous short- and medium-range Scuds into the Sea of Japan. This response was in keeping with past practice and the amped-up tension, but the outright provocation expected by many did not materialize. The 102<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth, April 15, was another milestone that experts pointed to in anticipation of a fourth nuclear test or a launch of a Taepodong or KN-08 missile. Again, the milestone

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<sup>1</sup> Many of these same Pyongyang watchers warned of provocations in the aftermath of Jang Song-taek's purge—sometime during the January-March 2014 timeframe. Minister of National Defense Kim Kwan-jin is reported to have speculated about the possibility in a video conference with members of the high command on December 17, 2013. It was reported in the South Korean media that Minister Kim had made the same report at the foreign and security ministers meeting held one day earlier in Ch'o'ngwadae [ROK office of the president] presided over by President Park Gyun-hye. The Institute for National Security Strategy, a think tank attached to the National Intelligence Service, pointed to the end of March, when the Key Resolve exercise was scheduled to end, saying, “North Korea is likely to intentionally perpetrate a local provocation in order to strengthen their internal unity and to resolve the system crisis due to the complaints of the residents and the division in the elite caused by the large-scale purging.” This meant that North Korea was likely to adopt a provocation strategy as a way to turn eyes to the outside in order to deal with the aftermath caused by the power shift in Pyongyang.



passed without incident. Finally, some experts theorized that if Pyongyang wanted to make a bold statement, it might carry out a non-violent demonstration during President Barack Obama's trip to Japan and South Korea at the end of April. Again, nothing dramatic occurred. In the summer of 2015, speculation has pointed to October 10 (the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Korean Workers' Party) as another opportunity to conduct a demonstration—possibly a launch of KN08 inter-continental ballistic missile.

There are a number of assumptions that have traction within the Pyongyang-watching community. The first is that Kim Jong-un, like his father, will resort to brinkmanship tactics as part of North Korean foreign and security policy. The second is that when it serves the North's purposes, it will engage in provocations—at least non-violent demonstrations—because they are necessary to the development of a credible nuclear and missile capability. The third is that if the regime feels slighted or internal power dynamics demand it, North Korea will resort to violent provocations as it did in 2010. The fourth is that the venue for most of these provocations (other than a nuclear demonstration) is the maritime environment, around the disputed Northern Limit Line (NLL). The fifth and final assumption is that if North Korea resorts to provocations, it will not be afraid to move up the escalatory ladder.

While the first four assumptions seem to be widespread throughout the Pyongyang-watching community, the fifth assumption is surrounded by ambiguity and debate. Beginning in the time of Kim Il-sung, North Korean provocations followed a somewhat similar escalatory pattern. There were periods of pause and identifiable off-ramps for de-escalation. Under Kim Jong-il, the escalatory ladder was even more predictable and intelligence analysts became convinced that he would not engage in the higher order of brinkmanship unless he had an escape route to de-escalation once North Korea had made its point and could declare "victory." No discernable pattern has emerged in the Kim Jong-un era. While the regime on the one hand can lash out with rhetorical fury not seen in decades, on the other it has since 2013 tempered its provocation profile and has engaged in a diplomatic charm offensive that continued unabated with the exception of an alleged cyber hack of Sony Pictures at the end of 2014 in an effort to forestall the release of a movie that made fun of the young Supreme Leader.

Kim Jong-un is a new leader who has yet to consolidate his power. As such, how he will use provocations and conduct escalation will likely be closely tied to politics inside the regime. In December 2013, he made the bold political move of removing his powerful uncle Jang Song-taek. Over the next few months, Kim destroyed the remnants of the regent system that his father had set up around him to guide his decision-making. How this 30-year-old man thinks about the outside world and how to engage it is also unknown. Whether he is a brash leader who acts out of emotion at any threat to his power or legitimacy or is a cold, pragmatic politician who is



comfortable manipulating the environment around him would figure greatly into how he would operate in a crisis. Will Kim Jong-un adhere to the provocation playbook that his father and grandfather used? Will he look for off-ramps during a crisis? How should the ROK and United States prepare for future provocations? This paper will address these questions, paying particular attention to actions that both the ROK and the United States can take to *strengthen deterrence of “low-level” DPRK provocations while minimizing risks of potential rapid conflict escalation.*



# The Timing of North Korean Provocations

In order to appreciate the cycle of provocations in and around the Korean Peninsula, as well as how Pyongyang views escalation, one must first understand the timing behind North Korean provocations. While the North's weapons demonstrations/testing and more aggressive activity toward South Korea (and the United States) over the years may appear somewhat random and without reason, an examination of the history of provocations on the peninsula suggests that while the motivation for such brinksmanship may vary, the timing is often tied to political dynamics inside the regime.

Although few would debate the importance of internal politics on provocation decision-making, there is a lack of consensus on what drives the timing. One school of thought is that instability within the leadership is a driver of provocations. In other words, the regime is acting out in an attempt to drive political consensus around the Supreme Leader. Another school argues that since a military provocation is an option that Pyongyang can take only with considerable risk, it can do so only when the leadership has sufficient confidence in the internal situation. One way of settling this dispute is to examine the history of North Korean brinksmanship, paying particular attention to the periods of political turmoil within the regime that were followed by provocation events. Can a cause and effect be determined? What is the gap in time between the turmoil and the provocation event? The answers to these questions not only will provide insights into the drivers of the behavior, but also will suggest the frame of mind that the leadership brings to the escalation process. If the leadership is stable going into a period of escalation, it is more likely to be willing to remain engaged in moving up the escalatory ladder than it is if it is unstable and vulnerable to external pressure.

In 2003, the Congressional Research Service produced a report that examined the chronology of North Korean provocations dating back to 1950. The purpose of this report was to place Pyongyang's efforts at brinksmanship and coercive diplomacy in the context of past actions in order to better judge their significance and to determine changes in trends. The report defined "provocation" to include: armed invasion; border violations; infiltration of armed saboteurs and spies; hijacking; kidnapping; terrorism (including assassination and bombing); threats/intimidation



against political leaders, media personnel, and institutions; and incitement aimed at the overthrow of the South Korean government.<sup>2</sup>

The most intense phase of the provocations was in the latter half of the 1960s, when North Korea staged a series of limited armed actions (agent infiltration, kidnappings, terrorism) against South Korean and U.S. security interests.<sup>3</sup> A raid on the Blue House in 1968 and an attempted assassination of President Park Chung-hae (father of the current South Korean president) in 1974 top the list of dramatic North Korean actions. The 1980s, which had fewer events, were highlighted by a 1983 attempt on President Chun Doo-hwan's life in a bombing incident in Rangoon, Burma (Myanmar), and a mid-air sabotage bombing of a South Korean Boeing 707 passenger plane in 1987. With the accession of Kim Jong-il to the role of Supreme Leader in the mid-1990s, North Korea's profile of provocation became more tactical and largely restricted to the maritime environment. These provocations, which now included missile and nuclear tests, were mostly harmless, with the occasional skirmish at sea that resulted in North and South Korean navy casualties. This situation changed dramatically in 2010 with the sinking of *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong-do. Since Kim Jong-un's accession to power, North Korea has tested two long-range missiles, conducted a nuclear test, and conducted artillery/short-range Scud firings into contiguous waters.

In 2014, the South Korean weekly *Dong-A Online* plotted these provocations against a timeline.<sup>4</sup> Figure 1 is based on this methodology. The vertical axis is a reflection of the intensity of the provocations—a simple accounting of the number of major provocations. The horizontal axis is a timeline from 1950 to the present. Additional information is inserted into the chart [by the author] to highlight periods of tension within the North Korean regime.

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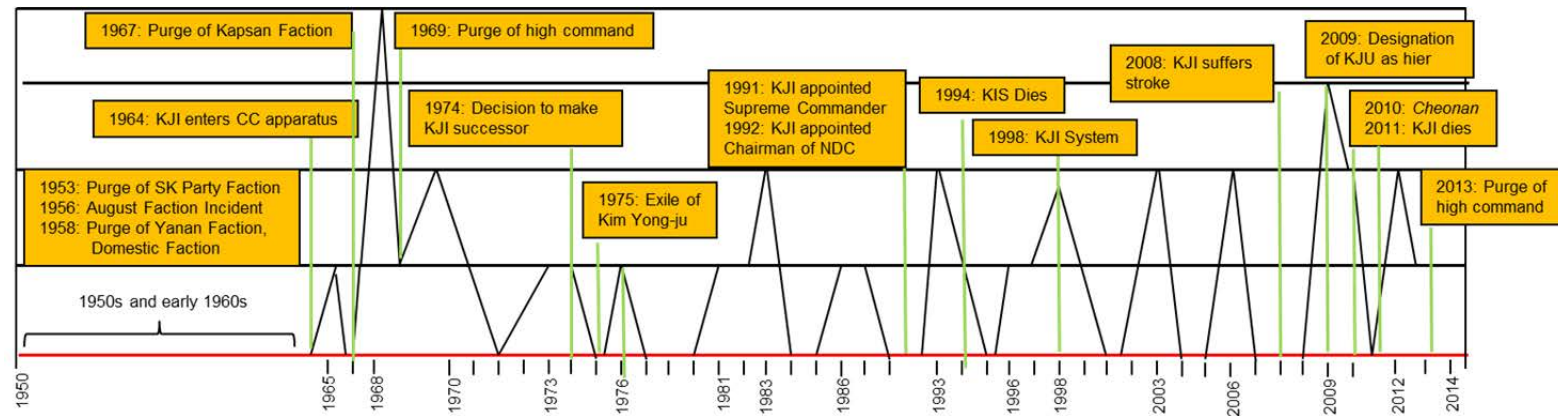
<sup>2</sup> Dick K. Nanto, *North Korea: Chronology of Provocations, 1950-2003* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 18 March 2003). This information was augmented by the author's own analysis, which brings this chronology up through 2014. This paper also used findings from Bernd Schaefer's *North Korean "Adventurism" and China's Long Shadow, 1966-1972* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Working Paper #44, October 2004).

<sup>3</sup> From 1954 to 1992, North Korea reportedly infiltrated a total of 3,693 armed agents into South Korea, with 1967 and 1968 accounting for 20 percent of the total. Nanto, *North Korea: Chronology of Provocations, 1950 - 2003*.

<sup>4</sup> Hwang Il-to, "North's 60 Years of Hit and Run...Real Threat To Come Not in Spring, But After Fall," *Dong-A Online*, 14 January 2014.



Figure 1. North Korean provocations and periods of political tension



\_\_\_\_\_ : Provocational trend line

\_\_\_\_\_ : Period of political tension



Examination of the information that went into this chart yields several insights on how North Korea engages in brinksmanship:

- North Korea's policy objectives have changed significantly over time—from ambitious, aggressive, and hostile ones in the 1960s, to more defensive and reactionary ones in the 1990s onwards (with the exception of the 2010 events).
- North Korea's military actions have been consistent with its policy objectives. North Korean leaders have been rational in the use of military force.
- The preferred location of North Korean kinetic actions has changed over time according to the shifting military balance and to where North Korea feels it has an advantage and a high potential for controlling escalation.
- There is obviously a close relationship between the power shifts in Pyongyang and the military provocations against South Korea and the United States. The number and intensity of the North Korean provocations has tended to increase after events such as a power struggle, the demise of the Supreme Leader, and the public naming of the successor.

While the first three bullets talk to the objectives and location of North Korean provocations, the final bullet regarding leadership dynamics suggests insight into the timing behind Pyongyang's calculus for major events that come with an associated risk of escalation. After over a decade of silence following the Korean War, North Korea dramatically increased its provocation activity in the late 1960s. This overlapped with a period of intense struggle among several of Kim Il-sung's chief lieutenants, which began with Kim Jong-il's entrance into the political arena in 1964. The jockeying for power eventually led to the purge of the Kapsan faction (also referred to as the "Kim Il-sung faction") in 1967 in favor of a unitary power system around Kim Il-sung that would eventually lead to the first hereditary succession.

As the leadership coalesced around Kim Il-sung over the next two years, North Korea carried out some of the most dramatic provocations in its history, one after another. These included the attack on the PCE-56, a South Korean navy patrol boat (January 1967); the January 21 incident (January 1968); the capture of *Pueblo* (January 1968); the penetration into Ulchin and Samch'o'k area (October 1968); and the shooting down of the EC-121, a U.S. Navy spy plane (April 1969). The confrontation was so intense that, in 1968 alone, 145 South Korean soldiers, 25 civilians, and 17 U.S. soldiers were killed. It was a crisis not very different from wartime.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



The 1970s were a quiet decade, other than the ax murders in 1976, as the unified guidance system was put into place that ensured the Kim family dynasty. Then, in the 1980s, North Korea returned to provocations.<sup>6</sup> In 1974, Kim Il-sung had chosen his son, Kim Jong-il, to be his successor, which triggered a period of power consolidation—something that Kim Jong-il managed to do by the Sixth Party Congress in 1980 when his status of heir apparent was made public. In the following years, North Korea returned to dramatic and violent provocations. On October 9, 1983, South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan was on an official visit to Rangoon, Burma. Minutes before he was due to lay a wreath at the Martyrs' Mausoleum, the roof exploded. The huge blast ripped through the crowd below, killing 21 people and wounding 46 others, including the South Korean Foreign Minister, Lee Beom-seok; the Economic Planning Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Suh Suk Joon; and the Minister for Commerce and Industry, Kim Dong Whie. President Chun was saved because his motorcade had been delayed. Four years later, on November 29, 1987, Korean Air Flight 858 was on a scheduled flight between Baghdad and Seoul when it exploded in mid-air over the Andaman Sea. Two North Korean agents were accused of planting the bomb and were traced to Bahrain, where they both took ampules of cyanide hidden in cigarettes. The male agent died, but the female agent, Kim Hyon-hui, survived and later confessed to the bombing. Both of these attacks occurred in a period of stability inside the North Korean leadership and probably resulted from Kim Jong-il's attempts to exert himself as Kim Il-sung began to transfer more power to him for running the day-to-day operations of the regime.<sup>7</sup>

Kim Jong-il continued to assume the defacto running of the regime in the early 1990s, becoming the Supreme Commander of the armed forces in 1991. According to defectors' reports, this was a period in which the high command began to push back against the hereditary succession and apparently hatched an assassination plot, which was foiled. Two years later, Kim Il-sung died. During this period, North Korea resorted to rhetorical bluster, especially regarding its burgeoning nuclear program, but did not engage in provocational behavior. It was nearly a year after the transition of power before North Korea engaged in any aggressive activity toward South Korea.

