

Dealing with North Korean Provocations: A Chinese Perspective

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For a variety of reasons, North Korea at times behaves in a provocative fashion. This chapter starts with a discussion of the concept of provocation and its nature. A careful exploration of North Korea's provocations is conducted in an effort to identify the domestic and external causes. With a diagnosis of the pattern of provocations, the chapter suggests ways to cure the symptoms as well to eliminate the root causes. It concludes: 1) to cope with North Korean provocations is a collective endeavor rather than China's lonely adventure; 2) military intervention is not China's policy choice, but in order to deal with the hazard caused by North Korea's unreliable nuclear technology, China should prepare to use force; 3) since persuasion plus material incentives alone fail to find receptive ears in Pyongyang, China's pressure is necessary; 4) as change within North Korea could fundamentally temper its external behavior, resuming the stalled Six-Party Talks may be the only viable way to root out important external factors that cause North Korea to take bold, costly provocations.

The Korean Peninsula has been called a barrel of gunpowder in Asia, which may explode at any time, thanks to the drawn-out competition between the two Koreas. The intervention of the major powers in the inter-Korean rivalry has complicated the situation, making it volatile and precarious. In this context, the DPRK has stood out for its provocations in recent years.

PROVOCATION AND ITS SUBJECTIVITY

According to *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, the word “provocation” means an “action or speech that makes someone annoyed or angry, especially deliberately.”¹ In international relations, a provocation could be an action or speech that usually targets specific actors. Judging the nature of one nation's actions is quite subjective for a number of reasons. First, it is always arguable who provokes first. From the perspective of the initiator of an action, its behavior may not be provocative, but rather justified as a legitimate reaction to another nation's provocation. For example, China's recent moves in the South China Sea are perceived as provocative by some nations in the Southeast Asia, but China believes that its moves were necessary responses to other nations' actions in the region. Second, perceptions of the same act can be influenced by relations with the parties in question, ideological orientation, historical experiences, or something else. For example, a suicide bomber against Israeli civilians is widely regarded as a terrorist in the United States, but he/she may be claimed as a martyr in some Arab countries. In the same fashion, North Korea's provocations against South Korea during the Cold War were perceived by the Chinese as heroic acts but denounced by the United States as reckless, risk-taking moves. Third, the absence of one authoritative institute, which is able to deliver a universally accepted verdict over one country's provocation, makes the debate over that country's external behavior confusing.

Even recognizing the subjective nature of what constitutes a nation's provocation, the international community can still pass judgment. Among the criteria used as a yardstick against which to measure behavior are: 1) any nation that violates resolutions passed by the United Nations Security Council is committing a provocation, even though the UNSC is notorious for its biases; and 2) any nation that acts in violation of international treaties or laws can also be perceived as causing a provocation, even though the treaties or laws do not always stand for justice and fairness. Taking the above-mentioned points into consideration, North Korea's ongoing development of long-range missile technology and nuclear weapons

certainly violates UNSC resolutions and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and warrants careful analysis.

SOURCES OF NORTH KOREA'S PROVOCATIONS

North Korea's provocations have their root causes in its external environment and domestic politics. Sometimes, a single factor triggers a provocation from North Korea; sometimes, multiple external and internal factors interplay and push Pyongyang to take actions, which intentionally anger its enemies. The external environment refers to the special geopolitics on the Korean Peninsula, i.e., the political division and military confrontation. Technically, the two Koreas are at war; efforts to replace the armistice treaty with a permanent peace mechanism on the peninsula have gone nowhere. In the past 70 years, North and South Korea have been locked in a drawn-out competition for superiority in terms of their political and economic systems. Both have tried to unify the peninsula on their own terms. Such a competition has made the peninsula one of the most fortified and dangerous places.

The situation on the Korean Peninsula can be characterized as follows. First, even though entente and tension between the two Koreas have alternated, the former is short-lived and the latter always prevails. Sporadic military incidents from time to time have thrown the peninsula into crises, which always fuels talk of war; therefore, provocations from both the Koreas have become a matter of routine.

Second, the inter-Korean rivalry has been further complicated by Sino-Japanese and Sino-U.S. rivalries. Since the end of WWII, major powers have intervened in Korean affairs and helped to perpetuate the division. Inter-Korean rivalry has usually been accompanied by the involvement of major powers. With China emerging as the second largest economy, the geopolitical landscape in Northeast Asia has begun to experience significant change. Age-old rivalries between China and Japan and China and the United States resumed, gained momentum, and inevitably spilled over into inter-Korean relations.

