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Leadership Transition and North Korean Belligerence

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Abstract

This paper explains the heightened aggressiveness that North Korea has shown since late 2009. It argues that a combination of militarism and frustration amplified by a precarious leadership transition caused Pyongyang's astonishing belligerence. Simultaneously, it calls into question common alternative accounts pointing to either excessive or insufficient engagement or a presumably uncontrolled military as the primary cause for North Korean hostility. In addition, the paper argues that North Korean aggressiveness is channeled toward South Korea (rather than the United States) and particularly its western maritime frontier, because there are especially acute grievances in that region and safer grounds for implementing a militaristic policy.

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North Korea has used a markedly heightened level of force against South Korea since late 2009. In November of that year, a North Korean naval vessel opened fire on South Korean warships near Daechong Island, which belongs to the South and lies off the North Korean coast. Then in March 2010, a North Korean submarine launched a secret torpedo attack against the South Korean corvette *Cheonan*, sinking it and killing 46 sailors.¹ Again in November 2010, North Korean artillery bombarded military installations and civilian areas on South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island, killing two marines and two civilians and wounding scores of people. While North Korea has a long history of violence—the Korean War being the most striking instance—these recent attacks are distinct in some respects from previous military provocations after the Cold War's end.² These premeditated surprise attacks were unusually destructive—designed to cause significant physical damage to military and/or civilian properties and lives. In addition, they were extraordinarily daring—carrying a higher risk of igniting a broader conflict. Also unprecedented is the fact that these *serial* attacks took place in a cluster over a sustained period, as opposed to sporadic occurrences of isolated acts. These characteristics of the attacks indicate that North Korea has a markedly greater propensity for risky physical strikes.

This paper aims to account for such heightened aggressiveness on the part of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Unlike most extant accounts that typically examine Pyongyang's motivations for individual attacks, this study identifies select conditions (or causes) producing its increased propensity for risky military behaviors as a phenomenon. This analytical

¹ Contrary to the judgment of an international investigation, some scholars as well as North Korea have denied its involvement. See Seunghun Lee and J. J. Suh, "Rush to Judgment: Inconsistencies in South Korea's Cheonan Report," *Japan Focus* (12 July 2010).

² According to the United Nations Command, North Korea committed 26 armed provocations since the armistice of July 1953. *Hankook Ilbo* (2 January 2011) [North Korea committed four provocations per year on average since armistice].

approach allows for employing social scientific inference, rather than attempting to discern North Korean leaders' veiled intentions. This research also offers explanations based on general knowledge (such as prospect theory), unlike nearly all available accounts that are essentially journalistic commentaries rather than scholarly analyses. This analysis focuses on carefully selected causes that were uniquely present during the examined period, instead of attempting to list all relevant factors, as many available studies do. I believe not all factors are of equal analytical importance, although I am aware that the DPRK's aggression has numerous causes, as nearly all significant political phenomena do. For example, South Korean military vulnerabilities and Kim Jong-il's violent personality almost certainly played a role in the recent attacks. However, since these conditions have been present for a long time, considering them does not add much to explaining the heightened aggressiveness in recent years. The assumption here is that the unprecedented level of violence and risk taking must have extraordinary causes that were relatively weak or absent in previous times.³ This approach is superior in that it allows for a sharper analytical focus and a deeper analysis.

The paper argues that North Korea's aggressiveness of such unprecedented magnitude originated from an extraordinary combination of militarism and frustration amid a precarious leadership transition. In the potentially violent succession process, North Korean politicians and soldiers had strong incentives to use force. Emerging politicians needed to secure soldiers' loyalty by demonstrating tangible military accomplishments and signaling their commitment to military ideals. Soldiers, for their part, supported military operations in order to signal their loyalty to the new leaders. The resultant uses of force were particularly large scale and bold, since North

³ This assumption makes my analysis implicitly comparative, although it focuses mostly on the past two years. For a methodological justification of this assumption, see Stephen Van Evera, *Guides to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). Also accepting this assumption is Seong-ho Sheen, "The Beginning of the Endgame? Attack on Yonpyong Island and North Korea's Survival" (Seoul: The Center for International Studies, Seoul National University, 2010).

