

War games gone wrong

TIM BEAL examines the US 'playbook' miscalculations that underlie the current US-North Korea crisis

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, and so on. Every year, North Korea (and China in the background) protests.

This year things were different. The US 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. North Korea reacted with unusual 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 US portrays its military exercises as defensive, a protection against the North Korean threat, the evidence points in the other direction.

Despite having a large army - it is in effect a people under arms - North Korea is much weaker than its southern neighbour. It is not just that South Korea has twice the population; its military has nearly all the up-to-date weaponry that the US can provide. Between 2000 and 2008, according to data from the Stockholm Peace Research Institute, it was the world's third largest arms importer, behind China and India, while North Korea was 90th. 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. The outcome would be inevitable. A recent article in the influential *Foreign Affairs* magazine 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 US-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 ceasefire by playing its only trump card: nuclear escalation.'

The authors got it a bit wrong. North Korea has made it clear that it will not wait until the Americans are at the gates of Pyongyang before resorting to nuclear weapons. A foreign ministry statement at the beginning of March declared that 'if the Americans light the fuse of a nuclear war, the revolutionary forces will exercise the right to execute a pre-emptive nuclear attack against the headquarters of the invaders'.

What is the US up to?

This is not, as was widely reported, a threat to attack first, but rather to use nuclear weapons in response to a conventional attack. So what is going on? Given that North Korea is so much weaker than its opponents and hence the chances of it deliberately starting a war are miniscule, it is clear that the US military exercises were designed to raise tension, rather than preserve peace. But why have the Americans done this?

Part of the US strategy was revealed in a *Wall Street Journal* article on 3 April, which described what officials called a 'playbook' to escalate tension in a planned manner. What was the purpose of the playbook? 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 latterday 'Sunshine Policy' that causes alarm in the US security establishment and the South Korean right. 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 approach.

The US 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.

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 was unexpected, although that in itself is not the major factor since any decision to go to war would lie with Washington, not Pyongyang. As the crisis was escalated the North Koreans responded, not with military action but gestures, such as the abandonment of the

1953 armistice agreement (which had been violated many times already, not least by the US military exercises themselves) and with belligerent, defiant rhetoric. All this got the media worked up into an apocalyptic frenzy.

The framers of the playbook strategy knew what they were doing. The *Wall Street Journal* article reassures us that 'US 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 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 US aim was not to precipitate war, but to prevent peace breaking out.

A step too far

In one respect, though, things didn't go entirely according to plan. Apparently the Pentagon got carried away and sent ships towards North Korea in a move that was not in the playbook. The US navy didn't like it.

If a war was to erupt in Korea, the most likely flashpoint would be in the West Sea around the northern limit line (NLL). This was unilaterally drawn up by the US after the armistice in 1953, ironically to stop South Korea's Syngman Rhee from re-igniting the conflict. The North does not recognise the NLL and there are often clashes. The two countries' presidents, 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 hardline successor Lee Myung-bak reneged on the plan.

Seoul and Washington are reported to have a number of contingency plans for different scenarios. One that would bring the US in at the early stages of a clash is North Korean naval boats crossing the NLL. A battle between the North and South Korean navies could be contained, as has happened in the past. A firefight 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, with

all means at their disposal, including nuclear weapons. The threat is meant 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 that it could be misinterpreted and exacerbate the crisis. North Korean, for its part, celebrated the anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth on 15 April not with a missile test or a military parade, as forecast by the western media, but rather by the usual mass dancing in the main square. The media reported, with a sense of bemusement, that all was calm in Pyongyang.

The possibility that North Korea has some sort of nuclear weapons capability, however rudimentary, clearly does provide a deterrent from a US-backed attack either directly, as in Iraq, or through proxies, as in Libya. Ultimately this might force Washington into meaningful negotiations, despite its long-stated precondition of any long-term agreement that North Korea abandon its nuclear weapons programme.

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 might not have developed its nuclear deterrent. Now that it has it, it will not easily let it go. ■

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 www.timbeal.net.nz/geopolitics

South Korean marines conduct a joint landing operation involving US and South Korean troops

