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The Likelihood and Implications of a North Korean Attack on the South

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Introduction

Since Kim Il Sung's death the future of North Korea has become the core of Northeast Asia security issues. Arguments focus on North Korea's current situation, policy directions, and the results of its policies. Diverse opinions abound. The future of the North is highly uncertain, due largely to the lack of objective or primary sources of information about the situation there. Applying two policy decision paradigms to the North can help predict its future. The first centers on the degrees of rationality in the North Korean policymaking process; the second, on the length of the time horizon that the North Korean regime considers in implementing those policies. Scenarios on the future of North Korea can thus be projected differently according to our assumptions about these two elements.

Will North Korea attack the South? This has been one of the key questions for the United States and South Korea in attempting to develop trilateral relations with the country over more than four decades. Such an unprovoked attack has now become one of the three basic scenarios regarding the future of the North. The usual argument for this possibility is that North Korean leaders will have no options but war against the South when their regime collapses.[1] Holders of this view,

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1. The speed of the projected collapse of North Korea will vary, depending on what is meant: collapse of the regime, the socialist system, or the entire state. This chapter treats the regime in North Korea as identical to the socialist system.

accordingly, share common ground with those anticipating the eventual downfall of the North. When applied to the North, the two paradigms above indeed suggest that collapse is unavoidable unless timely policy changes occur. Right now, the likelihood of a North Korean all-out attack on the South is neither high nor negligible, even if it is difficult to determine its probability. However, chance or small military conflicts other than a full-scale war may occur on the peninsula whenever Pyongyang wishes. If these contingencies are not deterred, or if they are ill managed, then they are likely to evolve into a full-scale war on the Korean peninsula, for the top leader in Pyongyang is facing a very serious dilemma in his regime. It can only be solved if he acts rationally, taking the national interest into account.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the major factors that are expected to affect the North's decision on waging war and draw some implications for the surrounding countries. Accordingly, its approach is not scholarly but policy-selective, using pragmatism and conventional wisdom in trying to make up for the scarcity of data on the behavior of policymakers in the North.

Scenarios of North Korean Provocation

It is supposed that the major factors affecting the North's decision making related to waging war include the domestic politico-economic situation, the country's war capabilities, the personality and views of the top decision maker, an intent or desire to launch a war, and the relations of North Korea with other countries. The weight and certainty assigned to these factors are assumed to vary widely. The initial three can be assessed with relatively certainty in the case of the North, but the same is not true of the latter two. The likelihood of North Korea inciting war will depend on how rationally Kim Jung Il may recognize those factors as he attempts to rescue his state from its disastrous situation.

Domestic Dilemmas

The immediate causes of a crisis facing the North Korean regime are accumulating economic problems and continuing food shortages. The crisis seems already beyond the threshold at which the regime must collapse.[2] The North has recorded negative economic growth consecutively for seven years since 1989; as a result, the economic output in 1997

2. See S.-C. Kim et al. (1996). According to this report, 15 critical elements in five sectors were evaluated as of 1995. The crisis is rated 2.7—that is, over the crossover point of 2.5—which implies that the North will have to undergo great reform between 2001 and 2008.

fell to only 60 percent of that of 1989 and the GNP per capita dropped to $290 in 1995.[3] The food shortage, which began to grow more severe in 1993, has since aggravated the crisis. As trade decreased, the need for North Korea to settle debts in hard currency added to its burden. The shrinking economy has made it more difficult to maintain an adequate supply of raw materials and of energy, and consequently manufacturing facilities operate at 30 to 40 percent of their capacity. This cumulative economic failure presents Pyongyang's leadership with a desperate situation and feeds the anticipation that the regime will collapse in the near future.

It seems that North Korea, even as a garrison state with strict regulation, cannot manage the economic crisis that is now rampaging nationwide. Currently, the central authority of the North finds it difficult to keep its residents from deviating from or escaping control. Endeavors by technocrats and party officials at reform or at a more open economy, to the extent that there are any, have become futile, in large part because of the long-standing rigidity, insularity, and inefficiency veiled by the regime's *juche* ideology. Even the people in the ruling class appear disappointed at and skeptical of the leadership of Kim Jung Il.