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<sup>6</sup> During this period, North Korea continued to conduct provocations, mostly covert. They seemed to be tied to Kim Jong-il's power consolidation and to evidence that he was taking a larger role in regime operations. Two notable provocations were the August 1974 assassination attempt on President Park Chung-hee that resulted in the death of his wife and the August 1976 incident in which a group of North Korean soldiers, wielding axes, attacked a U.S.-South Korean tree-trimming work team in a neutral area of the DMZ, killing two U.S. Army officers and wounding four American enlisted men and five South Korean soldiers. This latter incident was apparently carried out under Kim Jong-il's orders without Kim Il-sung's knowledge. As a result, Kim Jong-il was rebuked for overstepping his authority. While kidnappings and other provocations continued, violent acts ceased for the most part until the mid-1980s.

<sup>7</sup> It has also been suggested that the bombing was tied to the upcoming Olympics in Seoul.



Then, a North Korean patrol boat fired on a South Korean fishing vessel, killing three South Korean fishermen; North Korea released five other fishermen in December 1995. This marked the beginning of a new provocation profile, which was maritime in focus. Over the next few years, North Korea unleashed a steady stream of provocations, beginning with the infiltration operations of 1996. Then in the late 1990s and 2000s, naval clashes around the NLL became a regular occurrence.

Through these provocations, North Korea began to crystalize its relationship with the South around the idea of acquiring a bargaining chip. According to the calculus, the threat of violence could be used to lock in a relationship of give-and-take with South Korea. While South Korea had money to offer, the North could offer peace in return. The underlying logic was simple: South Korea must continue to provide unconditional aid (Sunshine Policy) and keep its engagement with North Korea separate from political issues, or risk confrontation. In order to reinforce this policy, Pyongyang divided its relationship with Seoul between an “on land” policy and an “at sea” policy. On land, North Korea remained focused on pursuing aid and economic cooperation with South Korea. At sea, it would provide the “stick” via provocations.<sup>8</sup>

Without a permanent peace treaty, the two Koreas have not agreed on a mutual recognition of maritime borders, and they lack the formal diplomatic channels that could help prevent the escalation of border clashes both on land and at sea. This became clear over the span of 10 years, from 1999 to 2009, when the navies of both countries engaged in a number of armed engagements:

- **First Battle of Yeonpyeong.** On June 15, 1999, North and South Korean warships exchanged fire, resulting in the sinking of two North Korean ships. It was after this clash that the Korean People’s Army General Staff issued a special communiqué declaring the current NLL void and proposing a different line that would not challenge UNC/ROK control of the Northwest Islands (NWI) but would be approximately equidistant from the two coasts.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This divided strategy was initiated by Kim Jong-il’s response to President Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy initiative. Over time, it became institutionalized into a wider brinksmanship strategy. To the outside world, North Korea characterized this strategy as the *Uriminzokkiri* policy, meaning “just between the Koreans.” Internally, North Koreans referred to it as the “Northern Limit Line” strategy.

<sup>9</sup> Although North Korea initiated the crisis, the Kim Dae-jung administration played down the incident and did not escalate it. According to North Korean defectors’ reports, Pyongyang would not have been capable of moving up the escalatory ladder if South Korea had decided to strike back. As a consequence, South Korea’s peace-making efforts encouraged North Korea to fix upon military provocation as the long-term basis of its foreign policy strategies. This strategy would be carried out through the development of nuclear weapons at an international



- **Second Battle of Yeonpyeong.** North and South Korean ships clashed again in June 2002, this time with greater casualties. After a 20-minute exchange, the North Korean ships moved back across the NLL and the South Korean ships did not pursue them. South Korea suffered five killed and 19 wounded. An estimated 30 North Koreans were killed, and an unknown number were wounded.<sup>10</sup>
- On November 1, 2004, three North Korean vessels crossed the NLL. They were challenged by South Korean patrol boats, but did not respond. The South Korean vessels opened fire, and the North Korean boats withdrew without returning fire. No casualties were reported.
- **Battle of Taechong.** On November 10, 2009, a North Korean gun boat crossed the NLL and entered waters near Taechong Island. South Korean vessels opened fire, reportedly causing one death and serious damage to a North Korean patrol ship.

Over this timespan, North Korea also conducted ballistic missile and nuclear tests (2006, 2009), but in no instance did a provocation—either a demonstration or a violent clash—overlap with a period of tension within the regime. When Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke in August 2008, the regime looked inward. It was not until three months after his public reappearance in January 2009 that North Korea launched the Unha-2 space booster (allegedly based on the long-range Taepodong-2), on April 5.

A major conclusion, therefore, can be drawn from the data of North Korean leadership dynamics and provocational behavior under Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. The regime chooses the time when it will engage in such behavior very carefully. Its calculus is not based on irrational decision-making. Provocations do not take place during periods of turmoil within the leadership, such as during a transition of power. It is only after stability has been reestablished that the regime again refocuses on engaging (albeit in a negative way) with the outside world. While provocations can be used to build consensus around the Supreme Leader, they have not resulted from a lack of stability at the center.

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level, and through naval provocations at the inter-Korean level. See Jang Jin-sung, *Dear Leader: Poet, Spy, Escapee—A Look Inside North Korea* (New York: Atria Books, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> This provocation was timed to coincide with the Seoul World Cup. The goal was to move the territorial dispute from the initial stage (provocation) to the second stage (marking the North Korean position) of Pyongyang's foreign policy strategy by publicizing the issue on the international stage. The subsequent actions along the NLL over the years have been designed to move the issue to the final stage (maintenance and recognition).



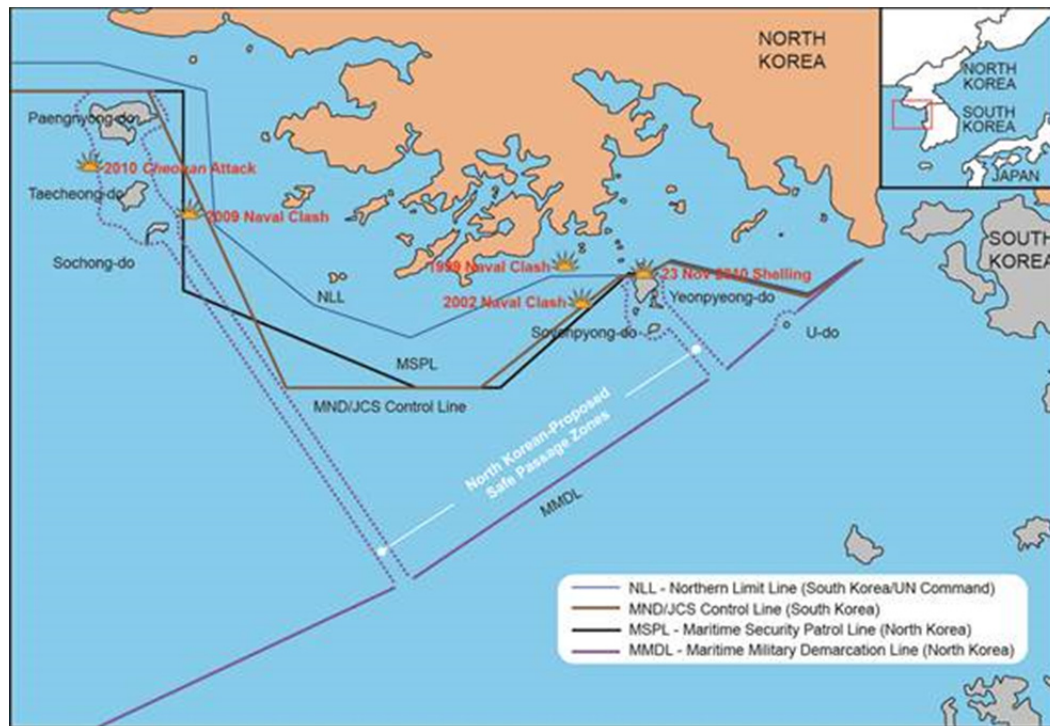
## The provocations of 2010

The question facing the Pyongyang-watching community is whether the North Korean calculus with regard to provocations that guided Kim Jong-il's decision-making will persist under Kim Jong-un. While it will take some time to reach ground truth on this question, an examination of North Korean activity since the younger Kim's designation as heir apparent would be instructive, given that his direct involvement in provocation decision-making most likely began with the events of 2010—see Figure 2. This was a formative period in his development as a leader: it brought into clear relief how North Korea operates through a crisis, in terms of conducting internal politics while managing the fallout (and potential escalation) in the international community.

Up to 2009, Pyongyang's rhetoric and threats surrounding the NLL were mostly tied to its political maneuvering. A continuing leitmotif of North Korea's regional foreign policy was its aim to establish diplomatic relations with the United States while isolating South Korea from the regional diplomatic and security forums. Couched within this larger strategic vision was a cold economic reality—the competition for maritime resources. The immediate causes of the pre-2009 clashes were largely economic. Because of the concentration of valuable blue crab south of the NLL, there was a sharp increase in the frequency of both South and North Korean vessels crossing that line to catch crabs—and the latter vessels were ever more frequently accompanied by naval vessels.



Figure 2. Clashes in the West Sea



A leadership shuffle in early 2009 accompanied the start of another period of tension over the NLL, when, in January, the North Koreans stepped up their rhetoric with regard to the disputed area, threatening an “all out confrontational posture” against the South in response to what they called violations of the sea border. Just weeks later, General Kim Kyok-sik, who had been Chief of the General Staff, was transferred to command of the Fourth Corps of the North Korean army, whose area of responsibility borders the NLL. Kim Kyok-sik was known to be one of Kim Jong-il’s most trusted generals, and was likely put in his new position so that he could help plan activities in the NLL area. Soon thereafter, the head of the Operations Department (which was then under the authority of the Korean Workers’ Party), General O Kuk-ryol, was moved to a senior position on the National Defense Commission (NDC), the chief command and control organ of North Korea’s armed forces. Within weeks of this move, the Operations Department was placed under the control of the newly enhanced Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB)—North Korea’s military intelligence organization with responsibility for operations against South Korea—which reports directly to the NDC. In the months following these appointments, the nature of North Korea’s provocations changed, becoming much more violent. Instead of the navy, North Korea relied on the RGB and its coastal



artillery, two military organizations tied to the heir apparent (and by extension to the unfolding political succession), to conduct provocations along the NLL.

**Sinking of *Cheonan*.** On March 26, 2010, *Cheonan* (PCC-772), a 1,200-ton South Korean navy corvette, was severed in half and sank in the waters off Paengnyong Island, the northern-most of the West Sea Islands in the contested waters near the NLL. Forty-six South Korean sailors died in the sinking.<sup>11</sup> The Joint Civil-Military Investigation Group (JIG), a multinational commission led by South Korea, concluded after nearly two months of investigation that a North Korean torpedo had sunk *Cheonan*.

The timing of this covert provocation appears to run counter to the narrative of North Korean brinksmanship for over 40 years. If defector reporting is to be believed (as well as public hints from the U.S. and South Korean intelligence communities), this provocation took place in the midst of unfolding turmoil within the regime.

In the spring of 2010, Kim Jong-il was faced with a disastrous currency revaluation that had thrown the succession into jeopardy. He also had a high command that not only was fuming over lost largess (because of the currency revaluation's impact on hard currency gains), but also was smarting over the loss of one of its ships in a dust-up with the South Korean Navy (in November 2009). Kim could have unleashed a purge to deal with the growing anger within the leadership. This probably would have been a temporary solution, but it could have sown the seeds of opposition to the hereditary transition of power, which was already being challenged by some sectors of the old guard within the military. Kim could have allowed the military to conduct an overt provocation, such as another at-sea clash with the South Korean Navy. This most likely would have resulted in another North Korean defeat. He also had to weigh the impact that such an overt provocation would have on Sino-North Korean relations. Therefore, the regime was presented with the challenge of diverting the anger outward while not inviting an immediate response. The solution was a covert attack where Pyongyang's fingerprints were faint, if not non-existent—the sinking of *Cheonan*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The island is on the South Korean side of the Northern Limit Line but within the North Korean contested waters.

<sup>12</sup> There is some debate in the Pyongyang-watching community over whether North Korea tipped off its attack. On February 25, the regime released a toughly worded statement in the name of the spokesman for the KPA General Staff in response to the annual Key Resolve/Foal Eagle exercise. The wording of the statement seemed designed to blur the distinction between Pyongyang's typical threat of retaliating against offensive moves during the exercises and a more provocative warning that the exercises themselves were an act of war requiring a North Korean response.



Tensions around the peninsula were immediately raised, with South Korean and U.S. forces on alert for additional provocations, and the North preparing for retaliatory strikes by heightening readiness and even repositioning some SA-5 anti-aircraft missiles in the coastal region near where *Cheonan* went down. This was followed by U.S.-South Korean joint exercises in the East Sea, South Korean Navy exercises in the West Sea, and North Korean threats of “physical response” and bolstered nuclear deterrent. Instead of vigorously pushing back, Pyongyang denied culpability and relied on China to blunt the resulting sanctions. Kim Jong-il disappeared from public view for nearly a month until the regime was confident that it could weather the storm of international outrage.

**Shelling of Yeonpyeong Island.** On November 23, 2010, military troops from the South Korea and the United States conducted war-simulation exercises, dubbed “Hoguk” [“Defend the State”], a massive joint endeavor involving 70,000 soldiers, 600 tanks, 500 warplanes, 90 helicopters, and 50 warships. According to the South Korean Ministry of National Defense, the units on those islands, including Yeonpyeong Island, fired 3,657 times, or over 900 shells per hour, into contested waters near the Northern Limit Line. Following this exercise, North Korean forces fired around 170 artillery shells and rockets at Yeonpyeong Island, hitting both military and civilian targets. The shelling caused widespread damage on the island, killing four South Koreans and injuring 19. South Korea retaliated by shelling North Korean gun positions. North Korea subsequently stated that it had responded to South Korean shells being fired into North Korean territorial waters.

This provocation was also tied to the succession process; however, unlike the sinking of *Cheonan*, it took place in a period of relative stability within the regime. Kim Jong-un had been announced to the world as the heir apparent two months before, at the Third Party Conference. The new leadership structure was in place with few indications of push-back within the regime. The fact that this provocation focused on the use of artillery—which is North Korea’s military capability specifically tied to the younger Kim—suggested that it was an exercise in internal communications to the regime, highlighting the heir apparent as a “military genius.”<sup>13</sup> The fact that North Korea was not willing to engage in a response volley to the South Korean retaliatory fire indicates the regime’s caution. It was more interested in making a point and possibly testing South Korea’s Proactive Deterrence Strategy than in engaging in an escalatory show of force.

