



North Korea's Artillery Attack on Yeonpyeongdo: Responses and Implications

Rajaram Panda

Rajaram Panda is Senior Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi

November 30, 2010



Summary

Both the revelation of a highly refined capacity for uranium enrichment and the shelling of South Korean military positions amply demonstrate Pyongyang's preparedness to push the crisis to the extremes. If the South too reacts with similar measures, it would be a recipe for disaster. True, the process of leadership succession could have been the key factor behind the North's belligerence but crossing of the threshold of tolerance by either party would not be the right choice. If it is true that the senior Kim in failing health has lost some of his earlier influence over the military, the shelling and newly revealed enrichment capacity are not the right reasons for resumption of the stalled SPT, though new "disarmament-for-aid deals have the potential to alleviate the North's food shortages and reserve currency woes." There has to be some balance between means and objectives of the strategy to be adopted vis-a-vis North Korea. The SPT has not proved successful. Can North Korea's nuclear ambitions be curtailed through diplomacy? Past experience does not suggest that it can be the case.

Though the Korean War ended 60 years ago, the spectre of a repeat threatens the peninsula again. North Korea is again bullying its way into the headlines. On 23 November 2010, North Korea and South Korea exchanged artillery fire across the disputed Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the Yellow Sea to the west of the peninsula. According to reports from Seoul, around 2.30 PM local time, North Korean artillery shells began landing in the waters around Yeonpyeongdo, one of the South Korean-controlled islands south of the NLL. According to the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the North Korean shells were fired from Kaemori and Mudo, both in Kangryong, Hawanghae Province.

Yeonpyeong Island is just two miles from the NLL and only eight miles from the North Korean coast. The island houses a garrison of about 1,000 South Korean marines. The Navy has also deployed its newest class of "patrol killer" guided-missile ships in the Western Sea. There



are only 1,600 civilians who live in the island and, after the shelling, some have fled the island on fishing boats to the mainland. Even while locals were evacuated to shelters and damages were being assessed, the JCS issued the highest Defence Readiness Condition or Defcon alert level, increased

the level of Watchcon, a five-stage surveillance alert, and also raised the alert for all military forces across the country. The South Korea-US crisis management team started assessing the possibility of the provocation developing into an actual war. As a fallout of the skirmishes, the Unification Ministry in South Korea decided to cancel inter-Korean Red Cross talks. Issues such as regular reunions of families separated by the Korean War, resumption of package tours to Mt. Kumgang, and rice and fertilizer aid to the North remained suspended. The Ministry also banned all visits from business people and staff to the joint Korean Kaesong Industrial Complex.

Two South Korean Marines were killed, 14 other wounded and more than 60 buildings set ablaze in the North Korean artillery bombardment. There was no immediate information whether there have been any casualties in North Korea. This is the most open confrontation between the two siblings since the North's sinking of a South Korean submarine on 26 March 2010.



Fire flares near a South Korean marine's K-9 self-propelled gun after the area was hit by North Korea artillery shells on Yeonpyeong.

It may be recalled that naval skirmishes occurred in the Western Sea in 1999 and 2002. Again in August 2010, North Korea fired 110 artillery rounds near Yeonpyeong and another South Korean island. In early November 2010 when the South Korean Navy fired warning shots at a North Korean fishing boat after the vessel strayed across the NLL, the North Korean boat had retreated.

Following the latest incident on 23 November, South Korea responded with its own artillery barrage and put its armed forces and fighter jets on alert and is examining the situation to see if Pyongyang's intention is to escalate further. Both Koreas still technically remain in a state of war since the Korean armistice in 1953 and seem close to the brink of a major conflagration. For South Korea, the shelling of the civilian island of Yeonpyeong is a breach of the 57-year armistice that halted the Korean War without a peace agreement. Seoul has estimated that North Korea fired 200 artillery shells on the island. South Korean forces fired back some 80 K-9 self-propelled howitzer shells at the North Korean coastal artillery batteries. This was the first inter-Korean clash since Kim Jong Il unveiled his youngest son as a four star military general in September 2010. The display of North's belligerence suggests that the junior Kim has decided

to flex his muscles to shore up “capital within the North Korean political elite, and particularly the military.”