It is an awkwardness peculiar to the North that, although the mourning period of three years for Kim Il Sung's death is over, the junior Kim has not officially succeeded to the positions of general secretary of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) and the state presidency, even though he has assumed their powers. This is in striking contrast to the efforts made in 1980 aimed at designating Kim Jung Il as successor, training him systematically, and ensuring that he be recognized abroad. Now, the junior Kim realizes that he can no longer rely on the legacy of his father; nevertheless, he wants to avoid any blame for his own lesser achievements by delaying his succession.[4] He may wish to find some reason to make the delay permanent and perhaps feels compelled to look for it externally. It seems what he really wants is to restore the economy without reforming the socialist system, even though the system itself is responsible for the disaster. Neither radical nor gradual reform and opening are acceptable to him: they will not guarantee the preservation and stability of his regime. As he seeks only temporary remedies, he is confronted more starkly than ever with the problem of how his regime can survive.

Kim Jung Il's relationship with the military demonstrates a similar dynamic: it seems easier for him to first hold the military and control

3. This is the statistic announced by the North Korean government. But the South's Bank of Korea estimated its GNP per capita at $910 in 1996, which ranks 110th worldwide (*Chosun IlBo*, 10 July 1997, 2).

4. According to a *Newsweek* interview by Alexandre Mansourov, Kim was to be inaugurated as state president in October (18 August 1997, 54).

the residents, and then to maintain the regime as the Supreme Commander of the People's Army and the Chairman of the Defense Committee. Kim and the military appear to have a symbiotic relationship, with each side interested in preserving the regime. The military acts as guarantor of the regime, the socialist system, and the North Korean state in the name of loyalty to Kim Jung Il, and he in turn provides the members of the military with high status, personal promotions, and economic incentives. This dependence on the military implies that Kim did not have enough confidence to control the whole country after his father's death. When he assumes the state presidency, he faces the immense political task of scaling down the status of the military, thereby reducing his support in order to save the people from economic ruin.

The right way to deliver North Korea from its total failure is very clear to see. The most realistic approach is to devise a policy of gradual reform and opening within the limits of a certain amount of control, as was done initially by the Chinese government. Nevertheless, fine-tuning the currently devastated North Korean economy will be no easy task. It is most likely that the North will muddle through, in both its internal and external relations, for a little longer—and then the regime will end in collapse.

Relations with South Korea and Other Countries

North Korean leaders have recognized that there must be a revolution in South Korea if the victory of socialism is to be complete. This recognition empowers hard-liners, motivating their insistence on military superiority over the South and pushing them toward unifying the Korean peninsula by force. However, South Korea's enhanced national status has radically altered the relationship between the two countries; in their view it has changed from being an object of their attack by force to being an ideological rival, and finally to being a powerful subject threatening to unify the peninsula by absorbing the North. This puts tremendous pressure on Kim Jung Il. Kim's first response was to shut down official channels of North-South dialogue by attacking the South Korean government for not having paid official condolences on Kim Il Sung's death in 1994; he then turned to a strategy intended to "contain the South and link with America."

Currently, Kim Jung Il is primarily using a dual strategy against the South. First, he is holding the South hostage to his brinkmanship. By continuing military threats, the North can simultaneously push the South to rely more on the United States and push the United States to improve its relations with Pyongyang. Means of carrying out this tactic include the production of unconventional weapons, forward deployment of troops along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), nullification of the Armistice Agreement, and the insistence on a bilateral North Korea-US peace

agreement. Second, Kim is exploiting the South, in effect duping his foe into solving his regime's crisis. Toward this end, he is demanding that costly light-water reactors be constructed, food assistance be increased, business investment be made in the Rajin-Sunbong area, and private economic cooperation be expanded—while making military threats. Meanwhile, the North has been constantly scheming for the overthrow of the South Korean government; since the armistice of 1953, it has been stirring up social disorder in the South.

