



DEALING WITH NORTH
KOREAN PROVOCATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Provocations by North Korea can take various forms: weapons tests, acts of direct violence, cyber attacks, threatening force buildups, etc. Individually and as a group, states are debating how they would respond to one or another of these actions. In Section IV, authors evaluate how four states on the frontlines assess the options available to them in response. We start with South Korea, the most likely target of a provocation. Then, we turn to the United States, which is committed by alliance and retains operation command of joint forces in time of war in Korea. Third, coverage turns to Japan, also under threat but likely to prepare for only an indirect role unless it is attacked. Finally, our attention shifts to China, which is raising questions about what actually constitutes a provocation. Missing in the set of papers is Russia, which is discussed briefly later in this introduction. As many await new North Korean challenges, which will be viewed as provocations in at least three states, comparing the military responses that are being planned warrants close attention. Diplomatic and economic responses are set aside here in order to focus on military responses.

Responses to provocations can vary in nature. They start with new preparations to counter North Korea's actions or efforts to eliminate the causes of those actions. In addition to deterrence to make Pyongyang think twice about its behavior, there may also be buildups and plans for responding with military force. The application of new sanctions also fits into this list of responses. Among the responses are some that strengthen alliances and others that focus on closer diplomatic coordination. The following chapters range across the spectrum of responses in four countries. We start with South Korea, emphasizing the military measures it is undertaking, while also recognizing domestic divisions over whether they are adequate to the threat. Hong Kyudok puts South Korea's responses to provocations in the context of its defense modernization. He lists a string of ongoing provocations, including the firing of missiles and war preparations said to include nuclear missiles targeted at the United States, and he calls for close ROK-U.S. coordination in response. Critical to such coordination, in his view, is addressing a perception gap or misunderstandings between these two allies on key contentious issues, namely extended deterrence, budget constraints, and operational control (OPCON) transfer. Bridging the gap is important in responding to Kim Jong-un's assertive moves. Hong focuses on defense reform and alliance coordination.

Before analyzing the ROK-U.S. gap, Hong assesses the elusive quest for defense reform in South Korea, which personnel changes now leave in doubt. Next, Hong focuses on the direction of North Korea's nuclear program, crediting it with substantial progress as well as stepped up provocations. Holding South Korea hostage through an enhanced threat capacity is viewed not only as serving the North's interest but also as attracting the attention of the Obama administration and having a deterrent effect. One response has been a debate on nuclear weapons in South Korea. Another response is to build South Korea's own missile system to deter North Korean provocations. The defense reform plan calls for closing the missile gap by reinforcing South Korea's Missile Command, building Kill-Chain to preempt long-range missile and artillery attacks. Following the force improvement structure established by the preceding Lee Myung-bak administration, Park has introduced a proactive deterrent strategy, Hong notes, observing that delaying OPCON transfer is an appropriate response to provocations. Raising concerns that U.S. defense budget cuts send the wrong message as well as that South Korea is spending too little, Hong concludes with warnings against not dealing with the threats adequately.

The military thrust of the analysis in Section IV is continued in Terence Roehrig's paper, which also emphasizes the importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance. He asserts that the U.S. responses to North Korean provocations have been grounded in its alliance with the Republic of Korea, a commitment of extended deterrence. The North has conducted numerous lower level operations that disrupt regional stability, yet the United States is reluctant to retaliate for fear of starting a dangerous escalation spiral that would put Seoul at risk and could start a larger war on the peninsula. As strategic deterrence remains stable, he adds, deterring lower level provocations remains one of the most difficult challenges, for which preparations have been intensifying. Focusing on these themes, Roehrig concentrates on recent developments.

Two visible signs of preparations are security dialogues and joint exercises. After the events of 2010, U.S. and South Korean officials began to rethink deterrence in Korea in ways that looked not only at preventing a large-scale invasion but also focused on the dilemma of deterring lower level provocations. ROK officials had stated clearly after the shelling of Yeonpyeong-do that should the North choose to use military force again, there would be a response. With a new Joint Counter-Provocation Plan in place, South Korea is in the lead to respond to any DPRK provocations that are short of a major war, but with the ability to request assistance from U.S. forces for these types of events. Many analysts of Korean security have lumped all sorts of actions from bombastic rhetoric, nuclear weapons tests, and the sinking of the *Cheonan* as North Korean provocations, yet their character is very different. Addressing the issue of differentiating between lower level, "local" DPRK actions where Seoul will be in the lead versus actions of war that trigger U.S. OPCON intervention may be a challenge, Roehrig explains.