Third, the traditional inter-Korean rivalry has come under the shadow of nuclear threat. In the past 25 years, North Korea's nuclear program, mainly designed to counter the loss of the power balance on the peninsula in favor of South Korea, has brought some sense of security to North Korea, but with a high price. North Korea has estranged China, its traditional ally, and invited sanctions resolutions from the Security Council. Its nuclear program remains an inflammatory issue that not only makes North Korea combative in an effort to safeguard its right as a nuclear state, but also forces other players—such as South Korea, the United States, and Japan—to take countermeasures, individually or collectively.

North Korea's provocations are rooted in an external environment, which is hostile, volatile, and charged with nationalistic emotions. As long as North Korea's relations with South Korea and the United States remain antagonistic, its provocative behavior will continue unchanged. Its domestic politics also play an important role in shaping North Korea's external behavior, as listed and explained below:

Power transition. From the end of the Cold War, North Korea's leadership has twice experienced major changes. Kim Il-sung's death in 1994 gave birth to Kim Jong-il's regime; Kim Jong-il's sudden death paved the way for young Kim Jong-un to gain ascendancy. As new leaders came to power, they could not resist the temptation to stir up a crisis, in

which they could flex their muscles towards South Korea, the United States, or both, in an effort to boost their reputation and consolidate their power base at home. Kim Jong-un, inexperienced and untested, demonstrated his risk-taking propensity by scrapping the “2/29 agreement,” conducting a new round of long-range missile and nuclear tests, and shutting down the Kaesong Industrial Park. With the serial provocations, he hoped to achieve a number of objectives: 1) to legitimize his leadership and consolidate his power base by arousing patriotism and nationalism among the North Koreans; 2) to signal to the outside world that he is a tough leader who should not be taken lightly; and 3) to quickly learn how to handle and control a crisis with the outside world and to establish a solid foundation for him to manage foreign affairs.

Economic hardship. North Korea’s economy always relies on external assistance. To receive foreign aid, North Korea worked hard to cultivate friendships with major powers; it also resorted to coercive measures to extract aid from rivals. The collapse of the Soviet Union and regime changes in East European countries disrupted North Korea’s commercial ties with these countries. It lost most of its traditional trading partners. Coupled with deteriorating relations with China, North Korea experienced economic hardship, dubbed the “Hard March” by the government. Economic devastation forced North Korea to take provocative actions in its foreign relations with the aim of extracting economic benefits from the outside world. In fact, its external provocations sometimes worked. In the early 1990s, North Korea’s withdrawal from the NPT helped it to ink the Agreed Framework, in which it secured a supply of free heavy oil and the construction of two light-water reactors from the United States, South Korea, and Japan.

Diplomatic isolation. Diplomatic recognition between South Korea and China plunged North Korea into diplomatic isolation thanks to the failure of “cross recognition.” Losing its friendship with the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, North Korea’s diplomatic isolation was further heightened. To break its isolation, North Korea has two options: to seek diplomatic recognition through peaceful means or to pull a nation to the negotiating table through provocative means. As the United States and Japan are reluctant to enter negotiations to discuss diplomatic ties, North Korea has had to resort to intimidation to force the United States or Japan to the table. Normalizing relations with the United States has become North Korea’s top diplomatic priority. As the United States fails to respond to North Korean overtures, it opts to take actions to provoke the United States into talks.

Nuclear Weapons. The precarious situation on the Korean Peninsula gave birth to North Korea’s nuclear weapons, which, in turn, made the situation more dangerous. North Korea’s development and possession of nuclear weapons directly led to two grave consequences. First, they emboldened North Korea to engage in provocations in its relations with South Korea and the United States; second, as a new bargaining chip, provocations may help it to extract more concessions from its competitors. In fact, North Korea’s nuclear programs have reshaped the geopolitical landscape, in which other non-nuclear actors might be ensnared into a competition for nuclear weapons. Every time North Korea detonated a nuclear bomb, the whole region was pushed into a maelstrom. Its nuclear program has become a bone of contention in the region and triggered one crisis after another.

Northeast Asia is experiencing a new round of changes in its geopolitical landscape. Major players in the region, such as China and Japan, sometimes behaved in a provocative fashion

in order to influence the changes to their advantage. The external and internal factors mentioned above interact with each other to make North Korea particularly prone to take risks in its relations with other players in Northeast Asia.