The North has, in reality, lost its base of support in the international community as the Cold War has ended. It has experienced massive and swift changes, including the demise of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the Eastern European socialist countries, and South Korea's establishment of diplomatic relations with Russia and China. China has supported the de-nuclearization of the Korean peninsula and is persuading the North to adopt a "Chinese-style" policy of opening to the West. Russia is negotiating a new treaty with North Korea; although it will continue their mutual friendship, the clause guaranteeing automatic military help will surely be excluded. Making matters worse, the North Korean regime has brought about its international isolation by directly violating international law: it has manufactured counterfeit dollars, exported terrorism, kidnapped foreigners, cultivated and illicitly sold opium, smuggled gold bullion, and exported weapons of mass destruction. All these actions seem to have been attempts to end its domestic economic deadlock.[5]

The North now realizes that it has no choice but to approach the United States, the only remaining superpower and the country responsible for the security balance of the Korean peninsula, for its regime to survive; thus it seems recently to be concentrating on the improvement of North Korean-US relations. This effort has involved a number of issues, including the North's neglect of the Armistice Agreement, the pursuit of a North Korea-US peace treaty, development of chemical and long-range missiles, talks between North Korean and US military generals, and the search for and possible repatriation of Americans who were prisoners of war or missing in action; the North's nuclear development program has received particular attention. North Korea clings to its high-handed approach to the United States; yet the Clinton administration's strategy of engagement and enlargement has led to results like the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework, partial mitigation of US economic sanctions, and a greater supply of food. North Korean leaders, nonetheless, are skeptical about US policy and seem impatient with the degree and speed of improvements in their relationship.

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5. The North has only 64 diplomatic offices abroad as of 1996, following the shutdown of 12 offices.

The North desires to normalize its relations with Japan, too. But so far the Japanese government has shown only modest enthusiasm for such negotiations; its position is delicate for several reasons.

North Korea's acceptance of the four-party talks seems promising. The regime's participation in the talks, however, is no indication that it will abandon either its hostility against the South or its antagonistic approaches to the United States. The agenda the North Koreans will likely propose at the talks can be easily guessed: key points include food assistance, additional mitigation of economic sanctions, and a North Korea-US peace treaty. Yet surely the North Koreans will come to the table with some reluctance, for they suspect that the four-party talks are designed not to cure their crisis but only to hamper their basic strategy to "contain the South and link with America." History suggests that North Korea will not let the talks proceed smoothly, as both the United States and South Korea desire. Military provocation against the South may be their countermeasure to the progress of the talks. On the side urging war is the stalemate of the dialogue between North and South; on the other side, restraining the North from war, is the changed post-Cold War balance and the stability in Northeast Asia.

Military Capabilities

North Korea has strengthened its military capabilities for the purpose of a socialist revolution, that is, a liberation of the South Koreans, which has long been the regime's major objective. The North has now attained superiority over the South in offensive power: having spent over 30 percent of its annual budget in the military sector for the last 50 years, North Korea maintains armed forces and a supply of weapons 1.6 times and 2 times larger, respectively, than those of South Korea.[6]

The North had planned to achieve war readiness by 1993, and since then its leaders have emphasized that the destiny of the Korean peninsula is war.[7] They accelerated the development of chemical weapons and large-caliber artillery in the early 1990s. After concluding the 1994 Agreed Framework negotiated with the United States, North Korea replaced its nuclear program with a program to develop long-range missiles. Kim Jung Il turned his regime to a wartime management system and simplified the chain of military command; he now issues orders and is reported to directly and instantly.

Since his regime began, Kim has put special priority on the program

6. Reserve or paramilitary forces of the North, which may number as many as 6.5 million, are excluded. They are equivalent to 4.5 million regular ground forces in terms of their equipment and training.

7. According to Hwang Jang-yop's news conference in July 1997, the North had completed an attack plan by 1992 (*Korea Herald*, 11 July 1997, 1, 2).

of artillery redeployment. The North has added 800 artillery pieces, such as the 170 mm self-propelling guns (range of 54 km) and 240 mm long-range multirocket launchers (range of 65 km), along the DMZ. This means that the North has become able to fire around Seoul without moving its guns. The North has recently strengthened its mechanized units into five corps, totaling 3,800 tanks and 2,600 armed personnel carriers.[8] In 1997 several large-scale exercises of these mechanized forces were conducted, which is exceptional.

