

The Winner and Loser of North Korea's Saber-Rattling

Cho Han-bum

Senior Research Fellow, Center for Unification Policy Studies, KINU

Online Series CO 13-13

1. Features of North Korea's saber-rattling

North Korea has continuously engaged in saber-rattling since its launching of the Unha-3 rocket and the third nuclear test. The regime's recent saber-rattling has some features which are different than in the past. First, North Korea is still clinging onto its tension-ridden phase which entails saber-rattling and is leaving no room for dialogue with its negotiating partners such as South Korea and the United States. In the past, North Korea used to induce negotiation through series of provocations, but this time, it remained stubborn by prolonging tension. Second, most of North Korea's saber-rattling, aside from the withdrawal of workers out of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and signs of future missile launches, are conducted by rhetorical threats after its third nuclear test. In other words, North Korea is revealing its intention for armed provocations along with internal measures such as military drills, but in large part, it is ratcheting up the threat with aggressive rhetoric. Third, the purpose of saber-rattling is multi-faceted and unclear. Instead of presenting a concrete agenda for negotiations, North Korea is pursuing an unattainable goal not only of wiping out "anti-North attitudes" within the international community including South Korea, the U.S. and the United Nations, but also resolving sanctions, through saber-rattling. Fourth, North Korea is continuing its saber-rattling even amidst the condition of being unable to receive any direct or indirect aid and support from its potential guardian, China. China is sending clear warnings and concern against North Korea's unilateral actions, and the

Chinese public sentiment toward North Korea is worsening as well. Fifth, both South Korea and the U.S.'s will for a military response have never been so strong. The 'ROK-U.S. Combined Counter-Provocations Plan' is provided for North Korea's provocations, and the U.S. is specifying its willingness to defend South Korea by its show of force.

2. The cause of North Korea's saber-rattling

The apparent reason for North Korea's saber-rattling may have been triggered by international sanctions against its launching of the Unha-3 rocket and third nuclear test, but the underlying structural cause is the durability of the vulnerable regime. North Korea has been strategically attempting to carry out armed provocations in order to survive. North Korea carried out localized provocations against South Korea while sticking to its strategy of threatening the U.S. and the international community through long-range missile launches and nuclear tests. Despite the advent of the Kim Jong-un regime, North Korea's economic situation has not improved, and a blueprint for reform has not taken shape. It is a compulsory task for North Korea, which lost the ability to be self-sustainable and resilient, to secure resources from international community for survival. North Korea intends to normalize U.S.-North Korea relations and extract large-scale aid from South Korea and the international community. The North Korea's ultimate goal is to strengthen the durability of the vulnerable regime and procure resources to stabilize the Kim Jong-un regime through saber-rattling.

North Korea's saber-rattling is related with Kim Jong-un's power base, which has not yet been consolidated. It is hard to tell whether Kim Jong-un, who, unlike Kim Jong-il, did not have enough time to prepare for succession of power, has completely gained control over the inner circles that control the party and military. Kim Jong-il had political charisma to adequately control the inner circles of both hardliners and moderates, whereas Kim Jong-un, with no political career, does not seem to have such ability. His relatively weak grasp of power is one of the main reasons for Kim Jong-un's firm stance in foreign policy. It is assumed that Kim Jong-un aims to gain trust from the military and tighten domestic control by adopting a hardline policy, while also raising his status as a powerful leader. Unlike his early days in power, it is notable that Kim Jong-un's move appears to be becoming increasingly more extreme. In this context, the moderates and proponents of dialogue are losing ground in North Korea, while the hardliners around the military are steering the situation instead. Thus, Kim Jong-un intends to solidify his power base with the support of hardliners. However, it can be interpreted that Kim Jong-un falls short of controlling the entire situation, and lacks the ability to suppress the hardliners or single-handedly change the situation.

3. The biggest loser is the Kim Jong-un regime

Ironically, the biggest loser of North Korea's saber-rattling would be the Kim Jong-un regime, itself. It is less likely that the outcomes North Korea intended could be derived by saber-rattling. Easing sanctions against North Korea, a country perceived to have substantial nuclear weapons, is hard to be expected since it would imply the disintegration of the international nuclear order. With pending issues such as the sinking of the Cheonan and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, the South Korean government

will be hard pressed to search for a new and softer measure against North Korea's saber-rattling. Even in the case that the South Korean government makes an attempt at dialogue, it would be difficult to reach a 'free-handed compromise' without changes in North Korea's attitude, aside from alleviating tension.

