

Playbook miscalculations: Hidden agendas behind the present US-North Korea crisis

Tim Beal

12 June 2013

Every year for decades the US has been running huge joint military exercises with South Korea. These have various functions – keeping the military in trim, tension-building, forcing North Korea to go onto alert to drain its meagre resources, etc. Every year North Korea (and China in the background) protests. This year things are different. The United States has ostentatiously introduced various weapons systems – including B-52s and B-2s – in an unprecedented display of military might conveying messages not merely for North Korea but for South Korea and China. It has used the opportunity to ratchet up missile defense, with serious implications for China. North Korea has reacted with an unusual degree of vehemence, reflecting both the youth of its leader Kim Jong Un, and increased confidence in its nuclear deterrent, or at least the threat of it. Although the United States portrays its military exercises as defensive, a protection against North Korean threat, the evidence points in the other direction.

Despite having a large army –North Korea is in effect a people under arms – it is much weaker than its southern neighbour. It is not just that South Korea has twice the population, but its military has nearly all the bells and whistles that the United States can provide. Between 2000 and 2008, according to data from the Stockholm Peace Research Institute, it was the world's third largest importer of arms, behind China and India, while North Korea was number 90. The South imported a hundred times as much as the North. Any war between the two Koreas would automatically involve the US because it has 'wartime control' of South Korea's military. Throwing the US into the equation, with Japan (which has the 5th largest arms budget in world) sitting in the wings, the odds are enormous, and the outcome, short-term at least, inevitable. A recent article on [Foreign Affairs](#) spelt it out:

Ironically, the risk of North Korean nuclear war stems not from weakness on the part of the United States and South Korea but from their strength. If war erupted, the North Korean army, short on training and armed with decrepit equipment, would prove no match for the U.S.–South Korean Combined Forces Command. Make no mistake, Seoul would suffer some damage, but a conventional war would be a rout, and CFC forces would quickly cross the border and head north.....

At that point, North Korea's inner circle would face a grave decision: how to avoid the terrible fates of such defeated leaders as Saddam Hussein and Muammar al-Qaddafi.[other than fleeing to China]... Pyongyang's only other option would be to try to force a cease-fire by playing its only trump card: nuclear escalation.

The authors got it a bit wrong. It no longer seems as if North Korea will wait until the Americans are at the gates of Pyongyang before resorting to nuclear weapons. One of the changes that this current crisis has brought about is that North Korea has [announced](#) that it will use its nuclear deterrent early in a conflict. North Korean English-language statements are often poorly translated and easily subject to misreporting. The pro-US [International Crisis Group](#) clarified the statement:

The statement declared that "if the Americans light the fuse of a nuclear war, the revolutionary forces will exercise the right to execute a preemptive nuclear attack against the headquarters of the invaders". World media reported this as threatening a preemptive nuclear strike against the U.S., but it should be interpreted to mean the North is prepared to retaliate with nuclear weapons against a conventional military attack..[by the Americans and South Koreans].

When examined, all North Korea's 'threats' are in fact reactive and conditional: ['First, if you read the North Korean statements in full, they are all saying "IF the U.S./ROK attack us first, we will fight back," \(not "we will attack you first," which is often how they are interpreted\)'](#).

So, what is going on? Given that North Korea is so much weaker than its opponents and that the chances of it deliberately starting a war are miniscule, it is clear that the military exercises are designed to raise tension, rather than preserve peace. But why have the Americans escalated the current exercises?

Part of the US strategy was revealed in an [article in the Wall Street Journal](#) which described what officials called a 'playbook' to escalate tension in a planned manner. The WSJ said that the Obama administration had approved the playbook earlier in the year, but it seems that it had been put together before that. The [planned B-2 demonstration](#) reportedly dates from December 2012.

What was the purpose of the playbook? Why stoke the fires at this particular time? Obviously the message is partly aimed at North Korea, and China, but the main intended recipient is Park Geun-hye, the new South Korean president. She promised during her election campaign to reverse the policy of her predecessor and engage with North Korea, a latter-day Sunshine Policy, something which causes alarm in the [US security establishment](#) and in the South Korean [right](#).

