

The Goal of North Korean Brinkmanship: Mediation

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Since the early 1990s, North Korean nuclear policy has been notorious for its brinkmanship — using provocative acts and inflammatory rhetoric to escalate tensions in ways that either enhance Pyongyang's power or its diplomatic leverage. This was illustrated in the August 2003 six party talks in Beijing when they announced their intention to conduct a nuclear test. The new round of talks launched in February 2004 creates the opportunity for North Korea to continue this trend, or to change directions. While many fear North Korea's use of brinkmanship techniques is part of an aggressive stance that will lead to war, that perception is doubtful. North Korea's frequent redefinition of a nuclear brink's demarcation has another viable purpose: Pyongyang's goal is not to go over the brink, but to be pulled back from the brink.

The Goals of North Korean Brinkmanship

Many wonder why North Korea, given its dismal societal condition and famines that seem to augur regime collapse, behaves in a reckless manner that encourages U.S. hard liners to contemplate regime change in this "axis of evil" member. Often the conclusion reached is that this behavior is calculated to induce the United States to acquiesce to North Korean blackmail: Rescue us on our terms, or else! Although that contention is plausible, it is more likely that North Korea is motivated by a more sophisticated model of an external rescue that may pose additional problems for U.S. policy toward Korea.

Pyongyang's brinkmanship is not a distracting tactic in a larger war-fighting strategy. Instead it is an essential element of a strategy designed to create two results. The first result is a form of interim deterrence against what they perceive as U.S. brinkmanship — the world's sole superpower applying a preemptive doctrine toward a cluster of rogue states and terrorists. North Korea's aggressive policy is designed to compensate for their manifest weaknesses and to keep U.S. military capabilities off balance. The second goal is to set the stage for external diplomatic and economic intervention that will pull the confrontational U.S.-North Korea parties away from the brink and act as a catalyst to negotiated reunification of North and South Korea. Increasingly the most likely candidate to fill that international role is China because of its ties to both Koreas, its ability to play such a role in Asian regional affairs, and — as long as PRC-US interests vis-à-vis North Korea appear to overlap — its means to persuade Americans that this would be in the United States' best interests.

China's Growing Role

This North Korean use of brinkmanship is a perverse way of facilitating an amicable negotiated resolution of North Korea's myriad problems as part of an inter-Korean confidence building process that will lead to co-existence and incremental reunification. North Koreans are well aware that the younger generation of South Koreans are avid supporters of peaceful reconciliation. What both Koreas require is a mutual benefactor that is perceived to be neutral. Despite China's

Cold War ties to North Korea, today the PRC fits that balanced bill more than any other country — including the United States.

This was well illustrated by the visit of one of the PRC's top leaders, Wu Bang-guo, to Pyongyang in October 2003 during which he conducted negotiations with Kim Jong-il to revive the six-party talks. The later announcement of rescheduled multilateral talks in Beijing was welcomed by Seoul. Whether or not the series of talks held in Beijing yield demonstrable progress, it is symbolic of China's role in Korean affairs that the venue for the attempt to resolve the nuclear issue is the "Beijing talks." Not many South Koreans think a comparably high level U.S. official would be tasked with such a mission because of the hardline predisposition of the Bush administration. The PRC's inter-Korean leverage also is demonstrated by China's rise to the status of the ROK's largest economic partner, South Korea's position as the PRC's second ranking foreign economic partner, and by China's encouragement of the DPRK to emulate the brand of capitalist reforms that Chinese communists have so successfully embraced.

Yet another China-related factor in the evolution of inter-Korean affairs is the way North Korea seems to have learned a perverse lesson from the United States' policy of strategic ambiguity regarding support of Taiwan in its relationship with the PRC. Pyongyang uses a creative version of strategic ambiguity that takes advantage of the gaps in South Korean and Japanese policies toward North Korea in a manner that enhances the DPRK's form of diplomatic deterrence vis-à-vis the United States.

South Korea's Shifting Position

If events surrounding the Korean peninsula continue to evolve in this manner, the United States had better prepare itself to cope with the processes and the results. That challenge is exacerbated by the ways the ROK under President Roh Moo-hyun is reemphasizing the brand of independent foreign policy that he stressed in his Fall 2002 election campaign. South Korean resistance to harder line U.S. approaches to North Korea is compounded by anxieties about Japanese acquiescence to that approach. The prospects for meaningful U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation are not helped by South Korean perceptions of the utility of the PRC in the inter-Korean context versus the roles of the United States and Japan in that context.

The emphasis on South Korean "independence" is intensified by two factors. Most evident are the tensions stemming from progressive South Koreans' perceptions that the U.S. armed forces' transformation plans will have a negative impact upon the existing level of inter-Korean strategic stability. These Koreans fear these shifts that are supposed to be motivated by worldwide transformation of U.S. forces in the War on Terrorism actually are part of a U.S. effort to set the stage for a preemptive attack on North Korea or some other move aimed at coercive regime change. These fears are behind recent public opinion polling that indicates more South Koreans think the United States poses a serious threat to their security than North Korea does by a 39% to 33% ratio. These liberal South Koreans, who are President Roh's core political constituency, also resent the level of pressure Washington put on Seoul to commit forces in Iraq. These critics are ambiguous about the United States, wanting to be seen as a reliable ally of the U.S. purposes in Iraq in order to assure that the United States will remain reliable in support of ROK purposes in the Korean peninsula, but not wanting to be seen as an abjectly obedient ally. This attitude is due to widespread Korean sensitivity to playing an excessively deferential follower's role behind a strong-willed leader — thereby conforming to a *sadaejui* (flunkeyism) paradigm. Both of these factors reinforce rising Korean nationalism and desires for greater South Korean independence from U.S. international guidance.

