



New Threats of War from North Korea: Part II

Marcus Noland says that South Korea seems determined to retaliate against a North Korean provocation, making the current situation more dangerous.

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Steve Weisman: This is Steve Weisman with Marcus Noland, director of research at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, talking about the escalating situation on the Korean Peninsula. Marc, you just made the point that the real danger is not a nuclear confrontation but some sort of military provocation that leads to retaliation by either South Korea, or Japan, with the support of the United States. What are some of the scenarios that this awful possibility might take the form of?

Marcus Noland: Let me run through a series of scenarios in the order of which I think they're likely to actually occur.

First, the North Koreans shoot off a missile sometime in the next week or so. It's associated with a number of dates that are auspicious on the North Korean political calendar. The UN Security Council meets, it's going to impose even tighter sanctions, but there is a lot of pressure on the United States and South Korea to talk to the North Koreans. And the United States does some sort of dance so it doesn't look like we're going around the South Koreans or going over their heads and we talk to the North Koreans. This is then portrayed internally in North Korea as political tribute – that in response to the awesome, intimidating power of North Korean rocketry, the American imperialists have come begging and [are] having extended concessions to North Korea. North Korea can then start standing down some of the actions that it's undertaken over the last couple months. That's one way of getting out of this situation.

The second possibility is the North Koreans attempt to test Park Geun-hye, the new South Korean president, but they don't do it through a conventional military means. They use some asymmetric technique like taking hostages at Kaesong industrial complex, or a cyber attack, or something that avoids a conventional military shootout. A conventional military shootout could get out of control. The reason is the South Koreans have publicly announced that if there was another shelling of an island or another sinking of a naval ship, as there has been in the last few years, they would respond in kind. In the past they have reacted passively. They've turned the other cheek. But the South Korean public is fed up with this. And they have publicly stated that not only will they respond in kind, but they will actually attack higher level units in the Korean People's Army, the North Korean army. Once you get that escalatory response by the South Koreans, nobody knows where that could end. And obviously that could be very messy.

The final possibility, one that almost verges on just fantasy, is the idea that North Korea is actually going to launch a nuclear attack against anyone.

Steve Weisman: You've said that that's highly unlikely. But what do you suppose is the thinking in the Obama administration right now? They don't want to see it escalate but they are also getting fed up, are they not?

Marcus Noland: Yes. The North Korean nuclear threat against the United States that was made a few weeks ago -- and then was reiterated a few days ago -- had a great effect in Washington DC. Now,

the threat in a narrow sense is not credible. The North Koreans do not have the capacity to certainly attack the mainland United States. They may be able to attack US units in South Korea or Japan. But that changed the political dynamic here in Washington.

I think residual sympathy for expending political capital on the North Koreans evaporated at that moment. The United States undertook a unilateral sanction that goes beyond the UN Security Council sanctions against the North Korean economy, and American officials will privately make it quite clear that they really don't care if there's collateral damage on those sanctions.

They are fed up with this and they've gone to Beijing and they basically told the Chinese: "You have a choice. You can either act cooperatively with us to diffuse this situation, or you will get ever more entangled in what is going to be ratcheting US pressure on the North Koreans until their behavior changes."

Steve Weisman: Earlier you said that China has uses for the existence of North Korea, because they don't especially want a unified Korean Peninsula. You and I have discussed this before. The South Koreans don't necessarily want a collapse of North Korea either, and neither do the Japanese, which have had a historic rivalry with the Korean Peninsula going back centuries. And yet, the North Koreans are convinced that this is a fight for their survival. They seem to feel that everybody wants them to collapse. The more the sanctions are imposed and the threats are made, that reinforces the fear. How do we get out of that situation?

Marcus Noland: I think it's very unlikely that we can get out of that dynamic with the current regime in North Korea. There was hope. Remember when President Obama was first elected in 2008, at the inauguration in 2009—and I was in the crowd—he stuck out his hand to Iran and North Korea. And North Korea in weeks responded with a nuclear test and then a missile test. Facing two wars and the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, the Obama administration made the completely understandable calculation that there was nothing to be gained by expending much political capital on the North Koreans. They appointed a man, Stephen Bosworth, to be the North Korea policy coordinator, who kept his job as dean at Fletcher School [of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University]. It was a part-time position. I think that tells you all you need to know.

There was hope that when Kim Jong-un came to power, he had been at least partially educated in Switzerland, and the hope was he was younger and more cosmopolitan and might be more willing to be more forthcoming. But, if anything, he's turned out to be more bellicose than his father or even perhaps his grandfather.

I try to be very judicious and evidence-based in making these assessments and I don't like to project on to people motivations or things about their personality that I really know nothing about. But in the case of Kim Jong-un, I would just make the following observation: Eric Schmidt, the head of Google, one of the world's most dynamic and innovative companies, comes to town. North Koreans are always talking about technological breakthroughs and technological leapfrogging. Well, Kim Jong-un refuses to see him. Dennis Rodman [basketball player], circus act, comes to town and Kim Jong-un spends hours partying with him. Think about that choice. I think that starts to raise legitimate questions about this individual's judgment and his capacity for leadership.

I think we're in a very difficult situation. I think there are ways to try to ratchet down the tension. But fundamentally, I don't see this situation getting better anytime soon with the current configuration of the North Korean regime.

Steve Weisman: Thank you, Marc.

Marcus Noland: Thank you.

