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The Yeonpyeong Attack: Shooting Down Denuclearisation?

By Koh Swee Lean Collin

Synopsis

The North Korean artillery attack on South Korean-controlled Yeonpyeong Island on 23 November 2010 constitutes the worst provocation amidst tension on the Korean Peninsula since the Cheonan incident. Could this episode effectively end all hope for denuclearising the peninsula?

Commentary

ON 23 NOVEMBER 2010, the North Korean People's Army (KPA) launched a massive artillery barrage on the Yeonpyeong Island which is controlled by South Korea. The attack was reportedly in response to the failure of the South Korean military to heed Pyongyang's warning to stand down from wargames on the island, which Pyongyang saw as a provocation. This attack left two South Korean military servicemen dead, scores wounded, and a rapid emergency evacuation of civilians from the island, which is perilously close to the contested sea border in the Yellow Sea.

To date, other than retaliatory artillery fire by the South Korean military forces and deployment of air force combat units to the scene, there have been no further signs of escalation. But in a surprising turn of events, the South Korean defence minister has resigned following domestic criticism of Seoul's handling of the incident. This latest provocation has been the worst since the alleged North Korean sinking of the South Korean Navy corvette ROKS Cheonan in March this year. Could this string of events threaten to end efforts to denuclearise the Korean Peninsula?

Not the first time, probably not the last

Ever since the two Koreas signed the armistice which ceased active hostilities of the Korean War in 1953, a series of armed provocations had taken place from time to time between the opposing Korean forces. Until the meltdown of its economy, precipitated by the dissolution of its primary sponsor at that time – the Soviet Union – Pyongyang had harboured dreams of eventual unification, by force again if necessary, of the entire Korean Peninsula under its rule. Infiltrations of armed agents, assassination attempts, for instance were employed as means to undermine Seoul.

In the 1990s, provocations from North Korea resumed, albeit at a lower tempo compared to during the Cold War. Most notable of all had been the 1996 Gangneung submarine infiltration attempt, which ended bloodily for both sides before all North Korean infiltrators were hunted down. With a plummeting economy, such

provocations have been largely subsumed by maritime incidents particularly in the disputed sea border known as the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the Yellow Sea.

Naval forces from both Koreas jostled with each other to safeguard their maritime rights to the disputed zone, which largely characterised the 'Crab Wars' between the two countries. Unlike the 1970s Cod War between the United Kingdom and Iceland, however, the inter-Korean 'Crab Wars' have been much more violent. Inter-Korean naval skirmishes, involving loss of lives, had taken place near Yeonpyeong Island in 1999, 2002 and 2009, when North Korean patrol boats crossed into the South Korean side of the NLL. Prior to November 2010, the worst incident erupted when the Cheonan was sunk, with significant loss of lives, by what had been later determined to be a torpedo fired from North Korean mini-submarine.

Nuclear trump card too valuable

Throughout the series of provocations by Pyongyang, the trend was apparent: tensions would erupt arising from those incidents, but they would be short-lived. Seoul would hurriedly deescalate the tensions and later demonstrate goodwill towards Pyongyang through the provisions of aid and offers of dialogue. A major reason for doing is Seoul's quest to roll back North Korea's nuclear weapons ambitions – though the desired outcome has not been forthcoming even after the Cheonan incident.

The question one needs to ask is no longer why North Korea shelled Yeonpyeong Island, but what this whole string of provocations actually mean for denuclearisation efforts in the Korean Peninsula. Ever since the first North Korean nuclear test in 2007, little meaningful progress had been made to encourage Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons ambitions. Despite carrots in the form of economic aid on one hand, and sticks in the form of sanctions on the other, what Seoul and its allies in the Six-Party Talks got in return had been continued North Korean reticence.

The time has passed for meaningful progress in denuclearising the Korean Peninsula. With an economy in shambles, a large but technologically-inferior conventional military force compared to its southern brethren, Pyongyang's only hope to fulfil its multiple strategic objectives – extortion of economic concessions, credible deterrence against perceived American military aggression, as well as to stay relevant on the international stage – lies in its nascent nuclear arsenal of an unknown quantity. No matter how rudimentary they may be, the nukes helped change the rules of the game in favour of Pyongyang.

The nuclear trump card serves as the centrepiece of Pyongyang's Military-First Policy, which will likely be perpetuated by Kim Jong-Un, the heir-apparent of the regime. Inexperienced and without credentials to boast of, the young Kim needs the top brass of the KPA as his powerbase. As such, not only will the Military-First Policy look set to continue, again at the expense of the average North Korean citizen's well-being. But also, Pyongyang's bellicosity may continue well into the future, promoted by the nuclear trump card which serves so many different uses for the regime. Clearly, one of these is the ability to deter any reprisal from Seoul to Pyongyang's provocations, as the Cheonan incident and the latest Yeonpyeong artillery attack had shown.

Shooting Down denuclearisation Efforts?

Pyongyang's possession of the nuclear trump card has actually emboldened the hawkish elements within the ruling regime to initiate provocations against South Korea. Nuclear weapons not only served the purpose of strengthening North Korea's bargaining position vis-a-vis other members of the Six-Party Talks, from which it could demand for concessions. They also serve well as a shield behind which Pyongyang could deter or withstand likely reprisals to its provocations.

Can this latest attack be turned into an opportunity to revive the stalled Six-Party Talks to denuclearise the Korean Peninsula? The ball is in Pyongyang's court, but uncertainty and pessimism is very much in the air.

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