

North Korean Aggression

By Logan Scisco

Early last month, North Korea angered the international community over its launch of a long range missile (Taepodong-2). This launch went against UN Security Council resolutions that ban North Korea from conducting ballistic missile tests, although North Korea's government saw it as an attempted satellite launch, arguing that it had the right to explore space. This launch was determined to be a failure, with the second and third stages of the rocket failing to separate as planned. Despite this failure, North Korea appears to have gained international attention yet again, by conducting its second nuclear test.

Although scientists and intelligence communities of the United States, Japan, and South Korea are trying to determine if what North Korea detonated was a nuclear weapon or simply a mock nuclear explosion, which could be done with large quantities of explosives, it appears that North Korea has taken a much more aggressive stance with the international community over its nuclear program. It seemed near the end of the Bush administration that North Korea would follow the path of Libya and give up its nuclear weapons program in return for international aid and more diplomatic recognition. However, despite attempts by the Obama administration to extend an olive branch to the North Korean government of Kim Jong-Il, the North Korean government has dug in its heels and has now withdrawn from the 1953 armistice that stopped the fighting in the Korean War.

With North Korea's aggression being a test of the Obama administration's resolve on U.S. security and non-proliferation goals, and with it having the potential to ignite a dangerous arms race in East Asia, it is important that extempers read up and understand this issue for the NFL national tournament. It does not matter if you do U.S. or International extemp, because each type will have rounds that will require extempers to analyze security trends and U.S. foreign policy. As such, this brief will explain some of the motivations behind North Korea's latest test, the response of the North Korea's neighbors about the test, and what steps the U.S. can take (or lack thereof) to force North Korea's hand.

Motivations

This is not the first time North Korea has conducted an underground nuclear test. The first time North Korea conducted a test, in 2006, it received a barrage of international criticism, which led to the United Nations imposing sanctions. However, these sanctions have been circumvented by many in East Asia, Russia and China in particular, and that has heavily weakened how the international community has responded to the North Korean problem.

There is wide agreement in intelligence circles that the latest belligerent actions taking place by North Korea are happening because of Kim Jong-Il's health. Extempers must understand that North Korea is the only communist state in the world that has had a successful dynastic succession. Kim Jong-Il took power after his father, Kim Il-Sung, passed away in July 1994. To continue this succession process, there are reports that Kim Jong-Il wants to facilitate the handover of power to his third son, Kim Jong-un, who currently sits on the National Defense Commission (NDC). This post is important because the NDC is part of the North Korean military apparatus and Kim Jong-Il's position as chairman in the NDC is what makes him the leader of the country.

However, to make sure that the succession from Kim Jong-Il to Kim Jong-un is successful, Kim Jong-Il must win the backing of the North Korean military, who has received most of the scraps that remain of the North Korea economy that has been destroyed since the mid-1990s. The North Korean military is said to be staffed with very conservative and militaristic generals, and to win their approval for an eventual succession, Kim Jong-Il may be throwing caution to the wind and ordering the nuclear test, in addition to short range missile launches to appease them.

The other theory, as revealed by the Council on Foreign Relations last week, is that Kim Jong-Il may be trying to re-assert his own authority in the government. Since his supposed stroke in September 2008, Kim has kept out of the public eye and when he has appeared has looked gaunt and weak. Although it is hard to get much reliable information out of North Korea, there are reports that when Kim Jong-Il had his stroke, the military temporarily took over the government. Therefore, to regain some of this lost authority, or to show that he still has the wits and ability to run the government, Kim Jong-Il may be making these moves.

Finally, a reason for North Korean action might be that they want a civilian distraction from economic woes. As North Korea's economic situation grows more desperate, the regime of Kim Jong-Il must try to create an international crisis so that the Korean people do not turn against the government. This is similar to the "boogeyman" strategy often employed by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, who denounces Western governments and continues to insist that his country is at the risk of an invasion by the United States.