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<sup>13</sup> Kim Jong-un’s first public appearance following the Third Party Conference seemed designed to link him publicly to military operations, especially the artillery command. He and Kim Jong-il watched a live-fire exercise within days of the younger Kim being publicly identified as the heir apparent. The fact that North Korea’s artillery units are the backbone of the regime’s deterrent presumably served to raise the status of Kim Jong-un in the eyes of the wider leadership.



## Escalation Dynamics

Given the heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula in the aftermath of the 2010 provocations, one of the unknowns facing the region is how escalation dynamics will play out in the future. Not only is North Korea now under new leadership, which may have a new calculus, but also South Korea's views on how to handle future provocations have radically changed. There are fundamental questions of how one or the other side will respond or counter-respond and whether the red lines that exist pose challenges to decision-makers on both sides. Does Pyongyang believe South Korea's promises to follow through with its more aggressive Proactive Deterrence Strategy? Does Seoul believe that this new strategy will deter North Korea under all circumstances? Unless both sides have a common understanding of how future escalation will unfold, the potential for a crisis to get out of control is very real.

In the past, both sides had a shared understanding of escalation, which was driven in large measure by Seoul's largely diplomatic response to North Korean provocations. While there had been tactical exchanges between ships in the vicinity of the NLL, there had been no purposeful and proportionate military operation launched in retaliation. This emphasis on diplomacy gave Pyongyang a sense of assuredness that it could control escalation resulting from its coercive strategy. At the same time, it may have emboldened the North's leadership to take the more aggressive actions it did in 2010—provocations that brought to the forefront long-standing political divisions among South Koreans over the best policies for dealing with their dangerous neighbor.<sup>14</sup>

The fundamental question facing South Korean leaders was whether a more forceful stance toward North Korea would deter Pyongyang or, on the contrary, increase the probability of a crisis. They knew that more purposeful (and proportionate) responses by the South and a willingness to respond with forceful retaliation could carry a very real potential for escalation into crisis.<sup>15</sup> For decades, it had been a

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<sup>14</sup> See-Won Byun, *North Korea's Provocations and their Impact on Northeast Asian Regional Security* (Washington, DC: Center for U.S.-Korean Policy, December 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff spokesman Army Major General Kim Yong-hyun warned on March 6, "If North Korea carries out provocations that threaten the lives and safety of South Koreans, our military will carry out strong and resolute retaliations." The South Korean statement advised that if provoked by North Korea, the South would attack the North's "command leadership."



singular aspect of the Korean standoff that North Korea held a disproportionate number of deterrence cards in its asymmetric ability to threaten Seoul. Whatever policies of response to North Korean provocations the South adopted would not change the fundamental strategic reality on the peninsula—Pyongyang had the advantage in crisis of being less risk averse than Seoul; South Korea had much more to lose.<sup>16</sup> As for the United States, its calculus with regard to responding to North Korean provocations was grounded in restraint—to restrain South Korean impulses to retaliate and seek international sanctions and condemnation against the North.<sup>17</sup> In both Seoul and Washington, there was an appreciation that tit-for-tat violent exchanges could quickly spiral out of control.<sup>18</sup>

The common understanding that once seemed to exist with regard to provocation and escalation changed in 2010 with North Korea's two violent attacks. Following the sinking of *Cheonan*, South Korean President Lee Myong-bak, in an address to the nation in May 2010, made the following declaration:

From now on, the Republic of Korea will not tolerate any provocative act by the North and will maintain the principle of proactive deterrence. If our territorial waters, airspace or territory are violated, we will immediately exercise our right of self-defense.<sup>19</sup>

Nine months later, after the Yeonpyeong shelling, President Lee again raised the stakes rhetorically by shifting the rules of engagement from a posture of “controlled response” to one of “manifold retaliation.”<sup>20</sup>

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The language indicates that the South has a decapitation strategy for dealing with North Korea. Such tough rhetoric is designed to increase the stakes for any North Korean provocation and give Kim Jong-un and his lieutenants a reason to pause before engaging in escalation.

<sup>16</sup> Abraham M. Denmark, *Proactive Deterrence: The Challenge of Escalation Control on the Korean Peninsula*. Academic Paper Series, Korea Economic Institute, 16 December 2011.

<sup>17</sup> In March 2013, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2094 in response to Pyongyang's February 12th nuclear test. The resolution, reportedly proposed by the United States and China, added three new individuals and two entities to the UN sanctions blacklist, and tightened restrictions on the North's financial dealings, including “bulk cash” transfers, linked to its weapons programs.

<sup>18</sup> Pak Geun-hae's administration has announced its intention to establish a security office as part of a government reorganization. This security office will serve as a “control tower” on security issues. One shortcoming of the Lee administration's reaction to the *Cheonan* sinking was a lack of clear guidance from the Blue House on how to proceed in the early hours and days after the incident. *Yonhap*, 06 March 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Full text of President Lee Myong-bak's national address, *Yonhap*, 24 May 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Michael McDevitt, “Deterring North Korean Provocations,” *The Brookings Institution, Northeast Asia Commentary*, February 2011.



The events of 2010, therefore, changed the calculus of the South Korean (and by extension U.S.) response. In March 2011, the South Korean Ministry of National Defense published a new Defense Reform Plan (DRP) known as DRP 307, which embodied and expanded the doctrinal changes evident in speeches by the South Korean president since the *Cheonan* incident. It also laid out changes in command and control and increased the emphasis on joint structures in the South Korean military command structure. Much of this reform was designed to give teeth to a new doctrine for dealing with the North below the level codified in the existing OPLANs. The goal of the Proactive Deterrence Strategy was to send an unambiguous signal that South Korea was ready, willing, and capable of responding to any provocation so as to prevent future adventurism by the North. But Minister of National Defense Kim Kwan-jin made clear that if this should fail, South Korea would no longer fall back on diplomacy.

If the enemy attacks our people and territory, I will use force to punish the enemy to make sure it doesn't even dare to think about it again. The enemy should be punished thoroughly until the source of hostility is eliminated.<sup>21</sup>

DRP 307 called on the South Korean military to move beyond self-defense and take prompt, focused, and proportional retaliatory actions in order to raise the costs of small-scale attacks to North Korea.<sup>22</sup>

The South Korean response to the Yeonpyeong shelling revealed the efficacy of the ideas spelled out in DRP 307. Therefore, it could be argued that the operational changes spawned by the Proactive Deterrence Strategy position the South Korean military to deal effectively with overt provocations by North Korea.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Rhee Sang-woo, "From Defense to Deterrence: The Core of Defense Reform Plan 307," CSIC Korea Chair Platform, 07 September 2011.

<sup>22</sup> According to one Asia watcher: "While many of the defensive reforms undertaken or called for within the rubric of these reforms were undeniably necessary and positive, crisis management and military defense are considerably different missions than deterrence. Establishing deterrence over small-scale attacks from the North is far more complex than defending against them, and carries with it a significantly greater risk of unintentional escalation. Much of this is due to the reality that the intention to deter small-scale attacks, and even the decision to increase the price of small-scale attacks through proportional retaliation, does not change the fundamental strategic dynamics of the Korean peninsula, in which North Korea is able to successfully bring tensions to the brink of crisis secure in the belief that, ultimately, Seoul is more risk averse than Pyongyang and is less willing to accept significant physical or economic damage." Denmark, *Proactive Deterrence*.

<sup>23</sup> Following North Korea's third nuclear test in 2013, the South Korea Ministry of National Defense unveiled ship-to-shore and submarine-to-ground cruise missiles. Dubbed the Haeseong-2 and Haeseong-3, respectively, the missiles are modified versions of a surface-to-



In 2013, as North Korea ratcheted up its rhetoric (see Figure 3), promising to set Seoul ablaze in response to U.S.-South Korean military exercises, the head of operations for the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff, Maj. Gen. Kim Yong-hyun warned that “if North Korea pushes ahead with provocations that would threaten the lives and safety of our citizens, our military will strongly and sternly punish the provocations’ starting point, its supporting forces and command.”<sup>24</sup> This was Seoul’s first enunciation of a decapitation strategy designed to raise the stakes for Pyongyang’s decision-making calculus. The challenge comes in how to deal with a covert provocation.

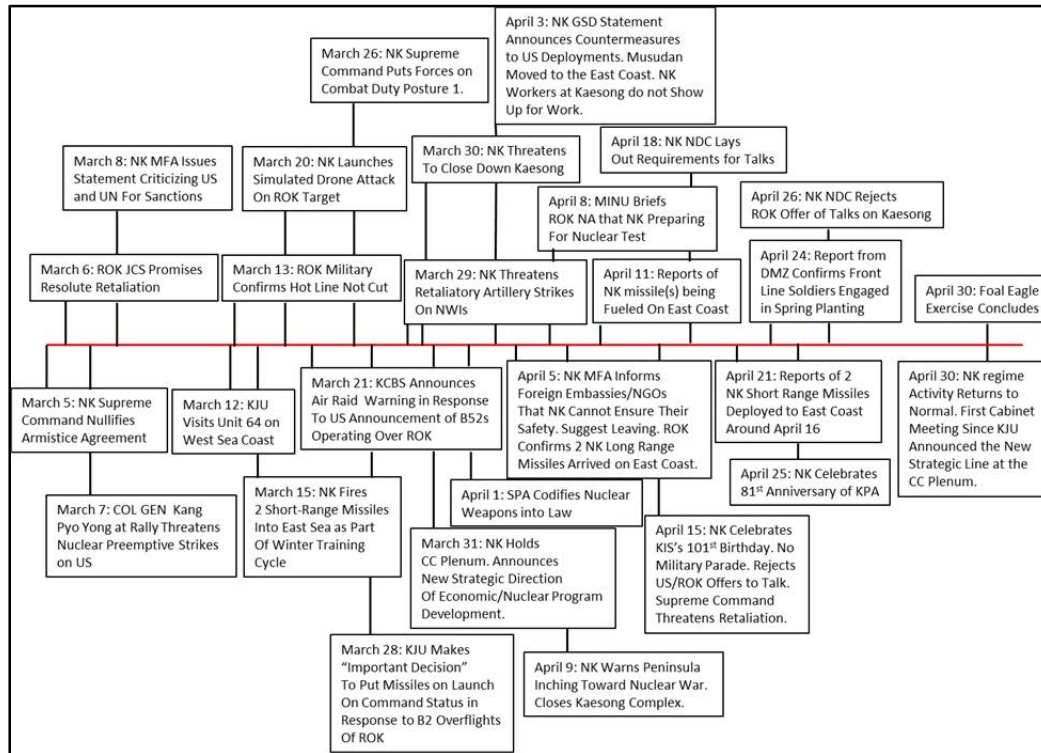
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surface cruise missile unveiled in 2012 but are designed to be launched from a ship or a submarine. The Haeseong-3 will be carried by a new Type 214 submarine, and the Haeseong-2 on a 4,500-ton-class Korean Destroyer (KD) vessel or a 7,600-ton-class Aegis destroyer. Their maximum range allegedly covers all of North Korea. According to ADM Cho Yun-hee, the ROK Navy chief of naval operations, this enhanced naval capability enables South Korea to conduct pinpoint strikes on North Korea’s core facilities. Presumably, this capability is to serve as a deterrent against North Korean provocations and, if needed, to respond to a variety of overt provocations.

<sup>24</sup> “Seoul Vows ‘Stern’ Response to North Korean Provocation,” *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 07 March 2013. A military source in Seoul clarified Maj. Gen. Kim’s statement by noting, “When we refer to command, it usually signifies divisional or corps commanders, but if Seoul comes under attack, the top levels of North Korea’s regime including Kim Jong-un could become targets.”



Figure 3. Escalation dynamics on the Korean Peninsula during the March/April 2013 crisis<sup>25</sup>



In the event of a provocation, South Korean planners may be faced with different sets of conditions that present little in the way of fingerprints. There may be no case for attribution whatsoever—that is, the circumstances may neither confirm nor deny North Korean complicity. Or, the act may almost certainly be the work of the North but present no evident “proof” with which to publicly confront Pyongyang. In either

<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that the 2013 crisis took place during North Korea’s winter training cycle. The winter training cycle begins every year in December and is the most intense training period of the year for the KPA. The last week of March is the most intense training period in the cycle. It is the time for the most complex training by the entire army, annually. In a vigorous winter training cycle, all units in the army are raised to full combat readiness as a matter of course and are graded by umpires on their speed in attaining that readiness level and the thoroughness of war preparations. If a unit receives a poor grade, it must perform remedial training in April. As April is the start of spring planting season and KPA units must grow much of their own food, remedial training is a hardship. See *NightWatch*, 26 March 2013.



event, South Korea will want to respond, especially if there is a general feeling among the South Korean population that North Korea is responsible.<sup>26</sup>

The case of *Cheonan* exemplifies another possible outcome: the proof seems irrefutable, but the North continues to deny culpability. Responding with force in this case is problematic because time has likely gone by in establishing blame, and China is likely to have at least tacitly taken the side of the North. Also, without conclusive, publishable proof, the United Nations is unlikely to be as helpful as it might otherwise be.

In any response to a North Korean provocation—whether covert and hazy as to authorship, or overt and unquestioned—there are challenges. The key elements are timing, which means getting the required permissions in a timely manner, and achieving proportionality that is accepted by the North and will not raise the specter of continued escalation. It will be important to maintain the distinction between self-defense and outright retaliation as punishment.

## North Korean calculus in responding to the response

Responding to a North Korean provocation does not necessarily conclude the engagement or halt escalation. How North Korea decides to respond to South Korea's response to its initial provocation will be critical to how the crisis proceeds. Central to Pyongyang's calculus will likely be its original motive for conducting the provocation in the first place.

In addition to motivation, Pyongyang's decision-making on how to respond will be tied to its evaluation of the South Korean response, primarily in two respects: timing and proportionality. Did South Korea respond quickly enough for its actions to be considered defensive and directly associated with the initial provocation? If so,

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<sup>26</sup> A major issue that the leadership in Seoul will have to contend with is public opinion. As was seen in public debates over the sinking of *Cheonan*, the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, and other security-related events, neither the South Korean polity nor public speak with one voice—something North Korea is adept at manipulating. A third of South Koreans still do not believe their government's report on the sinking of *Cheonan*. Therefore, the more time it takes to attribute an attack to the North, the more constrained South Korea will be in its ability to respond militarily. This risks undermining domestic legitimacy, since so much hype has been forthcoming from the Blue House and Ministry of National Defense. This provides an incentive for the North in the form of an opportunity to embarrass and undermine conservative support in the South.