Considering North Korea's fragile economy, the costs of maintaining military tension would also be quite burdensome. In the process of prolonging military confrontation, North Korea is likely to have spent a considerable portion of its war reserve stock, which would be hard to recover in a short period of time. Moreover, the North Korean people's confidence in Kim Jong-un will be tainted with doubt as the regime creates a state of war domestically with its rhetoric without any concrete results of saber-rattling, will only bring about the '*Shepherd Boy (from The Boy Who Cried Wolf)*' effect.

The level of trust in Kim Jong-un, among the North Korean elite, will also decline. Moderates will be seriously concerned about the risky way that Kim Jong-un manages state affairs, and the hardliners may possibly attribute the responsibility on Kim Jong-un for the prolonged confrontation without results. In light of fact that Kim Jong-Il succeeded, to some degree, in attaining results through an adequately tough or moderate strategy in the past, Kim Jong-un may also be faced with the situation where his ability of managing state affairs is questioned by both hardliners and moderates throughout this current situation.

The most extensive damage would be regarded as the international community's concerns about the Kim Jong-un regime. With a possible worldwide stigmatization of the 'dangerous leader Kim Jong-un and reckless North Korea,' the current situation will have a more serious effect on the North Korea's poor credit ratings. It will also have a fatal effect in terms of attracting foreign capital for the North Korea's integration into the global economy, which North Korea is pursuing. The belief that North Korea ignores international norms will spread widely. Specifically, political threats of the Kaesong Industrial Complex will have a negative effect on North Korea's future for a long time, in light of the fact that the threats fundamentally undermine the market order. It is also a big loss for the Kim Jong-un regime that friendly relations with China, its traditional ally, have worsened.

At the end of North Korea's saber-rattling, the political base of the Kim Jong-un regime will be weakened much more than intended. The split within the North Korea leadership will become severe with regards to the assessment on the achievements of saber-rattling. There is a good chance that the instability of the regime in general, become worse. One must keep an eye out in light of the fact that Kim Jong-un may create another crisis for breaking the bounds of the weakened regime, thereby creating a vicious circle.

4. The U.S. and China, the hidden winner and loser

The U.S. is the biggest beneficiary of this current situation. With North Korea's saber-rattling, the U.S. has proved the legitimacy and effectiveness of its missile defense (MD) system in which the U.S. has invested enormous national defense spending and efforts. Despite the various factors including domestic economic and financial issues, there were enough arguments in support for the MD system and maintaining and improving relevant defense capacities, which became the momentum for more allies to

be encouraged to join in the MD system. With the threat from North Korea, the U.S.' 'pivot to Asia' strategy is gaining momentum, while the ROK-U.S. alliance, the basis of the 'pivot to Asia' strategy, is more robust than ever. The U.S. has unprecedently implemented military and strategic measures on the Korean Peninsula and surrounding areas such as deploying the B-52 and B-2 stealth bombers, the F-22 stealth fighter's surveillance flight, forward deployment of the SBX radar, deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and more, with incredible speed and without any obstacles. These measures can be interpreted as the U.S. quickly executing military actions with this state of affairs since forward deployment is a key factor in command of the Asia 'pivot' strategy. The meaning behind recent U.S. military actions can be exactly evaluated when it is reminded that when after the sinking of the Cheonan, the U.S. abandoned deploying the USS George Washington into the West Sea and sent it back to the East Sea due to China's strong protests. Securing the justification and means for the U.S. and China to cooperate with regards to the North Korea issue can be seen as an incidental achievement.