Roehrig also examines the issue of ballistic missile defense. To address the North Korean ballistic missile threat, the United States has continued to increase its BMD assets in the region and is committed to building a region-wide BMD system that includes key allies. The Pentagon announced in October 2014 that it would be sending two additional Aegis destroyers to Japan by 2017. They combine with South Korea's *King Sejong the Great* Aegis destroyers as well as Japan's Aegis ships to help track North Korean launches, and if necessary, shoot down missiles that are judged to threaten either U.S. ally. ROK Navy ships are not equipped with the SM-3 missile and cannot shoot down ballistic missiles, but there are ongoing discussions in South Korea of acquiring this capability. For several years, the United States has been trying to convince South Korea to join its BMD system. Japan joined in 2005, but South Korea has been reluctant due to cost factors and, more importantly, Chinese objections. Beyond efforts to enhance deterrence, the United States has sought to improve its combat capabilities should deterrence fail. High-level trilateral cooperation has remained elusive due to ongoing disputes. Similar to the Hong analysis, Roehrig points to the importance of the OPCON transfer issue, to ongoing defense improvements, and to various problems that still need to be solved.

Ohara Bonji focuses on Japanese thinking about how to respond to provocations from North Korea, delving further into the challenge of trilateralism raised in the two previous papers. He makes it clear that Tokyo is not focused on direct military involvement. It recognizes its limitations in responding militarily, while emphasizing the broader context. A problem, he warns, is that North Korea's irrational statements make comprehending its true intentions hard. Its neighbors are doubtful that they can rationally resolve issues through direct talks with it. That makes them think that North Korea must be preparing for launching military

action, even including the use of nuclear weapons. Of the countries active in Northeast Asia, only the United States has the countervailing force to oppose North Korea, which has no effective measures except provocatively to threaten to launch missiles and test nuclear weapons. Ohara adds, the United States and South Korea have limited ways to deal with North Korea because they realize that there is a low possibility that the North will give up its development of nuclear weapons, and they cannot make the choice of recognizing that development. Pressuring the North through economic sanctions, they must prepare for the North's extreme reaction, proving that its threats are ineffective in order to make it stop thinking about extreme measures.

North Korea recognizes that China is not against it, Ohara notes. It thinks that China will definitely not drive it into a corner, controlling things to avoid destabilization. China is not a reliable partner, but it is useful. The United States and South Korea as well as Japan must make the North recognize their tight military cooperation, forging a military force that can render ineffective a North Korean attack, even one including nuclear weapons. Already Japan has begun to consider the use of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in peacetime, as reflected in the July 2014 cabinet decision to reinterpret the right of collective self-defense. Even so, it would be difficult for Japan to plan a major role in the event of an incident on the Korean Peninsula. If a U.S. naval vessel, which is proceeding together with a maritime self-defense vessel, were subject to missile attack, Japan could exercise the right of collective self-defense, firing a return missile in place of the U.S. vessel. In the event of a North Korean missile attack, there is a possibility of proceeding as part of a joint operation with the U.S. Navy, but it is unrealistic for it to participate by sending its army SDF to military operations on the Korean Peninsula should a situation arise there: Japanese are opposed to dispatching the SDF to another country; and Koreans are firmly opposed to Japanese forces entering their territory. Yet, assistance to or evacuation of its citizens may test this restraint. Even if the SDF cannot participate in joint operations, in information sharing and other respects, sufficient Japan-ROK cooperation has now been established. Through strengthening the cooperation of Japan, South Korea, and Australia, the United States and its allies can avoid relative decline in their power in the Asia-Pacific region, Ohara concludes, adding it should be made clear that Japan's shift in security policy and cooperation with South Korea lessens the U.S. burden.

Cheng shifts the attention to the causes of North Korean provocations, while calling into question what is a provocation. Perceptions of the same act can be influenced by relations with the party in question, ideological orientation, historical experiences, or something else. What may appear to be a provocation may not be so, Cheng states, while also pondering the causes of provocations in both its external environment and domestic politics. The external environment refers to the geopolitics on the Korean Peninsula, i.e., the political division and military confrontation. Moreover, Cheng charges that South Korea is also guilty of provocations, calling them a matter of routine, and insists that the inter-Korean rivalry has been complicated by Sino-Japanese and Sino-U.S. rivalries. North Korea's provocations are rooted in an external environment, which is hostile, volatile, and charged with nationalistic emotions, he concludes, arguing that resuming the stalled Six-Party Talks may be the only viable way to root out important external factors that cause North Korea to resort to provocations. A number of domestic factors might encourage provocative actions in its external relations: power transition, economic hardship, diplomatic isolation, and possession of nuclear weapons. With this argument, Cheng suggests that those who contribute to

economic hardship and diplomatic isolation are failing to do what is desirable to reduce the likelihood of North Korean provocations.