Korean leaders were frustrated due to their unfulfilled expectations. In the critical succession period, the Lee Myung-bak government in South Korea took away the benefits that its predecessors had promised and delivered to the Kim Jong-il regime. The Obama administration also failed to meet Pyongyang's high expectations regarding direct talks and diplomatic breakthroughs. The emerging political leaders in Pyongyang could not accept those losses, fearing that the military would doubt their competence and toughness. Therefore, they were willing to assume high risks in an attempt to recoup the losses through armed coercion.

The rest of paper is organized into four parts. The first section develops the argument about North Korean militarism and its impact on the propensity to use force. The second section traces the origins of Pyongyang's frustration and high risk-acceptance. After presenting my argument, I extend it to explain why North Korea avoided attacking the United States and chose the Yellow Sea area as the locale for its military campaign. The fourth section then critically evaluates the logic and empirical support of alternative explanations. Finally, the concluding section summarizes key findings and draws implications for policy

Cause of violence: militarism

Why did Pyongyang launch military strikes aimed at causing physical destruction and casualties? The answer lies in militarism—"preeminence of the military class or its ideals"—accentuated by a highly uncertain political succession process.⁴

The DPRK has been going through a precarious political transition, as Kim Jong-il has experienced serious health problems. Kim reportedly suffered a stroke in August 2008. Since then, leadership succession has assumed added

⁴ Webster online.

urgency, although his medical condition stabilized. Just like the previous transition, this succession is hereditary. Kim's third son, Jong-un, rose among candidates from the extended royal family in the uncertain process and was nominated as the successor in January 2009. Following a series of campaigns to build his "revolutionary achievements" (such as "battles" for boosting economic production, rocket launching, and nuclear testing), Kim Jong-un was proclaimed to be the heir apparent in September 2010.⁵ Kim Jong-il also appointed his sister Kyong-hui and her husband Jang Song-thaek to top party and military positions, apparently as the young heir's core guardians. Other kinship members and confidants also joined the guardianship, assuming key roles in the party, government, and army. Thus, the Kim family rule was set to continue beyond Kim Jong-il's death.

The succession process involved a significant risk of violent power struggle for several reasons. One is that no institutionalized mechanism is in place: there are no established rules for selecting the supreme leader in North Korea. The incumbent leader arbitrarily picks someone whom he can trust the most. Therefore, the successor's legitimacy is weak and susceptible to contest, as is commonly the case with other authoritarian states. For North Korea, political legitimacy is even more problematic, since succession is hereditary and reminiscent of anachronistic feudalism. Moreover, Kim Jong-un's father is unpopular due to economic difficulties. Another *sui generis* reason is that the heir apparent, Kim Jong-un, is young and inexperienced. He is only 27 or 28 years old and had held no significant public office until 28 September 2010. These are significant weaknesses for a patriarch ruling a traditionally Confucian society in which seniority is a crucial source of authority.⁶ His obscure stature can encourage potential challengers. It is reported that his

⁵ Donald Kirk, "Kim Jong-un confirmed North Korean heir ahead of massive military parade," *The Christian Science Monitor* (8 October 2010).

⁶ Although some analysts assert that Kim's youth and inexperience do not matter much, it seems that the North Korea authorities themselves regard these attributes as weaknesses. For example, Pyongyang has banned calling the heir apparent "cheongnyeondaejang" (young general). *Donga Ilbo* (27 December 2010) [North Korea bans calling Kim Jong-un 'young general'].

eldest brother residing in China—Kim Jong-nam—is disgruntled about his selection as successor.⁷ Finally, North Korea faces daunting domestic challenges (including food shortages) and stifling international isolation.

Under such potentially violent circumstances, Kim Jong-un would need loyal support from the military to maintain control after his father's death. The Korean People's Army (KPA) had already become the foremost pillar of political power in North Korea during the previous leadership succession of the mid-1990s. After Kim Il-sung's death in 1994, Kim Jong-il needed to consolidate power in the face of immense socioeconomic problems (e.g., famine, disease, recession) and widespread civil unrest. Having legitimacy problems as a hereditary successor, he had to rely on the military and therefore adopted the *songun* (military-first) policy to court its loyalty. Kim Jong-un is considerably weaker than his father was in 1994, at which point Kim Jong-il had already served as a Politburo member for 20 years and as the official successor for 14 years. Kim Jong-un faces domestic and international situations that are no less challenging, a country facing mass starvation, energy shortages, international sanctions, etc. The time to lay firm foundations for his rule is running out due to his father's illness. Therefore, the KPA's allegiance is even more essential for his political survival. This condition has elevated the military organization to a position of prominence and has led military thinking to pervade North Korean politics.