The firing of artillery shells on the South Korean island seems to be a planned provocation. This is because while the attack on the Navy corvette Cheonan in March 2010 was at night, the large-scale artillery assault on Yeonpyeong Island happened in broad daylight, targeting both military installations as well as civilian homes.



The North Korea-South Korea clash appears to be one of the most serious cross-border incidents since the 1950 War.

Why did North Korea decide to launch such an attack at this point of time? There could be five reasons:

One: With the Six-Party-Talks (SPT) stalled since December 2008, only 11 days before the Yeonpyeong incident Pyongyang disclosed to the American scientist Siegfried S. Hecker its new uranium-enrichment facility with a view to extract more concessions from the US, South Korea and Japan. The purpose was to draw the attention of the world. It is possible that this calculated revelation was a deliberate negotiating ploy to signal the plan of accelerating the nuclear weapons programme.

Second: Pyongyang went on the offensive angered by a South Korean military drill, called Safeguarding The Nation or Hoguk annual military exercise, involving 70,000 troops along with American forces. The intent has been cross-service coordination in recent years. North Korea read the situation as “simulating an invasion of the North” and “a means to provoke a war.” The US justifies that such military exercises are announced well in advance and that Pyongyang need not be paranoid about it. Also when everyone, except China, blamed North Korea for sinking the Cheonan warship in March 2010 and Pyongyang not only denied any role in this and showed its readiness to respond to any and all militaristic gestures with no reprisal whatsoever, Pyongyang felt emboldened after getting away scot free.

Third: North Korea is also in the midst of a change of power. Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke in 2008 and is ill. He needs to secure the succession to the third generation of his family. According to geopolitical analysts, there is already an internal power struggle. Though during Kim’s life time, it would be difficult to imagine opposition from the military to his son’s succession, the senior Kim probably did not take any chance and decided to keep the military busy in the “Great Patriotic War”. Also the senior Kim probably decided to bolster the military profile and drive regional tensions to a level that would enable him to extract concessions. It is also suspected that there is a power struggle in the North between hardliners and moderates and therefore the possibility of an internal conflict between hawks and doves cannot be ruled out. In order to cover up its bankruptcy in decision-making ability, the top leadership has been taking decisions that seem to be incomprehensible.

Four: The firing of artillery shells could also be ploy on the part of North Korea to draw Washington to the negotiating table and bargain for a peace treaty on favourable terms. Turning the West Sea into a conflict area could be a deliberate strategy to demand a peace treaty and get Washington to abandon its policy of “strategic patience” with the North. It is a different matter whether this ploy to get what it wants through brinkmanship will work.

Five: The senior Kim’s adoption of belligerence could have been a strategy of political manipulation by which a crisis situation is created to stir up public sentiment against Lee Myung-bak government’s hardline North Korea policy and return to the Sunshine Policy of his predecessor. This argument, however, seems to be far-stretched and cannot face the rigour of scrutiny.

Though all these five reasons may have some merit, none of them is verifiable. However, a combination of these factors working together is a possibility.

Responses

South Korea

The international community needs to come out with a strategy to reel in North Korea before the situation escalates into unmanageable dimensions. The response from the US, Japan and South Korea ranged from condemnation to military preparedness. The South Korean military went to “crisis status” and threatened military strike. President Lee Myung Bak convened an emergency Cabinet meeting and promised “a strenuous retaliation” if there was any further provocation. The blame game went on. The North blamed the South for starting the exchange; the South denied that any of the shots it fired fell in North Korean territory. South Korea started “reviewing the security situation” for its workers at the Kaesong Industrial Park, a jointly operated facility in North Korea. South Korea had earlier exercised remarkable restraint when the North Koreans torpedoed and sank the Cheonan in March 2010. This time too it has sought to continue to exercise restraint, while at the same time denouncing the North's belligerence.