These internal pressures for a more assertive stance versus U.S. leadership in the ROK-U.S. alliance relationship could help reinforce a long-standing North Korean ambition to drive a wedge between their southern rival and its strategic benefactor. This, too, has been part of North Korea's brinkmanship approach — in terms of making radical statements, sending signals that they are

prepared to carry out reckless policies, and behaving in what appears to be an irrational manner — that are collectively intended to be perceived differently by Americans and South Koreans.

How Crazy is North Korea?

It is common for U.S. observers of North Korea, especially foreign and defense policy pundits who are not Korea specialists, to react to such North Korean rhetoric, threats, and demeanor by describing the Pyongyang regime as a bastion of lunatics. If South Koreans were to take all these facets of North Korea at face value, they too would question the sanity of Kim Jong-il and his elite cohort. Of course, some South Koreans do see the DPRK's leaders and their posturing precisely that way — thereby reinforcing those Americans who perceive North Koreans as stark raving mad and fear the consequences for regional stability. On balance, however, more South Koreans grasp the nuances of North Korea's peculiar behavior and understand that it almost certainly amounts to what can be considered a form of calculated irrationality that is intended to engender anxiety among North Korea's adversaries and thereby enhance the DPRK's geopolitical deterrence, compensating for its evident vulnerabilities. The divergent perception of South Koreans and Americans reinforces the value of "calculated irrationality" as part of Pyongyang's brinkmanship approach because it simultaneously provides diplomatic leverage against the United States' strategic posture in East Asia and exacerbates frictions within the U.S.-ROK relationship. If North Korea's leaders are "crazy," it is because they understand the wisdom behind the saying "crazy like a fox."

This situation helps to underscore China's growing role and potentials as a mediator and facilitator in the inter-Korean context because the type of perceptual gap that is increasingly evident in U.S.-ROK bilateral relations does not constitute a significant factor in ROK-PRC relations. Instead of characterizing North Korean haranguing and posturing the way so many Americans do — as certifiably crazy — South Koreans and Chinese tend to agree that these rants and gestures are the result of North Korea's fears and the systemic vulnerabilities that lead to such angst. Also, Seoul and Beijing can grasp the pragmatic utility of the resulting brinkmanship. Instead of reacting adversely to these circumstances in a threatening manner, Seoul and Beijing increasingly respond to them by consulting with each other and trying to devise means that will cause the DPRK to alter its way of thinking and acting.

Adding yet another layer of intricacy to this situation for the next several months is the opportunity provided to North Korea by the confluence of domestic politics in both South Korea and the United States and the impact international events may have on both countries' political evolution. South Korea's National Assembly elections in April and the United States' presidential and congressional elections in November present distinct opportunities for North Korean brinkmanship. The South Korean situation is the most obvious. The more North Korea provokes United States' reactions that motivate support for those Assembly candidates who resist U.S. pressures on the ROK to conform in Korea and the Middle East, the more likely it is that the resulting South Korean government will be supportive of Roh's brand of engagement with North Korea. This government would be in a stronger position to get the United States to cooperate on that agenda. North Korea can also hope that its brinkmanship will have a similar impact on the U.S. elections by raising the soundness of U.S. policy toward North Korean WMD as a partisan campaign issue. The Democratic candidate could then create an alternative to the Bush administration's policies — an alternative that would be more attractive to the Roh administration. Since this would occur in the midst of existing U.S.-ROK frictions over the soundness of U.S. policy and in the thick of American and South Korean progressives' criticism of the Bush Doctrine's risks for other questionable conflicts, it is clear why North Korean purveyors of brinkmanship would see the situation as ripe. Depending on how the ROK and U.S. elections turn out from a North Korean perspective, there could be aggravation of the U.S.-ROK policy gap or some convergence in U.S.-ROK policy toward enhanced engagement with the DPRK. Any such outcome would be useful for North Korean purposes and strengthens Pyongyang's motives for further brinkmanship.

Assessment

North Korean creative brinkmanship seriously compounds the United States' problems on the Korean peninsula by undercutting the ability of the U.S.-ROK strategic partnership to cope with North Korea at the same time South Korea's more assertive roles within the U.S.-ROK-PRC and U.S.-ROK-Japan triangular relationships evolve in ways that raise new questions about long term trends. South Korea wants its closer ties with China to be acknowledged by U.S. and Japanese policy makers in a more creative manner. Arguably the best way for the United States to become more effective in coping with the prospect that responding to North Korea's brinkmanship could yield a China-focused outcome, complicated by South Korean "independencism," is to pay far more attention than it presently does to South Korean ideas about how to handle North Korea. There are many research centers in South Korea that focus on such aspects of crisis management and confidence building measures versus North Korea, and China's role as a potential intermediary. The ideas spawned in these South Korean centers could be more thoroughly integrated within U.S. policy if Americans paid more attention to them in a systematic institutionalized fashion. One bureaucratic option to accomplish that level of policy coordination would be to create a joint U.S.-ROK governmental research institute tasked with enhancing our shared appreciation for the nuances in peacefully dealing with North Korea and for coping with the results of either success or failure.

It would be premature to spell out precisely what kind of institution the United States should create. That can best be determined through consultations between the United States and South Korea, perhaps in the form of a conference or workshop focused on this issue. The more the United States does to cooperate with our South Korean counterparts on such an agenda, the more likely it will lead to success — not failure. Clearly this would be a better way to cope with the nuances of North Korean brinkmanship, deal with China's growing influence, come to terms with Korean nationalism, and — most important — avoid the risks of accidentally falling over the brink into a nuclear catastrophe.

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