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No. 158/2010 dated 25 November 2010

Strategic Instability in Korea

By Bernard Fook Weng Loo

Synopsis

The Korean Peninsula remains one of the most dangerous hotspots in the Asia Pacific. With the emergence of a new and unknown North Korean leader - and if wise heads do not prevail in either Seoul or Pyongyang - the region may be on the brink of renewed hostilities.

Commentary

ONCE AGAIN, the threat of instability leading to a resumption of armed hostilities in the Korean Peninsula is upon the region, with the latest artillery bombardment by North Korea of the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong. The South Korean military has responded with its own artillery bombardment of the North Korean positions. This latest development is merely another in a long history of similar crises, often seemingly unprovoked. It nevertheless threatens to undermine the strategic stability of the Korean Peninsula.

Strategic Stability

The concept of strategic stability is simple enough: it refers to a condition where strategies that states use to ensure their security remain unchanged, that these strategies remain stable. The critical question that analysts of international security ask is when does strategic stability between two states come under threat?

Strategic stability depends upon three elements that together shape the particular inter-state relationship: strategic culture, geography, and military balances. Strategic culture shapes how opposing sets of policymakers view one another, whether or not they view each other with any hostility and suspicion. Geography and the military balance shape the sense of security that either side of this relationship feels at any given time. Natural defences – mountain ranges, wide rivers or open seas – tend to confer a sense of security. However this sense of naturally conferred security can be overcome if, say, the other side acquired military capabilities – say, long-range ballistic missiles – that nullified these natural defences.

Latent Instability in the Korean Peninsula

The Korean War Armistice has lasted longer than some peace treaties have, and as such it is tempting to consider the peninsula as intrinsically stable. However, this stability may be more apparent than real.

Culturally, the Korean Peninsula is more or less homogenous. However, this shared culture did not prevent the outbreak of the Korean War. The fact that the Armistice has held longer than some peace treaties deflects attention away from many crises that have erupted since the 1950s, brought about by actions perpetrated by

the North: several attempts to assassinate various South Korean presidents; occasional skirmishes across the DMZ; hijacking and bombings of Korean Airlines aircraft; more recently, the sinking of the Cheonan.

The geography of the Korean peninsula definitely does not encourage a sense of stability, at least for South Korea, whose political and economic centre of gravity Seoul comes within range of North Korean artillery. Perhaps the only geographic condition that facilitates strategic stability is the awareness that the physical geography – the central mountain range that runs down the spine of the peninsula in particular – does not facilitate quick and decisive military operations.

The military balance provides grounds for further discomfort, because although South Korea is unequivocally stronger than North Korea, the latter has long been suspected of having acquired nuclear weapons. As it stands, it is likely that the North has always maintained a powerful chemical and biological weapons capability. Given its moribund economy and the South's conventional superiority, nuclear, biological and chemical weapons are an attractive and apparently cheap strategic option for the North.

“It only takes a spark”

The fact, however, that the Armistice has held therefore requires explanation.

The absence of strategic stability manifests itself in the sudden change of security strategies towards violence. As the history of the Korean Armistice demonstrates, the absence of sudden strategic shifts does not necessarily preclude the absence of these elements of strategic stability. The three elements are analogous to the same elements needed for a fire – fuel, tinder and oxygen. What is needed to turn these elements into fire is a spark.

This intervention comes in the form of politics – both the politics within both Koreas, and the inter-state political relationship. It is important that domestic politics in both states is stable, that neither set of policy elites is under domestic challenge. Where at least one set of policy elites is under domestic challenge, however, this is where this set of policy elites may be tempted to create an external distraction away from their domestic woes. Where both sets of policy elites are under domestic challenge, however, this is where the dangers of miscalculation leading to uncontrollable dynamics rise significantly.

What kept the strategic stability of the Korean peninsula since the Armistice was that neither set of policy elites across the DMZ were under significant domestic challenge. Syngman Rhee and later Park Chung Hee were both not very popular, but maintained control in Seoul through strong-arm tactics that stifled domestic challenges. Since the 1980s, successful democratisation has allowed such domestic dissatisfaction to be channelled through the ballot box.

Kim Jong Un: The X-factor

It is North Korean domestic politics that threatens to unravel. Kim Il Sung had a vice-like grip over North Korea. His son, Kim Jong Il had a fairly long apprenticeship, and he seems to have managed to maintain a strong grip over the ruling party and the North Korean military. However, his appointed successor, Kim Jong Un, is an unknown element, even within North Korean political and military circles. It will almost certainly take some time for Kim Jong Un to establish his control over the rest of the North Korean policy and military establishments.

Under such conditions, sparks from otherwise minor incidents can assume a significance far beyond the actual event. Small-arms fire being exchanged across the DMZ may spin out of control into much large conflagrations. Now, more than ever, wise heads need to prevail on the Korean peninsula. Fortunately, as the aphorism goes, it takes two hands to clap. To prevent war, it takes two sets of wise heads. We can be fairly certain these wise heads exist in Seoul; it remains to be seen if wise heads will prevail in Pyongyang as well.

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