PATTERN OF NORTH KOREA'S PROVOCATIONS

Northeast Asia has shown itself to be the most economically dynamic region in the world, now embarking on regional integration. North Korea stands as a maverick, which still embraces a command economy and cannot take meaningful steps to reform and open its doors to the outside world. Even though it goes against the economic and political trend, North Korea's external behavior does not deviate from other actors too much. The pattern of North Korea's provocations can be 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. The relationship between defensive and offensive provocations is also not static; as situations change, a defensive provocation may be transformed into an offensive one.

North Korea is weak in comparison to South Korea or the United States in economic or overall military strength. In addition, it suffers from a number of other major disadvantages: 1) as North Korea's relations with China become increasingly troubled, the U.S.-South Korean alliance remains solid; 2) South Korea and the United States conduct large-scale joint military exercises on a regular basis, perceived as a threat by North Korea; 3) North Korea is isolated, and its economy has to weather international sanctions imposed by the Security Council; and 4) North Korea's regime is rigid and vulnerable to power succession. With these facts in mind, a weak North Korea usually responds to external threats in a defensive, provocative fashion. For example, its pursuit of nuclear weapons is mainly a response to the unfavorable power transition on the Korean Peninsula. Although a defensive move, it crosses certain boundaries, such as withdrawal from the NPT, and thus constitutes a provocation. North Korea's alleged cyber-attack against Sony Pictures was a defensive reaction to a movie, *The Interview*, which made fun of its paramount leader Kim Jong-un. It crossed a red line—an act of vandalism, an unabashed provocation.²

Its relatively weak position does not prevent North Korea from initiating an offensive provocation, which may help it to achieve a number of objectives: 1) to hide its greater weakness during some period of time, such as leadership change; 2) to prevent South Korea or the United States from taking action deemed harmful to it, such as by shooting South Korean activists who try to send 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, particularly during general elections; and 5) to build a convincing military deterrent, conventional and nuclear. Therefore, even when its position is weak vis-a-vis South Korea or the United States, North Korea still has strong motivations to provoke.

Some North Korean provocations lie in a gray area and are hardly discerned as defensive or offensive acts. Regular verbal attacks on South Korean and U.S. leaders in state-control media are part of daily propaganda campaigns, although some finger pointing and name calling deviate from well-recognized ethics. Under certain conditions, some defensive provocations can be transformed into offensive ones. For example, North Korea's pursuit

of nuclear weapons in the 1990s might be perceived as a defensive provocation, but as it conducted its first nuclear test in 2006 and explicitly threatened to use its nuclear weapons against South Korea, Japan, and the United States in later years, these provocations can be regarded as offensive.

CHINA'S TWO-FACED ATTITUDE TOWARDS NORTH KOREA'S PROVOCATIONS

On the one hand, China wants both Koreas to refrain from taking any provocations in order to achieve the basic objective of “no war” and “no chaos” on the peninsula.³ Even though 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. Beijing has been forthcoming in venting its disapproval of some South Korean-U.S. activities, such as the joint military exercises in the Yellow Sea in 2011⁴ and the possible deployment of THAAD in South Korea,⁵ but rarely has it explicitly censured North Korea's conventional provocations. Yet, China has pursued the goal of “no nuclear” weapons on the peninsula, growing less tolerant of North Korea's nuclear development. When North Korea defied international opinion and conducted missile tests in July 2006, China broke its silence, implicitly denounced them,⁶ and endorsed passage of the Security Council's resolution 1695. When North Korea detonated its first-ever nuclear test in October 2006, China responded with explicit condemnation, exclaiming, “The DPRK ignored the universal opposition of the international community and flagrantly conducted the nuclear test. The Chinese government is resolutely opposed to it.”⁷ Since then, China has consistently opposed North Korea's nuclear tests.

China's two-faceted attitude towards North Korea's provocations demonstrates deep-seated thinking: 1) in comparison with South Korea and the United States, which are used to China's tough words, North Korea has been sensitive to and less tolerant of China's public criticism, let alone condemnation; 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, it is difficult to identify who is the initial perpetrator (China prefers to remain silent or express general, but ambiguous, statements rather than point the finger of blame); and 5) North Korea's nuclear tests crossed a threshold that China could not tolerate for at least three reasons. They are: the disruption of the Six-Party Talks and of China's efforts at denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula; the possibility of a chain reaction from South Korea and Japan going nuclear and making Northeast Asia a more dangerous place with the most nuclear states; and as a permanent member of the Security Council and a rising world power, China has a strong motivation to do its part to prevent nuclear proliferation and to contribute to the collective good.