While skirmishes between the two countries are not uncommon, their intensity has become serious after the American nuclear scientist was shown a secret and modern nuclear enrichment facility. There is a view that the shelling is a deliberate provocation, linked to food needs, which South Korea has denied and when international sanctions have been imposed.

Nam Joo-hong, South Korea's ambassador for international security, has opined that the regime in the North is trying to consolidate its grip on power by rallying its people around these radical measures. Indeed, the North's field army composed of hardliners and suspected to be behind the naval clash in November 2009 may have embarked on this ploy to boost the image of the junior Kim in line with the Songun or military-first doctrine.

While exercising restraint, the Lee government termed the attack a “clear armed provocation” and instructed ministers in charge of foreign affairs and security to “respond firmly beyond the rules of engagement.” Following an uproar in South Korea about the lack of preparedness to prevent the attack, the beleaguered defence minister Kim Tae-young resigned from office. President Lee named a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Kim Kwan-jin, as the new Defence Minister.

North Korea

In a TV broadcast, North Korea’s top military command blamed South Korea for the assault. In a communiqué issued by the Supreme Command of the Korean People’s Army, it said: “The revolutionary armed forces of the DPRK standing guard over the inviolable territorial waters of the country took such decisive military step as reacting to the military provocation of the puppet group with a prompt powerful physical strike.” It further said that it is the traditional mode of counter-action of the army of the DPRK to counter the firing of the provocateurs with merciless strikes. It went on: “Should the South Korean puppet group dare intrude into the territorial waters” of the North “even 0.001 mm, the revolutionary armed forces of the DPRK will unhesitatingly continue taking merciless military counter-actions against it.” North Korea’s deputy ambassador to the United Nations, Pak Tok-hun, had no apologies for his country’s part in the skirmishes. He claimed that a “dangerous” South Korean military exercise in a disputed area provoked the exchange. North Korea boasts that its military “precisely aimed and hit the enemy artillery base” as punishment for South Korean military drills.

China

China’s role is critical. As the North’s main source of fuel and food and as the only country with any clout there, China has to prevail upon Pyongyang to abandon its chosen path that can only ruin its future. China expressed its “concern” and called for the reconvening of the SPT and urged Pyongyang to give up its nuclear ambitions, though it has remained silent on the North’s new enrichment plant. Moreover, the war games in waters within its exclusive economic zone, which extends 370 km from its coastline covering also the areas south of Yeonpyeong, is a matter of worry for China too. Both the US and South Korea have pressed China to use its influence on Pyongyang to ease tensions and prevent escalation.

Maintaining stability on its border is China's top priority as "an erratic neighbour armed with nuclear weapons is anything but a recipe for stability." China is well positioned to take the lead and help the North walk back from the brink. However, while it is true that Pyongyang "does not simply jump when Beijing says jump" and the North is very much a self-contained political entity, yet China does have some leverage over the Kim regime because of its economic and ideological links.

It is a puzzle that though China's influence is rising steadily around the world, it is unable to persuade the North to adopt a path of greater openness and stability. Despite Pyongyang's recalcitrance, China continues to extend support to the Stalinist state as it fears that a vacuum created by a sudden collapse would open the door for Korean unification and bring the Korea-US military alliance to its doorstep, apart from the fear that the refugee influx in the event of a regime collapse in the North will put enormous pressure on its own economy and social stability. China's intentions are not clear. At one level, it wants North Korea to return to the SPT. At another level, it suits its interests to maintain the present status quo. The possible alternatives to the wretched status quo – regime instability, military conflict with the South and its allies and, eventually, the reunification of the Korean peninsula – are "enough to strike fear into the hardest Chinese hearts."

