

Andrei Lankov

THE YEONPYEONG ISLAND INCIDENT: WHY IT HAPPENED, WHY NOTHING CAN BE DONE,
AND WHAT TO EXPECT: SOME THOUGHTS.

So North Korea did it again. In late March a North Korean submarine sunk a South Korean warship. This time North Korean policy planners decided to try something new. On the afternoon of the 23rd November, North Korean artillery began to shell the South Korean island of Yeonpyeon which is located in the disputed waters to the west of the Korean peninsula (though, the North Koreans have not claimed the island itself).

Since the incident took place when military exercises were being conducted in the area by the South Korean military, there have been suggestions that some South Korean mistake – like an incidental shell landing to the north of the border – provoked such a reaction. It is not completely impossible, but unlikely: both the unusual intensity and length of fire (the North Korean batteries fired about 150 shells) seems to indicate we are dealing with a well planned operation.

As one should expect, the international media immediately reacted to the news by running huge headlines to the effect of the Korean peninsula being ‘On the Edge of War’. This probably helps them increase to newspapers’ sales and advertisement revenues, but this is inaccurate, since a war on the Korean peninsula is highly unlikely (as we will see below). However Yeonpyeong Island incident may indicate that we are entering a new phase of the never-ending ‘North Korean crisis’.

Why did they do it?

The media usually describes incidents like these as ‘provocations’; however in this particular such description is not correct. By definition, a ‘provocation’ is an act which is designed to lure the opposite number into an overreaction or some unreasonable actions, but this is not the North Korea’s aim this time (on the contrary, the North Korean strategists known perfectly well that no reaction whatsoever is likely to follow). *Essentially we are dealing with a premeditated diplomatic gesture conducted in a somewhat unorthodox way, through the use of heavy artillery.*

It is not widely noticed that another such gesture took place two weeks earlier, when, a group of American nuclear scientists led by Dr. Siegfried Hecker, a Stanford University professor and former director of the Los Alamos laboratory, was shown a state-of-the-art, brand-new North Korean uranium enrichment facility. Both the sophistication and scale of this facility, proudly – and purportedly – shown to the Americans by their North Korean minders, was far in excess of anything they had expected to see.

Essentially this means that the North Korean government delivered an important diplomatic message. First it was sent to Washington and then 'CC'ed to Seoul. In the case of Washington it was sent with the aid of 1000-odd uranium enriching centrifuges, while in the case of South Korea the delivery vehicle was the artillery shells. The contents of the message were predictable and clear: 'We are here, we are dangerous, we are getting more dangerous every year, and we are not going to remain quiet if you keep ignoring us. Actually, we can and will make a lot of trouble, but nonetheless we are also willing to negotiate a price for being reasonable'. In a less colourful language we can say that the leaders of North Korea demonstrated their ability to create trouble more or less with impunity and also hinted that they are not going to remain quiet if their demands for the resumption of unilateral aid and assorted political concessions are not met.

The major target of North Korea's actions is the current US posture towards North Korea. This approach is usually described as 'strategic patience'. Somewhat similar approach has been taken by Seoul as well, even though in the Blue House they have not invented a suitably catchy name for this policy.

For roughly two decades US policy towards North Korea was largely based on the assumption that with the right incentives and payouts North Korea can be persuaded to surrender its nuclear program and generally moderate its behaviour. However, after the second nuclear test in May 2009, American policy makers finally came to realise something which was actually crystal clear from the beginning; there are no incentives that the United States government can realistically offer which will lead to North Korea surrendering its military nuclear program.

Such an approach is not a demonstration of North Korea's alleged 'irrationality' or 'bellicosity' (actually the North Korean leaders are afraid of war and are also rational in when it comes to policy decisions). *It's quite a rational policy, actually, since North Korea does need nukes.*

First, North Korea needs nuclear weapons pretty much for the same reason that all nuclear powers need them – as a deterrent. Frankly, after the Iraq and Afghan invasions it is difficult to say that their fears of an attack are completely groundless.