Given the reasons above, China generally turns a blind eye to North Korea's conventional provocations and avoids publicly criticizing its behavior. At the same time, China has been quite critical of North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons and has been willing to take actions to punish North Korea for its nuclear provocations.

WHAT CAN CHINA DO?

North Korea's provocations not only have a direct impact on the security of North Korea, the United States, and Japan, they also have caused deep concern in Beijing, which believes that North Korea's uncontained provocations in conventional and nuclear fields might cause unwanted consequences. First, they might trigger an escalation of provocations or crises on the peninsula or in the region, as we have witnessed in the past. Given the tense situation, a minor provocation could turn into a big flare-up that traps China into an unwanted conflict or war. Second, a provocation would further complicate relations among the major powers, already simmering in resurrected rivalries, as they take different, if not conflicting approaches to the provocation (e.g., pitting China against the United States at the Security Council over the wording of the resolution against North Korea). Third, as North Korea's nuclear test sites are so close to China's border, its nuclear development poses a direct threat to China's security. If not a military response, China has to adopt other, cohesive measures to deal with North Korea's provocations.

Efforts to eliminate North Korea's provocations are doomed to fail, but to reduce them is still desirable and possible. From China's perspective, to use or threaten to use military force against North Korea is not an option in the foreseeable future for three reasons: 1) as China's core national interests are not in real danger, it sees no reason to do so; 2) technically, North Korea is still China's ally, to use or threaten use military forces against it would tarnish China's credibility, and there is no indication that either it or North Korea will turn against the other in the near future; and 3) even though North Korea has been widely perceived as a maverick, which does not follow regular rules, its conventional provocations have remained within bounds, which make external military intervention unnecessary.

North Korea's nuclear test technology is quite primitive: it did not seal the test tunnel well in the first nuclear detonation; and the second detonation, almost equal to an earthquake of magnitude 4.0, shattered the mountain badly and left cracks through which nuclear radiation may have leaked. Nearby border areas in China may have suffered nuclear contamination. Although the Chinese could not feel it, their children may bear the consequences.⁸ Given such dangers, China may use its military force to intervene under the following conditions: 1) North Korea conducts a new test, which might cause nuclear contamination into China's territory; 2) North Korea's nuclear facilities fail and may cause nuclear hazards, which may get out of control and impact China; 3) North Korea uses nuclear weapons against South Korea or the United States; or 4) the United States takes a surgical action in an attempt to take out North Korea's nuclear weapons. Military force may also be necessary in case of contingencies to stem the exodus of Korean refugees.

As China's retired lieutenant general Wang Hongguang revealed, North Korea has paid little attention to China's words and has done what it wanted to do.⁹ Yet, there have been cases of successful quiet diplomacy by China, as in late 2010, when Dai Bingguo's mediation during the Yeonpyeong crisis persuaded North Korea not to take further action as South Korea's military resumed its shell firing exercise.¹⁰ Coercive measures to pressure North Korea to do what it would not have done otherwise could, in some circumstances, be employed. It is no secret that China has applied pressure on North Korea for its diplomatic objectives—at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, it forced North Korea to choose between itself and the Soviet Union.¹¹ Yet, it is quite rare for China to resort to coercive measures in its

relations with North Korea. After North Korea detonated its first nuclear bomb, China went public with its disapproval of North Korea's provocations, punishing it through the Security Council in order to avoid a one-on-one confrontation with North Korea. Recently, when North Korea defied China and stubbornly pressed ahead with its nuclear and missile tests, China's response was increasingly tough. In the wake of North Korea's third nuclear test, a frustrated Beijing tightened its economic grip on Pyongyang by strictly enforcing Security Council resolutions against it.¹² So far, China's coercive diplomacy has not worked well, the stalled Six-Party Talks remain suspended, and North Korea shows no sign of embracing the idea of denuclearization.

Two caveats should be borne in mind: first, to persuade or force North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons is a collective task rather than China's sole responsibility. Concerted actions among major nations can produce an amplified effect. Second, persuasion plus material incentives and pressure are quick and easy ways to reduce North Korea's provocations, but they can only cure the symptoms rather than tackle the fundamental causes.

