What We Should and Shouldn’t Fear on the Korean Peninsula

North Korea’s suggestion about evacuating diplomatic missions has again inflamed passions and once more forced experts to pay attention to details and try to answer the question: “What should we be concerned about on the Korean Peninsula, and what should we not worry about?”

In my opinion, the evacuation suggestion was in NOWISE a means of getting attention. Nor was the move consistent with North Korea’s image as a country practicing nuclear blackmail and threatening the world. That is the sort of thing a country does when it feels vulnerable and has reasons for behaving in such a manner.

Let’s begin by reviewing the power balance. North Korea has the world’s fourth largest military, and the South has the sixth. However, its military is better armed and it does not use it for economic purposes. South Korea’s military spending is 23-26 times higher than North Korea’s. The 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty would automatically bring the United States into a war. With that power balance, not even nuclear weapons would save the day — not only would they not contribute to the achievement of strategic objectives, they would provoke an extremely harsh response by the international community against the country that broke the taboo against their use.

North Korea has been employing aggressive rhetoric (and although its rhetoric is repulsive, it is not threatening), and it has moved Musudan missiles to its east coast. It is true that they have only been seen in parade and there have been no known successful tests, but some Western media outlets are already diligently frightening their audiences with the possibility that they can reach Guam. However, most of the news about North Korea portrays North Korea not just as the top newsmaker, but as the main cause of all the problems. It is as though everything was peaceful and quiet, and then North Korea suddenly...

That is why I will focus on the other side’s actions. In 2011 alone, the South Korean military conducted 13 exercises, including exercises practicing the capture of key facilities in the North. More than 540,000 South Koreans, including civilians, took part in routine exercises during September 2012. No other country conducts maneuvers on that large a scale — especially on a regular basis. By way of comparison the Warsaw Pact exercises once held in Europe involved 10,000-15,000 people, and they were considered large and potentially dangerous.

In 2012, South Korea spent 2.6% of its GDP on defense. Seoul increased military spending three years in a row.

It had held nine exercises by the end of March 2013, and at least 10 more are planned. The South Korean military’s upcoming Doksuri exercise will involve 200,000 people. That is one third of the South Korean military. Because troops cannot be secretly mobilized and trained before an invasion, Pyongyang must view any maneuvers involving that many people as potential preparations for an invasion. An exercise is a good way of putting significant numbers of military units in their starting positions for a war, which would immediately look very suspicious if it were done outside the framework of an exercise.

That is an easy conclusion to draw when we recall that the South Korean army’s maneuvers in 2013 practiced a preemptive artillery strike on North Korea. People with actual combat experience have been appointed to positions of command. The number of US allies involved in the war of 1950-1953 that are participating in the exercises has
grown (England, Australia, and even Colombia). Weapons capable of destroying underground bunkers and combat vehicles that can traverse the minefields in the DMZ have been added to the inventory. Tensions are escalating both horizontally (the numbers involved in exercises are growing) and vertically (new types of military hardware from B-52 bombers to more modern systems). Washington is moving seven long-range Lancer B-1 bombers to its airbase in Guam (Pyongyang’s air defenses are believed to be unable to shoot them down), and F-22 Raptor stealth fighters and B-2 Spirit stealth bombers are being deployed to Osan Air Base (South Korea). If the United States were to actually employ high-altitude bombers against the DPRK, North Korea would have nothing to counter them with. That means Pyongyang’s key facilities could be bombed with impunity, and a formal pretext for such bombing could be found.

Recall the recent US-South Korean agreement on responding to “North Korean provocations.” Its main provisions are as follows:

a) A counterattack could include the United States;

b) A counterattack could be carried out both at the site of the incident and against logistics and command and control structures.

Future maneuvers, especially if held in disputed waters, would be very conducive to incidents like the North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island three years ago. A South Korean military leader had decided to show off and gave the order to fire on North Korean waters. North Korea fell for the provocation. Now, however, the response to provocations might even be an attack on the North Korean leadership by American high-precision weapons, and North Korea’s reputation would prevent its version of events from being considered.

Add to this the recent widespread rhetoric about a preemptive strike from the South Korean military, including Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin, on top of South Korea’s domestic political situation: Although Lee Myung-bak, that vehicle of a confrontational policy, is no longer president, a large group of his supporters remain in positions of power. The country’s new leader began work under difficult conditions and has not yet been able to put her own people in all key posts, including the important post of defense minister.

Park Geun-hye’s policy is aimed at restoring trust between the two countries. Ms. Park spoke of that during the election campaign, and the State Department sounded warning notes at the time. She needs to be careful; that policy could undermine the basis for cooperation between South Korea and the United States. Then there was the statement by US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel that Kim Kwan-jin’s service as defense minister “can only further strengthen the ROK-U.S. relationship.”

We also need to consider the corruption scandals involving some members of the military lobby Land Burns Underfoot. The deteriorating situation favors these conservatives because in situations like this you don’t “change horses in midstream,” and Park will be unable to avoid responding as she is forced to side with the hard-line proponents.

From all this, we might conclude that certain circles in South Korea and the United States are preparing a military provocation in the very near future that will have an outcome like the Gulf of Tonkin incident. The incident will be blamed on North Korea, and the response will escalate into a large-scale invasion. Citizens of other countries could suffer during the bombing of its capital. In analyzing that possibility, Pyongyang evidently concluded that it would be advisable to evacuate foreign diplomats.

Countries preparing for a war of aggression do not take that kind of step. So we should not fear that the “unpredictable tyrannical regime in Pyongyang is playing at nuclear blackmail and will initiate a conflict that will turn into a global standoff.” We should be concerned about something entirely different. First, we should worry about those who like to fish in troubled waters and start a conflict for their own personal, not necessarily political, gain. Second, the general nervousness, confusion and lack of communication increase the likelihood that someone will imagine he has seen something (as happened on March 27) and start shooting. If it had happened near the DMZ, the Northerners could have taken the shooting for the start of an invasion and opened fire in response. Then the Southerners would be sure that they had been attacked, and the situation would have started to escalate.

But the danger was avoided that time, and I would like to believe that the voice of reason will prevail against the ambitions of some unworthy individuals, although things will remain tense until the end of April. First of all, the large-scale South Korean exercises I mentioned earlier will continue throughout the month. Second, Kim Il-sung’s birthday, North Korea’s main national holiday, will probably be marked by some ceremonial event intended for “internal consumption.” It could be a missile launch, which North Korea’s enemies would immediately interpret as
conclusive evidence of the regime’s aggressive nature. However, the South Korean media has already begun talking about a fourth nuclear test. Any such action would pour oil on the fire and trigger a “security dilemma,” generating new questions and new answers.

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