Second, it is a powerful tool of the blackmail diplomacy and such diplomacy is vital for North Korea's survival. North Korean leaders believe that due to their peculiar position as a divided country, Chinese style economic reforms are not acceptable to them. They suspect – perhaps, correctly – that in the case of North Korea such reforms are likely to produce an East German style political collapse than a China style economic boom. Thus North Korea is stuck with its anachronistic and inefficient economic system which cannot even feed its people. Therefore in order to stay afloat, North Korea regime needs a certain amount of aid obtained from overseas. This aid should also arrive without too many conditions, with

donors willing to be lax when it comes to the aid distribution (because a large part of that aid is funnelled to the regime's core constituency in order to maintain internal support).

Third, the nuclear program is necessary for domestic purposes, it is one of the few things that the Kim Jong Il government can proudly boast about, and it is also a perfect justification of the never-ending comic difficulties.

Fourth, to some extent the nuclear and missile programs are money earners since a certain amount of foreign exchange can be procured by selling technology and sometimes materials to third countries.

The significance of the nukes as both a deterrent and the major tool of the aid-extraction diplomacy means that the surrender of such programs is completely out of the question. It has always been the case, and finally America policy makers realised this. As soon as this belated realization came, they decided in that there is no point in talking to North Korea. In the past the US was willing to talk and provide aid, largely because American diplomats believed that such concessions and bribes were a way to eventually create a nuclear-free North Korea. Now that chances of such a development seem to be very slim, the United States is no longer willing to provide North Korea with significant amount of unconditional aid.

Roughly at the same time, starting from early 2008, the new South Korean administration began to take a much harder line in dealing with North Korea and began to demand reciprocity and concessions. At first, North Korea reacted by closing down two of the three major 'inter-Korean cooperation projects' (whilst these projects are somewhat euphemistically described as 'cooperation' they are in fact heavily subsidised by the South Korean tax-payer and are in fact aid projects in disguise). At first, North Korean officials seem to have assumed that the South Korean government would buckle under such pressure and return to the policy of unconditional aid. However, it did not work out as intended: the South Koreans remained tough and even ignored the North Korean advances when Pyongyang tried to re-start the 'cooperation' projects.

However such a turn of events does not serve North Korea's political goals because, as we have said above, North Korea needs a steady stream of unconditional aid. It is often stated that the dramatic reduction in South Korean and US aid, combined with the international sanctions, began to bite and is now slowly pushing North Korea towards the brink of the regime collapse. These ideas are quite popular among the South Korean and American right but, unfortunately or not, this seems to be wishful thinking. If anything, the food situation in North Korea today appears to be better than it has ever been over the last 16-17 years. However the reduction of aid has had some political consequences which are not welcomed by the North Korean leadership: this made them almost entirely dependent on China as a sole source of aid.

Over the last few years China has become the major aid provider to the North. According to some estimates, more than half of the China's entire foreign aid budget (admittedly a small one) is now spent on North Korea. Concurrently, more than half of North Korea's foreign trade is now conducted with China, and contrary to what many believe this situation makes North Korean leaders very unhappy.

Why is this growing dependence on China seen as a major problem by the North Korean leadership? There is good reason for such worries among the North Korean leadership. It's true that China would like to maintain the division of Korea and would also like to maintain the North as a buffer zone to protect its North-East. It's also true that China fears instability in North Korea and hence is willing to provide Pyongyang with a certain amount of aid. However, even though China needs (or at least would prefer to have) a separate North Korean state, it does not need this state to be headed by the Kim's family. On the contrary, many in Beijing would prefer to see a state that is easier to control, is less unpredictable, and would be more willing to conform with Chinese interests. After all, we should not forget that Beijing (with the tacit assent of Moscow) in 1956 sponsored a group of North Korean dignitaries who aimed to depose Kim Il Sung and replace him with another leader more agreeable to China. And we know that the memory of this event is still alive and well in North Korea's Supreme Family.

So in the last couple of years, North Korean officials have been repeatedly warned not to become too cosy with China and Chinese, while North Korean counter-intelligence service has worked hard to prevent the possible penetration of the country by Chinese intelligence networks. So North Korean leaders need America and South Korea unconditional aid once again not because they are facing the threat of mass starvation but largely because they want to curtail the worrying rise of Chinese influence over domestic policy.

Such a line fits extremely well into the established diplomatic culture of North Korea. For the past five decades North Korea has always attempted to maintain two sponsors, which are preferably hostile to one another, thus making diplomatic manoeuvring much more easy. In other words they want the US and South Korea back to the game, and they are becoming much more impatient with the 'strategic patience' of the United States; therefore they decided to send a message emphasising their ability to create trouble.