If North Korea collapses, South Korea will face an enormous economic burden to rehabilitate an impoverished North Korea. But what China would dread the most is a large, economically dynamic Korean peninsula right on its border. It would feel more comfortable with a failing state as a neighbour rather than a successful economically vibrant state adjacent to it. China dreads the millions of refugees streaming across its 1,415-km border, "close to a region historically riven with ethnic tensions between Beijing and the local non-Han Korean population." It also does not want the situation to escalate since that would enhance the American presence in the region. During the visit of Stephen W. Bosworth, US special envoy to North Korea, to Beijing on 23 November 2010, both he and Chinese officials agreed on the need for multilateral efforts to address the issue.

Japan

The Japanese government called North Korea's action "unforgivable". Prime Minister Kan Naoto ordered his Cabinet members to step up information-gathering and prepare for emergencies. Japan issued a strong statement harshly condemning Pyongyang for its attacks on civilian targets and expressed strong support for South Korea.

Japan's self-defence forces are expected to increase their intelligence-gathering activities, including closer surveillance from naval vessels operating in the Sea of Japan near the Korean peninsula. Japan is unlikely, however, to prepare forces for a possible wartime situation. If the fighting escalates further between the two Koreas, Japan would also need to prepare for a potential flood of refugees.

The United States

The US demanded that North Korea "halt its belligerent action". It has backed South Korea and Japan in suspending energy aid, tightening UN sanctions and has demanded that the North show serious purpose before talks resume. Though the Obama administration has insisted that it would not allow the North to do what it wants, at the same time it is keen to revive the SPT as well as bilateral negotiations. The US supports South Korea and Japan in their policy towards North Korea but there seems to be a lack of serious American strategy for getting there. Obama, however, strongly affirmed US commitment to defend South Korea as part of the alliance relationship.

For the US, North Korea's belligerence demonstrates the fact that its policy of non-proliferation has failed. Pyongyang has successfully defied US efforts and managed to build a nuclear-weapon facility. The world faces the grim scenario of an immature 20-something successor to Kim Jong Il having his finger on the nuclear trigger and thus a clear demonstration of proof of failure of nuclear non-proliferation.

Three US presidents – Bill Clinton, George Bush and Barack Obama – have tried over two decades a carrot and stick policy. But the neo-Stalinist regime in Pyongyang has not only gone ahead with its own nuclear programmes but has also been clandestinely promoting similar activities in league with Pakistan, Iran and now Myanmar.

During the first two years of his Presidency, Obama demonstrated 'strategic patience' though his policy of diplomatic engagement of North Korea. What it meant was that the Obama administration would not engage unless the North ceased provocations and kept its promise to dismantle its nuclear facility. What has now transpired is that Pyongyang has pursued just the opposite policy.

In the present case, the US agreed to hold joint military exercises as a first response to the North's shelling. The exercise includes sending the aircraft carrier George Washington and a number of accompanying ships into the region. It would serve two purposes: deter the North from further attacks; and signal China that unless it reins in the North, American presence in the vicinity will increase.

However, the US' options are limited. The military option may prove to be counterproductive as the unpredictable North possesses crude nuclear weapons as well as a 1.1 million-strong army. North Korea exists outside the system of world bodies and US leverage thus remains limited. Pyongyang's close ties with China have also not deterred it from defying its benefactor. China which is nervous of instability in its neighbourhood also has limited options.

Others

Russia urged restraint and a non-military resolution. Britain condemned the "unprovoked attack" and urged Pyongyang to refrain from hostilities. Australia called on China, its largest trading partner, to adopt a more robust approach towards North Korea. Australia's foreign minister Kevin Rudd termed North's action as "outrageously provocative". UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, a native of South Korea, called the attack "one of the gravest incidents since the end of the Korean War."

