Rattling the American Cage: North Korean Nuclear Threats and Escalation Potential

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I. Introduction

Peter Hayes and Roger Cavazos write: "We do not believe that North Korea intends to attack South Korea, pre-emptively or otherwise, in the current cycle of threat projection. However, miscalculation, accidents, or "wild cards" can all activate an unstoppable chain of events that lead to uncontrollable escalation...Talk is cheap, valuable, and entails no concessions. In the current charged environment, the only way to obtain badly needed information about North Korean intentions and therefore, the real level of threat, is to talk to them."

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II. Policy Forum by Peter Hayes and Roger Cavazos

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The signal to noise ratio on the Korean Peninsula is usually very low with a great deal of noise and only a few signals. Recently, the signals increased in amplitude and frequency but so too has the noise. Interpreting the signals correctly is even more challenging when the parties are not talking to each other but rather, past each other.

North Korean threat rhetoric is often hard to decipher. For example: "If the US imperialists brandish nuclear weapons, we -- in complete contrast to former times -- will by means of diversified, precision nuclear strike in our own style turn not just Seoul, but even Washington, into a sea of fire."[1]

Thus wrote a North Korean official in the authoritative party newspaper *Rodong Simun* on March 6, 2013. This was the first time the North threatened to use nuclear weapons against cities, emulating the operational practices of the United States, China, and Russia. Perhaps that was the point.

This was followed shortly by a March 7 2013 declaration that North Korean forces could "carry out preemptive nuclear strikes on the strongholds of the aggressors"[2]—another attempt to assert that the North is a nuclear weapons state on equal footing with the United States, China, and Russia – a status that can only be accorded via the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and is therefore unreachable for North Korea.

How seriously should we take these threats?

If we read the DPRK decisive system-wide policy pronouncements, and not just those public but tactical in nature statements designed to twang nerves in Washington or Seoul we find a more deliberate positioning of the North Korean nuclear weapons strategy than the casual reader might assume from reading the headlines based on the latest threat statement from Pyongyang, or the latest riposte from Washington.

Until mid-March, DPRK foreign affairs officials asserted that as “an all-powerful treasured sword that defends the country's sovereignty and security,” its nuclear weapons were not negotiable. At least, not “as long as the United States' nuclear threats and hostile policy exist.”[3] As late as March 16, when this statement was broadcast, the North held open the possibility that it might abandon its nuclear weapons provided US nuclear threats and hostility are removed.

This posture shifted dramatically in the last week of March. On March 25, US B52 bombers flew over South Korea in military exercises that simulated nuclear bombing runs against North Korea.[4] Nuclear-capable B2 stealth bombers followed on March 28 [5] and F22 stealth fighters on March 31 that could accompany B2 bombers in a nuclear strike mission on North Korea.[6]

There are very deep North Korean memories of airpower killing an estimated twenty percent of the populace and flattening most vertical structures during the Korean War [7]. The nuclear-capable B-52 and F111 flights and the near war during Operation Paul Bunyan in 1976 struck a particularly resonant chord at the time with the North Koreans. What one side intends as deterrence can easily be perceived as a provocation given an unsettled strategic environment. The B52s and B2s flights may also have the effect of reducing China’s influence to zero or even negative in Pyongyang given its inability to affect the US mobilization of countervailing nuclear threat against the North.

Beijing may also perceive that this unilateral move shows that the United States has given up on China to influence Pyongyang. From the Chinese perspective, sending the bombers embodies the “Pivot” in the worst possible way—especially given the likely association in Chinese minds of the B2 bombers over Korea with the mistaken stealth bombings of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 during the war in Kosovo.

On March 26, the North Korean foreign affairs ministry informed the UN Security Council that the United States was “fostering a vicious cycle of escalating tensions in order to come up with an international justification for provoking a nuclear war against us under the pretext of "non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.”

“The United States,” it said, “is now fully mobilizing its "three nuclear strike means" in the preparations for a nuclear war of northward aggression”—referring to US bombers, land-based missiles, and submarine-based missiles.[8]

On March 2, North Korea’s supreme commander Kim Jong Un ordered North Korean forces, including artillery, rockets, and missiles, to “enter No 1 combat ready posture.” He told his subordinates that the DPRK would “answer the US imperialists' nuclear blackmail with a merciless nuclear attack.”[9]

It is unclear what “No 1 combat ready posture” consists of because that was the first time North Korea has announced that level of preparation. Again, North Korea likely felt threatened by unprecedented U.S. actions and responded in an unprecedented manner. However, it is important to note that North Korea did not actually move their military forces in any observable ways.