They carefully chose two weak points for each of their adversaries. To the US the North Korean strategists decided to emphasise North Korea's growing capabilities in the sphere development and nuclear proliferation. And to the South Koreans they demonstrated the strategic and economic vulnerability of Seoul and other major population centres as well as the political vulnerability of any South Korean government which is excessively harsh on the North.

Since for the Americans the major (almost only) reason why they care about North Korea is its potential for proliferation, the North Korean regime demonstrated to Washington that

even without aid and in spite of the international sanctions North Korean engineers and scientists managed to make considerable progress towards a full scale military uranium program, which will make a nice addition to the old good plutonium program of the 1990s. It is especially significant because a uranium program is more difficult to control.

The South Koreans were reminded that the Seoul metropolitan area, home to the half of the South Korean population, is located within the shooting range of North Korean artillery batteries. Apart from the ability to inflict physical damage, North Koreans can easily create problems for the South Korean economy which is much dependent on the whims of international markets. Foreign investors and trade partners are not going to like headlines of a war 'which is going to erupt on the Korean peninsula' and such a crisis will have a significant negative impact on the South Korean economy. On top of that, the average South Korean voter who does not usually care too much about North Korea and does not want unification that much (although the latter attitude is not often freely admitted) still expects South Korean government to be capable at handling North Korea, in avoiding major confrontations. Therefore, the North Korean leadership expects that sooner or later, South Korean voters will penalise an excessively stubborn government by supporting the opposition.

The decision to shell Yeonpyeong Island may also have some domestic dimensions as well. Actually it was expected that the world's youngest Four-Star general, would have to show his 'metal' to the North Korean elite and, especially, to the top-brass of the North Korean military. One would naturally expect that his promotion is not looked upon favourably by the North Korean military leadership: after all he spent a great deal of his childhood in a school for privileged children, in Switzerland. So for Kim Jong Un it makes sense to show that he is not just a spoilt brat, an admirer of Swiss cakes, but as an aggressive warlord who is as tough as it gets. However while this factor is highly likely to be in play, it appears that this is largely of a secondary nature. It seems that the North Koreans would be doing this anyway, succession or not. Perhaps the only impact that Kim Jong Un had on the incident was to make the affair more bloody and violent than it would be otherwise.

What can be done?

The short answer is simple: "Nothing". There is no doubt that over the next days and weeks we are going to see shows of military strength and a number of tough statements coming from Seoul and, perhaps, Washington. But all these gestures are not going to produce even the slightest change in the overall situation and will be ignored by the yawning North Korean leaders (but used by the North Korean propaganda-mongers as an excuse to produce a tidal wave of even more belligerent rhetoric).

To start with, a major war is out of the question. With the current balance of power South Korea is in a position to win, but the price of such a war is prohibitively high. The major reason (but by no means the only reason) is the strategically unfavourable position of Seoul

itslef, the major centre of South Korea. The entire metropolitan area is within the range of North Korean heavy artillery. Even if these batteries were successfully silenced in the first hours/days of such a war, they would still be able to inflict heavy damage on Seoul and its vulnerable infrastructure as well as kill many thousands of its civilian population. The advance of the South Korean forces North is also likely to be difficult and bloody.

On top of that, in case of such a military victory, South Koreans will have to assume responsibility for a destitute North; a prospect which terrifies many South Koreans even now, when the South Korean economy is in exceptionally good state. In spite of the lip-service which is still paid to unification, the majority of young and middle-aged South Koreans are not willing to pay too much for achieving this 'great national goal' (let alone sacrifice their life for the restoration of National Unity).

Retaliatory military strikes against North Korean military installations which were mentioned by President Lee Myung Bak in the aftermath of the Yeonpyeong Island shelling are also not an option. Actually, such strikes were really conducted they would produce the opposite effect, essentially amplifying the political message that Pyongyang wants to deliver.

There is almost no doubt that South Korean military forces are perfectly capable of wiping out a few artillery positions or destroying a significant part of the North Korean antiquated navy in one stroke. However this will have no impact on the people who really matter in Pyongyang, the members of a few dozen families who have been running the country now for over 60 years. These people are willing to sacrifice as many as commoners as necessary and this attitude was clearly demonstrated by the great famine of the late 1990s.