Pyongyang will find it difficult to disassociate the response from the provocation and characterize it as an offensive act. Did South Korea overreact in its response? If so, North Korea may feel the need to respond in order to avoid looking like the loser in the engagement.

### **North Korean Decision-making in a Crisis**

A number of considerations are likely to influence any country's behavior during a crisis. Some of these are:

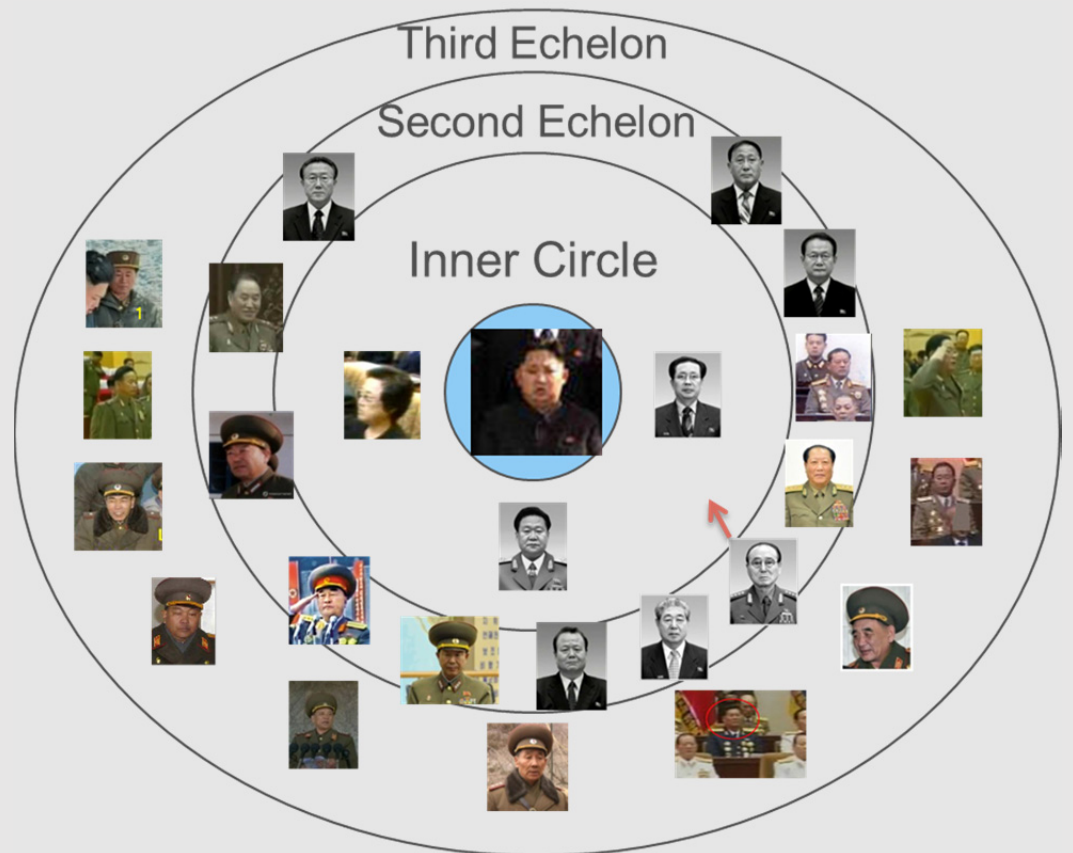
- Perceptions and beliefs of the elite
- Perceptions of the international environment
- Decision-making structure and processes
- Distinctive features that may be unique to the leadership itself.

During the 2013 crisis, North Korea was facing a unique set of circumstances in that Kim Jong-un had only been Supreme Leader for a little over a year and was still working on consolidating his power. He was working within the guidance laid down by his father's last will and testament, which laid out the need to test critical defense systems (nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles). This tenet of the will led to the sanctions and set North Korea on the path to increased tensions on the peninsula. The will also reportedly called for Kim Jong-un to find a way of securing a peace treaty with the United States that would allow for enduring security for the regime. Only with such a treaty in hand can Pyongyang feel secure enough to turn its attention to the economy, allegedly an area that Kim Jong-il felt that his son needed to address in order to consolidate his power. Finally, Pyongyang, as it had done with every new South Korean administration since 1992, needed to test the Park administration in order to identify red lines and determine areas of weakness and flexibility.

Motivations behind the crisis are one thing. How North Korea conducted the crisis is another. The unconditional manner in which North Korea took actions such as nullifying the Armistice Agreement and the willingness to raise the tensions to such a high level while shutting off lines of communication were probably tied to Kim Jong-un's leadership style and his desire to draw a clear break with how his father ran the regime. The fact that Kim was most likely working under a compressed timeline for escalation would partly explain how the regime carried out the crisis. He does not enjoy his father's legitimacy within the larger regime and thus was under pressure to show results. Therefore, he had to react to every perceived insult and provocation from the United States, South Korea, and the international community (UN) to avoid looking weak—something Kim Jong-il did not need to worry about. He also lacks his father's instincts on how to manage a crisis, and so he must rely on his



advisers and placate institutional interests within the regime. Therefore, once the crisis began, the North Korean decision-making and execution process for crisis management most likely became restricted to a group of individuals at various levels of the regime.<sup>27</sup>



The chart above shows the various individuals who were likely involved in the decision-making and execution during the 2013 crisis. The inner circle included Kim Jong-un (the final decision-maker) surrounded by his key advisers and regents: (L-R) Kim Kyong-hui (regent), VMAR Chae Ryong-hae (director of the General Political Bureau), and Jang Song-taek (regent).

The second echelon included those officials who held critical portfolios within the high command and Party and were responsible for relevant policy areas or had

<sup>27</sup> For a detailed discussion of leadership dynamics and decision-making under Kim Jong-un, see Ken E. Gause, *North Korean Leadership Dynamics and Decision-Making Under Kim Jong-un: A First Year Assessment*, CNA Occasional Paper 2013-U-005684 (November 2013).



control over critical resources that could be used in the crisis. These officials could provide advice and intelligence, but had no decision-making authority. They had also cultivated a close relationship with Kim Jong-un since 2010, when he became the heir apparent. They include: (L-R) Kim Yong-kon (KWP Secretary for ROK Affairs), Gen. Kim Yong-chol (Director, RGB), VMAR Hyon Yong-chol (Chief, GSD), Gen. Kim Kyok-sik (MPAF),<sup>28</sup> Gen. Ri Yong-kil (Director, GSD Operations Bureau), Pak To-chun (KWP Secretary for Defense Industry), Chu Kyu-chang (Director, KWP Munitions Department), Gen. O Kuk-ryol (vice chairman of the NDC),<sup>29</sup> Gen. Choe Pu-il (MPS), Gen. Kim Won-hong (MSS), Kim Yong-il (KWP Secretary for International Affairs), and Kang Sok-chu (vice premier and senior foreign policy adviser).

The third echelon was composed of military officers who were responsible for executing operations. They had limited influence and contact with Kim Jong-un other than during guidance inspections and field exercises. He could reach out to them for subject matter expertise. During this crisis, the most likely officers responsible for executing operational orders included: (L-R) Gen. Pak Jong-chun (Director, Artillery Command), LTG Pak Jong-chon (Supreme Command HQ), MG An Ji-yong (Commander, Island Defense), CG Choe Kyong-song (Commander, XI Corps), CG Kang Pyo-yong (vice MPAF), CG Pyon In-son (Commander, IV Corps),<sup>30</sup> VADM Kim Myong-sik (Commander, KPA Navy), LTG Kim Rak-gyom (Commander, Strategic Rocket Forces), Gen. Ri Pyong-chol (Commander, KPA Air Force), and Gen. Pak Jae-gyong (vice MPAF).

The calculations surrounding timing and proportionality will be central to North Korea's response, but they will not be the determining factors. Most likely, Pyongyang's decision-making will be worked out in advance of the provocation and tied to the motivation for the original attack. If the motivation is tied to an issue in the international arena, such as the demarcation of the maritime boundary, North Korea is unlikely to continue escalating as long as South Korea's response is not disproportionate. The overt provocations that North Korea conducts around the NLL are designed to highlight what Pyongyang feels is a wrong that needs to be corrected.

<sup>28</sup> In May, Kim Kyok-sik was removed as Minister of the People's Armed Forces and made Chief of the General Staff.

<sup>29</sup> O Kuk-ryol has close ties to the Kim family and allegedly provides critical advice on issues of crisis management. On some occasions, he might enter the inner circle of decision-making.

<sup>30</sup> "North Replaces Commander of Key Frontline Unit," *JoongAng Daily Online*, 30 April 2013. Pyon In-son was replaced as commander of IV Corps by Ri Song-kuk. Col. Gen. Pyon became director of the General Staff's Operations Bureau, a post that he held until 2015 when he was purged for reportedly allowing the KPA to be too aggressive in operations along the NLL.



The leadership believes that it is on solid (even legal) footing in its justification for the provocation. The provocation in and unto itself serves the regime's purpose. There is no reason to escalate the crisis.

If the motivation is tied to internal regime politics, however, the North Korean response is a much more complicated affair. The regime's calculus at this point is no longer driven by a set of rules or a game plan that it has adhered to in the past. Rather, it is hostage to very near term political considerations, which are likely opaque to the outside world.<sup>31</sup>

- In a situation where the regime is trying to burnish the credentials of the Supreme Leader, as was suspected to be the case with the Yeonpyeong Island shelling, the regime will likely respond to the South Korean response, but may not be willing to escalate beyond a certain point. Many Pyongyang watchers believe that the response-counter-response dynamics that followed the initial shelling had been preplanned by North Korea, which quickly began to de-escalate following the South Korean response.
- In a situation where the regime is engaged in a serious internal struggle tied to the Supreme Leader or the transfer of power, as was suspected to be the case with the *Cheonan* sinking, the regime will likely resort to covert provocations and be willing to respond to any South Korean response and not back down as the two sides move up the escalatory ladder. The regime sees its survival in jeopardy. Showing weakness at this point is not an option. In addition, the regime also likely believes that its artillery aimed at Seoul will ensure that South Korea backs down first.

On the Korean Peninsula, one of the most dangerous aspects of possible uncontrolled escalation is the failure to fully comprehend motives, perspectives, or desired end states of other actors involved.

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<sup>31</sup> Pyongyang is trying to signal that North Korea acts by different rules and calculations than it did under Kim Jong-il. Three examples are the unconditional manner in which Pyongyang has handled questions regarding its nuclear program, the Kaesong Industrial Complex closure, and the Kenneth Bae affair. In all three cases, it has gone out of its way to call outside expectations into question, pointing out that North Korea is not looking for short-term economic gains or trying to get the United States to send a high-level envoy to Pyongyang. Whether this is a short-term strategy meant to draw a clear distinction between the Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un eras or represents a fundamental shift in the regime's foreign and security policy remains to be seen.



## The North Korean Calculus in 2014

In the first two years under Kim Jong-un, North Korea engaged in three demonstrations (missile tests in April and December 2012 and a third nuclear test in February 2013) and a rhetorical test of wills in response to the Foal Eagle/Key Resolve exercise in 2013. In the first few months of 2014, as the United States and South Korea prepared for its annual Foal Eagle/Key Resolve exercise, many Pyongyang watchers were expecting to see a North Korean provocation. Expectations ran from demonstrations of a missile test or a fourth nuclear test, to more violent actions, such as the shelling of an island. According to the prevailing theory, North Korea had purged its second most powerful leader, Jang Song-taek, in December and this most likely would necessitate a return to brinksmanship in order to build consensus within the regime. Another theory, tied tangentially to this one, was that the military had won the power struggle with Jang Song-taek and, as a result, would move away from the “diplomatic charm offensive” toward a hard-line policy in dealing with the outside world, in order to cover up for its internal weakness. Both theories were wrong.

### Purge of Jang Song-taek and stability within the regime

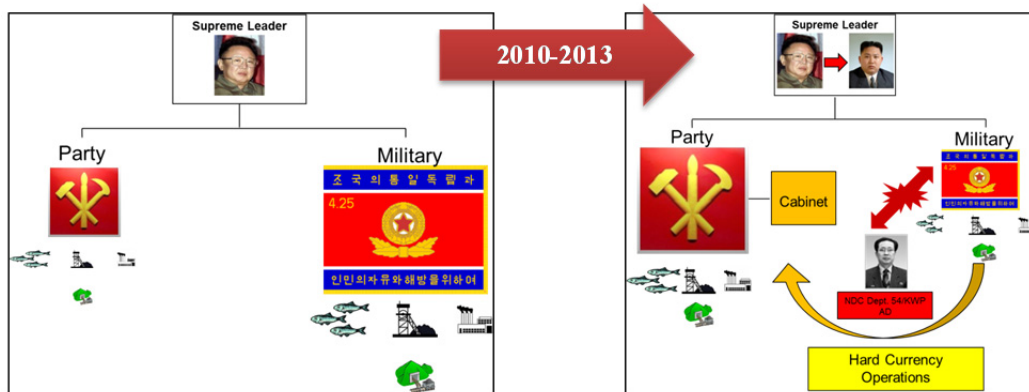
On December 8, 2013, Jang Song-taek, vice chairman of the National Defense Commission, Kim Jong-un’s uncle, and arguably the second most powerful individual within the North Korean leadership, was forcibly removed from a Politburo meeting. Four days later, he was tried by a military tribunal and summarily executed.

The reasons for Jang’s downfall were varied, but at the top of the list was that he was becoming too powerful and his pursuit of power was causing severe tremors within the regime. Over the years, he had developed an extensive patronage system of loyal supporters who occupied key posts throughout the regime. From his position as vice chairman of the NDC and director of the KWP Administrative Department, which oversaw the internal security apparatus, he had secured control over numerous hard currency operations, many of which had previously been run by other individuals and institutions—namely, the military (Figure 4). Through a deliberative process, beginning in 2010 when he assumed a role on the NDC, Jang began to place many hard currency operations (institutions and trading companies) throughout the regime



under the control of the Administrative Department, thus making this body into an unchecked power center. As the Control Tower, Jang also oversaw the day-to-day operations of the economy and other important domestic policy sectors.

