



Proactive Deterrence: The Challenge of Escalation Control on the Korean Peninsula

by Abraham M. Denmark

Since the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty in 1953, the U.S.-ROK alliance has been tremendously successful in deterring a large-scale attack by the DPRK. Even during national famines and persistent mass poverty, North Korea has invested significant percentages of its national wealth into developing a large military force; in contrast, South Korea has emerged as a robust democracy with an advanced, capable military and one of the world's leading economies. Indeed, South Korea's success and security today is a testament to the ability of the ROK military, with the support of America's nuclear and conventional extended deterrent commitment, to prevent another invasion from the North.

Although today the DPRK's ability to forcibly unify the Korean Peninsula is highly questionable and deterrence against a large-scale invasion remains the alliance's top priority, North Korea retains the ability to successfully conduct small-scale attacks against South Korea, apparently at will. This was most recently demonstrated on the night of 26 March 2010 in the black waters of the Yellow (West) Sea, when the South Korean Pohang-class corvette, *Cheonan*, suddenly exploded and quickly sank, killing 46 sailors.¹ The North's ability to successfully strike the South was further confirmed seven months later when North Korean artillery units in Mudo and Kaemori bombarded Yeonpyeong Island, killing two South Korean marines, injuring six additional military personnel, and killing two civilians.

These attacks sent tremendous political shock waves throughout the ROK and galvanized unprecedented levels of popular anger toward Pyongyang. The sudden death of ROK sailors stunned South Korean civilians and strategists alike. More shocking were the deaths of civilians on Yeonpyeong Island, who were the first civil-

ians killed by the DPRK on ROK soil since 1953. As a result of popular dismay at these attacks as well as the strategic determination that significant deficiencies in the ROK military's defensive capabilities had been exposed and that deterrence against the North may have slipped, South Korea's strategic community and the ROK military developed a series of policy, strategy, and operational adjustments centered on the concept of "proactive deterrence." While much of the new policy, which included recommendations to improve the ROK's ability to defend against and respond to small-scale attacks from the North, is prudent and necessary, the decision to attempt to deter such attacks could represent a significant shift in the ROK's strategic orientation. Such a shift could have several implications for escalation control on the Korean Peninsula, which should be a primary issue of concern for South Korean and U.S. strategists alike.

This essay will examine the phenomenon of small-scale attacks against the ROK conducted by the DPRK in order to put the attacks of 2010 into their proper historical context. This essay will then describe deterrence and escalation dynamics on the Korean Peninsula today, discuss the strategic implications of proactive deterrence, and recommend policies and initiatives that could mitigate the potential for accidental escalation while sustaining general deterrence over the DPRK.

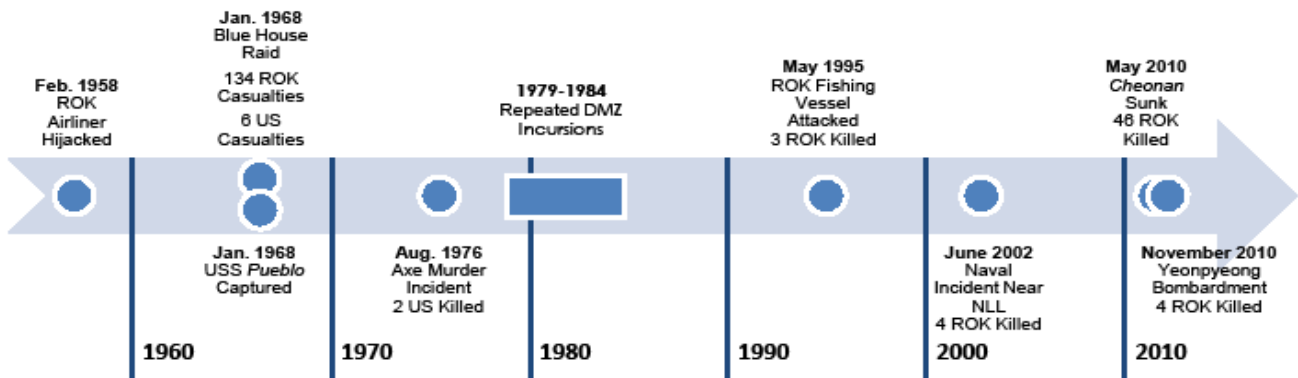
Small-Scale Provocations and Seoul's Deterrence Shift

Although U.S.-ROK planning since the end of the Korean War has focused on deterring and defending against a large-scale DPRK attack, small-scale attacks by the North against the South have unfortunately been a regular occurrence. Indeed, as of this writing, North Korea has conducted 221 attacks against the South since 1953, an average of almost four attacks per year.² To achieve a multitude of different objectives, these

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attacks have utilized a wide variety of tactics against a diverse target set that has included attacks on the Blue House, a terrorist attack against a civilian airliner, repeated incursions along the DMZ, attempted assassinations, and attacks against ROK and U.S. ships and aircraft (*Figure 1*). Despite the diverse nature of these attacks, they share some common characteristics: their violence, their suddenness, and their relatively limited scale.

