

North Korea's Attack on Yeonpyeong and the Choices for South Korea

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1. "The Yeonpyeong Provocation"

On the afternoon of November 23rd, North Korea launched a sudden and indiscriminate attack on the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong in the West Sea. As a result of this attack 2 South Korean marines were killed and 15 people were injured; civilian casualties continue to mount. South Korea, just beginning to breathe easily after the successful conclusion of the G20 Summit in Seoul, has been confronted with the dual shocks of North Korea's announcement of its uranium enrichment program and the attack on Yeonpyeong.

This latest "Yeonpyeong provocation" differs from previous North Korean provocations in several significant ways. Over the past 6 decades since the armistice was signed the North Korean regime has committed countless acts of provocation, but this is the first time the "regular army" has "openly" made a "direct attack" on South Korean territory which indiscriminately targeted both military personnel and civilians. The rash and aggressive nature of this attack differs dramatically from those of the past.

The Cheonan attack targeted the South Korean military around Baekryeong Island, whereas the Yeonpyeong attack occurred in closer proximity to the South Korean capital and involved civilians living on the island. This sends an underlying message that the next provocation may take aim directly

at the capital. The announcement of the uranium enrichment program is another provocative act, sending the message that they are considering a 3rd nuclear test of far greater destructive force than the previous two.

2. The North Korean Regime's Aims

The Korean peninsula is presently in the midst of a security crisis. It is useful to recall the remark made by James Clapper at the Senate confirmation hearing on his nomination as director of national intelligence. Speaking about the Cheonan incident, Clapper warned that "We may be entering a dangerous new period when North Korea will once again attempt to advance its internal and external political goals through direct attacks on our allies in the Republic of Korea."

There are several probable objectives behind the North Korean regime's decision to attack Yeonpyeong. First, there is the internal objective of suppressing internal friction and resistance to the succession plan by upholding South Korea as an external threat and encouraging a sense of confrontation. Their intention is to create an outlet for the public's frustration by redirecting it towards South Korea, and to use the warlike atmosphere to move the succession process along as they wish. They already started to move in this direction with the Cheonan attack, and from now until 2012 we can anticipate that they will continue to make additional provocations for the same purpose.

Their external objective can be interpreted as a North Korean version of pressure tactics against the US. The North's attempts to use the NLL dispute as a pretext to disrupt the armistice structure are aimed at dragging the US to the table to negotiate a peace treaty and create a situation in which US troops have no choice but to pull back even if North Korea does not demand a withdrawal. This is due to the fact that once a peace treaty is signed the American people themselves will demand that US troops be withdrawn from South Korea. There is also a hidden strategy here of provoking disturbances within South Korean society and forcing them to de-militarize their security posture by creating a pro-peace mood.

By committing this attack on Yeonpyeong immediately after announcing the uranium enrichment program North Korea has maximized the shock value of the provocation in hopes of heightening the interest of the US and thus creating a new opportunity for negotiations. Of course, just because it says it wants to restart the 6 Party Talks or bilateral US-DPRK talks does not mean it has any intention of abandoning its nuclear programs or softening its antagonistic

policy against South Korea. North Korea's primary objective is to escape the economic difficulties brought on by the UN sanctions, and in the long-term to force a change of US policy in order to guarantee the continued existence of a nuclear-armed North Korean regime.

Examining the Yeonpyeong attack from various angles, it is clear that its primary objective was to threaten South Korea. Not balking even at the radical step of attacking civilians, North Korea is determined to heighten fears of war and paranoia about the North Korean regime throughout South Korean society, in order to dampen our spirits and force us into submission. They seem to be pursuing a series of provocative measures aimed at changing the ROK government's policies in the short-term or at least helping a pro-DPRK government to take power in the 2012 presidential elections. Next to nuclear weapons, a pro-DPRK government in the South is the most valuable inheritance that Kim Jong Il wishes to pass on to his 3rd son.

Just as Kim Il Sung's faith in the leftist groups in the South influenced his decision to attack in 1950, the sharply divided public opinion in South Korea over the Cheonan attack was a major factor in encouraging the North Korean regime to commit this latest attack on Yeonpyeong. At the very least, it is clear that our domestic debate over the causes of the Cheonan sinking made it easier for the North Korean leadership to decide to make another provocation.

3. False Arguments that Obstruct National Unity

There are those who argue that North Korea chooses to develop nuclear weapons and commit acts of provocation because it feels threatened by the instability of the armistice arrangement. This is a faulty argument which merely mimics the North Korean position. The suggestion that all these problems will be solved by the signing of a peace treaty with a partner who habitually commits open acts of aggression and develops nuclear weapons is unpersuasive and lacks any logical foundation. It is thanks to the armistice agreement that we have been able to maintain peace and avoid a major conflict on the peninsula since the end of the war. The instability on the peninsula is caused not by the armistice arrangement but rather by the North's acts of aggression, and until the North Korean leadership changes its fundamental attitude genuine peace will remain a distant dream.