Figure 4. Shift in the flow of hard currency, 2010–2013



These charts portray the shift in the flow of hard currency from the *Songun* (Military First) period under Kim Jong-il to the Kim Jong-un era. Jang Song-taek was a prime mover behind this shift.<sup>32</sup>

Jang's growing power exacerbated tensions among various power holders within the regime. According to some accounts, the KWP Organization Guidance Department, military, and internal security forces joined together to oppose Jang. Kim Jong-un also saw Jang as a threat and a hindrance to his ability to run the regime. As the health of his primary regent, Kim Kyong-hui, began to decline in mid-2013, a decision was apparently made to move against Jang Song-taek before his power became too institutionalized and threatened Kim Jong-un's role as sole decision-maker.

The implications of the purge of Jang Song-taek and his network were profound. Although at the more senior levels of power the purge was surgical, the entire leadership has been frozen in place, cautiously waiting for the leadership's reshuffle to play itself out. A few new appointments were made at the April convocation of the Supreme People's Assembly. It was presumed that some turnover took place within the key Party bodies at meetings of the Politburo and Central Military Commission. Choe Ryong-hae, another of Kim Jong-un's regents, was promoted to vice chairman

<sup>32</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the leadership dynamics that led to Jang Song-taek's downfall, see Ken E. Gause, *North Korean Leadership Dynamics and Decision-making under Kim Jong-un: A Second Year Assessment*, CNA Occasional Paper 2013-U-006988 (February 2014).



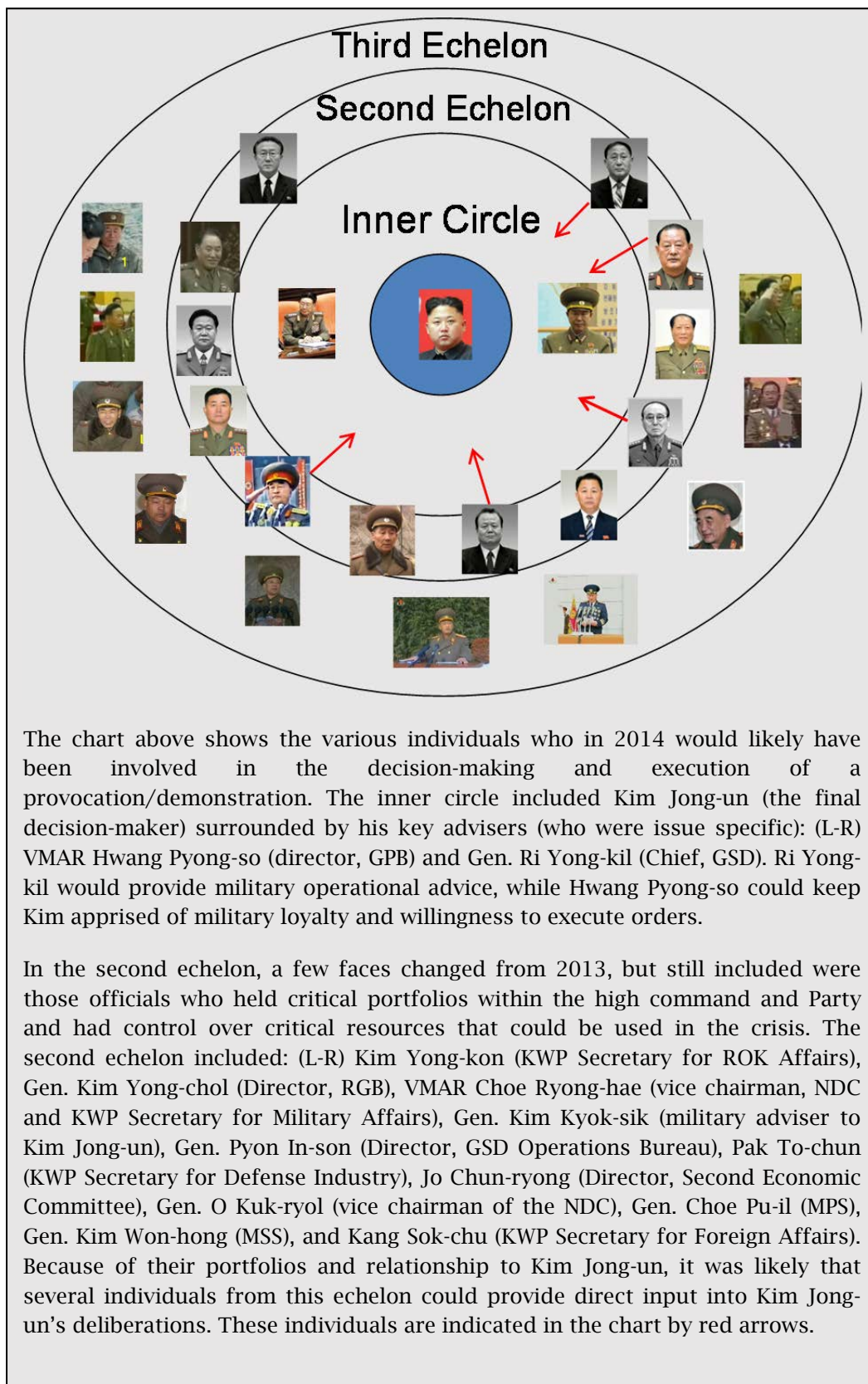
of the NDC to replace Jang Song-taek. But despite assumptions in the days after Jang's execution, Choe's role in the regime was not to replace Jang in terms of power and influence. His portfolio as director of the General Political Bureau was transferred to Hwang Pyong-so, a first vice director of the KWP Organization Guidance Department and protégé of Kim Jong-un. Thus, it appeared that power was being spread across the regime and not allowed to pool in any one place other than on the shoulders of the Supreme Leader himself.

Therefore, the reason that North Korea did not engage in provocations in the first month or two of 2014 was likely tied to the fact that the regime was focused inward, on ensuring that stability was reestablished in the aftermath of Jang's purge. Pyongyang watchers concluded that when North Korea eventually decided to return to its brinksmanship ways, it would likely be an indication that the regime was stable and confident in its ability to weather the blowback from the international community. It was also clear that future provocations would be driven by a different decision-making process around Kim Jong-un—something that could impact his calculus related to provocations and escalation.

## Implications for North Korean decision-making on provocations

The North Korean leadership structure continued to evolve in the aftermath of the Jang Song-taek purge—especially at the very top, where strategic-level decisions are made. The most noticeable change was to the regent structure that Kim Jong-il put in place to guide his son's power consolidation, and presumably his decision-making, process. That structure consisted of three primary regents: one who is now dead (Jang Song-taek), another who had disappeared (Kim Kyong-hui), and a third who was demoted in the leadership's pecking order (Choe Ryong-hae). In 2014, Kim Jong-un appeared to be surrounded by advisers, none of whom had the influence or the access to do anything more than provide advice. As a result, Kim Jong-un, who had always been the final decision-maker, now had more latitude to enforce his will on the regime at his own discretion. The filters that once could (and allegedly did) press for caution in the face of advice from the military or science and technology sectors to carry out a provocation or conduct a test were gone.







The third echelon was composed of military officers who were responsible for executing operations. They presumably had limited influence and contact with Kim Jong-un other than during guidance inspections and field exercises. He could reach out to them for subject matter expertise. During this crisis, the officers most likely responsible for executing operational orders included: (L-R) Gen. Pak Jong-chon (Director, Firepower Command), MG An Ji-yong (Commander, Island Defense), CG Choe Kyong-song (Commander, XI Corps), CG Kang Pyo-yong (vice MPAF), CG Ri Song-kuk (Commander, IV Corps), VADM Kim Myong-sik (Commander, KPA Navy), CG Kim Rak-gyom (Commander, Strategic Rocket Forces), Gen. Ri Pyong-chol (Commander, KPA Air Force), and Gen. Pak Jae-gyong (vice MPAF).

Like his father before him, Kim Jong-un now has to reach out for advice to inform his decision-making. He is directly exposed to the differences of opinion and the closely held personal and institutional agendas of those who exist below the level of Supreme Leader. His personality and leadership style will become more of a factor in the decision-making process now that the filters provided by the regent structure have been removed.

While at the time, Kim Jong-un had only been in power for less than two years, some information, albeit highly speculative, was emerging about his leadership style. Defectors' reports painted a picture of a young and impetuous Supreme Leader who was sometimes quick to make decisions without seeking advice. His decision to reveal the failure of the Unha-3 missile test in April 2012 may have been his own or may have resulted from his listening to those advisers who advocated transparency given the unprecedented openness leading up to the launch.<sup>33</sup> Other reports described Kim as a spontaneous decision-maker who is quick to anger.

Assuming the role of Supreme Leader in all of its facets requires more than just acting on one's own initiative and making decisions. It also requires interacting with the wider leadership. Defector reporting suggests that Kim Jong-un is becoming

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<sup>33</sup> According to one Pyongyang watcher, decision-making in the Kim Jong-un era has been characterized by an air of improvisation and immaturity. In April 2012, at the time of the long-range missile launch, Pyongyang invited foreign reporters in to show them around the launch site and watch the rocket launch—but then on the day of the launch, prevented them from viewing the event. Then, having raised tensions in March/April 2013, Kim completely switched directions in May and began an over-the-top diplomatic charm offensive. These, and other events, such as the on-again-off-again family reunions, have led many in Washington and Seoul to conclude that Kim and the North Korean leadership lack a strategic plan and rather are buffeted by short-term tactical considerations primarily tied to internal pressures. See Ahn Jong-sik, "Time to Take a Step Back on North Korea," *Daily NK*, 8 February 2014. (Ahn Jong-sik is the deputy head of the SBS Political Department.)



increasingly comfortable in his role as Supreme Leader and in dealing not only with his closest advisers but also with powerful institutions, such as the high command.<sup>34</sup> While he appears to be keenly aware of the protocols that need to be observed and to understand the boundaries within which he needs to operate in order to not endanger his position (and, by extension, the stability of the regime), his policies indicate a bolder approach to dealing with the issues facing the regime, both internally and externally.<sup>35</sup> Recent evaluations of Kim's personality point to a "thuggish" character and a tendency to try to enforce his will.<sup>36</sup> Any challenge to his authority will be dealt with harshly—a response that few doubt, especially if the challenge comes from inside the regime. Challenges to that authority from outside the regime may be a different matter. According to some sources, Kim Jong-un may be cautious and be willing to listen to advice, even if is critical of his chosen path.<sup>37</sup> While his inclination may be to demonstrate his power, he will not do this blindly and may even be persuaded that his actions are potentially too provocative and could lead to negative consequences inside the regime (i.e., to his own power). If so, this very recent speculation suggests that Kim Jong-un's decision-making on foreign and security policy is much more conservative than previously thought. It indicates that he is not a juvenile bully prone to wanton acts of aggression. It also suggests that he (and, by extension, North Korea) can be deterred and dissuaded, but only within certain limits.

## Ramping Up for another provocation?

In the lead up to the 2014 Foal Eagle/Key Resolve exercise, the speculation within the Pyongyang watching community once again pointed to a provocation. The early indications were that the reorganization of the leadership following Jang Song-taek's

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<sup>34</sup> Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013. According to Radiopress, Japan's North Korean news-monitoring agency, state media had already run 101 reports on Kim Jong-un's activities in 2013 (as of June 24). In 2012, the number of stories on Kim's activities did not reach 100 until mid-August. Forty-eight of the 101 reports on Kim as of June 24 were related to the military.

<sup>35</sup> According to one theory reportedly emerging from sources inside North Korea, Kim Jong-un is at the mercy of factions around him. He "is merely an avatar of his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, with no close associates of his own or real authority." Policy-making, therefore, depends on which faction comes out on top in the struggle to interpret Kim Jong-il's legacy. See "The Rise of Moderate and Hardline Factions in North Korea," *op.cit.*

<sup>36</sup> Some point to the March/April 2013 crisis on the Korean Peninsula as evidence of a desire by Kim Jong-un and North Korea to push the limits on the international front. The unconditional abrogation of the Armistice Treaty went much further than any similar moves his father made.

<sup>37</sup> Author's interviews in Seoul, March 2014.



purge had been completed. If this were the case, past precedent would suggest that North Korea would soon return to its brinksmanship behavior. Kim Jong-un would need to demonstrate his ability to lead the regime—something that would be necessary in order to build consensus within the wider leadership and enhance his legitimacy as the Supreme Leader. The question was when it would happen and how North Korea would manage the escalation.

In early March and running into April 2014, North Korea engaged in a tit-for-tat response to the Foal Eagle/Key Resolve exercise. An examination of this period reveals elements of Pyongyang’s escalation calculus.

Table 1. North Korean escalatory behavior in early 2014

Date	Event
February 24	On the first day of Key Resolve, a North Korean patrol ship briefly violated the Western Sea border three times.
February 25	North Korea fired four Scud missiles from its east coast, which flew about 220 km. The ROK MND deemed the firings a “low level provocation.”
March 3	North Korea fired two short-range missiles into the sea off its east coast from the Gitdaeryeong and Wonsan areas, both on the North’s southeastern coast. The Scud-C missiles were evaluated to have flown over 500 kilometers.
March 4	North Korea fired seven short-range projectiles from its east coast (Wonsan) using a 240mm MRL and a 300mm KN-09 launcher. <sup>38</sup>
March 26	North Korea launched two medium-range Nodong missiles, which flew 650 km and landed 10 km from Japan’s air defense identification zone. They were launched on the fourth anniversary of the sinking of the <i>Cheonan</i> . The no-notice MRBM tests resumed the interrupted pattern of progressively longer-range no-notice SRBM tests from February 21 to March 4.
March 31	The two Koreas traded hundreds of rounds of artillery near the NLL. North Korea fired about 500 rounds during a three-hour drill, with approximately 100 falling south of the NLL. In accordance with the ROE developed after the 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong, South Korea responded with three times the rounds that landed in its waters.

On March 14, KCNA issued a NDC statement that clarified its stand on the “United States’ hostile stance toward North Korea.” It mostly emphasized the reality and permanence of North Korea’s “nuclear deterrence.” It also placed a somewhat unusual emphasis on the ideological threat posed by the United States, declaring, “It is again the U.S., the sworn enemy, which has resorted to crafty and foolish moves to undermine the ideology of the DPRK and bring down its social system.”

