

Policy Forum 10-057: Time to Talk: The Threat of Nuclear and Conventional War in Korea



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Time to Talk: The Threat of Nuclear and Conventional War in Korea

Policy Forum, November 24, 2010
Peter Hayes

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I. Introduction

Peter Hayes, Executive Director of the Nautilus Institute, writes, "The probability that a major war could start due to provocations by either side is unknown but finite. So any increase in the risk such as this kind of palpable, visible tension poses the possibility of unacceptable and uncontrollable escalation... The only way to reduce the risk of war is to restart dialogue between the parties to the

Korean conflict, most importantly, between the United States and the North.”

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Peter Hayes

–“Time to Talk: The Threat of Nuclear and Conventional War in Korea”

By Peter Hayes

The DPRK artillery attack on an artillery unit and civilian settlement on South Korea’s Yeonpyeong Island that killed two and injured fifteen is a new and dangerous escalation of the Korean conflict, now sixty years old.

The attack came only two days after a visiting American professor revealed their enrichment capacity to the world after his visit to the North Korean facility in Yongbyon last week. The revelation of a working enrichment plant itself was a major escalation of the two decade standoff over the North’s nuclear weapons program.

The two events, one involving conventional weapons and one involving nuclear weapons, are linked. The disclosure of the enrichment plant declared to the world—especially the United States and China—that the North no longer relies only on plutonium to make nuclear weapons. Rather, within a few years at most, they will have the ability to make highly enriched uranium, and they are confident that they will be able build a “multi-generational nuclear weapons state” that will be handed off to Kim Jong Un, son of the current DPRK leader Kim Jong Il, in the coming decades. “Get used to it” is the message to Washington and Beijing.

The artillery attack in turn is linked to the coercive power represented by the DPRK’s nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009. In March this year, they launched their first conventional attack on a South Korean military asset since the late nineteen sixties, when Kim Jong Il was only Kim Jong Un’s age today.

Admittedly, the March attack was covert, by a submarine, but it sank the Cheonan, a South Korean warship, in contested waters. Kim Jong Il likely ordered the attack to demonstrate that he could not be cowed by the hostile and politically aggressive stance towards the DPRK of the South Korean President Lee Myung Bak who was elected in 2008, and who unilaterally junked many inter-Korean agreements negotiated over the previous decade.

There are two theories as to why the North Koreans felt in March that they could conduct such a blatant attack and get away with it. Both are linked to their acquisition of working nuclear weapons, at least, of crude nuclear devices, and tested twice, in 2006 and 2009.

One theory is that Kim Jong Il and his advisors believe that having nuclear weapons sets a lid above which escalation cannot go along the DMZ, and therefore, it’s safe to undertake conventional military actions that they could not contemplate for the previous four decades when they did not have nuclear weapons.

Previously, the United States could use nuclear weapons against the DPRK and they had no countervailing capacity. Today, the DPRK has broken this monopoly in the Peninsula. Thus, goes the thinking, it can safely use conventional force to compel the South to change its policies towards the North—and to force the Chinese to declare their backing for the North due to the risk of war in the Peninsula.

Another theory is that they sank the Cheonan because they think that the United States and South Korea may plan to attack the DPRK, including with nuclear weapons, and that if they don’t draw lines in the sand (or sea) against pressure such as South Korean-US naval exercises in the area, then they will be constantly forced to capitulate, again and again. Exploiting the risk of nuclear war, even at low levels of conventional military usage, is a way to deter the United States and the South. Put simply, the idea, which is very Korean, is never show weakness and once pushed, push back harder.

In this interpretation, they are improvising constantly, and the latest ROK naval exercises in this

area were a good opportunity to demonstrate that a nuclear weapons state, even a small state, can't be pushed around. They had issued a warning that something like this might occur, so it is not surprising, although it is shocking.

Only this time, the DPRK attack was not covert, and it was aimed directly at a South Korean territory, not contested ocean, all of which may reflect the North Korean's confidence that their nuclear shield is stronger today than it was in March, now that they have unveiled their enrichment capacity.

Either way, the situation is fraught with danger. Faced with this kind of aggression, it is imperative that South Korea avoid further political and military provocation of the North. The DPRK is trading on the fact that this incident occurred in the midst of a US-ROK naval exercise in the west sea that China has opposed strongly as posing a threat to China itself.

Seoul's only option is to put pressure on China and Russia to demonstrate to the DPRK that this behavior is unacceptable. Both these parties have the ability to hurt the regime in concrete ways, both symbolically and publicly.

In all probability, China will say nothing in public that suggests that the ROK and the United States are aggrieved parties, nor anything that might affront or offend the DPRK. But China may act in tangible ways that send a message to the North Korean military that if they start a war, they are on their own (and by the way, there has been a technical problem with the pipeline that supplies oil to the North Korean military, we will solve the problem as soon as tensions subside, so sorry).

Although the latest incident is of great concern, we should not overstate the near-term risks of war in Korea. There is always a risk of escalation in Korea. The warning times are very short; both sides have very large military forces deployed along the DMZ on a state of high alert. The stakes involved are essentially infinite for the DPRK (because they would lose any war that they start, so starting a war would be suicidal) and huge for the ROK (because of the social, economic, and humanitarian impacts of a major war in the Peninsula).

The probability that a major war could start due to provocations by either side is unknown but finite. So any increase in the risk such as this kind of palpable, visible tension poses the possibility of unacceptable and uncontrollable escalation.

Both the DPRK and the ROK are manipulating that risk, the DPRK in the most blatant way, but the ROK is contributing in its own way to the dynamic, apparently secure in the belief—until yesterday—that neither side really wants war.

The only way to reduce the risk of war is to restart dialogue between the parties to the Korean conflict, most importantly, between the United States and the North.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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