On the other hand, China is bearing substantial losses. China is not efficiently responding to the U.S.' forward military deployment, as part of carrying out its 'pivot to Asia' strategy. There is clear justification for U.S.' military response given the situation that North Korea has hinted at military attacks towards the U.S. mainland and islands in the Pacific Ocean. The problem is that such military operations by the U.S. do not influence North Korea only. On China's side, the recent U.S. military operations will possibly have a negative impact on Chinese diplomatic and security interests. Although the extent of the MD and monitoring systems are not only limited to North Korea, China has yet to find any justification to respond. Also, the increasing public sentiment against North Korea in China could be a burden. In an era of U.S.-China hegemonic competition, North Korea has important strategic value for China, but the worsening Chinese public sentiment towards North Korea could be a constraint for China in formulating its North Korea policy. As it has been confirmed that China's influence on North Korea is limited, China's concern lies in the fact that its diplomatic authority is being damaged and that the North Korea-China relationship seems to be deteriorating more than ever. This means that China needs to act to alleviate tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

5. South Korea's countermeasures

In the current situation, it is not easy for South Korea to lead and initiate changes. This is because it will be hard to fundamentally improve the situation without North Korea's preemptive measures. This is also in light of the fact that there are concerted international efforts with regards to North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles, which China is also seemingly joining in. South Korea's proper countermeasures could be considered as the management of the stable situation and the alleviation of military tension. Also, the spending on the agreement expense would be beneath this level. It is necessary to consider some indirect ways of using China, which is bearing losses from this situation. Because South Korea, the U.S., and North Korea are quite limited when taking preemptive actions for breaking the current deadlock, using an indirect solution may be considered to have a justification through China's mediation.

The Kim Jong-un regime's saber-rattling is demanding the fundamental change in perceptions of North Korea. Both Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun's moderate North Korea policies, and Lee Myung-bak's hardline North Korea policy are not evaluated to have succeeded because their policies showed limitations in inducing North Korea to positively change its attitude. North Korea, which has 'nothing to lose,' has repeated its policy of creating crises and getting what they want in return by continuous provocations and violations of agreements. This means that North Korea has lost its qualification as an equal partner for negotiations and this is problematic given that this pattern of behavior will probably happen again in the future. Even though North Korea has repeatedly violated agreements, the previous South Korean administrations' North Korea policies continued to pursue negotiations with the recognition that North Korea is an equal partner and that they have to bear all domestic and foreign expenses from the breakdown of negotiations.

The implementation of the 'Trust-Building Process' is based on the partner's earnest attitude towards negotiations. When there is an inherent uncertainty of this basic premise, the entire stability of the 'Trust-Building Process' becomes threatened. This means that in a situation where the credibility of the North Korea's regime is not confirmed, inherent weaknesses of the agreements through the 'Trust-Building Process' will be exposed. One should pay particular attention to the fact that the premise of the 'Trust-Building Process' lies in the North Korea's earnest attitudes towards negotiations.

It is now time to fundamentally change the perceptions of North Korea as an equal negotiating partner. In the stage that North Korea's willingness for negotiations and credibility are not confirmed, North Korea should be recognized as one that needs to be 'managed,' not an equal partner. The new method should be considered to manage North Korea which is a threatening partner that does not abide by stipulations of agreements. This means that patience and confidence are needed in implementing a North Korea policy based on a long-term perspective of the unification process. Especially, the South Korean administration should directly persuade its people of the necessity of having patience with North Korea and the costs of management. When North Korea is recognized as one to be managed and not as an equal partner, the costs and problems arising from the negotiating process can be alleviated. Specifically, it is necessary to recognize the importance of the costs not of negotiations but of managing the stable situation. Therefore, during this stage, the conditions should be prepared for the full implementation of the 'Trust-Building Process' and it should be considered that the efforts to draw the North Korea's sincere attitude for negotiations can be more important than the actual results.

The tension of the Korean Peninsula should be stably managed while at the same time, efforts should be concentrated to change not only the North Korea's regime, but also the North Korean society in general. The long-term and consistent policy should be established to deal with the people of North Korea while responding efficiently to the North Korea regime's provocative strategy for negotiations with South Korea. In addition, detailed plans should be prepared in order to cope with the possibility of unstable situations in North Korea originating from the Kim Jong-un regime's structural weakness, which is conceived underneath the saber-rattling. For this purpose, it is most important for South Korea's domestic politics with regards to its North Korea policy to be stable. The sustainability of its North Korea

policy should be increased through trusting relations between the ruling and opposition parties with regards to North Korea policy and the settlement of conflicts within South Korea. It is now time to have patience based on the confidence in responding to the North Korea issue. © KINU 2013

* The views expressed in this paper are entirely that of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).