The North has also become capable of surprise attacks by surface, sea, and air. The North Korean commando force is the largest in the world, numbering over 100,000 personnel, 850 fighting and 500 supporting airplanes, and 290 helicopters, of which 60 percent are forward deployed. The 300 AN-2 planes capable of low-altitude penetration can send more than 2,000 armed personnel to disrupt and attack deep within South Korea. North Korea's naval forces are also strong, comprising 470 fighting and 330 supporting boats, 260 landing craft, and 35 submarines; the latter can disturb sea-lanes and lay mines within the South's territorial waters, as well as land special-purpose forces.

In spite of this numerical superiority, however, some believe that because of its chronic economic problems, Pyongyang cannot sustain a war or may fail to launch a war. They argue that North Korea's weaknesses—for example, the obsolescence of its weapon systems, its lack of logistical support, and the shortages of fuel and food—will be multiplied in wartime. They also point out that about 30 to 40 percent of the North's military forces are currently mobilized in manufacturing and farming, and that the North's strategy of an all-out war in the shortest period of time disguises their inability to sustain a war.[9]

However, the North seems to have offset such weaknesses by mixing conventional weapon systems with unconventional ones, a process that began in the early 1990s. By replacing old weapons with newly developed unconventional ones, North Korea has increased the ratio of unconventional to conventional arms and thereby enhanced its strategic maneuverability. Those unconventional weapons under development or already deployed include long-range missiles, biochemical munitions, large-caliber artillery, and perhaps nuclear weapons. All of them are capable of mass destruction. This asymmetry in military strength seems to contribute considerably not only to the war threat against the South but also to convincing the United States and Japan to approach the North.

Additionally, Kim Jung Il is inspiring both civilians and soldiers with patriotism and hostility toward outsiders. Ideology is as large a part of North Korean tactics and strategy as the quality of their weapons. The

8. The South has 5 mechanized divisions, while the North has about 22 mobile divisions.

9. The North is said to have less than six months' worth of war materials stored.

preparation of a precise war plan and the exercises based on it can provide a good guide to North Korea's potential for war, a potential that may easily develop into actual warfare. The result of this ideology and these exercises is that most North Koreans accept the inevitability of war.[10] People in the North now seem to prefer war to starvation.

In sum, the North's excessive preparedness for war and the nationwide propaganda campaign may erupt in a war begun by Kim Jung Il, for he is a dictator hostile to the South and his regime is in crisis. He is likely to provoke a war to provide a rationale for the hardships the North Korean people are already suffering.

The Desire for War

Since the end of the 1953 Korean War, North Korea has made three assumptions in pursuing its security strategies and policies on the Korean peninsula (Jeon 1996). First, in seeking to unify the peninsula by revolution, the North should not avoid a military confrontation with the South: therefore it needs to secure military superiority over the South. Second, the North should end US military threats to its existence: thus it struggles to force or convince the United States to pull out American troops from the South. During the Cold War, the North joined with the Soviet Union in attempting to defeat US imperialism; currently, in the post-Cold War era, it employs military and diplomatic measures in attempts to appease the United States. Third, the North should take the lead in bringing peace and stability to the peninsula: therefore it needs to replace the Armistice Agreement with a peace agreement between Pyongyang and Washington.

All objective observers would agree that none of these strategies has been attained satisfactorily. As both the North Korean economy and the international security environment have changed, they have become impractical; adjustments are clearly needed. Nonetheless, Kim Jung Il has not yet abandoned those old-fashioned strategies inherited from his father. He appears to adhere stubbornly to the "four military lines" that were launched in 1962 by Kim Il Sung in the face of a loss of confidence in his ability to tackle economic catastrophes.[11] Since being designated his father's successor, Kim Jung Il has advocated unification by force; since being named commander-in-chief, he has taken the lead in the nuclear development program and in conducting a war plan. Because of the current power structure of the North, Kim's personal emotion and

10. Hwang Jang-yop noted at his news conference that North Korean people consider the possibility of war with the South, even when they build a private house or road (*Korea Herald*, 11 July 1997, 2).