Three days later, on March 31, Kim presided over a pre-announced Korean Worker’s Party Central Committee Plenum that “set forth a new strategic line on carrying out economic construction and

building nuclear armed forces simultaneously."[10] (see Attachment 1). To this end, the Party directed that the Korean Peoples' Army should make nuclear forces "pivotal" in all aspects of military strategy and deterrence.

For the senior-most leadership of the entire country to announce where and when they would assemble indicates there were at least some in positions of power who did not believe a decapitation strike or pre-emptive attack was imminent. Moreover, a key indicator of US intention to conduct a pre-emptive attack on North Korea based on prior experience—in particular, the August 1976 crisis—is the concurrent presence of US nuclear strike bombers appearing in Korean airspace and US aircraft carrier battlegroups offshore. In this standoff, there are no US aircraft carriers near Korea, a fact that is well known to North Korean intelligence. Nonetheless, the rhetorical threats continue increasing from Pyongyang even as the real signals of conventional threats remains static.

What to make of this roller coaster ride of nuclear invective and threat rhetoric?

First, the US decision to reassure South Korea (and itself apparently) that it might consider a nuclear strike on North Korea if the North attacked the South by sending nuclear-capable aircraft and submarines to exercise in and around Korea was tailor-made to prompt Northern leaders to escalate. It provided a perfect, undeniable rationale for conservatives in Pyongyang opposed to dialogue with the United States to shoot down any residual notions that the North might enter into a dialogue about the future of its nuclear weapons.

Thus, the DPRK's atomic energy department announced [11] on April 2 that it would "readjust" and "restart" its uranium enrichment plant and plutonium-producing 5MW reactor at Nyongbyon (hereafter Yongbyon), the latter having been disabled in October 2007 as part of denuclearization talks—a slap in the face of not only the United States, but also China.

Second, North Korea does not have the resources to have a very large military *and* an economy. It's economy is broken. It is sustained only by food and oil provided by China, and the manual labor of its work force digging out minerals for export, and its long-suffering agricultural industry. The only way that Kim Jong Un can square this circle is to reduce the size of the conventional military and to push demobilized soldiers into the civilian economy. North Korea lacks the huge surplus labor dedicated to agriculture that China possessed. To the extent that nuclear weapons allow Kim to substitute nuclear for conventional forces, the former may enable him to pursue military and economic goals simultaneously—at least in theory.

Third, the Party ended its March 31 directive by noting: "As a responsible nuclear weapons state, the DPRK will make positive efforts to prevent the nuclear proliferation, ensure peace and security in Asia and the rest of the world and realize the denuclearization of the world."

On April 1, the DPRK's Supreme People's Assembly promulgated a law to consolidate the North's status as a "nuclear weapons state" that enshrined the Party's directive into domestic law, and laid down important fundamentals for future nuclear weapons doctrine [12] (Attachment 2). Many states have written policy into domestic law as a way of ensuring programmatic (budgeting) access and establishing a bureaucracy to establish inertia and prevent change – this is a classic signal of political will to stick to a decision. It also has the effect of raising the cost to change.

Here, Kim signaled that the door is not yet closed totally on negotiations over his nuclear weapons program. By demonstrating his ability to challenge the United States with the most virulent possible threats, he has positioned himself to be North Korea's Richard Nixon to engage the United States.

As a down payment on that option, he also indicated, albeit ambiguously, that the North does not

intend to cross the United States by exporting nuclear weapons or materials.

The DPRK's nuclear strategy is not about deterrence or reassurance. It has plenty of conventional forces for deterrence or self-reassurance, even if they are relatively inferior and more so with every day that passes.

Rather, these statements are opportunistic, and express its authentic strategy which is extortionate. The North's nuclear forces are intended to compel their adversaries to change their policies towards the DPRK, not to deter unprovoked external attack—except when such an attack might actually be in motion.

Also, charismatic leadership in a "partisan state" based on an ideology born in guerilla strategy requires an endless streams of reaffirmation in the form of battles against external forces. [13] Although Kim Jong Un appears to be secure in his rule, at least on the surface, he needs to establish his own credentials separate to the revolutionary legacy of his grandfather and the military-first politics of his father. Confrontation with the United States and virulent nuclear threat is perfect for this renewal of charismatic leadership.

In the latest ambiguous posturing and messaging, the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) which served as an oasis of exchange that continued even during previous fatal incidents has been affected for two days straight(as of this writing). There is precedent for closing KIC, but it is rare. North Korea said they allowed their activities in Kaesong to continue in order to benefit the South Korean companies who were operating shops in the KIC. However, if South Korea continued to insult North Korea then North Korea announced would close the zone.