Figure 1: Selected Small-Scale DPRK Attacks on the ROK, 1953–2011



Despite the regularity of such attacks, alliance deterrence planning until 2010 focused primarily on large-scale attacks by the North. This began to change after the attacks of 2010, when Seoul decided that further incursions were intolerable and must be deterred. The resulting policy of proactive deterrence represents a significant shift in South Korea’s strategic orientation.

A new era in South Korea’s strategic thinking was inaugurated in March 2011, when President Lee Myung-bak approved an updated Defense Reform Plan (referred to as DRP 307) based on the proposals of the Presidential Committee for Defense Reform (PCDR) and the Presidential National Security Review Board. According to the chairman of the PCDR, Dr. Rhee Sang-woo, DRP 307 focused on doctrinal changes designed to cope with the North Korean threat and the reorganization of the ROK military’s command and control and force structure.³

Under these changes, South Korea’s orientation shifted from one of deterrence by denial (depriving the North of the benefits of an attack by defending against small-scale attacks and containing provocations) to proactive deterrence. According to Dr. Rhee, Seoul had determined that deterrence by denial was overly passive and only served to restore the status quo ante, constrained the ROK military’s ability to shape a more favorable battlefield, and ceded the operational initiative to the DPRK.⁴

DRP 307 included several important reform proposals that would improve the ROK’s ability to defend against, and respond to, small-scale attacks from the North. It focused on reinforcing jointness and maximizing efficiency in defense management, and it sought to centralize and streamline the ROK military’s command structure, placing the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as commander of the Combined

Forces Command upon the transfer of wartime operational control to the ROK in 2015.⁵ The ROK military also reportedly revised rules of engagement in order to allow troops to respond rapidly and lethally to future North Korean aggression, and DRP 307 has signaled a tolerance for accidents as a necessary price for increased vigilance.⁶

DRP 307 also called on the ROK military to move beyond self-defense and take prompt, focused, and disproportionate retaliatory (and perhaps even preemptive) actions in order to raise the costs to North Korea of small-scale attacks. The ROK minister of national defense, Kim Kwan-jin, explained that “[i]f the enemy attacks our people and territory, I will use force to punish the enemy to make sure it doesn’t even dare to think about it again. The enemy should be punished thoroughly until the source of hostility is eliminated.”⁷

While many of the defensive reforms undertaken or called for within the rubric of these reforms were undeniably necessary and positive, crisis management and military defense are missions that are considerably different from deterrence. Establishing deterrence over small-scale attacks from the North is far more complex than defending against them and significantly increases the risk of unintentional escalation. Much of this is due to the reality that the intention to deter small-scale attacks, and even the decision to increase the price of small-scale attacks through proportional retaliation, does not change the fundamental strategic dynamics of the Korean Peninsula, in which North Korea is able to successfully bring tensions to the brink of crisis secure in its belief that, ultimately, Seoul is

more risk averse than Pyongyang and is less willing to accept significant physical or economic damage.

Deterrence on the Korean Peninsula

Thomas Schelling demonstrated that deterrence is essentially the manipulation of risk,⁸ and it is clear that in the intervening decades since the end of the Korean War, the DPRK has grown exceedingly skilled at the manipulation of risk. Fundamentally, the ROK has much to lose in a conflict while the DPRK has very little to lose, short of complete destruction. And, unfortunately for those who seek to deter small-scale attacks, the structural dynamics that have defined inter-Korean escalation calculations for decades cannot be altered by changes in policy, strategy, or doctrine. South Korea represents one of the world's largest and most advanced economies, and its people enjoy a very high quality of life. Moreover, while the current ruling party and its constituency follow a strong approach to North Korea defined by military strength and limited economic support, significant segments of the population of South Korea oppose harsh or confrontational policies toward the North; instead they prefer pursuing friendly engagement to encourage reform and more responsible behavior. While the ROK (and its U.S. allies) likely have the ability to defend the South and forcibly reunify the peninsula, doing so would come at a profound human and economic toll. The threat of North Korean long-range artillery, Special Forces, weapons of mass destruction, and ballistic missiles foretells devastation for the South in the event of a general conflict—a price that the ROK's wealthy and cosmopolitan polity is unlikely to accept. This dynamic makes a policy of strength and confrontation difficult to sustain over a long period of time, especially when Pyongyang's approach to the ROK is relatively friendly and positive.