Securing military loyalty has required three militaristic tasks, which has created powerful incentives for Kim Jong-un and his guardians to launch armed attacks. First, Kim Jong-un has needed to show his firm commitment to the military and its ideals. He has assumed a chief role in upholding the *songun* ideology. At the Third Party Delegates' Conference where he officially became the next top leader, he reaffirmed the military-first ideology as the guiding principle for politics.⁸ Shortly afterwards, Kim attended a massive

⁷ It is unknown what his other elder brother—Kim Jong-chul—thinks about Kim Jong-un's ascendance to successorship.

⁸ Youngkey Cho, "North Korea's Third-Generation Hereditary Succession and its Future," *IIRI Working Paper* No. 9 (Seoul: Ilmin International Relations Institute, 2010),

military parade alongside his father. One can interpret these as symbolic acts to signal Kim Jong-un's commitment to the military. Physical attacks led by Kim can have powerful effects, showing that Kim shares the professional officer corps' view of military power as the most effective instrument of statecraft.⁹

Second, to gain the hearts and minds of soldiers, Kim has had to demonstrate his ability to command armed forces effectively. His father gave him the rank of four-star general and top posts in the National Defense Commission and the military commission of the Worker's Party, although he never served in the military and only attended a military university. These formal ranks and positions alone would not bestow respect and loyalty from conscripts who have served as long as ten years, to say nothing of seasoned officers. He had "to earn his stripes with the North Korean military."¹⁰ Given his weak military credentials, highly visible accomplishments were needed, which the propaganda apparatus could use to build him up as an effective commander in a short period of time. Successful attacks were far better for that purpose than other means, such as weapons development.¹¹ (Since failed attacks could bring about a backlash, Kim had every reason to maximize the chance of success.)

Third, Kim Jong-un faced powerful incentives to identify and purge

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The conference revised party regulations in ways that empower the party's central military commission and political commissars within the KPA. These changes do not indicate the waning of military-first policy; an official document authorizing those revisions explicitly reemphasized *songun*. Rather, they constitute an institutional groundwork for Kim Jong-un's reign after his father's death. With those organs empowered, Kim can secure supreme authority over the military by simply controlling the central military commission in which he is presently second only to his father. The young Kim would need such an institutional prop, since he lacks Kim Jong-il's personal authority. The new rules do not affect the KPA's practical standing but merely alter the way supreme leaders control soldiers. See Yonhap News (6 January 2011) [North Korea inserting 'safety devices' for hereditary succession into party regulations].

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Solider and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), chapter 3.

¹⁰ US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates quoted.

¹¹ Sheen, "The Beginning of the End?" p. 2.

potentially disloyal elements from the military.¹² Perhaps because of this concern, Kim Jong-il retired military elders who might find it hard to obey the young leader blindly.¹³ (Some died under suspicious circumstances.) In addition, something had to be done to weed out untrustworthy officers of the younger generation. Military attacks could serve this purpose: those who opposed the attacks were more likely to be disloyal. Given that the attacks have had the goal of building up Kim Jong-un's military credentials, officers who did not share this goal or assigned it a lower priority would be less likely to approve them. In addition to providing a litmus test for allegiance, the attacks created a permissive atmosphere for purges, by accentuating the threat of war and the need for dependable officers. Thus, the Kims had political incentives to plan and launch "physical strikes" against the South.

These political needs also created pressures and opportunities for military officers to support and even push for armed attacks. Generals for their part needed to prove their loyalty for the sake of survival, so they supported the use of force. Generals probably even faced temptation to propose attacks on their own initiative in order to show their superior loyalty and thereby advance their career. Proposing an attack carried high risk in that its failure would bring severe punishment. Therefore, accepting the risk could effectively signal allegiance to the political leadership; proposing an attack was a sort of "costly signaling."¹⁴ Kim Jong-un would find it hard to turn down promising attack proposals, not only because their success would strengthen his political position, but also because declining them might create an impression of timidity—a major stigma for a military commander.