11. The four military lines include arming all the people, fortifying the whole territory, upgrading all the soldiers to officers, and modernizing all the armed forces.

thinking will be the primary influences on the decision to make war: all others who possess any power just attempt to read Kim's mind and follow his thinking (Hwang Jang-yop, Seoul news conference, 10 July 1997). Thus it is no exaggeration to say that no radical or moderate line of thought now exists in the North: no routine decision-making process is possible. Kim may decide on his own that it will be a heroic act to wage war.

Of course, whether his decision to make war is rational in his view or irrational in the view of others, it is natural that he should first reconsider the strategic issues. These issues include the following:

- Does warmongering help him stabilize and preserve his regime?
- What certain gains does war against the South and the United States bring him?
- When, for what cause, and on what scale should the war begin?
- Does war give him a chance of forcing the South into unification on his terms?
- Will the South or the United States enter the North and unify the peninsula on their terms if war begins?
- What will be the condition of his leadership, if he fails in the war?

When political tensions rise because of the economic impasse, leaving him with no way out, he may act without regard for strategic considerations. Plainly speaking, his loss of confidence, caused by the North's economic collapse, may drive him to despair and to denial of *juche,* or self-reliance; war may be his only answer. At least that possibility is not entirely out of the question, as long as Kim reiterates, as he has done for 30 years, that war is the manifest destiny of the North—even if such reiterations are partly meant for internal consumption, as a means of domestic control.

Types of Military Attack

Given all the factors discussed above, it is hard to claim that an attack by the North on the South is totally unlikely. It is important to consider what type of attack Pyongyang would make, in order to attain what goal. Three kinds of military attack are possible for the North, depending on how rationally Kim's decisions are made. First, he may choose to attempt an all-out war for a forced unification of the peninsula, which would be intended to realize the regime's long-standing objective as proclaimed to the people. Such a decision by the top leader would be irrational and anachronistic. Even if he has been prepared for a war

since 1993, several other conditions must be met for this actual revolutionary unification to occur. South Korean society must have erupted into extreme disorder, the United States must have withdrawn all its combat forces, and sufficient so-called revolutionary forces in the South must have been created. The reality, however, is quite the opposite of these conditions. The situation in the two Koreas is far different from what it was at the time of the Korean War. South Korea is now superior to the North in economic prosperity, international status, and the strength of its alliances; its armed forces are now well-equipped to cope with a fiercer full-scale war. Kim and his inner circle might understand that unification by force, a rhetoric that has long been used to justify their domestic rule, is much harder to attain than to demand, despite their greater military force.

Second, North Korea might attack precisely because the regime is collapsing. If Kim realizes that the disintegration of his regime seems imminent, he may act in a desperate attempt to divert attention from the North's internal situation. This would be a "more irrational" choice by Pyongyang's leader, and it is sure to fail, as seen in the cases of Hitler and Saddam Hussein. In this scenario, Kim would lose his senses to the extent that he would disregard the blame he would be certain to receive from the outside world for his attack. Yet he might retain the tactical sense to choose a limited war, to avoid the justification for entry into the North's territory that all-out war would give to the South Korean-US combined forces. Taking this into account, the North may see the five islands in the Yellow Sea as easy first targets for attack. Indeed, those five islands and the Yellow Sea around the Northern Limit Line (NLL) of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) are counted as the flash points of the Korean peninsula.[12] Such a limited attack is doomed to failure, however. The North may be unable to capture the islets, particularly Paek Ryong Island, which is fortified as strongly as the mainland. It is uncertain whether, in this case, the North would escalate its attacks to other South Korean territory.

If the North initiates an all-out war from the beginning, the situation will become very serious. Both the United States and South Korea are greatly concerned about this possibility, which could arise if Kim judges that he does not have much to lose in a war when the regime is collapsing or perhaps even miscalculates the chance of his winning. When North Korea's quick and full-scale attack brings an immediate response by the South and the United States, both sides will experience terrible losses. South Korean and US combined forces will fight the North

12. For instance, North Korean gunboats violated the NLL 13 times last year and for the first time even exchanged gunfire with South Korean naval boats on the Yellow Sea last June around Younpyong Island, one of the five islands (*Monthly Chosun*, August 1997, 244-47).