North Korea, on the other hand, is economically backward, undeveloped, and armed to the teeth. The opinions and living conditions of its people appear to matter little to North Korea's ruling elite, who have for decades preferred to sustain their power with isolation and confrontation, even at the cost of poverty, instability, and a devastating famine.

The United States has since 1953 been South Korea's ace in the hole. Even as North Korea has tested nuclear weapons, Seoul could be assured that North Korea would not initiate a large-scale attack, conventional or otherwise, because of the conventional and nuclear extended deterrent pledge by the United States. Seoul could therefore feel secure in backing off from a confrontation in the North, firm in the knowledge that Pyongyang's provocations would not escalate to the level that would elicit a heavy U.S. response.

Thus, for decades, Pyongyang has demonstrated a greater willingness than Seoul to accept losses and increase tensions to near the point of outright hostility, leading to the North Korean maxim that “we are willing to cut off our leg, and you are not willing to cut off your pinkie.” Seoul has much to lose from a conflagration, and its politics often force its leaders to push for peace during a conflict—in effect, forcing Seoul to blink first. Pyongyang in contrast appears comfortable with escalating tensions in order to extract concessions, apparently secure in its beliefs that Seoul has far more to lose if tension were to escalate into conflict and thus is not willing to pay the tremendous human and economic costs associated with regime change by force.

This structural advantage in escalation dominance has to date allowed the DPRK to conduct small-scale attacks against the ROK, relatively safe in the knowledge that Seoul will not allow tensions to escalate into a general conflict.

Escalation Challenges of Proactive Deterrence

These unchanged dynamics call into question the likely effectiveness of an attempt by Seoul to deter small-scale attacks. With its new strategic approach, Seoul is in effect attempting to deter attacks that were not previously the target of deterrence, without changing the structural escalation dynamics that have enabled both deterrence against large-scale attacks from the North as well as Pyongyang's ability to conduct small-scale attacks without fear of a general war.

Effective deterrence requires the ability to credibly threaten a potential attacker with costs that, according to the attacker's calculation, outweigh the benefits of the original potential attack. While deterring large-scale attacks with the threat of forcible regime change is a relatively straightforward calculation for North Korea to make and the outside world to understand, Pyongyang's cost-benefit calculations regarding small-scale attacks are much more difficult to determine. Indeed, the small-scale attacks of 2010 are instructive as to the opacity of North Korean strategic calculations regarding small-scale attacks.

Reports regarding Pyongyang's motivations for conducting the attacks of 2010 are diverse yet equally plausible. Observers have asserted that the attack on the *Cheonan* was motivated by a diverse set of factors, including the North taking revenge for a November 2009 naval clash, undermining the legitimacy of the Northern Limit Line (NLL), intimidating Seoul so that it doesn't carry out future military exercises in the area, raising tensions to extract concessions from the United States and the ROK, and boosting regime legitimacy, or was an act used by military hard-liners to expand their influence in Pyongyang.⁹ Similarly, plausible reasons for the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island have included retaliation for South Korea's previous shelling of disputed waters (Pyongyang's declared motivation), Northern jealousy over the South's expanding global stature, brinkmanship to extract U.S. and South Korean con-

cessions, and internal leadership transition dynamics.¹⁰

Even more difficult than determining North Korean motivations with any degree of certainty, explaining what costs would prevent escalation or another small-scale attack is even more difficult to confidently understand. For example, a great deal of uncertainty continues to surround Pyongyang's decision to not respond to a South Korean artillery exercise that was in itself a response to the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. Even though Pyongyang had threatened to respond harshly to the exercise, there was no military reaction. Why? Some have credited Chinese intervention for Pyongyang's apparent restraint.¹¹ Although possible, the fact that Pyongyang had apparently ignored previous Chinese entreaties not to test a nuclear weapon at least brings Chinese influence over Pyongyang into question. Other explanations—that deterrence succeeded in preventing escalation or that further escalation was simply not part of Pyongyang's original plan—are likewise equally plausible.

Such uncertainty about North Korean cost-benefit calculations will pose a major challenge to ROK efforts to conduct proportional responses to future small-scale attacks. Proportionality requires a fairly robust understanding of what an adversary holds dear, and North Korea's apparent willingness to accept the death of its people and economic catastrophe complicates the ROK's ability to identify what exactly threatens that which Pyongyang holds dear.