Regional Response

If one country should be mad about North Korea's latest show of bravado it is China. The People's Republic of China is the one who kept North Korea from being overrun by US-led forces in the Korean conflict and currently supplies much of the political and economic aid that keeps the country afloat. China often worries that a collapse of the North Korean regime would lead to a massive influx of refugees, leading to social instability within China. Therefore, China currently fears the collapse of the North Korean government more so than a belligerent North Korea.

However, sentiment in China is changing. There are indications that China, as well as Russia, are now willing to impose sanctions on North Korea for its latest test, albeit they have not voiced how strongly they want these sanctions to be imposed. There is even debate within Chinese society about whether or not it serves China's international interest to be so closely tied to an agent of instability in East Asia. After all, if China is trying to become a world power then it needs to exercise diplomatic responsibility because it is hard to believe China's pledge to desire a nuclear free Korean Peninsula.

South Koreans are also worried about the latest show of force by North Korea, especially with the North warning of a possible military confrontation. South Korea and North Korea have had two deadly engagements in the waters to the west of the peninsula since 1990, and such an engagement this time could raise tensions to an irreversible level. The South Korean government of Lee Myung-bak is being blamed for antagonizing North Korea by cutting off economic and food aid to the country because of North Korea's refusal to fully disclose details about its nuclear program. However, these accusations leveled against the president by the opposition has not stopped Mr. Lee from taking South Korea into the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a creation from the days of the Bush administration, which has the goal of intercepting ships that are carrying weapons of mass destruction or the technology that allows for their use. North Korea had said before that if South Korea joined the PSI (it was just an observer before), it would

consider it tantamount to a declaration of war. However, South Korea figured the risk was worth it and joined, believing that it needs to make a stronger stand against North Korea after the “Sunshine Policy” of the 1990s and early 2000s failed to pay a large security dividend.

Japan has also grown worried about North Korea’s aims. The Japanese considered a nuclear program in the 1990s, but abandoned the idea because they are under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. However, now there are Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) members arguing that Japan might want to pursue a nuclear arsenal so that it can counter the North Korean threat. Such a step would prove costly for regional stability, as China would most likely increase its nuclear arsenal if Japan decided to pursue a nuclear program. This would also blow the top off the world’s non-proliferation regime.

Steps for the U.S.

One troubling sign from the Obama administration about these signs of aggression is that, according to Defense Secretary Robert Gates, the administration does not see this as a crisis. Many regional leaders disagree and worry that the Obama administration’s focus on Afghanistan and the Israeli-Palestinian dispute will lead to a loosening of U.S. obligations to the region. Gates has also said that the U.S. has no plans to increase its troop numbers in South Korea, which total over 28,000, and that it does not plan any naval actions such as a blockade out of the fear that the North Korean government could take them for signs of aggression and destabilize the situation further. The U.S. government has also ruled out a pre-emptive military strike, but the Defense Department has recently asked Congress for hundreds of millions of dollars to increase the military capabilities of South Korea’s armed forces.

The most likely outcome of this situation is for the U.S. to impose more sanctions upon North Korea. However, as the Council on Foreign Relations pointed out, it is very hard for these sanctions to have an impact because we have to worry about other people circumventing the sanctions and we also have very little economic activity with North Korea in the first place. This is also true of South Korea and Japan. It is tough to exercise leverage when you have nothing to exercise leverage with.

Finally, another approach would be for the U.S. to start backchannel diplomacy with North Korea, potentially in a bilateral arena. Although critics would scoff that this would be bad because we could alienate regional allies such as South Korea and Japan who want a seat at the table and that we would be rewarding North Korea for bad behavior, we have to face the fact that if bilateral negotiations will keep North Korea from acquiring a nuclear weapon that can be put onto an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), then it will be worth it. Since North Korea might be plagued by a succession question, the U.S. might want to use such a bilateral arena to provide a security guarantee for the country after Kim Jong-Il dies. Assuring the North Korean government that the U.S. will not support an invasion of the country, nor try to take advantage of its predicament, may help to tone down tensions to the point that the risk of war being reignited on the Korean peninsula remains minimal and provide the Obama administration with a successful example of its pledge to use diplomacy over force.