The United States has taken various steps to retain control of the situation. A new agreement with the South Korea military will bring in the US at an earlier stage of an 'incident', thus [shifting power from the South Korean president to the US military](#). There are rumours that US 'wartime control' of the South Korean military is to be [postponed](#) yet again. Donald Gregg, Bush senior's ambassador to South Korea, has suggested that the US-initiated UN resolution condemning North Korea's satellite launch was intended to [derail Park's engagement policy](#).

Now the Wall Street Journal suggests the US is putting the playbook on hold and 'dialling back' its threats. Why? There appear to have been concerns expressed by [Seoul](#) that things were getting too dangerous. It seems that the vigour and determination of Kim Jong Un's response has been unexpected but that, in itself, is not a major factor since the decision for war lies in Washington, not in Pyongyang. The WSJ gives a clue as to the real concern – the US navy itself. Apparently the Pentagon had got carried away with war fever and had sent ships towards North Korea in a move that was not in the playbook.

One of the problems about running a global empire, with the largest war machine in history, is that not everyone can be kept in the loop. Many people, even generals and admirals, have to be kept in the dark and left to do their own thing in accordance with general principles laid out from up above. As the crisis was escalated and the North Koreans responded, not with any military action, but gestures, such as the abandonment of the 1953 Armistice Agreement (which had been violated so many times already, not least by the military exercises themselves) and with belligerent, defiant,

rhetoric . All this got the media worked up, as it likes to be, in an apocalyptic frenzy. Armageddon is around the corner, Kim Jong Un has gone crazy and must be stopped now before he nukes us all!

The framers of the playbook strategy knew what they were doing. The Walls Street Journal article reassures us that

U.S. intelligence agencies assessed the risks associated with the playbook and concluded there was a low probability of a North Korean military response because the regime's top priority has been self-preservation.

Or to put it another, more honest way, they knew that they could be as provocative as they liked, short of an actual incursion into North Korea, because the government would not retaliate. Far from being a crazily threatening country, as portrayed by the media (with a little prompting from US officials), North Korea is small and weak, but is ready to defend itself and calibrates quite carefully its response to provocation. The playbook was based on an understanding of this. The aim was not to precipitate war, but to prevent peace breaking out.

That's what the US navy stumbled into. If a war was to erupt in Korea the most likely place is in the West Sea around the Northern Limit Line (NLL). This was unilaterally drawn up by the Americans after the Armistice in 1953 ironically to stop South Korea's Syngman Rhee from re-igniting the war as he wanted to do. Kissinger, in a moment of candour, admitted that the NLL was [clearly contrary to international law](#). The North does not recognise the NLL and there are often clashes. Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong Il agreed at their summit in 2007 to turn it into a '[zone of peace](#)' but Roh was soon to vacate office and his hard-line successor, Lee Myung-bak, keen to precipitate a crisis that he hope would lead to a collapse of North Korea, reneged on that.

One of the 'contingencies' mentioned in plans to bring the US in at the early stages of a clash is [North Korean naval boats' crossing the Northern Limit Line](#). A battle between the North and South Korean navies could be contained, as has happened in the past. A fire-fight involving the US navy is another matter. This might be interpreted by Pyongyang as the opening salvoes of an invasion and they might counterattack, as they have threatened to do, with all means at their disposal including nuclear weapons. This threat is meant, of course, as a deterrent but deterrents are only effective if both sides believe in them.