In some cases, certainly, proportionality can be straightforward. In the case of the Yeonpyeong bombardment, the destruction of the responsible artillery batteries seems appropriate (although that action is unlikely to deter future small-scale attacks). Yet the sinking of the *Cheonan* presents a more complex choice. What is proportional to losing a surface ship and 46 sailors? Surely, the ROK's sinking of the offending minisubmarine will not cost North Korea as much as losing the *Cheonan* cost South Korea. Nor is it likely to enhance deterrence. Yet other available options, such as attacks on submarine bases or a submarine blockade, are disproportional and would be likely to escalate the crisis.

The opacity of Pyongyang's cost-benefit calculations regarding escalation and crisis makes attempts at establishing deterrence against small-scale attacks a highly fraught proposition. Uncertainty regarding Pyongyang's expected reactions to attempts at deterrence will increase significantly as Kim Jong-il gradually transfers power and authority to the next generation of leadership, with his young son, Kim Jong-un, at the helm. How the younger Kim and his generational cohorts will solidify their hold on power, navigate brinkmanship and negotiations with the outside world, and approach

North Korea's economy and nuclear program are entirely unknown and will likely be highly unpredictable for the foreseeable future.

The possibility of preemption by the ROK by what it assesses to be an imminent small-scale attack from the North is especially problematic from an escalatory standpoint. Although it is unclear that preemption is an explicit element of Seoul's proactive deterrence approach, the statement by presidential spokesman Lee Dong-kwan that the principle of proactive deterrence is "to preempt further provocations and threats from the North against the South, as well as simply exercising the right of self-defense" certainly suggests as much.¹² The danger of preemption is the potential that Pyongyang may respond with an attack more devastating and shocking than what may have been originally intended, especially if domestic North Korean politics come into play and Pyongyang sees itself as unable to back down.

Further, the distinction between self-defensive actions and those that punish or retaliate can be unclear in the fog of war and tension. For example, if South Korea is struck by artillery, would it be considered self-defense to attack the firing artillery units? What about supporting artillery units? What about command and control nodes that certainly played a role in the attack? What about the unit's logistics train? Or the military or civilian leadership centers that may have ordered the strike? Somewhere along this list of possible targets lies the line between self-defense, punishment, and retaliation. Although the ROK may see a strike as being conducted purely in self-defense, the DPRK may interpret the same strike as punishment or even a preemptive element of a more general attack, either of which may elicit additional, escalatory strikes from the North. Punishment and retaliation therefore significantly increase the potential for escalation and should be tightly controlled.

Other escalation control challenges are raised when considering reported changes to ROK military rules of engagement, allowing lower-level units to make decisions regarding self-defensive actions. Although this has already proven to raise the risk of an accidental attack on nonthreatening civilian aircraft, it also raises the risk of escalation in general. If a South Korean military unit strikes a North Korean unit out of the mistaken belief that it was about to attack, Pyongyang could easily read such an action as an offensive attack in itself and respond in kind. Tensions would therefore escalate drastically through no explicit action by the leadership of either side, complicating the ability of central commanders on both sides to understand what is happening and ratchet down tensions. Because of North Korea's apparent willingness to sacrifice lives and economic development to make a political point, an impulse to establish deterrence over small-scale attacks may encourage planners to consider disproportional responses, especially if small-scale attacks begin to generate political pressure within the ROK to bring them to a halt. Yet reactions from Pyongyang—how North Korea will view

such disproportionate responses as part of its strategic calculations, how it may attempt to manipulate international perceptions to position itself as the victim of aggression, and how it may choose to escalate tensions in order to prove a political point or satisfy domestic political requirements—all raise the risk of unnecessary miscalculation.

Recommendations

The majority of the recommended changes to South Korea's military following the 2010 small-scale attacks have been focused on improving defensive capabilities, and most were generally prudent and necessary. The alliance is strengthening combined intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, and the ROK military intends to develop precision strike capabilities.¹³ South Korea has also signaled its intent to further consolidate the U.S.-ROK combined defense system and to rapidly utilize U.S. supporting forces in the event of future small-scale attacks.¹⁴ In addition, restructured mechanisms within the U.S.-ROK alliance will help damp escalatory tendencies. Seoul and Washington have established an Extended Deterrence Policy Committee (EDPC) with high-level oversight, through which the alliance compares threat perceptions, facilitates information sharing, and recommends policy changes based on deterrence rationales.¹⁵

Yet efforts to deter small-scale attacks appear to be an unrealistic objective. Given North Korea's consistent record of conducting small-scale attacks on the South, the difficulty of understanding North Korean behavior and strategic calculations, and the risks of escalation associated with attempting to deter small-scale attacks, it seems that enduring such attacks unfortunately appears to be an unalterable cost of the continued existence of a hostile regime in Pyongyang. Nevertheless, additional strategy and policy shifts are warranted.