Korean forces in accordance with OPLAN 5027, which the two countries prepared jointly for just this eventuality: an all-out war on the peninsula. Despite suffering heavier casualties and losses—particularly in the Seoul metropolitan area—during the first seven to ten days from the North's massive attacks with both conventional and unconventional weapons, the South, together with US reinforcements, will be able to defeat the North over the next several weeks. South Korean forces may conduct counterattacks, taking advantage of this opportunity to enter the North and overthrow the regime to unify the peninsula. Thus the North will have nothing to gain from a "second" Korean war.

Third, the North may undertake military actions for strategic purposes. Kim may decide to provoke smaller conflicts, intensifying military pressure short of war, to secure the bargaining leverage that is absolutely necessary for negotiations with the United States or the South. Thus Pyongyang's leaders would hope to benefit both internally, by consolidating their power and controlling the people more efficiently, and externally, by gaining the ability to bargain for more concessions from the United States on politico-economic issues. This might be called an "extrarational" policy decision by Kim and his inner circle. As they have already taken aggressive positions and heightened military tensions by violating the Armistice Agreement more than 500 times, they should be expected to pursue the same actions in the future. Indeed, such provocations may become more frequent and bold, if thought to be needed.

North Korea seems to have carefully manipulated the level of tension in order to avoid a serious military confrontation. South Korea is quite capable of confronting and resolutely countering such provocations. Although the North's arrogant schemes are apparently successful, these confrontations between North and South actually result in lost chances for economic restoration. The North must bear not only the direct expense of maintaining a costly offensive posture to create tension along the MDL but also the indirect expense of external assistance withheld or reduced due to its provocative actions.

Kim Jung Il must be well aware of the logical analysis of his situation: that the North's excessive military buildup since the early 1960s is largely responsible for the current economic catastrophe, that an all-out war against the South will never help him preserve the regime, and that military provocation is at best temporarily helpful for political purposes. Hence, his "extrarational" ideas for simply threatening the South intermittently may be attractive for several reasons. First, he never loses any territory. Second, he can continue to control North Koreans as he wants. Third, he does not provide any particular cause for direct US intervention. Fourth, he can improve his leverage in negotiating with either the South or the United States. Fifth, he can search for policies to enable survival without risking his regime.

Nevertheless, North Korea under Kim's leadership will disregard logic to do whatever appears advantageous to his regime's survival. In a genuine sense, it is still hard to deny or ignore the possibility that the North may attack the South in an all-out war in response to such conditions as the regime's collapse due to economic failures.

Policy Implications

North and South Korea

The North's justification for a war against the South seems to be not only that it is a long-standing objective of the regime but also that it is the means of ensuring the regime's internal stability and of providing a tool of brinkmanship in its external dealings with the United States and South Korea. Those who believe that North Korea will not easily collapse in spite of the disastrous blows to its economy apparently assume that the country will find some economic salvation from the outside, despite or because of its position on war. The North may misjudge the effect of its preparations and provocations: despite its intentions, it cannot sever the link between the South and the United States, while at the same time calling on the United States to improve bilateral relations and to provide economic assistance. Given its current status, in time North Korea is more likely to meet with collapse, either sudden or gradual. Actions taken to desperately hold up the garrison state will simply bring on the collapse of the socialistic regime sooner.

An objective, candid adviser of Kim Jung Il would tell him to choose his policies rationally. Above all, the North is in dire need of economic restoration, which can be attained speedily only by reforming and opening the economy. The North must keep the peninsula stable and peaceful in order to afford the mobilization of all its national resources for economic reconstruction. One thing is certain: neither South Korea nor the United States will first attack the North. Their combined military posture on the peninsula is basically oriented to defense: that is, they are clearly set as a "shield" against the North Korean "spear." Using heavy armaments to threaten the South with war can neither help the North rehabilitate its economy nor guarantee an advantage in peacemaking on the peninsula, as history tells.

For these reasons, proposals by the South for the peace and stability of the peninsula should be accepted by the North. The first step is participation in the formal four-party talks, where a peace system for the peninsula accompanied by economic assistance to the North will be discussed and determined. Already existing agreements, like the 1953 Armistice Agreement and the 1991 Basic Agreement, should be observed

with equal diligence by both sides. Naturally, the Seoul government feels unwilling to provide food aid and extend economic cooperation to a country that is constantly watching for a chance to attack South Korea. Moreover, Kim's failure to transfer part of his military spending to food procurement in the face of his people's mass starvation is hard to understand. North Korea's continuing military provocation will be deplored by foreign diplomats over and over again, leading to further embarrassment by causing China and Russia to lessen their support for the North.

