ADIZ: a four letter word

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I. Introduction

Roger Cavazos asserts that spring on the Korean peninsula is often associated with provocations. This spring may be exceptional since there are complicating factors off the Korean peninsula which can make the situation worse. In particular, overlapping Air Defense Identification Zones have the potential to escalate things rapidly and force political leaders to shift attention away from their domestic concerns.

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II. Policy forum by Roger Cavazos

ADIZ: a four letter word

Springtime on the Korean peninsula usually sees a re-birth of tensions; although the old tensions never really die. This year the tension seems to be starting from a relatively lower base than normal. But, there is a much larger Freedom of Navigation cum sovereignty issue with the potential to distract at least six world leaders from the Korean issue in Northeast Asia in the near future. So here are a few things to observe and a few suggestions that might help mitigate the springtime tension.

Historical Trope: Stimulus and Response

Conventional wisdom holds that North Korea engages in provocations in early spring in order to make up for a food shortfall. To simplify this trope, North Korea rattles its saber in spring because the winter stores are depleted and the just planted or just about to be planted crops are not ready for harvesting. North Korea makes a commotion and receives desperately needed food aid. It is true that since the early 1990s, North Korea has experienced serious food shortfalls, but 2013/2014 shortfalls should be the narrowest in years at 40,000 tons according to the World Food Programme.[1] That amount of food shortfall can be bought on the open markets and distributed internally, if North Korea were willing to spend about $150 million.[2] However, in Spring 2013, North Korea stoked tensions to extremely high levels and did not receive food aid. It is unclear if North Korea will continue to connect tensions with food in a classical stimulus-response dialectic. It is clear though that there is more to the trope than the glib “saber rattling is rewarded with food ai d”.

In March and April every year since 2001, the U.S. and the South Korean militaries run a very long exercise to simulate returning large numbers of forces and equipment to the Korean peninsula by in fact moving fairly significant power projection capabilities in the form of strategic bombers, surface and sub-surface combatants and recently stealth fighters to the theatre.[3] About 10,000 U.S. forces and around 200,000 ROK troops also participate in either command or field exercises.[4] But what draws North Korea’s attention are the transitory platforms – and the capabilities they represent.

The combined capabilities form a military barrier around the Korean peninsula. With that barrier in place, North Korea is forced to engage in a land fight, if North Korea chose to fight. Should North Korea decide to attack South Korea, of course, there would be a horrifically high number of casualties, likely including several thousand Communist Party of China members who serve as diplomats in the Chinese embassy and consulates, staff Chinese multinational companies headquartered in Seoul and the children of Chinese who have the means to send their children to study in Korean universities.[5] Most of the more than $200 billion in trade between China and its fourth largest trading partner will also halt after a North Korean attack.[6] But the outcome is almost certain. The formidable North Korean battle machine will grind to a halt when drained of fuel and /or ammunition thirty days or less after starting a land fight.[7]

When North Korea's actions are placed in that context we can see that there is indeed more to the trope than North Korea pulling out the "old playbook" or being rewarded for bad behavior. North Korea has some legitimate security concerns when that many capabilities are pointed in its general direction. Even though South Korea and the United States have repeatedly reassured North Korea the exercises are defensive, North Korea never passes up the chance to complain loudly. North Korea is also notified in advance of the exercises. They know it comes every year at about the same time. Yet North Korea raised nary a peep when both China and Russia held a far larger exercise even closer to North Korea and North Korea received only four days' advance notice. The China-Russia Maritime Joint Exercise was held off the Northeastern coast of North Korea and Southeastern coast of Russia in the vicinity of Vladivostok in the Gulf of Peter the Great from 5 to 12 July 2013.[8]

What to watch for: nuclear-capable forces

We already know B-52s strike a particularly discordant note in the collective North Korean psyche as Peter Hayes articulated from his personal interactions with North Koreans.[9] However North Korea's official press seems understandably concerned when ANY nuclear capable platform is flown to the Korean peninsula. It should be noted that flying nuclear-capable platforms TO Korea strongly corroborates U.S. and Korean assurances that there are no nuclear weapons ON the south side of the Korean peninsula. The U.S. has flown several B-52 missions on to the Korean Peninsula, but the U.S. rarely publicizes the flights. Usually, if the U.S. does not publicize the flights, the North Koreans do not publicize it either. But they do take notice.

ADIZ: a four letter "word"[10]

If the U.S. and Korean forces deploy naval forces of roughly the same size as 2013 (a Destroyer squadron consisting of five ships, a LOS ANGELES-class attack submarine and about 2,000 sailors) and previous years, it is almost inevitable some of those surface and sub-surface naval assets will cross through China's recently declared ADIZ (Air Defense Identification Zone). Neither the surface nor sub-surface combatants have to file flight plans, but all ARLEIGH BURKE-class destroyers have a landing deck for helicopters. All models after BURKE-class destroyers after Flight IIa (Fiscal Year 1994) are built with two helicopter hangars.[11] Almost all exercises involving surface combatants also include flight operations – which will likely entail flying through an ADIZ. Moreover, if an aircraft carrier participates in the exercise, as USS RONALD REAGAN CVN-76 did in 2011, then it is almost certain that at least some of the aircraft will transit China's declared ADIZ.[12] The ocean is extremely large, but with that many ships and with such large and so many overlapping ADIZ in the area, the chance of miscommunication, miscalculation and human error is high.

All the navies in the area would do well to communicate frequently and to study International Maritime Organization's Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (IMO COLREGS).[13] A complicating issue at hand is that some countries consider that everything in an ADIZ and everything in an Exclusive Economic Zone are only subject to national laws and not

governed by IMO COLREGS.

Given unpredictable sea states at that time of year and the possibility of human miscalculation that can happen any time, it is possible to see things rapidly spinning out of control - even if North Korea does not do anything. But it would be uncharacteristic of North Korea to avoid exploiting any gaps which might open between the U.S., China, South Korea, Japan and Russia.

Conclusion

There is more potential than normal this year for escalation around the Korean peninsula as deterrence signals meant for North Korea may easily be misinterpreted or lead to human error in areas near North Korea. Factors complicating normal U.S. deployments for exercises with South Korea this spring include negative developments like overlapping ADIZs and recently promulgated fisheries enforcement. All these issues boil down to sovereignty and are essentially political issues. Kinetic solutions should only be used in the most extreme of circumstances. However, frank military-to-military dialog prior to the exercises should inform political discussions. One military incident has the potential to distract at least six world leaders who have to deal with important domestic issues of their own. Woe unto the military that forces world leaders to shift their focus at a time and manner that is most unwelcome.

III. References

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[6] Cavazos, Pgs 12-13

[7] Cavazos, Pgs45-47

[8] China Military Online, "China-Russia Maritime Joint Exercise" July 2013. Available as:

http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/special-reports/node_60442.htm

[9] Peter Hayes, “Tactically Smart, Strategically Stupid”, Nautilus Policy Forum, 20 March 2013

[10] In English-language vernacular a “four letter word” is a euphemism for a curse word, 骂人的话.

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