It is sometimes stated that even though the loses of military hardware and life are not going to have much physical effect on North Korea, the loss of face for the North Korean leadership could serve as a deterrent against future attacks. Unfortunately this seems to be wishful thinking. In a country where the government is in full control of the media, we can be certain that such a defeat will remain unknown to almost everyone outside the military elite. On the contrary, it is very likely that, regardless of the reality, the entire affair will be presented as another victory for the Korean people over the 'wolves of US imperialism' and their 'shameless south Korean puppets'.

On the contrary, such retaliatory strikes are likely to amplify the message that North Korea is going to deliver. The North Korean strategists want to damage the South Korean economy as well as create domestic tension which will eventually turn the South Korean public against the current South Korean government and its North Korean policy. However if such retaliatory strikes happen we can be certain that the international media will not be merely writing about a 'war that is about to start in Korea' but rather will declare that a 'war started in Korea'. This of course will send South Korean stocks and bonds off a cliff, thus seriously intensifying the economic impact of the entire affair.

Fortunately as the Cheonan incident has demonstrated recently, the South Korean government seems to understand this quite well and is likely to limit itself to the only outlet it has at its disposal: tough rhetoric and shows of military force, harmless but, essentially, meaningless.

If South Korea itself cannot retaliate – and the US, being way too busy elsewhere and quite nervous about the future of East Asia, is not going to strike as well, what about the diplomatic measures and pressure on the third countries? In this regard the recent decision to conduct military exercises with US participation might be seen as an attempt to exert pressure on the North using its alleged dependence on China. It's assumed that such exercises will make China uneasy. Exercises are meant to send China the message that unless Beijing does do something to curb North Korean antics, it is going to see US battle groups cruising close to Beijing frequently enough. However this approach assumes that China has enough influence over North Korea. However as we have seen, to a very large extent the entire affair was initiated by the North Korean leaders in order to distance themselves from China. China is as incapable of controlling North Korea as the Soviet Union was in the 1970s and 1980s (back then, by the way, the Western government also tended to grossly exaggerate the scale of the Soviet influence).

What to Expect?

Since nothing of significance can and probably should be done, we can be almost certain that North Korea will get away with it without any serious implications – not the first time, and certainly not the last. However it seems highly likely that in due time (judging by the space between the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents it will take about half a year) North Korean generals will stage another operation of similar type and with similar political goals in mind. Pyongyang regime will use violence to emphasize the same message: as long as the North Korean government is not getting its fair share of aid from Washington and Seoul, it is capable of inflicting punishment which on balance inflicts far more damage on South Korea than such an aid costs the South Korean tax payer.

Whether they will succeed in these efforts is still difficult to say – at any rate, the assessment of the possible scenarios and their relative probability would require a paper of more or less equal length. Currently it seems that the Lee Myung Bak administration is likely to remain stubborn. But the North Korean attacks must have led those who are aspiring to replace him to reconsider whether such a hard approach to the North would be a good idea.

It also remains uncertain which approach to the issue will be taken by the Americans. Obviously an immediate change in policy would be a clear demonstration of weakness. However, at the same time, by staging the recent 'uranium excursion' the North Koreans demonstrated that neither sanctions nor the withdrawal of aid can stop them from further advancing their nuclear capabilities. They will demand negotiations while doing a number of things clearly not to America's liking – like sending teams of their nuclear scientists to

countries like Syria or Burma and improving the technological base of their existing nuclear arsenal.

It is an open question whether America should remain stubborn in the face of such a threat or should they restart negotiations with North Korea. If such negotiations were to restart it is unlikely whether their talks would deal with the dismantling of the North Korean nuclear program. The agenda is much more likely to be about the freezing of such a program, something in line with Dr. Hecker's "three no's" proposal ("No More Nukes, No better nukes, No proliferation"). However, even if such negotiations were to start and succeed (and this is a big if) they will only provide a partial solution to the problem, or more likely they will just help to postpone the inevitable.

As long as the North Korean government exists in its current form it cannot change its economy, and as long as it cannot change its economy it is bound to follow a foreign policy designed to solicit aid from the outside world using centrifuges, artillery or any other tools considered useful.