<sup>38</sup> Some have speculated that the firing exercise came in response to the entry of the U.S. nuclear-powered attack submarine *Columbus* into Pusan port on March 3. See “DPRK Fires Seven Short-Range Projectiles from East Coast,” *Yonhap*, 04 March 2014.



Many Pyongyang watchers interpreted this as a signal of imminent action, the nature of which was unclear. In addition to enhancing its nuclear capability, the statement promised “additional measures...to demonstrate its might one after another as long as the U.S. nuclear threat and blackmail persist as now.” However, the statement seemed to be divorced from the situation that North Korea was currently facing. It made no reference to the Foal Eagle exercise. It did not attempt to set expectations for new provocations or backtrack from an earlier statement from the KPA Strategic Rocket Force that missile tests had concluded.<sup>39</sup> Instead, it seemed more akin to a policy statement on North Korea’s need to remain vigilant and react to persistent “U.S. nuclear threats and blackmail.” What was missing from the analysis of this NDC statement was the context in which the North Korean leadership was looking at the situation.

The statement was released in a period of tense Sino-North Korean diplomatic interactions. During the visits of Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin to Pyongyang in February and early March, Chinese officials lectured North Korea on the need for restraint and even made veiled references to a meeting of the minds with the United States and South Korea about stability inside the regime following the purge of Jang Song-taek. The NDC statement seemed to take on these Chinese concerns one by one and justify North Korea’s brinksmanship as a prudent reaction to the existential threat posed by the United States. As if to reinforce this message of defiance, the statement was released on the eve of Wu Daiwei’s March 17-21 visit to Pyongyang, which the North Koreans bracketed with multiple artillery barrages into the Sea of Japan (March 16, 17, and 23). Wu’s arrival and departure were noted with very spare, unenthusiastic reports in KCNA, plus an especially strident March 17 *Rodong Sinmun* article insisting that the United States had compelled North Korea to have recourse to nuclear weapons.<sup>40</sup>

On March 26, North Korea launched two medium-range missiles off its west coast, an action that provided a glimpse into its escalation calculus. Kim Jong-un could not ignore the Foal Eagle exercise, as doing so could undermine his legitimacy with the North Korean people. At the same time, North Korea could not ignore China’s vigorous strategic messaging campaign designed not only to prevent a fourth nuclear test but also to strongly encourage restrained behavior in the face of the U.S./ROK

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<sup>39</sup> This KPA SRF announcement came in the wake of Chinese complaints that one missile test had resulted in a near miss of a passenger jet.

<sup>40</sup> According to Xinhua, Wu’s trip “mainly focused on the Korean Peninsula situation and the resumption of the six-party talks.” It appears to be part of a renewed Chinese effort to pressure North Korea to cease its campaign of rocket and missile tests in response to Key Resolve/Foal Eagle and communicate directly with the United States. But the March 26 flight test of two Nodong MRBMs gave a clear indication that the North Korean leadership felt that its need to respond to the exercise trumped its needs to placate Beijing.



exercise. As a consequence, Kim was willing to ascend the escalation ladder, but only within well-recognized limits (based on past precedent) that he could control.

At the end of March, the regime again began to signal a future demonstration of its military might. Seizing on criticism of its recent missile exercises, which was voiced at the UN Security Council, North Korea on March 30 issued an authoritative Foreign Ministry “statement” warning that the regime intended to carry out an exercise for its “striking forces” in response to ongoing U.S.-ROK drills.<sup>41</sup> The statement—which was broadcast to both domestic and external audiences—said that the exercise was for “utilizing [its] more diversified nuclear deterrent” against different “medium- or long-range targets.” The pronouncement warned that a “new type of nuclear test” would not be “ruled out” if the United States sought to frame the planned “striking forces” test as a provocation.

Kim Jong-un built on this rhetoric a day later at a gathering of KPA combined unit commanders. He sharply criticized the United States, casting the ongoing U.S.-ROK exercises as extremely serious and requiring a strong North Korean response. While inflammatory, his remarks were less dramatic than the extreme rhetoric that had come out of the regime in 2013 when it was contemplating carrying out a long-range missile test—suggesting a toned-down approach in order not to escalate the situation before the regime was ready to unfold its brinksmanship strategy.<sup>42</sup> His reference to the January 16 NDC “important proposal,” which highlighted a way forward in North-South relations, suggested that he also wanted to preserve the option to resume dialogue with Seoul and did not want any follow-on escalation to interfere with this possibility.

In addition, Kim’s remarks occurred in the days leading up to meetings of the Politburo and Supreme People’s Assembly at which additions and subtractions to the leadership would be made. In other words, this would have been another reason not to engage in escalation. In 2013, North Korea had convened a Central Committee plenum and an SPA meeting during the March/April crisis, but in terms of internal leadership dynamics, it had been a relatively stable period. The fact that the regime convened a Politburo meeting (and later a meeting of the Central Military Commission) without reporting on the leadership changes that were made suggested

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<sup>41</sup> Pyongyang Korean Central Broadcasting Station, March 30, 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Kim’s appearance at the loyalty meeting indicated that the regime was still in the process of building support around him within the officer corps. If this was the case, a demonstration of the regime’s military prowess is likely in the planning.



that Kim Jong-un and his advisers may have had concerns about leadership stability if the reshuffle was widely broadcast.<sup>43</sup>

As Key Resolve wound down to its conclusion on April 18, the North Koreans noticeably hesitated to use the exercise as justification to proceed with their threats to conduct further missile testing. Instead, they responded with unusual defensiveness to reports of South Korea's SRBM test, in a manner suggestive of managing the perception of internal audiences. What is more, they did not react at all to a news release concerning B-52 and B-2 exercises around Hawaii.

According to one source, this hesitation could have resulted from indecision within the North Korean leadership over whether to complement its completed SRBM and MRBM tests with an inaugural test of an IRBM. Kim Jong-un and his advisers were probably under several countervailing pressures. In terms of testing, there was much more to lose with a failure of an IRBM test in terms of North Korea's deterrent than could be gained in terms of technical know-how from a successful launch. Just as important to the decision-making was the international situation around the peninsula in April. An IRBM test could severely hamper the progress that had been made in talks with Japan, to say nothing of the inevitable elevation of Chinese pressure on the regime, which had been steadily growing since the missile test in December 2012.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The sensitivity tied to these meetings was made clear in May when Choe Ryong-hae was replaced by Hwang Pyong-so as the director of the General Political Bureau. At the SPA meeting at the beginning of April, Choe assumed Jang Song-taek's post as a vice chairman of the NDC. Hwang Pyong-so was reportedly appointed as a member of the CMC at an April 26 meeting of the body. The fact that the regime did not publicly report Hwang's replacement of Choe as head of the GPB until May suggests the sensitivity of this move.

<sup>44</sup> These insights were provided to the author from another American Pyongyang watcher.



# Cyber Attacks and High Level Purges: Has Kim Jong-un Become More Dangerous?

North Korea's failure to conduct a nuclear/missile test or engage in more aggressive acts along the NLL in the aftermath of the Jang Song-taek purge led some Pyongyang watchers to question whether Kim Jong-un had thrown away the playbook of his father and grandfather. Others suggested that to make such an assumption would be extremely dangerous and could create an environment whereby an incident in the future could spin out of control. On the contrary, they contended, as Kim Jong-un proceeded with his effort at power consolidation, the likelihood was high that at a minimum he would have to sanction future provocations to either placate forces within the regime or send messages to the outside world. In November 2014, the cloak and dagger drama that unfolded around a Hollywood comedy revealed a new twist on a well-known arrow in the North Korean escalation quiver and rumors of a ghastly execution in 2015 raised the specter of irrational thinking at the top of the regime.

## "The Interview"

In the early 2000s, Seth Rogan and Evan Goldberg conceived of a plot for a comic take on the assassination of a world leader. It was originally supposed to focus on North Korea and its leader, Kim Jong-il. The screenplay was put on hold until Kim Jong-il died. Following his death in 2011, the project was resurrected under the working title "Kill Kim Jong-un."<sup>45</sup> Rogan and Goldberg took it to a number of friends and advisors to enquire whether such a movie should be made about a specific living person as opposed to a caricature. The consensus was that this would make the movie "more interesting and funnier."<sup>46</sup> Although the title was later changed to "The

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<sup>45</sup> Shelli Weinstein, "Seth Rogan: Censoring North Korea in 'The Interview' 'Seemed Wrong,'" *Variety*, 15 February 2015.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*



Interview," it represented the first movie ever with a plot centered on the fictional assassination of a sitting leader.

In June (2014), the North Korean regime took notice of the movie, scheduled for release at the end of the year. The state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) threatened a "merciless" response against the United States unless it banned "The Interview." Officials called the film an "act of war."<sup>47</sup> Several months later, on 22 November, Sony officials noticed that the company's computer system had been compromised when skulls appeared on employees' screens with a message threatening to expose "secrets" from data obtained in a sophisticated hack. Initially, the company said it was dealing with an "IT matter," but later acknowledged the hack to staff, calling it a "brazen attack" comprised of "malicious criminal acts."

An unknown group calling itself #GOP—later identified as Guardians of Peace—claimed it was behind the cyberattack, prompting the FBI to launch an investigation. Their name was subsequently attached to leaks of information. Speculation mounted that North Korea may have had a hand in the attack. Pyongyang eventually denied involvement, but heaped praise on the hack, calling it a "righteous deed." As for the movie, its debut was delayed, but after consultations with U.S. officials, Sony went ahead with the release through various mediums. This was followed by a mysterious collapse of North Korean Internet sites caused by sustained electronic attacks that crippled the country's Internet infrastructure.<sup>48</sup>

Pyongyang's rhetoric surrounding the Sony cyberattack was reminiscent of past incidents in which the regime sought to claim credit for a provocation while at the same time avoiding blame and thus controlling escalation. Through such a covert approach to managing the escalation ladder, North Korea was able to demonstrate its asymmetric capabilities while keeping alive the possibility of North-South engagement, which was a fundamental goal of the Kim Jong-un regime.

## Provocational signals in the grey zone

Ambiguous denial has been part and parcel of North Korea's provocation strategy over the years. It was on display as Pyongyang handled the fallout of the *Cheonan* attack, as well as with several suspected cyberattacks (in 2011 and 2013) against

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<sup>47</sup> KCNA website, Pyongyang, in English 25 June 2014.

<sup>48</sup> The networks are not considered especially robust since they rely on a single provider, China United Network Communications Group Co. Ltd., the state-owned provider in neighboring China. North Korea's service was sporadic starting Saturday, December 20, and then collapsed entirely for nearly 10 hours two days later. The United States provided no comment on whether it was behind the attacks.



South Korean banks and media outlets. But in those instances, the regime's need for ambiguity was couched in its desire not to be perceived by the international community as acting outside the boundaries of "fair play." In other words, the regime had no defense for its actions, which were offensive in nature and largely tied to internal politics inside the regime. Even though internally it could often rationalize these attacks as being retaliatory, the regime knew it could not win in the court of public opinion and if revealed, North Korea could conceivably lose the support of its patrons (China and Russia) on the UN Security Council and suffer at the hands of Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo.

The calculus behind the 2014 Sony attack was different. Since May 2013, immediately following the end of the March/April 2013 crisis, North Korea had been engaged in a diplomatic campaign across the region in search of international aid. This campaign began with Seoul and Washington and then stretched to Tokyo and Moscow. Pyongyang's desire was to weaken the regime's reliance on Chinese aid and ultimately increase pressure on South Korea to drop its demands on the nuclear program and provide North Korea with access to its economy in a manner reminiscent of the Sunshine era.<sup>49</sup> In the middle of this "charm campaign," news of this movie that smeared the reputation of the Supreme Leader began to filter into the regime. With Kim Jong-un still working to consolidate his power, such an international attack on his image could not go without a response. Unlike the *Cheonan* affair, North Korea now felt that it was on much more solid ground in its outrage. After all, this was not about retribution for the military for a lost ship, this was the international community, unprovoked, using a movie to make light of the Supreme Leader. But while North Korea could express its anger, its diplomatic campaign tied the regime's hands in how it could respond. Sinking another ship or lashing out along the NLL would only bring international condemnation, additional sanctions, and undermine any chances of securing vital international aid. Covert measures of a less lethal variety were called for. Something that would send a provocation signal yet obscure the perpetrator, thus blunting any response.

On 7 December, a spokesman from the NDC's Policy Department criticized the charges that North Korea had carried out the hacking operation as "false rumor" and "wild." While the regime refused to take responsibility, its outrage stopped well short of a categorical denial. But, in order to avoid its message of possible complicity from being lost, Pyongyang resorted to an unprecedented tactic of hinting that as part of a "just struggle" against the United States, "supporters and sympathizers" of the regime were likely involved. This allowed North Korea to firmly link the actions of

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<sup>49</sup> Allegedly Kim Jong-il in his last will and testament counseled his son to find a way to link into the South Korean economic engine in order to realize the "strong and prosperous nation," which would be vital to Kim Jong-un's consolidation of power.



the Guardians of Peace to “The Interview,” something that had not been explicit before the NDC message since the GOP had not mentioned the movie.

## The benefits of a cyber response

North Korea’s cyber warfare capabilities are not new. Their origins stretch back to the 1980s. But it has only been in the last few years that the regime has fully incorporated this form of asymmetric capability into its thinking related to escalation and deterrence. Since 2012, the first year of Kim Jong-un’s reign, the North Korean cyber force has allegedly doubled in size to somewhere between 3000-6000 with most of the hackers being dedicated to the Reconnaissance General Bureau and the General Staff.<sup>50</sup>

- The two primary RGB cyber units are Office 91 and Office 121. Office 121 is the more robust of the two units and allegedly has the most advanced capabilities. It is tasked with disabling command and communications structures.<sup>51</sup> Most of its operations are initiated from locations inside China, thus complicating any direct retaliation. Lab 110 develops technologies dedicated to reconnaissance and targeting the South Korean telecommunications infrastructure. It was allegedly responsible for the 2009 denial of service attacks against the United States and South Korea.<sup>52</sup>
- The General Staff’s Offices 31, 32, and 56 make up the so-called Command Automation Department, which is responsible for military-related system penetration programs.<sup>53</sup>
- KWP United Front Department’s Operations Bureau is responsible for cyber-psychological warfare and organizational espionage. Critical to these operations is Unit 204, which conducts cyber psychological and information warfare operations.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Egle Murauskaite, “North Korea’s Cyber Capabilities: Deterrence and Stability in a Changing Strategic Environment,” *38 North*, 12 September 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. See also “Profiling an enigma: The mystery of North Korea’s cyber threat landscape,” HP Security Briefing, Episode 16 (August 2014).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Egle Murauskaite, “North Korea’s Cyber Capabilities: Deterrence and Stability in a Changing Strategic Environment,” *op. cit.*

<sup>54</sup> CAPT Kim Duk-ki, “The Republic of Korea’s Counter-Asymmetric Strategy: Lessons from ROKS *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong Island,” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (Winter, 2012).