Thus, the political transition gave a strong boost to militarism, which in

¹² It is reported that purges are also targeting other security organs, including the State Security Department. *Chosun Ilbo* (25 December 2010) [Is the ultimate purpose of artillery barrage on Yeonpyeong Island purging Kim Jong-un's enemies?].

¹³ Jin-Ha Kim, "North Korea's Succession Plan: Stability and Future Outlook," *IIRI Working Paper* No. 8 (Seoul: Ilmin International Relations Institute, 2010).

¹⁴ On the logic of costly signaling, see James Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 41, no. 1 (1997), pp. 68-90.

turn led to military operations designed to produce tangible results—physical destruction and casualties. This development is neither coincidental nor entirely *sui generis*, as there exists a well-documented general tendency behind it. The political involvement of the military often begets militarism, and militarism tends to increase belligerence in various ways, for example, by exaggerating the utility of force—especially offensive power.¹⁵ North Korea had followed a similar pattern in the past. For example, unprovoked armed attacks accompanied political contention and rising militarism in the late 1960s.¹⁶ At that time, Kim Il-sung authorized attacks on South Korea to enlist military support for purging his potential challengers. Also, Kim Jong-il's rise to power in the 1970s and the early 1980s brought about a series of military provocations partly designed to build up his meager military credentials. The latest North Korean bellicosity (which exceeded the previous levels) reflects the fact that militarism has reached its historical peak since the armistice of 1953 during a particularly precarious transition in political leadership.

Cause of risk taking: frustration

The above-described dynamic alone cannot explain why the attacks were unusually bold, carrying a high risk of escalation. Understanding North Korean leaders' extraordinary frustration helps answer this question. From late 2008 through early 2009, North Korea held high expectations vis-à-vis South Korea and the United States.

Pyongyang expected that Seoul would continue to provide massive unconditional assistance as it had done since the inter-Korean summit of 15 June 2000. This expectation was based on promises made and concrete

¹⁵ Stephen Van Evera, "Militarism," at <http://web.mit.edu/polisci/research/vanevera/militarism.pdf>.

¹⁶ Dae-sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), chapter 11.

actions taken by the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations over a decade (1998-2007). During that period, Seoul provided food, fertilizer, medicine, and even hard currency through the joint industrial park at Kaesong and the tourist resort at Mt. Kumgang. According to a Republic of Korea (ROK) government estimate, the provisions amounted to US\$2.9 billion in cash and US\$4 billion in goods.¹⁷ It seemed that even the conservative Lee Myung-bak government would continue such assistance. The official policies of the Lee government dubbed “Denuclearization, Opening, 3000” and “grand bargain” envisioned the provision of massive aid, albeit conditional on North Korean reciprocation. Despite some strains in the relationship, Seoul and Pyongyang held a series of secret meetings to arrange a possible summit in hopes of making a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations.¹⁸ A summit could bring North Korea huge economic benefits, as Pyongyang had received millions of dollars and massive economic aid as a quid pro quo for holding summits in 2000 and 2007. Those previous summits also led to further assistance to North Korea over the following years. Public opinion, to which the ROK government paid close attention, largely supported engagement with the DPRK in principle, despite disagreements on its extent and pace. In a June 2009 poll conducted after the North Korean nuclear and missile tests, 38.5 percent of respondents still wanted to continue engagement, while 34.6 percent advocated its expansion.¹⁹ The “sunshine policy” of opening to the North received solid backing even among President Lee’s supporters, with 64.7 percent favoring its continuance or expansion.

North Korea also expected that the new Obama administration would show greater willingness to accept its position on the nuclear issue and support inter-Korean cooperation.²⁰ On the day before Obama’s inauguration,

¹⁷ *Chosun Ilbo* (3 June 2009) [Cash provisions to North Korea over ten-year period totaling at US\$2.9 billion].

¹⁸ Lee Jong-Heon, “Koreas seek to arrange summit,” UPIAsia.com (3 February 2010).

¹⁹ *Public Opinion Briefing* No. 47-3 (Seoul: East Asia Institute, 2009).

