



Policy Forum 11-25: Did Deterrence Against North Korea Fail in 2010?



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Did Deterrence Against North Korea Fail in 2010?

By Ken Jimbo

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Plumes of smoke rise from Yeonpyeong following the North Korean shelling of the island on November 23, 2010.
(Photo: AAP)

I. Introduction

Ken Jimbo, an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University, writes “We can reach a tentative assessment that deterrence failed in 2010, and is likely to fail again, but that escalation control succeeded. The recent incidents indicate a ‘stability-instability paradox’ on the Korean Peninsula — there is a decreasing probability of major war but an increasing probability of low-level conflicts.”

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II. Article by Ken Jimbo

- Did Deterrence Against North Korea Fail in 2010?

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The sinking of the Cheonan and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 raised concerns for both the South Korean and US governments that North Korea may no longer be conventionally deterred [1]. The two governments have been reviewing how their basic and extended deterrence policies should be reorganized to adapt to this new dimension in North Korea’s behavior. In reviewing deterrence, the following four considerations are particularly important.

First, North Korea was certainly not deterred from launching not one but two limited strikes against the South in 2010.

The failure to prevent an adversary from engaging in repetitive acts of aggression derives from the adversary's perceptions that the cost incurred for the previous attack did not exceed the benefit gained from it.

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

Second, due to progress in its nuclear weapons program, North Korea may have greater confidence in its capacity to control the level of escalation. Shortly before shelling Yeonpyeong, the North revealed its new uranium enrichment facility to visiting US scientist Siegfried Hecker and reasserted its nuclear capabilities. These messages of nuclear weaponization [2] were deliberately sent before the shelling of Yeonpyeong as signals to deter large-scale US-ROK retaliation. North Korea seemed to believe that such signals and its nuclear capacity enhanced the effectiveness of mutual deterrence vis-à-vis South Korea and the US at the strategic level. As far as North Korean perceptions are concerned, the magnitude with which it can conduct conventional armed attacks before inviting major military retaliation has significantly increased.

Third, both Koreas and the US appear keen to exercise a certain level of restraint and control escalation. South Korea retaliated in response to the Yeonpyeong shelling by firing about 80 shells at North Korean barracks, command structures and artillery near the border, but there was no significant military escalation from North Korea despite its verbal attacks. South Korean F-16 and F-15 jets were also rushed to the area, but they did not provoke North Korean targets. More importantly, the US did not take joint action directly on initial counter strikes. In terms of the range of escalation, the offensive exchanges in the Yeonpyeong case were relatively low in intensity. We can reach a tentative assessment that deterrence failed in 2010 [3], and is likely to fail again, but that escalation control succeeded. The recent incidents indicate a 'stability-instability paradox' on the Korean Peninsula — there is a decreasing probability of major war but an increasing probability of low-level conflicts. North Korea assumes that South Korea and the US do not want minor conflicts to escalate into major ones, making it safe to engage in the former.

Fourth, the role of China in deterring North Korean aggression is increasingly important. As deterrence consists of sets of action to convince a party to refrain from initiating harmful action, it is not determined only by opponents but also by supporters. China has two options with regard to deterrence on the peninsula.

On the one hand, China could weaken deterrence through efforts to persuade South Korea and the US not to pressure North Korea. It can also increase its anti-access and denial capability to encourage North Korean military operations. For example, Chinese objection to the US-ROK Yellow Sea naval exercise in July 2010 can be interpreted as an attempt to deny US engagement access in a Korean contingency.

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

The apparent failure of deterrence on the Korean peninsula in 2010 has had a significant impact on Japanese perceptions of basic and extended deterrence and raises important questions regarding the role of US security alliances in Northeast Asia.

First, there is the question of whether North Korea believes that an increased level of aggression

against Japan might also go without significant repercussions and costs. Although the thresholds are high for North Korea to conduct missile attacks or vigorous guerrilla activities against Japan, the Japanese government should pay greater attention to provocative behavior such as low-level and asymmetrical maritime assaults.

Second, US extended deterrence to Japan and South Korea should also be strengthened in order to increase the cost of North Korean aggression. Bilateral security cooperation between Japan and South Korea should be given more importance since both countries share mutual interests in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance activities.

Third, US-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation must be upgraded to enhance the impact and credibility of US deterrence in the region. The three countries must take concrete actions in line with the joint plans outlined in the foreign ministers' statement of December 2010 in order to build a renewed and sustainable foundation for trilateral cooperation on North Korea and other regional challenges. This effort must also include joint steps to strengthen coordination with China as a rising regional power based on the common goal of Northeast Asian peace and stability.

III. Notes

[1] see <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2009/07/11/whats-driving-pyongyang/>

[2] see

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/10/23/a-northeast-asian-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-is-unrealistic/>

[3] see <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/01/23/north-korea-push-could-soon-turn-to-shove/>

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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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