- The KWP Central Party Investigative Group (Unit 35) is responsible for the education and training of the regime's cyber warriors.<sup>55</sup>
- The State Security Department's (secret police) communications monitoring and computer hacking group conducts cyber warfare, presumably in support of its mission of internal state security.

It appears increasingly likely that the traditional North Korean approach to provocation and escalation based on brandishing its hybrid offensive capabilities and use of unexpected offensive bursts as a means of asserting its geopolitical stance and responding to external pressure is no longer sufficient. Taking advantage of the unique qualities presented in the cyber realm, Kim Jong-un has added an additional dimension to this strategy, which fits well in a period when the regime is facing sensitive internal change (tied to power consolidation) and challenges externally (an international community poised to impose sanctions under a policy of strategic pause/benign neglect).

For North Korea, the benefits of a cyber warfare-based provocation in terms of escalation are tied to issues of attribution, retaliation, and proportionality.

- **Attribution.** Cyberattacks are difficult to trace, thus hindering the ability of adversaries to identify the source of the attack. In addition, North Korea's Internet infrastructure and the regime's strict control over its use ensure that there are no rogue actors and that all officially sanctioned actors exercise careful procedures to cover their tracks.
- **Retaliation.** Critical to North Korea's control of the escalatory ladder is its ability to blunt retaliation. In terms of cyberattacks, this is not only an issue of timing—delaying a timely response, thus diminishing its utility—but also of geography. Many North Korean cyberattacks originate from Chinese territory, using Chinese infrastructure. This complicates any response from the United States or South Korea—any retaliation risks involving third parties.
- **Proportionality.** The potential spillover effects of a robust response to a North Korean cyberattack leaves adversaries with little recourse other than retaliation outside the cyber realm. That, however, brings with it little chance of proportionality in the response and thus a real risk for wonton escalation. Responding to a denial of service attack with a drone strike significantly raises the possibility that tit for tat escalation could get out of control. Although North Korea suffered the temporary shutdown of some of its internet sites following the Sony hack, the response was widely considered feeble and not

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.



likely to deter Pyongyang from engaging again in this medium if it wants to send a signal or respond to a perceived wrong.

If North Korea chooses to rely heavily on cyber warfare vice conventional kinetic attacks to underwrite its brinksmanship strategy, what appears on the surface to be a “more humane” form of signaling could in fact mask a creeping danger. As the regime undertakes attacks without severe retribution, it could begin to believe that it can act with impunity, without realizing that it is inching toward still unclear red lines within the cyber realm. At some point, without knowing, North Korea could step over a red line that results in real world conflict.

The nature of cyber warfare also sets up a dynamic that complicates any attempts to grasp North Korea’s strategic calculus in terms of escalation. Within the cyber domain, it is all about plugging holes. Once an attack takes place, it identifies a vulnerability in a system—be it on the individual, company, or national level. This is followed by the target’s action to cover/fix the hole. Therefore, cyberattacks by their very nature are one off events—once the attack is complete, it most likely cannot be repeated. Thus North Korea does not have an incentive to reveal its full potential through any one attack. This in turn masks North Korea’s calculus and ability to ascend the escalatory ladder within the cyber realm. This lack of clear knowledge about an adversary’s capability undermines the rules of deterrence.

## Political consolidation’s impact on rationality

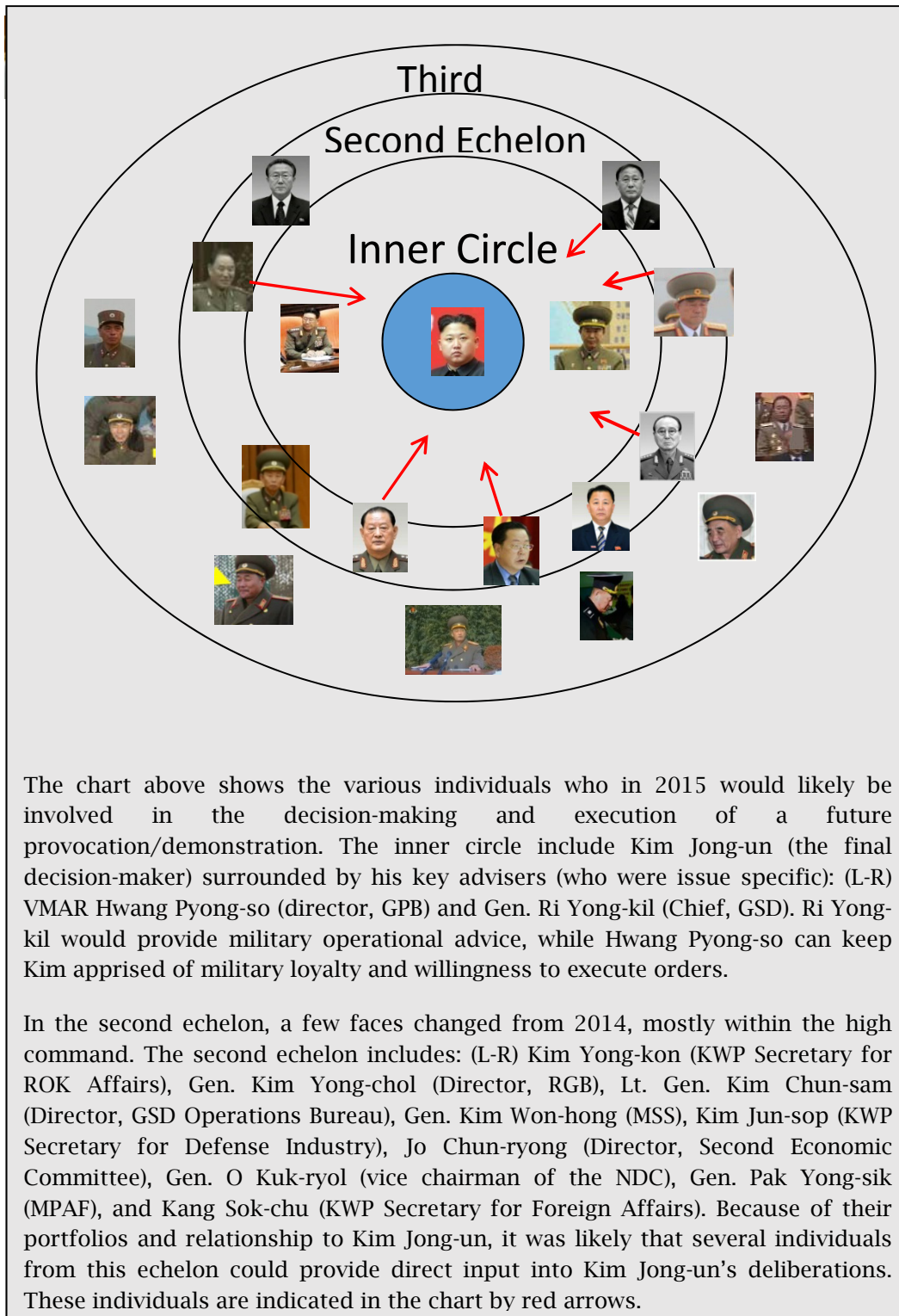
In the absence of Pyongyang’s political calculus when it comes to a future crisis, an understanding of the Supreme Leader’s rationality and propensity for risk become even more important. When the time comes, can the international community depend on Kim Jong-un being a rational actor who equally perceives the costs as well as the benefits to launching an attack? This question was raised in the aftermath of the purge of Jang Song-taek. The execution of his powerful uncle raised questions in the minds of many Pyongyang watchers as to Kim’s rationality, and even his sanity. Was he a Caligula figure in the making, driven by an uncontrollable temper? When North Korea did not conduct another high profile demonstration or launch another *Cheonan*-style attack in 2014, these concerns subsided. Then on April 30, 2015, Hyon Yong-chol was allegedly executed for “disrespecting the supreme leadership” by falling asleep during a Kim Jong-un speech. If Kim Jong-un could be incensed to the point to give the order to execute his defense minister for such a transgression, what would he do in a crisis?

Succession and consolidation in totalitarian regimes are periods that can be especially unpredictable. Tensions inside a regime are often opaque to the outside world. In order to deal with leadership dynamics, a leader (or his heir apparent) needs to take actions that can seem incomprehensible to the international



community. Sometimes, a leader needs to deflect attention away from internal problems surrounding the transfer of power to an outside threat. In the case of Kim Jong-un, he is young and lacks the expansive and deep education his father had before taking the reins of power. This has created a certain narrative in the minds of the Pyongyang watching community that Kim is “hot headed” and prone to rash actions to satisfy near term goals or quash immediate frustrations. Some have argued that his lack of experience has been evidenced in his inability to think and act strategically. Instead, he leaps from one tactical decision to the next without thinking through the consequences of his actions. Therefore, when he has a key lieutenant executed, someone who appeared in good standing only days before, the tendency of Pyongyang watchers and intelligence analysts is to connect the dots in a way that can provide insight into Kim’s state of mind. Further removed, the international media tends to draw conclusions in the most dramatic direction—Kim Jong-un is an irrational leader overseeing an increasingly unstable regime.







The third echelon is composed of military officers who are responsible for executing operations. They presumably have limited influence and contact with Kim Jong-un other than during guidance inspections and field exercises. He can reach out to them for subject matter expertise. They include: (L-R) LTG Yun Yong-sik (Director, Artillery Bureau), MG An Ji-yong (Commander, Island Defense), CG Kim Yong-bok (Commander, XI Corps), CG Ri Song-kuk (Commander, IV Corps), VADM Ri Jong-su (Commander, KPA Navy), CG Kim Rak-gyom (Commander, Strategic Rocket Forces), and Gen. Ri Pyong-chol (Commander, KPA Air Force).

More than likely, Kim Jong-un is not an irrational actor. His actions since coming to power do not point in that direction. The demonstrations of North Korea's critical defense systems in 2012 and early 2013 were probably tied to requirements laid down by Kim Jong-il—something that Kim Jong-un could not ignore. Other than the bold rhetoric that characterized the March/April 2013 crisis, North Korea has not returned to the violent provocations of 2010. On the contrary, when publicly humiliated in front of the world with the announcement of the release of “The Interview,” Kim’s decision-making appeared to stay firmly within existing boundaries designed to keep foreign relations alive while sending (via the cyber realm) signals of disgust that did not stray beyond identifiable, nation-based red lines. While the circumstances surrounding Hyon Yong-chol’s purge are currently unknown, the truth may be as simple as Kim Jong-un taking advantage of a lapse in respect by a subordinate to send a message to the wider leadership that may have grown complacent following Jang Song-taek’s purge that he is still in charge and the rule of the Supreme Leader needs to be respected above all else. Even the inaugural test of a submarine launched ballistic missile, which took place in the wake of the Hyon execution, was muted and apparently designed to send a signal of capability while not raising too many alarms.<sup>56</sup>

## Return to a brinksmanship strategy?

At the time of this writing in the summer of 2015, rumors have begun to spread about whether North Korea will return to its brinksmanship strategy, both out of

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<sup>56</sup> Coverage of the SLBM test, a noteworthy event given the Supreme Leader’s presence at the test, was relegated to page two of *Rodong Sinmun*.



frustration and in an attempt to change the strategic decision-making of its neighbors. The international media is awash in speculation that North Korea might attempt another missile or nuclear test, or even a cyberattack, tied to a regime holiday, such the military-focused Day of *Songun* (August 25), National Independence Day (September 9), or Party Foundation Day (October 10), to highlight a fundamental shift in strategy. Such a move would spell an end to North Korea's diplomatic charm campaign and most likely signal a change in Kim Jong-un's calculus with regard to the region.

Regardless of any discussion about the rationality of the Supreme Leader or media speculation, there are indications that the regime is reconsidering some of the fundamental assumptions on which its diplomatic campaign has been based. Its increasingly harsh personal attacks on President Park Geun-hye (vice her administration) suggest that the Pyongyang is losing patience with South Korea's policy of denuclearization and lack of substantive economic engagement. These attacks have been coupled with firing drills in contested waters and toughening of the regime's terms for inter-Korean engagement. Of particular note were messaging (both via communiques and actions) coming through defense and national security channels.

- 8 May “emergency special warning” by the KPA Southwestern Front Command threatening to launch “unannounced direct target strikes” against South Korean ships.
- Mid-May live firing drill in the disputed waters of the Yellow Sea.
- 15 May Pyongyang announcement to pull out of events marking the 15 June anniversary of the 2000 inter-Korean summit because of Seoul's attempts to “depolitize” the event by keeping it purely at “the artistic, athletic, and cultural” level. This was one of the few inter-Korean exchanges that had not been impacted by worsening relations across the DMZ.
- May 20 NDC Policy Department pronouncement criticizing President Park personally for her criticism of the North Korean SLBM test.
- 24 May NDC Policy Department statement on anniversary of Seoul's post-*Cheonan* sanctions placing burden on South Korea to ensure “great turnabout” in bilateral ties. Rodong Sinmun followed with statement that bilateral dialogue and cooperation will remain stymied as long as the sanctions are in force.
- Press statement from the KPA Strategic Forces that condemned South Korea's 3 June (2015) ballistic missile test, which Pyongyang viewed as provocative.



- June 3 NDC statement accusing President Park of “germ warfare” in the aftermath of the accidental U.S. delivery of live anthrax to South Korean labs.

This enhanced rhetoric and threatening actions are not necessarily indicative of a return to a brinkmanship strategy. At the moment, they only suggest that Pyongyang is frustrated and Kim Jong-un may be losing patience with Seoul’s hardline stance that he most likely thought would melt in the face of the charm campaign. In order to take the next step toward a return to a full blown brinkmanship strategy, Kim Jong-un will have to weigh a variety of factors from manner of action (overt versus covert) to South Korean operational and strategic response to potential blowback inside the regime.