The US administration moved to cool things down. A planned ICBM missile test (of which there have been more than a thousand over the years) was postponed on the grounds, Chuck Hagel explained, that it [could be misinterpreted and exacerbate the Korean crisis](#). The North Koreans, for their part, did not carry out the test of a midrange missile that had been confidently predicted by US officials. Since Pyongyang had never stated it was planning a test we don't know if they suspended it as a counter-gesture. The anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth was celebrated on 15 April not by a missile test, or by a military parade, both definitely forecast by the media, but rather by the usual mass dancing in the main square. The Western media reported, with a sense of bemusement, that all was calm in Pyongyang. The Economist said that the city [appeared to be busier preparing for the coming of spring than a coming war](#). One resident was quoted as saying

"The people of Pyongyang are confident. They know we can win any war," he was quoted as saying. "We now have nuclear weapons. So you won't see any worry on people's faces, even if the situation is tense."

'Winning a war' is, of course, stretching things, and North Korea's meagre nuclear arsenal can't do that. Indeed nobody would win a nuclear war. But the possibility that North Korea has some sort of nuclear weapons capability, however rudimentary, does provide a deterrent from an American attack, either in the Iraq fashion, directly, or in the Libyan one, through proxies. This possibility might, just might, force Washington into meaningful negotiations and accepting peaceful coexistence, North Korea's long term aim. Secretary Kerry has been making various noises about negotiations and dialogue but these are difficult to interpret because it is the [preconditions](#) which are the key indicators whether proposals are serious and he has been ambiguous about them . North Korea has laid out its own preconditions. Halting the military exercises for one, and Washington's refusal to do that suggests it is not ready to negotiate yet. However, it is the demand that it be recognised as a nuclear weapons state which will be the sticking point. The United States has long demanded that North Korea abandon any nuclear weapons programme. It has no plans to do that itself, of course, or to encourage others, such as [David Cameron](#), but then double standards are the very stuff of imperialism.

In the past, before it had nuclear weapons, that was negotiable, but no longer. If George Bush had not torn up Bill Clinton's 1994 Agreed Framework then North Korea would not have developed its nuclear deterrent. But the United States could never bring itself to peace with North Korea and agreements were never consummated, and negotiations floundered.

What will happen now? It was predictable that tensions would subside and sometime mid-year there would be talks between Pyongyang and Seoul. The playbook would have failed but US opposition to tension reduction would continue. Park Geun-hye came away from her meeting with Obama in May being criticised for not being assertive enough in pressing [the South Korean case for engagement](#). The initiative was taken out of her hands by two North Korean moves. Kim Jong Un sent a top level envoy to deliver a personal letter to Xi Jinping and, in an attempt to repair bridges, agreed to [re-join the Six Party Talks](#). The North then made an overture to the South that could not be rejected and talks about talks swung into action immediately. How far they will go and what will be achieved is as yet unknown and no doubt there will be wranglings as they [spar over details](#). The State Department gave a [frosty reaction](#) to the North-South negotiations. But the big game is that between Washington and Pyongyang and that is very complex, complicated by the strange world of American domestic politics, and the strategic need to keep tension alive on the Korean peninsula as a key part of the strategy of containing China. At the Sunnylands summit in June Obama apparently [rebuffed Xi's plea](#) for the US to come back to the Six Party Talks.

No war, but then no peace either, in the immediate future.

Tim Beal's most recent book, [Crisis in Korea: America, China, and the Risk of War](#) was published by Pluto Press in 2011. He also maintains the website [Asian Geopolitics](#).

#####

Possible photos

Kim Jong Un inspects off shore islands in a wooden boat to evade South Korean radar



Source: Lorenz, Andreas. "Crisis in Korea: Obama Must Change US Approach to Stop Kim." *Der Spiegel*, 5 April 2013. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/only-barack-obama-can-calm-crisis-surrounding-north-korea-a-892786.html>

Receding threat? Mass dancing in Pyongyang



Source: "Foreign media reports Pyongyang residents preparing for spring, not war." *Hankyoreh*, 12 April 2013. http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/582562.html

Original caption: In an unspecified location in Pyongyang, this Korean Central News Agency photo shows young North Koreans dancing in traditional Korean attire, Apr. 11. Similar events are being held across the country for the one-year anniversary of Kim Jong-un's leadership in North Korea.