Implications

Both the revelation of a highly refined capacity for uranium enrichment and the shelling of South Korean military positions amply demonstrate Pyongyang's preparedness to push the crisis to the extremes. If the South too reacts with similar measures, it would be a recipe for disaster. True, the process of leadership succession could have been the key factor behind the North's belligerence but crossing of the threshold of tolerance by either party would not be the right choice. If it is true that the senior Kim in failing health has lost some of his earlier influence over the military, the shelling and newly revealed enrichment capacity are not the right reasons for resumption of the stalled SPT, though new "disarmament-for-aid deals have the potential to alleviate the North's food shortages and reserve currency woes."

There has to be some balance between means and objectives of the strategy to be adopted vis-a-vis North Korea. The SPT has not proved successful. Can North Korea's nuclear ambitions be curtailed through diplomacy? Past experience does not suggest that it can be the case. China may be the key player to exercise some leverage and restraint on the North but this time even China seems to have little room for manoeuvre. But even if it is expected to rationalize any diplomatic defence, it is unclear if China really would want to do so because it has prioritized its own interests. It is wary of the potential catastrophe stemming from refugee flows in the event of regime collapse. If the North's belligerence continues and the Kim regime does not stop its sabre rattling, the stick option may be chosen over the carrot. The consequences can only be terrible and such a situation must be avoided at all costs.

As Victor Cha has noted, North Korea is "the land of lousy options." Verbal condemnation and sanctions have proved to be ineffective. Now military exercises can remain only largely symbolic. If the US joins South Korea in a strong military response, this may lead to a full-scale war and the first target would be the South Korean capital Seoul.

If the US decides on a stronger response, it could mean a naval quarantine of the North. But such a course carries a huge risk. Taking the North head-on would mean deploying tens of thousands of troops, air power and thus the prospect of another Korean War. As said, the first casualty would be the destruction of Seoul instantaneously when the North unleashes artillery batteries near the border. The war, if it at all breaks out, could also mean the complete annihilation of the Korean peninsula as the use of the nuclear bomb cannot be ruled out.

Even if North Korea shows restraint this time owing to pressure from the international community, can it be trusted to continue to practise good behaviour in the future? If the past is any guide, there is no guarantee in this regard. In the 1980s, North Korea indulged in similar destructive acts like blowing up a South Korean airliner and detonating a bomb in Myanmar in an attempt to assassinate the then South Korean President. Both attacks were ordered by then heir apparent to Kim Il-sung, the present ruler Kim Jong-Il. This time, Kim Jong-un is in that position and the latest artillery attacks were premeditated to enable the junior Kim to establish his military credentials.

The future of the Korean peninsula seems to be bleak. However, a military escalation culminating in a full-blown war does not seem to be a possibility in the near term in view of the high stakes of everyone to maintain the status quo. President Lee Myung-bak did not order a counterattack and exercised remarkable restraint though he has vowed “enormous retaliation”; one hopes that he continues to maintain such a position.

Has India any role in the Korean imbroglio? To be realistic, an Indian role is limited. Yet, certain considerations can be factored in for taking a position. First, India has diplomatic relations with both Koreas. India can leverage this relationship to some extent. India's humanitarian role in the Korean War, especially of the medical unit, and offer to accept North Korean refugees are fondly cherished by the Korean people. India can use this element of its soft power. Second: India has a burgeoning economic relationship with South Korea, with bilateral trade already exceeding \$13 billion and projected to reach \$30 billion by 2014. Negotiations for a civil nuclear pact are already under way. POSCO brings in the single largest FDI to India with Rs. 52,000 crore to build a steel plant in Orissa (marred at present with controversy over environmental issues). LG, Samsung, Hyundai, etc. are brand names in India. South Korea's economic footprint in India is thus well-established. Any turbulence in the Korean peninsula will adversely impact India's economy as economic ties with South Korea will be derailed. India, therefore, should not feel shy in engaging both Koreas diplomatically, howsoever limited such a role may be.