Some say that the clashes in the West Sea are occurring because North Korea does not recognize the NLL and South Korea refuses to budge from its own position. This is of course illogical. The NLL was drawn during the armistice by the UN forces, which at that time had complete control of the waters around the Korean peninsula, and the waters north of the NLL were conceded to

the North Korean side for the sake of peace and conflict prevention. Until the early 1970s North Korea steadfastly maintained the NLL boundary. Their current objections are part of their strategy of “neutralization of the armistice structure → withdrawal of US troops from South Korea by fait accompli.” For South Korea, the value of the NLL in the West Sea is similar to that of Dokdo in the East Sea. Just as we have no reason to negotiate with Japan on the issue of Dokdo, we should also firmly reject North Korea’s attempts to force the NLL issue.

Others try to emphasize the economic argument for changing our North Korea policy, saying that our economy can only improve if inter-Korean relations are going well. When North Korea commits provocations South Korea suffers economic damages such as dips in its market rating. Actually one of the objectives behind North Korea’s attacks is to destabilize the South Korean economy and thus encourage the South Korean people to demand a change in North Korea policy in order to avoid such losses. But we must acknowledge that this argument - that the economy can thrive only if inter-Korean relations are good - ignores historical reality.

South Koreans certainly owe no thanks to North Korea for the wealth they enjoy today. The South Korean people achieved their present prosperity through hard work and frugal living, all the while staying vigilant against North Korea’s provocations. North Korea acted not as a contributor to but as a disruptor of South Korea’s development. South Korea’s global credit rating has faltered as a result of North Korean provocations sowing discord within our society, but if all levels of society remain united we will not come to harm. It is through our unity that we have achieved our present success.

Some people question how it is possible for North Korea to attack us when our economy is 50 times the size of theirs. Further, they say that even when the North attacks we should take a more mature attitude of calm, cool patience instead of responding with tit-for-tat retaliations. Such things are easy to say and pleasing to hear, but they overlook the North Korean regime’s persistent, bitterly antagonistic policy against the South. Just as the person with more money may not necessarily win a fight, likewise economic superiority is no guarantee of victory in war. As the US defeat in Vietnam and the downfall of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan showed, there are many historical instances of a smaller country defeating a larger, more powerful one. The lesson of the big cicada that spent the whole summer enjoying itself while the ant worked industriously to prepare for winter should be regarded as more than just a simple children’s story.

Freedom and peace are privileges that are only bestowed on those who make thorough preparations and are determined to defend them. A century ago our ancestors had to suffer the

humiliation of losing their country because they lacked that preparation and determination. There is an expression that has been popular with the previous administrations in the last decade, “Peace must be bought at a price.” This expression was probably devised as a way of justifying the policy of “spoon-feeding” and “being led around by” North Korea. The money we gave to buy peace came back to us in the form of nuclear weapons, submarines, and now coastal artillery batteries and howitzers. This taught us the historical truth that “Peace cannot be bought with money.”

4. South Korea's Choices

In shifting its attack area from Baekryeong Island to Yeonpyeong and expanding from military to civilian targets, it feels as if the North Koreans are squeezing the heart of South Korea. The Yeonpyeong attack marks the first military provocation since the end of the war in which North Korea's regular army has violated South Korean territory and inflicted indiscriminate casualties upon its citizens. Even in the 1960s and 70s, when North Korea's national power was relatively superior to that of the South, they did not dare to commit such a reckless act; the reason they are able to do so now is because they believe they are backed by a powerful force. That force is the threat of nuclear weapons.

Just as Kim Il Sung passed on the plutonium program to Kim Jong Il to enable him to stand against South Korea and the US, now Kim Jong Il is passing on a uranium enrichment program to his son Kim Jong Eun. We can describe the 3 generation-long history of the North Korean nuclear program by the analogy that Kim Il Sung planted the seed and Kim Jong Il raised the flower, and now Kim Jong Eun will be able to taste the fruit. The idea that the regime will abandon its nuclear weapons if we give in to their every demand may be a naïve delusion, but at this point we have no choice but to respond to North Korea's strategy. That is the painful lesson of the last 20 years of nuclear negotiations with North Korea.

Through the attack on Yeonpyeong, the regime seems to be forcing South Koreans to choose between “peace through passive submission” and “a way of life which preserves our dignity.” In other words, they are presenting us with the choice of continuing the former progressive government's 10-year policy of conceding to the North Korean regime's every demand in the name of peace while spoon-feeding them and allowing them to lead us around, or else standing united against the threat of war and preserving our national dignity and self-respect. Our choice is clear. We must not submit to the threats of the North Korean regime, which is

promoting an unparalleled 3rd generation succession while driving untold numbers of our compatriots to their deaths. We must strive to increase our national power and our people's self-respect. In this way we can preserve our national dignity and character, as well as our people's pride, while building a stronger nation and taking the lead in promoting peaceful unification. This is the fundamental duty of our era and a calling to serve our people.

In the past we have lived very carelessly, overlooking the reality of the North Korean regime's persistent policies towards South Korea and nuclear development. Now we must straighten up and take charge of our situation. Also, we must put an end to the senseless domestic conflict over North Korea which has been a waste of our national power. We must reflect on how our domestic debate over the Cheonan sinking was reflected in the eyes of the North Korean leadership. Must we keep searching for further proof that it was the North Korean army that attacked Yeonpyeong, or that the shells were in fact manufactured by North Korea? It is time for all of our people to observe the true character of the North Korean regime and its South Korea policy, and forge a unified national consensus on the issue.