Kaesong is an important symbol of what little Korean unity exists. It is also an important demilitarized area that presents an invasion corridor or "dagger aimed at the heart" of Pyongyang that traverses the DMZ. Threatening to shut down KIC casts a shadow of war over the entire ROK economy. When a rumor circulated for only a few hours that North Korea would close the zone, South Korea's stock market lost almost over a percentage and a half. [14] For all these reasons, threatening to shut down KIC is a perfect wedge to push Seoul to pressure Washington to capitulate to North Korean demands.

We do not believe that North Korea intends to attack South Korea, pre-emptively or otherwise, in the current cycle of threat projection. However, miscalculation, accidents, or "wild cards" can all activate an unstoppable chain of events that lead to uncontrollable escalation. Who would have guessed, for example, that a former North Korean defector would steal a fishing vessel from the island of Pyeoncheon, and return to the North across the Northern Limit Line at this of all possible times?

Talk is cheap, valuable, and entails no concessions. In the current charged environment, the only way to obtain badly needed information about North Korean intentions and therefore, the real level of threat, is to talk to them.

In this regard, it is easy to find the bad news and reasons to have a continuing standoff and fight. It's harder to find the tiny signals that all is not lost. The latter are what matters. We believe we have discerned some of these signals and that these deserve to be the subject of discussions between North Korea and the United States as a matter of urgency.

III. Attachment I

Report on Plenary Meeting of WPK Central Committee

Pyongyang, March 31 (KCNA) -- The historic March, 2013 plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) took place at the building of the WPK Central Committee, supreme staff of the Korean revolution, on Sunday.

First Secretary of the WPK Kim Jong Un guided the meeting.

Present at the meeting were members and alternate members of the WPK Central Committee and members of the Central Auditing Commission of the WPK.

Present there as observers were senior officials of ministries, national institutions, provincial, city and county committees of the WPK, complexes, major munitions factories and enterprises.

The participants paid silent tribute to President Kim Il Sung and leader Kim Jong Il.

Taken up for discussion at the meeting were the following agenda items "1. On tasks of our Party on bringing about a decisive turn in accomplishing revolutionary cause of Juche as required by the present situation and the developing revolution", "2. On personnel affairs issue to be submitted to the 7th Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly" and "3. On organizational matter".

Kim Jong Un made a report and concluding speech on the first agenda item.

The plenary meeting set forth a new strategic line on carrying out economic construction and building nuclear armed forces simultaneously under the prevailing situation and to meet the legitimate requirement of the developing revolution.

This line is a brilliant succession and development onto a new higher stage of the original line of simultaneously developing economy and national defence that was set forth and had been fully embodied by the great Generalissimos.

It was stressed at the meeting that the party's new line is not a temporary countermeasure for coping with the rapidly changing situation but a strategic line to be always held fast to, in the supreme interests of the Korean revolution.
The nuclear weapons of Songun (NOTE: this means “military first policy”) Korea are not goods for getting U.S. dollars and they are neither a political bargaining chip nor a thing for economic dealings to be presented to the place of dialogue or be put on the table of negotiations aimed at forcing the DPRK to disarm itself.

The DPRK's nuclear armed forces represent the nation's life which can never be abandoned as long as the imperialists and nuclear threats exist on earth. They are a treasure of a reunified country which can never be traded with billions of dollars.

Only when the nuclear shield for self-defence is held fast, will it be possible to shatter the U.S. imperialists' ambition for annexing the Korean Peninsula by force and making the Korean people modern slaves, firmly defend our ideology, social system and all other socialist treasures won at the cost of blood and safeguard the nation's right to existence and its time-honored history and brilliant culture.

When the party's new line is thoroughly carried out, the DPRK will emerge as a great political,

military and socialist economic power and a highly-civilized country which steers the era of independence.

The meeting set forth tasks for carrying out the new line and ways for doing so.

All the officials, party members and other people should wage bold offensive and all-people decisive battle with faith in sure victory and strong determination and thus make the flame of miracle and innovation sweep all fields of national economy.

The pilot fields of the national economy, the basic industrial fields should be drastically developed and production be increased to the maximum. Forces should be directed to agriculture and light industry, key fields in building an economic power to improve and put on a stable basis the people's living standard at the earliest possible date.(Emphasis added)

The self-reliant nuclear power industry should be developed and the work for developing light water reactor be dynamically promoted to actively contribute to easing the strain on the electricity problem of the country.

Spurs should be given to the development of space science and technology and more advanced satellites including communications satellites be developed and launched.

The country's economy should be shifted into knowledge-based economy and the foreign trade be made multilateral and diversified and investment be widely introduced.

The economic guidance shall be fundamentally improved as required by the new situation and Korean-style advantageous economic management methods be completed by embodying the Juche idea.