²⁰ Blaine Harden, “With Obama in White House, North Korea Steps Up Big Talk,” *The Washington Post* (4 February 2009).

a North Korean broadcasting agency stated with an unmistakably conciliatory tone: "The DPRK is furthering good-neighborly and friendly relations with all nations of the world on the basis of the principle of independence and international justice. It has also made efforts to improve and normalize relations with those countries which had been hostile in the past, if they respect its sovereignty and give up their hostile policy...the trend to establish diplomatic relations and develop friendly and cooperation relation is growing further in the international community day by day."²¹ This statement, albeit vague, was uncharacteristically hopeful in the light of usually harsh denunciations.

This high expectation was based on Obama's conciliatory rhetoric made during the presidential campaign. Obama stated in July 2007 that his first measure to denuclearize North Korea would be "sustained, direct, and aggressive diplomacy," which the Bush administration was unwilling to use, and that he would not "belittle South Korean efforts to improve relations with the North."²² "Not talking to people we are punishing," he declared again in September 2008, "has not worked in North Korea."²³ The appeasing tone continued after the presidential election. For instance, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in her confirmation hearing that a "tough-minded, intelligent diplomacy" was needed to deal with Pyongyang.²⁴ In February 2009, she also stated that Washington must "engage in the Six-Party Talks and even bilaterally with North Korea."²⁵ Another basis for the expectation was the Democratic Party's traditional emphasis on engagement and "carrots." Toward the end of the Clinton presidency, Washington and Pyongyang had held mutual visits of high-level officials and moved toward diplomatic normalization. Also significant was the actual provision of food, energy, and medical assistance

²¹ "Invariable Foreign Policy of DPRK," KCNA (20 January 2009).

²² Barack Obama, "Renewing American leadership," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2007).

²³ Presidential debate transcript, Mississippi (26 September 2008).

²⁴ Transcript of the Senate confirmation hearing nominating Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State (13 January 2009).

²⁵ Interview with *Asahi Shimbun*, 17 February 2009.

worth US\$245 million over the last two years of the Bush presidency.²⁶

Seoul and Washington did not live up to Pyongyang's expectations, however. Concerned about North Korean nuclear development, the Lee government declined to deliver those benefits promised by its predecessors. Besides curtailing aid, Seoul suspended the profitable tours of Mt. Kumgang over the shooting death of a tourist by North Korean soldiers in July 2008. Also, South Korea eventually turned down the North's summit proposal that set significant payment as a precondition. South Korean assistance dwindled further, as North Korea tested rockets and nuclear devices in violation of United Nations resolutions and thereby posed a sharply increased threat to security. The Obama administration did no better in meeting North Korean expectations. Instead of initiating direct talks with Pyongyang, the Obama team spent the first few months in office reviewing the Bush administration's approach. Nor did Washington negotiate over the next step to implement the nuclear agreement signed on 19 September 2005. The rocket and nuclear tests conducted by the Kim regime only reduced Washington's willingness to make concessions, while resulting in economic sanctions.

These setbacks notwithstanding, Pyongyang's old expectations persisted. The three major agreements with South Korea and the United States (which were being implemented through early 2009) remained reference points for North Korean diplomacy.²⁷ Pyongyang insisted on numerous occasions that Seoul and Washington implement them. (Characteristically, North Koreans declined to acknowledge that they were not fulfilling their obligations.) Pyongyang would stand to gain much, if Seoul and Washington fully implemented their ends of the agreements. The joint declaration signed at the inter-Korean summit of 15 June 2000 called for, *inter alia*, *balanced* economic development through cooperation, which actually meant South Korean

²⁶ Mark E. Manyin and Mary Beth Nikitin, "Foreign Assistance to North Korea," *CRS Report R40095* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 12 March 2010), p. 2.

²⁷ Jihwan Hwang, "Face-Saving, Reference Point, and North Korea's Strategic Assessments," *The Korean Journal of International Relations*, vol. 49, no. 6 (December 2009), pp. 55-75.

assistance to the North, given the huge economic disparity between them. The declaration adopted at the second summit of 4 October 2007 pushed for military concessions in the Yellow Sea border regions while expanding economic cooperation (meaning more aid for the North) over a new industrial zone, a shipbuilding yard, and infrastructure such as ports, railways, highways, etc. The joint statement that the Six-Party Talks produced on 19 September 2005 promised Pyongyang economic assistance and diplomatic normalization in exchange for denuclearization. The attractiveness of these potential gains partly explains Pyongyang's reluctance to give up on the agreements despite their unraveling. However, it still seems puzzling that North Korea failed to adjust its expectations, while simultaneously expressing deep distrust of Seoul and Washington on an almost daily basis.