First and foremost, Seoul should prepare the South Korean people for the reality that, so long as North Korea remains hostile, future small-scale attacks are likely. Although strenuous efforts to defend against such attacks and respond as appropriate are certainly warranted, deterrence against small-scale attacks is unlikely to succeed so long as the fundamental strategic deterrence dynamics on the Korean Peninsula remain.

In line with this orientation, defense investments and doctrine should be oriented toward a forward, active defense that preserves stability and maximizes the safety of South Korean military and civilian assets from a sudden, small-scale attack from the North. Deterrence is not only the threat of force intended to convince a potential aggressor not to undertake a particular action because the costs will be unacceptable—it can also

succeed if the potential aggressor believes the chances of success to be extremely low.¹⁶ Improving South Korea's defensive capabilities can therefore have a deterrence effect, albeit an imperfect one. On land, this should include a significant investment in the construction and hardening of modern shelters within civilian population centers as well as increased training of police and emergency responders to rapidly identify and mitigate North Korean incursions. At sea, this investment should entail a significant investment in advanced maritime domain awareness and antisubmarine warfare capabilities, both of which would benefit from significant alliance coordination. Additional investments, such as helicopters to defend against small-boat Special Forces incursions and the use of armed unmanned aerial vehicles to patrol the DMZ and vulnerable areas of coastline, are warranted. Precision capabilities to strike attacking North Korean units should be developed and responsibly employed, but only to halt additional attacks, not to preempt, punish, or retaliate.

Finally, alliance and military consultative mechanisms should be strengthened to address and minimize the potential for accidental escalation. While the ROK military's right of self-defense is sacrosanct and should not be restricted, actions that preempt, punish, or retaliate should be discussed and pre-approved by both allies. Further, to ensure that the United States and the ROK understand each other, the EDPC should work to define the different actions that are defensive and those that preempt, punish, or retaliate. Such consultation and coordination efforts will help mitigate escalatory actions that are not supported by alliance commanders as well as ensure that U.S. and South Korean leaders are comfortable and supportive of one another's actions. While such a mechanism has been obliquely discussed by Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta, it should be explicitly established as part of normal alliance procedures.¹⁷

The EDPC should also be the venue for discussion between the U.S. and ROK militaries about exit ramps and methods to de-escalate crises. Too often, discussions about retaliation and deterrence forget to consider an adversary's likely responses and how to actually de-escalate a crisis. Simple demonstrations of power and will are alone insufficient; the EDPC should examine these challenges and develop alliance-approved plans to de-escalate crises created by future small-scale attacks from the DPRK.

One effect of the 2010 attacks has been a more active U.S. presence at Yeonpyeong Island and the Yellow (West) Sea, which has previously only been a venue for inter-Korean tensions and conflict. Inserting U.S. units into these areas likely has been effective in changing the DPRK's risk calculations. Yet it also raises the risk of escalation if the DPRK were to succeed in attacking a U.S. military unit (either intentionally or unintentionally). The EDPC should therefore examine response options if the target of future small-scale attacks were to be U.S. military assets, and consider the use of declaratory statements as well as a mix of diplomatic, economic, and mili-

tary responses to such an attack.

Ultimately, there are no certainties when dealing with North Korea. The pattern of tension, belligerence, and brinkmanship employed by the North is inherently threatening to peace on the Korean Peninsula and all of Northeast Asia. As successful as the U.S.-ROK alliance has been in deterring a large-scale attack from the North for almost 60 years, the price of a divided Korean Peninsula is apparently regular small-scale attacks from the North and eternal vigilance from the South and its American allies. Although reforms and adjustments are very much warranted, it is important that strategists in Seoul and Washington remain mindful of the differences between crisis management, defense, and deterrence. Attempting to deter what may, in fact, be undeterrable raises the risk of miscalculation and accidental escalation—outcomes that as much as possible should be avoided by Seoul and Washington.

In the face of threats and belligerence from Pyongyang, strength and resolve will continue to be necessary to ensure the security of South Korea and the freedom of its people. Yet equally important will be the wisdom and restraint of South Korean leaders and strategists. The peace of Northeast Asia is in their hands.

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(Endnotes)

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