The DPRK's possession of nukes should be fixed by law and the nuclear armed forces should be expanded and beefed up qualitatively and quantitatively until the denuclearization of the world is realized.

The People's Army should perfect the war method and operation in the direction of raising the pivotal role of the nuclear armed forces in all aspects concerning the war deterrence and the war strategy, and the nuclear armed forces should always round off the combat posture.(Emphasis added)

As a responsible nuclear weapons state, the DPRK will make positive efforts to prevent the nuclear proliferation, ensure peace and security in Asia and the rest of the world and realize the denuclearization of the world. (Emphasis added)

Institutions in charge of security and safeguard, judicial and prosecution and people's security and the Korean People's Internal Security Forces should resolutely foil the vicious moves of the imperialist reactionaries and class enemies, devotedly defend the party, social system and people and surely guarantee the new line of the party with arms and by law.

The party and working people's organizations and power bodies should increase their militant function and role in every way in the struggle for implementing the party's line.

The meeting entrusted the Presidium of the SPA and the Cabinet with the matters of taking legal, administrative and technical measures for implementing the tasks.

At the meeting a decision on the first agenda item "On carrying out economic construction and

building nuclear armed forces simultaneously and thus bringing earlier the final victory in the cause of building a thriving socialist nation" was adopted with unanimous approval.

The second agenda item, personal affairs issue to be submitted to the 7th Session of the 12th SPA, was discussed and decided at the meeting.

The meeting also dealt with an organizational matter, its third agenda item.

Members of the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the WPK Central Committee, members and alternate members of the Political Bureau were recalled and new ones were elected to fill vacancies.

Pak Pong Ju was elected to fill a vacancy of a member of the Political Bureau of the WPK Central Committee.

Hyon Yong Chol, Kim Kyok Sik and Choe Pu Il were elected to fill vacancies of alternate members of the Political Bureau of the WPK Central Committee.

Members and alternate members of the WPK Central Committee were recalled and new ones were elected to fill vacancies.

Upon authorization of Kim Jong Un, Paek Kye Ryong was appointed as director of the Light Industrial Department of the WPK Central Committee and Yun U Chol as editor-in-chief of Rodong Sinmun, organ of the WPK Central Committee.

Members of the Central Auditing Commission of the WPK were also recalled and new ones were elected to fill vacancies.

IV. Attachment II

Law on Consolidating Position of Nuclear Weapons State Adopted

Pyongyang, April 1 (KCNA) -- A law on consolidating the position of nuclear weapons state for self-defence was adopted in the DPRK.

An ordinance of the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK in this regard was promulgated on Monday.
The ordinance said as follows:

The DPRK is a full-fledged nuclear weapons state capable of beating back any aggressor troops at one strike, firmly defending the socialist system and providing a sure guarantee for the happy life of the people.

Having an independent and just nuclear force, the DPRK put an end to the distress-torn history in which it was subject to outside forces' aggression and interference and could emerge a socialist power of Juche which no one dares provoke.

The Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK decides to consolidate the position of the nuclear weapons state as follows:

1. The nuclear weapons of the DPRK are just means for defence as it was compelled to have access to them to cope with the ever-escalating hostile policy of the U.S. and nuclear threat.

2. They serve the purpose of deterring and repelling the aggression and attack of the enemy against the DPRK and dealing deadly retaliatory blows at the strongholds of aggression until the world is denuclearized.

3. The DPRK shall take practical steps to bolster up the nuclear deterrence and nuclear retaliatory strike power both in quality and quantity to cope with the gravity of the escalating danger of the hostile forces' aggression and attack.

4. The nuclear weapons of the DPRK can be used only by a final order of the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army to repel invasion or attack from a hostile nuclear weapons state and make retaliatory strikes.

5. The DPRK shall neither use nukes against the non-nuclear states nor threaten them with those weapons unless they join a hostile nuclear weapons state in its invasion and attack on the DPRK.)

6. The DPRK shall strictly observe the rules on safekeeping and management of nukes and ensuring the stability of nuclear tests.

7. The DPRK shall establish a mechanism and order for their safekeeping and management so that nukes and their technology, weapon-grade nuclear substance may not leak out illegally. 8. The DPRK shall cooperate in the international efforts for nuclear non-proliferation and safe management of nuclear substance on the principle of mutual respect and equality, depending on the improvement of relations with hostile nuclear weapons states.

9. The DPRK shall strive hard to defuse the danger of a nuclear war and finally build a world without nukes and fully support the international efforts for nuclear disarmament against nuclear arms race.

10. The related institutions shall take thorough practical steps for implementing this ordinance.

Source: http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2013/201304/news01/20130401-25ee.html

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III. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSES

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