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If South Korea Retaliates

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After years of successive US administrations concentrating exclusively on the North Korean nuclear issue, the Obama Administration now faces a dangerous situation between the two Koreas. North Korea's sinking of the South Korean corvette, the *Cheonan* this past March, and the artillery shelling of South Korea's Yeonpyeong island in November mark an escalation of North Korea's military provocations. These two attacks resulted in South Korean fatalities, including civilians in the latter case, and both occurred within the vicinity of South Korean islands in the Yellow Sea, only a few miles off the North Korean mainland.

Larry Nicksch, Senior Associate with the East Asia Programs at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, asserts that a “calculated South Korean [military] response [against North Korea] should be directed at a specific target or select group of targets, but their number should be very small. Not only should the South Korean military retort be selective, but it should be sufficiently resourced with enough intensity to destroy or seriously damage the target(s). Finally, the South Korean display of force should be limited in time and not be open-ended.”

North Korean provocations are becoming more frequent; there were four in the last year. In addition to the two above, North Korea attacked a South Korean naval vessel in November 2009 and conducted a heavy artillery exercise near Yeonpyeong this past February. Not only are these attacks becoming more frequent, they are also becoming more severe. North Korea appears to have diversified its military actions, deliberately taking South Korea by surprise. North Korea's apparent restraint in the face of South Korea's military exercise on December 20 should not be interpreted as a reduction of the danger. After suffering setbacks in this region in the recent past, North Korea has often bided its time for several months until an opportunity to strike again presented itself.

North Korea's motives probably are a combination of a number of factors. Pyongyang likely intends to intimidate the South Korean government and body politic into returning to the former "sunshine" policy of granting unconditional financial and economic aid. In addition, North Korea seeks to gain control of the disputed Northern Limit Line (NLL) separating the two South Korean populated islands, Yeonpyeong and Soyeonpyeongdo, from the South Korean mainland, thus making South Korea's hold over the islands untenable. Pyongyang now claims that the islands are within its territorial waters.

Furthermore, the internal North Korean political situation undoubtedly has come into play, especially the rising political power of the North Korean military as Kim Jong-il struggles to secure succession for his son, Kim Jong-un.

But most worrisome is the fact that North Korea's emerging nuclear weapons' capabilities appear to give the regime, and the military, a greater sense of power in relation to South Korea and the United States. In short, their fear of retaliation by South Korea and the United States has declined.

Another North Korean attack in the NLL region could include air strikes, or even island landings on Yeonpyeong and/or Soyeonpyeongdo, by North Korean Special Operations Forces (SOF) with the objective of seizing them. Reportedly, North Korean SOF have been training in amphibious warfare.



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The frequency and severity of North Korean provocations have pushed South Korean President Lee Myung-bak literally against a political wall. South Korean warnings of retaliatory air strikes need to be taken seriously. Long-standing US opposition to any South Korean retaliation seems to have softened. Admiral Mullen praised South Korea's recent restraint but said that he did not ask South Korean officials to "take their air assets off the table."

A South Korean retaliation could produce two very different results. Potentially, it could sober North Korean leaders and calm the situation. North Korea has considerable military weaknesses, of which its leaders are aware. But North Korea could respond with its own escalation, including unleashing its considerable artillery assets along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) against South Korean-US defenses and the capital city of Seoul, thus igniting a new Korean war.

Another dangerous retaliatory scenario would be a response to North Korean SOF island landings. The outcome would likely be a North-South military clash of several days or weeks. South Korea no doubt would seek to recapture the islands and would call on the United States for military support. To keep such a clash limited, it would have to be confined to the NLL region and North Korea's military positions opposite the islands. The lesson of this danger is that South Korea must now maintain strong forces on and around the islands to repulse any planned North Korean landings.

If a future provocation involved an attempted island landing, air strike, artillery shelling, or naval attack, a South Korean retaliation could be done in a way that could reduce the risk of a North Korean escalation. However, this measured South Korean retaliation would have to be implemented as an immediate response to the North Korean attack. The retaliation would occur at the same time of North Korea's military action, thus making the entire exchange one episode. As such North Korea would not have a separate South Korean military action to respond to and possibly miscalculate over.

This calculated South Korean response should be directed at a specific target or select group of targets, but their number should be very small. Not only should the South Korean military retort be selective, but it should be sufficiently resourced with enough intensity to destroy or seriously damage the target(s). Finally, the South Korean display of force should be limited in time and not be open-ended.

Another important element in any South Korean retaliation would need to be close coordination with the United States. Furthermore, this coordination with the United States would emphasize the immediate and simultaneous deployment of formidable US air power assets from South Korea, Misawa in northern Japan and the Okinawan airbases in southern Japan, into air space visible to North Korea. US officials would announce that the purpose was to prevent a North Korean escalation and respond with overwhelming firepower if necessary. My personal observations over many years have been that the visible demonstration of massive US air power makes a strong, deterrent impression on North Korean leaders. If US heavy bombers were returned to Guam to be part of such a demonstration, the deterrence impact would be strengthened considerably.

The risk of South Korea, and possibly US, retaliation is real in light of future North Korean provocations, and this heightened likelihood is a reality that both the US and South Korean governments and publics need to face. If retaliation becomes inevitable, careful planning and coordination could heighten the chances of success and significantly reduce risk of a new Korean War.

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