The pattern of North Korea's provocations is categorized into two types, defensive and offensive. The former is for self-defense, whereas offensive provocation is action or speech initiated to threaten, frighten, or enrage a targeted actor(s). The line between defensive and offensive is thin and can be quite subjective. Provocations may help to achieve a number of objectives: 1) to hide its greater weakness, as during leadership change; 2) to prevent South Korea or the United States from taking an action deemed harmful to it, such as sending leaflets to the North; (3) to boost the leadership's reputation by winning a competition with South Korea, such as in missile development; (4) to influence South Korean and U.S. domestic politics during elections; and (5) to build a convincing military deterrent. Even though North Korea has been widely perceived as a maverick, which does not follow any rules, its provocations have remained within bounds, which make external military intervention unnecessary, Cheng concludes.

Although China has exercised caution in its response to the provocative interactions between the two Koreas, its attitudes toward North Korea and South Korea have some subtle differences, explains Cheng. Beijing has been forthcoming in expressing its disapproval of some South Korean-U.S. activities, such as the joint military exercise in the Yellow Sea and possible deployment of THAAD in South Korea, but it rarely explicitly censures North Korea's conventional provocations. This two-faceted attitude towards North Korea's provocations demonstrates deep-seated thinking: 1) North Korea has been insensitive to and less tolerant of China's public criticism; 2) bound by the alliance treaty signed in 1961, China has avoided making any remarks about North Korea's external behavior on the grounds that China has no right to infringe on a country's sovereignty; 3) from China's perspective, North Korea's provocations have their own historical and geopolitical causes and should not bear sole blame; 4) the tit-for-tat conventional provocations between the two Koreas are perceived to be so frequent and intertwined, China prefers to remain silent or express general, but ambiguous, statements rather than point the finger of blame. Thus, China has generally turned a blind eye to North Korea's conventional provocations. At the same time, China has been willing to take actions to punish North Korea for its nuclear provocations. From its perspective, to use or threaten to use military force against North Korea is not an option in the foreseeable future: 1) as China's core national interests are not in danger, it sees no reason to do so; 2) since technically North Korea is still China's ally, to use or threaten to use military forces against it would tarnish China's reputation. Other actors have also behaved in a provocative way and caused tension or crises in their external relations. The answer is to jump start the Six-Party Talks to tackle three interconnected issues: North Korea's nuclear weapons, replacement of the armistice treaty with a permanent peace mechanism, and normalization of relations between North Korea and the United States and other nations. With the three issues settled, we can reasonably expect a tangible reduction of North Korea's provocations, Cheng insists.

Clearly, Chinese thinking about provocations is sharply at variance with the attitudes in the other three states. Coordination in responding to North Korean provocations does not seem likely, with the exception of nuclear weapons. The second difficulty in coordination is finding a way for Japan and South Korea to agree to trilateralism, missile defense ties, and a role for Japan in case of a need to evacuate its nationals from South Korea. Finally, missile

defense coordination between South Korea and the United States looms as a third challenge in preparing for North Korea's provocations. In the background are China's objections to the strategies of all three states toward North Korean provocations, its aim to split Japan and South Korea, and its objections to THAAD and other steps that South Korea could take to strengthen cooperation with the United States to deal with potential provocations. Given these problems, preparations to respond are far from optimal.

Russia's view of provocations overlaps closely with China's. It puts much of the blame on the United States and raises doubt that what others call provocations would actually be the fault of North Korea. Nuclear tests are also Russia's foremost concern. In the absence of them, Russia is critical of the deterrent actions of the United States and its allies and is willing to provide some military assistance in the form of arms to the North Koreans. In recent months it has appeared to outflank China in its outreach to the North, even putting Xi Jinping in a bind by inviting Kim Jong-un to Moscow at a time Xi is also to be present to commemorate the shared victory in WWII. (Kim's decision not to attend temporarily solved this problem.) With China showing some signs of backtracking on the pressure it applied to North Korea, some may discern a revival of Sino-Russian competition that allowed the North to extract ample arms and assistance from both. Yet, given the growing bonds between Moscow and Beijing, there is more likelihood of a common cause in opposition to the U.S.-South Korean strategy, which is backed by Japan. The prospect of polarization over deterrence and North Korea, in general, without Russia or China being in favor of its nuclear weapons program, puts limits on the strategies of the other states.

There is considerable overlap in the security-conscious chapters of Hong, Roehrig, and Ohara—all in sharp contrast to the Cheng chapter—but there are differences in emphasis. All favor sending clear signals to North Korea that provocations would be met with firm responses. Deterrence is alive and well. All call for three-way, integrated missile defense systems. Hong stresses that Seoul must do more for its own defense. It cannot rely on the United States forever, given concerns about sequestration and U.S. commitments. Ohara welcomes the shift to Japan defending itself, but calls for doing more. Roehrig sees the United States as having already offered ample incentives and assurances to North Korea, but not having pressured the North enough. China's view on provocations and how to address them was the outlier. What others view as deterrence, it appears to see as provocations. The ideas of Hong, Roehrig, and Ohara reflect views shared by many in the security community in three countries, who are striving to prod others in their country to do more. Cheng's outlook is likely to confirm their stances rather than those of others who prefer to count on China to take a central role against North Korean provocations.