Kim Jong-il persistently declined to accept the new status quo and lower his expectation, because this could have derailed his succession plan. In order to demonstrate his son's competence and toughness and thereby secure generals' loyalty for him, it was necessary to at least restore the old status quo. Accepting losses would damage Kim Jong-un's reputation, undercutting support and inviting challenge.

Due to the resultant gap between expectation and reality, the North Korean leadership came to feel a strong sense of loss and frustration. One can find numerous North Korean statements reflecting these feelings. On the eve of its second nuclear test, North Korea complained: "The present US administration is talking about what it called a 'change' and 'bilateral dialogue' but it is, in actuality, pursuing the same reckless policy as followed by the former Bush administration to stifle the DPRK by force of arms."²⁸ A few days later, North Koreans said in disgust: "The US is keen on using a catchphrase 'carrot and stick.' It would be better for the 'Donkey' of the US Democratic Party to lick the carrot."²⁹ A week prior to the attack near the Daecheong Island,

²⁸ "US Warmongers Accused of Stepping Up Military Moves against the DPRK," KCNA (26 May 2009).

²⁹ "DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman Clarifies Its Stand on UNSC's Increasing Threat," KCNA (29 May 2009).

Pyongyang revealed its grievance, saying that as a consequence of the 19 September 2005 joint statement turning into “a dead document,” North Korea “suffered a huge economic loss.”³⁰ North Korean frustration toward South Korea also found clear expression. A week before the sinking of the *Cheonan*, North Korea stated that “the DPRK cannot but feel the bitterness of disillusion about the conservative ruling forces” in Seoul.³¹ And shortly after the artillery attack on the Yeonpyeong Island, came the statement that “the DPRK...is now exercising superhuman self-control.”³²

Deeply frustrated, Pyongyang became more risk-accepting in its attempt to recoup its “losses” and thereby obtain loyalty from the military. This outcome is quite natural from a psychological perspective given the expectation-reality gap Pyongyang faced. Prospect theorists have extensively documented the general tendency that individuals (including political leaders) who perceive losses become willing to accept greater risks for recovery.³³ Whether one perceives to be in the domain of losses depends crucially on how one frames the reference point—expectations in our case. Accommodation to losses, or downward adjustment of the reference point, tends to be slow.

This high risk-acceptance, in combination with the powerful militarism discussed in the preceding section, has resulted in unusually bold physical attacks since late 2009. Due to the fact that the political transition is a drawn-out process, the North Korean frustration and militarism were sustained over a period of time, producing serial provocations, as opposed to an isolated attack.

³⁰ “DPRK FM Spokesman Urges US to Sit at Negotiating Table,” KCNA (2 November 2009).

³¹ “S. Korean Balderdash about N. Issue Dismissed,” KCNA (20 March 2010).

³² “Statement Released by Spokesman of DPRK Foreign Ministry,” KCNA (24 November 2010).

³³ Jack S. Levy, “Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations,” *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 1 (March 1997), pp. 87–112; Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” *Econometrica*, vol. 47, no. 2 (March 1979), pp. 263–292.

Remaining puzzles regarding targets

The preceding sections analyzed the causes of North Korean aggression, highlighting the significance of militarism and frustration. By extending the analysis, this section seeks answers to two related questions: (1) Why did North Korea attack South Korea, not the United States? and (2) Why did North Korea strike in the Yellow Sea area?

The DPRK targeted the ROK because it was an easier opponent. Since the Kim regime needed successful attacks, it made sense to pick an adversary that is more vulnerable and less prone to react forcefully. Compared to the United States, South Korea is vulnerable because of its geographical proximity and military weakness. Also, a forceful retaliation would be less likely from the ROK, since it is susceptible to the DPRK counter-reprisals and pressures for restraint from China (and perhaps the United States). In contrast, attacking the mighty United States would more likely lead to a severe punishment and a humiliating defeat. Another reason for picking on South Korea may be that Pyongyang was more frustrated with Seoul. The ROK, along with China, had been the largest and most reliable donor to the DPRK since 1998. Therefore, its sanctions may have generated a greater sense of loss.