TACKLING THE ROOT CAUSES

North Korea's external provocations arise from within and without. If we expect North Korea to behave in a moderate manner, we should encourage it to change from within, including regime change and policy change. For the time being, policy change in North Korea is the more realistic expectation. If Pyongyang decides to open its door to the outside world and undertake meaningful reform, its external behavior will become increasingly moderate, because a peaceful and stable external environment is necessary for such a change. History shows that the international community rarely forces a country to make a fundamental change unless the ruling class wants to change. China could encourage North Korea to reform with the objective of reducing its desire to provoke in its external relations.

In addition, China is prepared to work with other partners to deal with the external factors that stimulate North Korea's combative spirit. The geopolitical division among Koreans is still the most destructive factor. Although the Korean people bear the major responsibility to iron out their differences and achieve national unification, China and other stakeholders can help to tackle two interconnected issues: the truce on the peninsula and North Korea's nuclear weapons. The truce makes the two Koreas nervous since they still live under the shadow of war. In comparison with South Korea, North Korea may be more worried about its security as the United States still firmly stands behind South Korea. Turning the truce treaty into a permanent peace treaty and ending the war on the peninsula can help to create an environment conducive to reducing North Korea's provocations.

North Korea's nuclear weapons are a direct result of inter-Korean rivalry. According to North Korea's calculations, nuclear weapons can help it to stave off invasion from South Korea and the United States and give it added strength in its competition with South Korea. Unfortunately, these weapons became a problem in the region and hurt North Korea itself, as seen in Security Council sanction resolutions; China's alienation; the further deterioration of inter-Korean relations; and the fact that North Korea-U.S. normalization is still beyond reach. In fact, as South Korea and the United States took steps to prevent North Korea from launching a nuclear attack, including joint military exercises and possible deployment of THAAD in South Korea, North Korea's security itself was surely further jeopardized.

To continue to push for early resumption of the stalled Six-Party Talks is a viable way to eradicate some of the root causes of North Korea's provocations, but so far North Korea shows no sign of giving up its nuclear weapons. Even though North Korea continues to insist that "to achieve denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il's testament, and Korea is willing to participate in any kind of talks, including the Six-Party Talks, to settle the nuclear issue peacefully through negotiations,"¹³ it remains deadlocked with South Korea and the United States over a variety of issues with regard to the resumption of the Six-Party Talks.

CONCLUSION

North Korea's provocations constitute one of the prominent security threats in Northeast Asia, but they are not alone. Other actors have also behaved in a provocative way from time to time and caused tension or crises in their external relations. In comparison with other actors, North Korea's provocations stand out in a number of ways: their high frequency, their conspicuously offensive nature, their unabashed verbal abuse of competitors' leaders with racial and sexual discrimination undertones, and their enlarged scope with nuclear and missile tests and explicit threats to use nuclear weapons against competitors. As North Korea's immediate neighbor and long-term ally, China has mixed feelings toward North Korea's provocations. On the one hand, it fully understands that North Korea's provocations have internal and external causes and do not stand alone as rivalries among major powers in the region intensify. China itself is criticized for being aggressive in some territorial disputes, but as it emerges as a leading power, it may come to realize that it has to do something to rein in North Korea's external provocations if it wants to exercise leadership and keep its own security free from nuclear threat.

To temper North Korea's external behavior is a collective mission rather than China's sole responsibility. Every other stakeholder should take responsibility to create favorable conditions that encourage North Korea to take moderate action in its foreign relations. China can do so by persuading North Korea behind the scenes with material incentives. If persuasion fails, China can apply pressure, including assistance cuts and economic disengagement. So far, China has entered the stage of using persuasion and pressure simultaneously in its relations with North Korea. Although military intervention is not an option, given the geographic proximity of North Korea's nuclear sites and its primitive nuclear technology, China has to be militarily prepared for possible nuclear hazards.

To restrain North Korea's provocations, Beijing can register its disapproval by imposing limited sanctions against it, following UNSC resolutions, but the approach China has adopted can only alleviate or cure the symptoms. To root out the fundamental causes of North Korea's provocations, China and other stakeholders, especially South Korea and the United States, should work together to encourage North Korea to open its door to the outside world and reform. They should also jump start the Six-Party Talks in order to tackle the three old, 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.

Certainly, unification will be the ultimate solution to North Korea's provocation. As unification is still remote, provocations from both Koreas will be a matter of routine. North Korea continues to resist the international call to give up its nuclear weapons and may counter the call by conducting a new round of long-range missile and nuclear tests. China and other stakeholders should be prepared.

ENDNOTES

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