The South has been living for the last 45 years with the possibility, even if it is minuscule, of the North's provoking a war, whether all-out or limited. Of particular and serious concern today is that the North, trying to break out of a political deadlock on the verge of its economic collapse, might attempt a full-scale war on the pretext of liberating the people in the South. Seoul, in collaboration with Washington, must make Pyongyang realize that starting a war can never be the right way out. To do so, several facts should be conveyed. First, the US-South Korean military alliance is strong enough to defeat any attack by the North. Second, a war will surely end not only the lives of Kim Jung Il and his key advisers but also the existence of the North's regime. Third, both the United States and South Korea are ready to assist the North and cooperate in its economic rehabilitation if and when Kim makes rational policies. Internal measures should also be taken. South Korea, as well as the surrounding countries, needs to be wary of the syndrome of "crying wolf" in coping with Pyongyang's repeated military provocation. Keeping the South free from political instability, economic unrest, and social disorder is also important to prevent revolutionary forces, supported by the North as part of its strategy of unification by force, from growing within the South.

In short, the North's strategy of "sticks"—using limited provocation and threats of war to contain the South while linking itself with the United States—seems to be just a time-wasting scheme. If Kim wants to avoid delay in averting the collapse of his regime, and even of the state, he should make a bold, major change in course to embrace Chinese-style reform and opening in securing foreign capital and technology. Seoul will be a fitting and helpful partner in cooperating with Pyongyang to effect its economic recovery, as long as Pyongyang behaves in ways that build confidence, encourage coexistence, and demonstrate reconciliation with Seoul.

Countries Surrounding the Peninsula

The policy of the United States, the only superpower in the post-Cold War era, is to remain in Northeast Asia as a regional balancer. A crucial

part of that policy envisions both a stronger US-South Korean alliance and positive engagement with North Korea. It is absolutely essential that the former goal not be sacrificed to the latter. Following the suspension of the North's nuclear program, the United States appears not to have paid serious attention to North Korea's limited but repeated military provocations. Such inattention may give Pyongyang the wrong impression—that the US-South Korean consultative mechanism exists merely on paper; as a result, the North may initiate a war.

Before the United States engages the North on a large scale, it first needs to strengthen the combined forces, thus making clear its willingness to defend the South, in accordance with the South Korean-US defense alliance treaty, in the case of war on the peninsula. As part of this process, the United States and South Korea can develop and declare joint guidelines for combined defense, which may include a ban on preemptive attacks on the North. Second, the United States should bring the North's military threats under its political control. US economic and political engagement with the North needs to be fully incorporated into its military policy toward the peninsula, as it is, for instance, in the recently published *Quadrennial Defense Review*. Third, the United States needs to take an active part in guiding direct North-South talks to promote peace and stability on the peninsula, within the framework of the four-party talks. The discussions should cover issues like a North-South peace agreement, summit talks, and negotiations on disarmament, all of which the United States and China can guarantee jointly. Fourth, US troops in the South should be maintained according to the US-South Korea defense treaty even after the North's military threats disappear. Their presence in the South should be kept separate from the agenda of the forthcoming four-party talks, for it is part of the United States' broader Asia policy.[13]

The key factor is China's attitude. To Beijing, the North is a buffer zone on its border; therefore, for the sake of its own security, it wants to protect the peninsula from any instability. The Chinese government will refrain, in principle, from direct military intervention into a Korean war, insofar as it opposes an initial attack by Pyongyang. By the same token, China is opposed to the possession or use of nuclear weapons on the peninsula. Nevertheless, Beijing would probably send its troops into the North either to support the Pyongyang regime or to keep its own borders stable. If nationwide, sudden disorders occur in the North—whether caused by a people's rebellion, a military coup, the assassination of Kim Jung Il, the entry of foreign forces, or any combination of these or other factors—the Chinese government cannot stand by with indifference.

