Possible Developments on the Korean Peninsula

Things are heating up again on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea has put its long-range artillery and strategic rocket forces targeted at US military bases on alert: “From this moment, the Supreme Command of the Korean People’s Army will be putting in combat duty posture No.1 all field artillery units including long-range artillery strategic rocket units that will target all enemy objects in U.S. invasory bases on its mainland, Hawaii and Guam.”

These blistering new statements by the North Koreans again threatening the United States and its stooges with nuclear weapons have once again spooked the media and the Internet, which is certain that “Pyongyang is about to start a second Korean war” or “North Korea has decided to open fire on American targets.” Many Russian and world news outlets hit their readers with headlines like those on Tuesday, March 26.

This article will, on the one hand, focus on the context in which the statement was made and, on the other, address the likelihood North Korea will start a war with the South.

North Korea’s reputation and the information war being conducted against it mean that any news item about the North makes it seem that, as the sole source of tension, the country is again about to do something unexpected. To put it mildly, that is not the case.

Like similar previous statements, it was made in response to a new South Korean-American agreement changing the way they would react to “provocative actions” by North Korea. First of all, they are officially allowed to “yield” to provocations and, as the North Koreans would say, “retaliate a hundredfold.” Second, they would retaliate both against those executing the provocation directly and against logistics and command and control structures, including the highest command level.

Yes, that means that theoretically South Korea and the United States could go after Kim Jong-un with high precision weapons and American drones in response to an exchange of fire started by anyone on the maritime border. That is an extreme example, of course, but the signing of the agreement has greatly increased the scope for abuse.

We hear about the threat from North Korea constantly, and, at first glance, its aggressive rhetoric, which resembles that of the Soviet Union in the 1930s, provides an excellent underpinning for those fears. However, the situation looks very different if we consider facts rather than words.

South Korea has conducted large-scale military exercises 4-5 times more often than the North. And they have not been limited to practicing how to respond to a North Korean invasion. The annual Key Resolve exercise in 2013 practiced a preemptive attack on North Korea with 80,000 troops. In 2012, 100,000 troops took part in a similar exercise, and they practiced capturing the entirety of North Korea after a regime collapse. A March 2012 exercise involving 10,000 US Marines practiced an assault landing at key North Korean facilities.

There have also been recent actions, which the statement in fact mentioned. First of all, there was an American exercise involving B-52 strategic bombers practicing nuclear strikes on North Korea. It was widely covered in the press, although it was publicized as training for retaliatory measures.

Second, the news broke that the South was developing plans to destroy North Korea’s top leadership and options for a demonstration strike on Kim Il-sung’s and Kim Jong-Il’s Mausoleum as symbolic acts. However, I should point out
that if we disregard the double standards, a show of force like that would not differ greatly from the destruction of the World Trade Center twin towers on September 11, 2001.

Third, there was a series of measures associated with the third anniversary of the sinking of the South Korean corvette Cheonan. The day before the anniversary, South Korea’s defense minister visited Baengnyeong Island, which is located near where the South Korean ship went down. He met with military personnel and told them to punish North Korea severely if they committed a provocative act. A four-day exercise was devoted to the Cheonan, and in military circles that date was openly declared a “Day of Retribution.” North Korea responded by placing its rocket artillery units on alert.

Let’s talk now about the likelihood of a North Korean attack. The side that starts a war usually does so on the assumption that it has a chance of winning. Let’s consider the odds in a hypothetical confrontation between the North and the South.

True, the North Korean army is very large and, some say, its soldiers are individually well-trained and highly motivated. However, its equipment leaves much to be desired, both because it includes a large number of 1970s-era weapons and because it has a shortage of fuel and spare parts. Its infrastructure is seriously obsolete — in terms of both communications and high technologies.

Then too, whereas the North Korean army is the world’s fourth largest (as many as 1,100,000 troops), South Korea’s armed forces are the sixth largest after Russia (with perhaps 700,000 troops). South Korea’s military budget is among the top 10 in the world; according to various estimates, it is 23-26 times higher than North Korea’s.

Finally, the South would not be by itself. A mutual defense treaty has been in effect between the Republic of Korea and the United States since 1953. Under it, the United States would assist the Republic of Korea with all of its military power. Moreover, the North Korean army would be under the operational control of American generals (up to a certain point in time, they controlled the South Korean army even during peacetime).

All of this means that the North would have no chance if it were to attack the South: Even without American support, a war between the North and the South would result in the offensive being countered completely and a high likelihood that the war would be pursued successfully on its soil. Nuclear weapons would not turn the tide of the war because they would not be the deciding factor in even one strategic mission. But if Pyongyang were to wield the nuclear club, the international community would approve any retaliatory measure for violating the taboo — including a nuclear response.

If the “goal of the North Korean leadership is regime survival,” it would be suicide to start a war. Therefore, it would be a bad idea, to say the least, for the regime in Pyongyang to begin a large-scale conflict. However, it is entirely possible that its idiosyncratic nature could cause it to overreact to a provocative act. That brings us to the main question: Who will benefit from a worsening situation on the peninsula?

To answer that, we need to take a closer look at South Korea. Former President Lee Myung-bak believed in putting heavy pressure on the North, but that concept proved unproductive for five years. South Korea has a new president now, but a lot of the people who supported the previous policy are still in office, and they comprise a very influential lobby that wants both to ensure their personal security and to make sure that South Korea’s policy remains tough and confrontational. They want to go down in history as the ones who unified the country, and they are not concerned about the consequences. Worse yet, they have worked so hard to convince others that the Kim regime is on the brink of collapse and “just needs a push” that they have come to believe it themselves.

And although their political influence is on the wane, they could try to arrange an incident in the expectation that the Northerners would overreact, after which no one would believe North Korea’s explanations.

Also, people are generally jumpy, and that makes it more likely that one side will lose its nerve. The latest example was the incident that took place at 2:30 AM local time on March 27 when a South Korean border guard on duty in Hwacheon County saw an “unidentified moving object” and threw a grenade at it, after which the country’s military leadership announced there was a threat of an armed infiltration from the North. The high alert was lifted after the area around the border post was reconnoitered and no trace of an intrusion was discovered.

So we should not look upon the worsening situation on the Korean peninsula in a bipolar/propagandistic fashion. It would be a gross oversimplification to blame everything on the North. Both sides are responsible for exacerbating the conflict, and it remains to be seen which is more to blame.
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