Time, however, is not on Kim Jong-un’s side. The *Byungjin* policy has hampered his ability to consolidate his power. By not being able to show progress on the economy (i.e., gaining access to the South Korean economic engine), Kim will be unable to secure the loyalty and provide the largess that will enhance his *bona fides* as Supreme Leader. As North Korea’s isolation continues, Kim’s calculus is likely to evolve. At some point, he will have to take bold action. While more-aggressive provocations are less likely in the near term, they cannot be discounted. Therefore, the question concerning North Korea’s provocative behavior may not be *whether* it will occur but *when* it will occur. Assuming this is true, what can be done?



## Deterring North Korea in the Kim Jong-un Era

Any discussion of deterrence should be tied to considerations of escalation. In the case of North Korea, these discussions should also be tied to the Supreme Leader's drivers and boundaries. Carrying out random strategic messaging without understanding how those messages will resonate with Kim Jong-un is only a self-satisfying act of wishful thinking. In the end, North Korea's calculus is tied largely to the personality and predilections of an individual. It is his fears and aspirations that need to be manipulated to deter, dissuade, or, if all else fails, mitigate.

Under Kim Jong-il, North Korea's brinksmanship strategy used a framework with three stages: Provocation, Marking the Position, and Maintenance and Recognition. On the international level, this strategy was tied to missile and nuclear tests. Within the inter-Korea context, it was linked to naval (and later cyber) provocations. In both of these arenas, Kim Jong-il's planning revolved around securing these three stages, ultimately achieving international recognition of the North Korean point of view. His tolerance for escalation was informed by decades of observation of South Korean and U.S. responses. De-escalation off-ramps were part of each provocation engagement.

An early assessment of Kim Jong-un portrayed him as a leader who was growing in self-confidence and would likely see provocations as a policy tool. This assessment also portrayed Kim as someone who was bolstered by the outcome of the 2013 crisis and, therefore, less willing to forgo confrontation, confident that his will would win out in the end. Not endowed with his father's deep knowledge of escalation dynamics on the peninsula, this assessment continued, Kim Jong-un was more prone to miscalculation. His growing self-assurance would deter his advisers from providing advice that contradicted his worldview. The events of the last couple of years suggest that this assessment may not be entirely correct. It is most likely applicable to inter-crisis periods, as opposed to the period leading up to a provocation. In other words, during periods of increasing tension on the peninsula, Kim Jong-un may be willing to push strategies that appear bold and aggressive. But during this period, his decision-making is still informed by advisers and calibrated depending on external stimuli. After a provocation occurs and the escalatory ladder is engaged (if the 2013 crisis is any indication) his decision-making changes. Decisions are heavily weighted toward the implications for his own position and legitimacy within the wider leadership. His



self-perceived ability to de-escalate (and risk showing weakness) is diminished. How far he is willing to move up the escalatory ladder is unknown.

If this model of a leader (and by extension, a regime) going through a power consolidation is placed in the context of decision-making on future provocations, certain assumptions can be made that comport with how North Korea has acted since Kim Jong-un took over. It is a regime that will engage in non-violent demonstrations where escalation can be managed. On one hand, even in the face of warnings from the United States, South Korea, and China, North Korea conducted two missile tests in 2012 and a nuclear test in 2013. Such demonstrations feed the requirements for Kim's power consolidation process. But, on the other hand, as international pressure has grown and the Sino-North Korean relationship has become more strained, Pyongyang has not engaged in another demonstration—although it has apparently engaged in a high profile (yet covert) cyber-attack. According to some sources, the economic pressures on the regime (especially from China) may not have deterred other tests, but may have slowed the pace of testing. If true, it suggests that Kim Jong-un, while eager to move forward with these programs, has been influenced by external pressure and has likely listened to those within the regime who caution against moving too quickly.

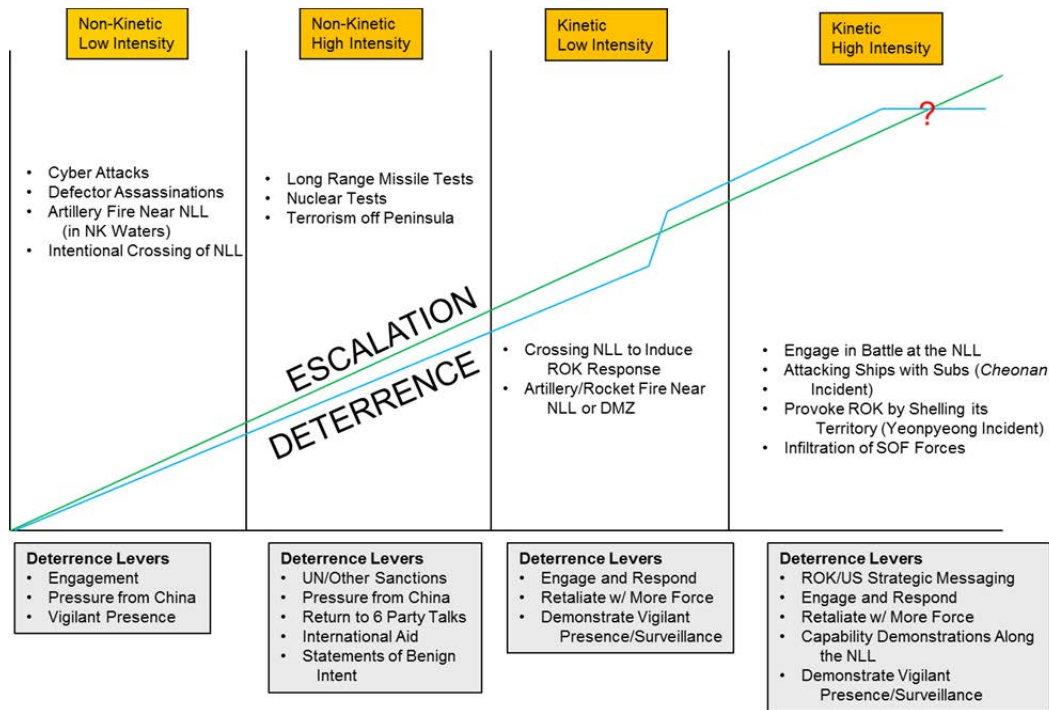
Despite its aggressive rhetoric, which has reached a new level of animosity under Kim Jong-un, the regime has not yet engaged in violent provocation. Even during the Foal Eagle/Key Resolve exercises in 2013, 2014, and 2015 when the regime could have justified aggressive actions as a way of bolstering its own deterrent and responding to the aggressive actions of the United States and South Korea, it chose to confine its actions to rhetorical fusillades and Scud launches into the Sea of Japan. It made no attacks on South Korean territory or ships at sea. This suggests that the cost somehow outweighed the benefits that could have been gained from undertaking such actions. According to some reports, the pressure from China and the threats of retaliation from the Blue House and the South Korean Joint Staff, including decapitation strikes, may have figured into the North Korean calculus. The U.S. decision to forgo the testing of the Minuteman missile in 2013, as well as the U.S.-South Korean decision to downplay the 2014 and 2015 exercises, may have also provided needed off-ramps and a more deliberative decision-making process to occur inside Pyongyang. Contrary to the portrait of an impetuous leader who makes emotional decisions and lashes out at perceived threats, to date, Kim Jong-un has proven to be a pragmatic decision-maker—someone who may be able to be deterred at the upper end of the escalation scale.

If, as the above suggests, North Korea can be deterred but only within certain boundaries and under specific circumstances, what can be done? First, it is important to understand that North Korea's provocations can be categorized into four types, each driven by different motivations and potentially deterred by different strategies



or combinations of strategies. As shown in Figure 5, provocations can be either kinetic or non-kinetic and they can be of low or high intensity.

Figure 5. Deterring North Korean provocations



At the lower end of the escalation scale, there are a few levers that the United States, South Korea, and China can use to try to dissuade and deter North Korea, such as the threat of sanctions or cutting off or curtailing fuel. However, Pyongyang can forecast the blowback from a non-kinetic provocation or a demonstration of one of its weapon systems. It recognizes that neither Seoul nor Washington is ready to escalate in response to a non-kinetic event. The risk is low and the benefits internal to the regime may outweigh the pain North Korea will suffer from the international community. Therefore, as the chart shows, deterrence at the lower end of the escalation scale is difficult. Even if North Korea is persuaded to delay a provocation, it might not remove it from its near-term calculus.

Moving up the escalation scale to kinetic provocations opens the way for more deterrence levers and pressures that the United States and South Korea can bring to bear on North Korea. Deterrence through denial and deterrence through punishment become viable strategies in an environment where lives are at stake. Key to affecting North Korea's calculus is making these levers visible. It is only when both sides move



up to the upper end of the escalation ladder that North Korea's calculus may change as Kim Jong-un may feel compelled to conduct a provocation in order to underscore his legitimacy and maintain the support among the hardline elements within the Party and armed forces. Short of that, U.S./South Korean strategic messaging, demonstrations of capabilities, and enhanced surveillance (some of it visible) should act to deter North Korea from more violent provocations. Below are some examples of deterrence measures.

**Make it abundantly clear that the United States and South Korea are united in their commitment to deterrence and will respond forcefully to any provocation.**

- Policy-makers must avoid public disagreements regarding the issue of how and when to respond to North Korean provocations.
- U.S. policy-makers and military commanders must take every opportunity to reinforce U.S. support of South Korea and the defense of its people.

**Make it clear that the Alliance is able to respond in a proportional way to a range of North Korean provocations.**

- Conduct combined maritime exercises close to the NLL, where the meaning cannot be missed.
- Train and conduct demonstrations to show the South Korean Navy's ability to conduct anti-submarine warfare (ASW).
- Make defense investments and doctrine toward a forward, active defense that preserves stability and maximizes the safety of South Korean military and civilian assets from a sudden, small-scale attack from the North.<sup>57</sup>
- On land, invest in the construction and hardening of modern shelters within civilian population centers, as well as increased training of police and emergency responders to rapidly identify and mitigate North Korean incursions.<sup>58</sup>
- At sea, invest in advanced maritime domain awareness and anti-submarine warfare capabilities (e.g., helicopters to defend against small-boat special forces incursions, and armed unmanned aerial vehicles to patrol the DMZ and vulnerable areas of coastline).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Denmark, *Proactive Deterrence*.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.



- When North Korean rhetoric and military movements warrant, make it clear that the Alliance is ready for any eventuality.<sup>60</sup>
- Incorporate within strategic messaging that South Korea is willing to engage in decapitation strikes if it believes that North Korea is about to conduct a provocation on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>61</sup>

**Ensure that intelligence on North Korean movements is current, and thoroughly analyze potential motivations.**

- Be consistent in the use of ISR assets to monitor North Korean activity in and around the coastline.
- Consider being visible in some ISR operations above the NLL in order to show readiness. Be aware, however, that such activity could prompt a provocation.
- Conduct a Red Team analysis on assumptions of North Korean motivations and internal regime dynamics.
- Use games and table-top exercises to better understand escalation dynamics with regard to different types of provocations driven by different motivations.

**When responding to a provocation, do it in a timely and proportional manner.**

- Focus on the point of attack, if it can be discerned.
- Remain in the same domain. If an attack is in the maritime realm, respond in the maritime realm. A response against the base from which the attack originated is acceptable, but indiscriminate attacks on the peninsula are not.
- Pay close attention to North Korean media for possible signals of escalation or de-escalation.

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<sup>60</sup> In October (2012), North Korea's National Defense Commission issued a statement condemning President Lee Myung-bak's recent visit to the island of Yeonpyeong. In response, the South Korean military stepped up its combat readiness by deploying artillery and tank brigades and combat air patrols by F-15Ks and KF-16s. This was accompanied by a statement from the Ministry of National Defense: "If (the North) launches attacks, (the South Korean) military will strongly and thoroughly retaliate against the origin of the attacks and their supporting forces under the right of self-defense....We are closely watching the North Korean military's movements."

<sup>61</sup> According to interviews the author conducted in Seoul in 2013 and 2014, there is a view that South Korean references to decapitation strikes during the March/April 2013 crisis may have had an impact on Pyongyang's calculus.



## Conclusion

As Kim Jong-un works to consolidate his power in the coming months and years, South Korea and the United States should expect that provocations will continue to be a part of North Korea's strategy for dealing with the outside world. Policy-makers should understand that there can be no "umbrella" deterrent for the myriad kinetic and non-kinetic maritime provocation options available for North Korea, especially when a variety of triggers or pressures might lead Pyongyang to strike.

This paper has laid out a model for thinking about North Korea's provocations, its calculus for escalation, and its susceptibility to deterrence and dissuasion strategies. Although Kim Jong-un is a young leader and in many respects an unknown quantity to the outside world, there is good reason to believe that the dynamics of decision-making on provocations have not changed dramatically. The regime will likely not be willing to employ provocations in a period of turmoil or transition within the leadership. The effects of the Jang Song-taek and Hyon Yong-chol purges have lingered into the summer of 2015 and at the time of this writing (August 2015), North Korea has yet to engage in anything more than rhetorical banter and launching "projectiles" into the Sea of Japan. Although there are hints that preparations are being made for another missile launch or, possibly, a fourth nuclear test, debate continues on when Kim Jong-un will give the go-ahead. Potential for escalation tied to the upcoming joint exercises (Ulchi Freedom Guardian) is also not beyond the realm of possibility.

Deterring North Korea is not easily done. The United States and South Korea have a number of political, economic, and military levers at their disposal, but the nature of the North Korean threat diminishes the utility of many of these levers at the lower end of the escalation scale: there, internal political considerations may trump any negative consequences for engaging in non-kinetic behavior, such as demonstrations of critical defense systems.

While it is unlikely during this period of power consolidation that Kim Jong-un will undertake reckless acts of provocation at the higher end of the escalation scale, it is not beyond the realm of possibility, especially if politics inside the regime demand it—something that would be out of the pattern of traditional North Korean provocation behavior except for the *Cheonan* sinking in 2010. It would be important for the United States and South Korea to take measures to prevent the crisis from escalating: as the pressure grows inside the regime and Kim Jong-un is



increasingly compelled to respond to external threats and actions, his hubris and aggressive personality could make finding off-ramps difficult. Central to the Alliance's deterrence/dissuasion posture will be:

- A careful reading of the North Korean motivation
- A response based on proportionality and timing
- A strong alignment between strategic messaging from the Blue House and South Korean high command, and demonstrations of force.

Finally, when considering North Korean provocations and deterrence, it is important to realize that this is not just a military issue. Pyongyang sees provocations as a way of perpetuating a national coercive strategy. Responding to such aggressive behavior requires a whole-of-government response—military, diplomatic, legal, and international. Relying on military operational plans and threatening military responses alone will do little to prevent the unintended consequences of escalation.









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