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13. Kim Jong Il understands well the roles and capabilities of the US forces deployed in South Korea, Japan, and other regions of the Pacific (M. C. Kim 1996). His awareness may help dissuade him from pursuing an all-out war.

At this time, China neither recognizes US unilateral hegemony in Northeast Asia nor agrees to the idea that US troops in the South contribute to China's national interest. Taking this into account, the United States needs to respect China's historical relations with and national interest in the North as it seeks Beijing's assistance in preventing North Korea from attacking the South. Both countries have a strategic interest in restoring the North's economy by encouraging Pyongyang to mimic China's successful economic reforms and by providing economic assistance. In practical terms, the United States can accept China's principle that the Koreans should solve Korean issues independently and peacefully at the four-party talks; it can also assure the Chinese government that as part of a "cross-recognition policy" it will recognize the North. If it does not first take proper measures to obtain China's consent to its strategy, the United States should not expect China to remain indifferent to a US military intervention within North Korean territory.

It is quite natural that Japan should be concerned about an all-out war on the peninsula. The North may launch preemptive strikes against cities in Japan, using long-range missiles equipped with chemicals in order to block US military engagement.[14] Japan's involvement in such a war, according to the renewed guidelines for US-Japan defense cooperation, would be limited to rearguard support, that is, aiding US forces in Japan in areas such as logistics, rescue on the sea, and minesweeping. Many Japanese believe that another Korean war would solidify the influence and role of the United States in Northeast Asia. Partly for this reason, Japan is collaborating with the United States in supplying food and economic assistance to North Korea to help prevent a war on the peninsula. Tokyo also has reopened its normalization talks with Pyongyang, which had stopped in November 1992, and is considering an upgrade of its diplomatic delegation to an assistant secretarial level.

Russia opposes both a renewed war on the peninsula and US dominance in Northeast Asia. Should a war begin, Russia would likely take advantage of the situation to expand its role in Northeast Asia, particularly the Korean peninsula. It might propose an earlier cease-fire and expansion of multilateral dialogue on regional security. For now, it can do little for the North by way of providing economic assistance or preventing a Korean war.

Conclusion

After examining the factors that presumably affect North Korean leaders' decisions on instigating and waging a war, one cannot with ease entirely

14. Hwang Jang-yop talked about North Korea's war scenario at his news conference in Seoul (10 July 1997).

dismiss the likelihood that either the North will collapse or that it will attack the South. Some factors, such as North Korea's long hostility toward South Korea and its military readiness, seem to encourage war; other factors, such as the North's current economic failure, desire to wage war, and unpredictable leadership and decision-making process, seem to have less or no effect. The most powerful factor working against the possible inclination to begin a war seems to be the relations of the North with other countries.

The type of attacks on Seoul, if any are made, may depend on the rationality (or irrationality) of Kim Jung Il's plans. His regime's immediate goals should be easing its current macroeconomic hardship and solving its food shortages. As long as he is given a chance to survive, one can suppose that he will act rationally. But an all-out war might be ordered if Kim realizes that his regime is on the verge of collapse and that he has no other escape from that impasse. It is, of course, an irrational decision. By choosing war instead of bargaining as a way out, he will lose everything and the North will be eventually unified with the South—on South Korea's terms. Kim may provoke limited military conflicts rather than a full-scale war in an attempt to enhance his negotiating position, but this strategy is not rational, either. The costly offensive postures required to create such tensions will make economic restoration slower and may lead to the regime's collapse.

The rational decision for Kim is first to concentrate on restoring the North Korean economy by adopting a policy of coexistence and reconciliation with Seoul and by normalizing relations with Washington and Tokyo. The major steps Pyongyang must take to build mutual confidence are positive participation in the formal four-party talks, observation of the 1991 Basic Agreement, and adherence to the 1953 Armistice Agreement. They will enable Kim to secure the capital, food, and technology from the surrounding countries that are required for his regime's survival.

But it cannot be assumed that Kim will act rationally. Unless North Korea reduces its disproportionately large stock of armaments and abandons its threats of war, the United States and South Korea have to preserve their combined war-deterring capabilities and maintain an efficient mechanism for mutual consultation. Together with other neighboring countries, they must then engage the North.

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