Selecting the locale for armed provocation seems to follow similar logic: the attacks took place in the most vulnerable areas of South Korean defense, so that they had the best chance of success. The ROK islands and surrounding seas targeted by the North lie just off the North Korean coast but are relatively distant from the South Korean mainland. While the tiny islands can merely sustain small garrisons, North Korea can deploy large forces along its long coastline on the opposite side. Therefore, North Korea enjoys an advantage in obtaining and maintaining a local military superiority—especially when an element of surprise can be exploited. (This explains the fact that all the provocations were *surprise* attacks, and that North Korea did not strike when the South was ready and alert. For a notable instance, Pyongyang did not immediately retaliate against the ROK artillery drills of December 2010, while it

had used a similar event as pretext for an attack in November.³⁴) Moreover, the risk of escalation is lower, because the targeted littoral area is physically separated from the heavily armed land border, and US military intervention is less likely due to the region's proximity to China. The DPRK would want to reduce this risk, since a full-scale war would certainly lead to its defeat at the hands of the superior US and ROK forces. (Some pundits assert that destitute North Korea does not fear a full-scale war because it has little to lose; its fire-breathing rhetoric appears to confirm this view. This argument is not convincing, however: the Kim family and ruling clique has much to lose, including their enormous wealth and power; military officers would lose their privileges and possibly their lives in a failed war.) Pyongyang also harbors acute grievances over this area. The Roh government in 2007 pledged major concessions over the region, which would have practically nullified the Northern Limit Line, thereby providing significant strategic and economic gains to North Korea.³⁵ Consequently, Pyongyang's expectations were raised, however, the Lee government has not honored this pledge. The result is a keen sense of loss and frustration on the DPRK side.

Alternative explanations

Many analysts and pundits view the ROK and US policies toward North Korea as primary causes of its recent aggressiveness. However, they disagree on which policies are to blame. One group argues that appeasement under the Kim and Roh governments led to aggression. The "sunshine policy" and the "policy of peace and prosperity" weakened the ROK defense posture by reducing military readiness and alertness. A history of condoning repeated

³⁴ Yonhap News (20 December 2010) [Reasons for no North Korean response to artillery drills].

³⁵ The Northern Limit Line is an inter-Korean demarcation line in the Yellow Sea that the United Nations Command drew up in 1953. While South Korea regards it as a legal maritime border, the North refuses to recognize it and stands by its own southerly line.

provocations and rewarding bad behaviors also undermined the credibility of deterrence threats.³⁶ To the contrary, another group asserts that the confrontational policies of the current governments in Seoul and Washington induced the North Korean attacks by forcing Pyongyang into a corner; the isolated North Korea lashed out to relieve external pressure and enhance deterrence. These divergent diagnoses underpin the politically charged debate on the responsibilities and remedies for North Korean belligerence.

These simplistic explanations, however, are inadequate by themselves. It is difficult to accept the “confrontational policies” per se as the primary cause for North Korean aggressiveness. Contrary to common perception, the Lee Myung-bak government was not so harsh on Pyongyang before its attacks, even in comparison with its pro-DPRK predecessors.³⁷ As Figure 1 shows, inter-Korean trade under the Lee presidency (2008–2009) was larger than that during the progressive era (1998–2007), except for one year. In 2009 South Korea accounted for 33 percent of North Korean foreign trade, which was the highest level since 2000—except for 2007.³⁸ For all the armed attacks, inter-Korean commercial exchanges still have remained substantial. In October 2010, it amounted to US\$165.6 million; in January 2008—the last full month of the Roh presidency—the volume was merely US\$140.5 million.³⁹ After all, the Lee government has yet to close down the Kaesong industrial complex, which provides the North annually with US\$50 million in workers’ compensation. All these facts indicate that Seoul is still committed to engagement, albeit to a lesser extent due to the suspension of Mt. Kumgang tours as well as food and fertilizer supplies since 2008. Moreover, decades of truly hardline approaches adopted by Seoul and Washington never produced the recent level of military

³⁶ Victor D. Cha, “Five Myths about North Korea,” *The Washington Post* (10 December 2010).

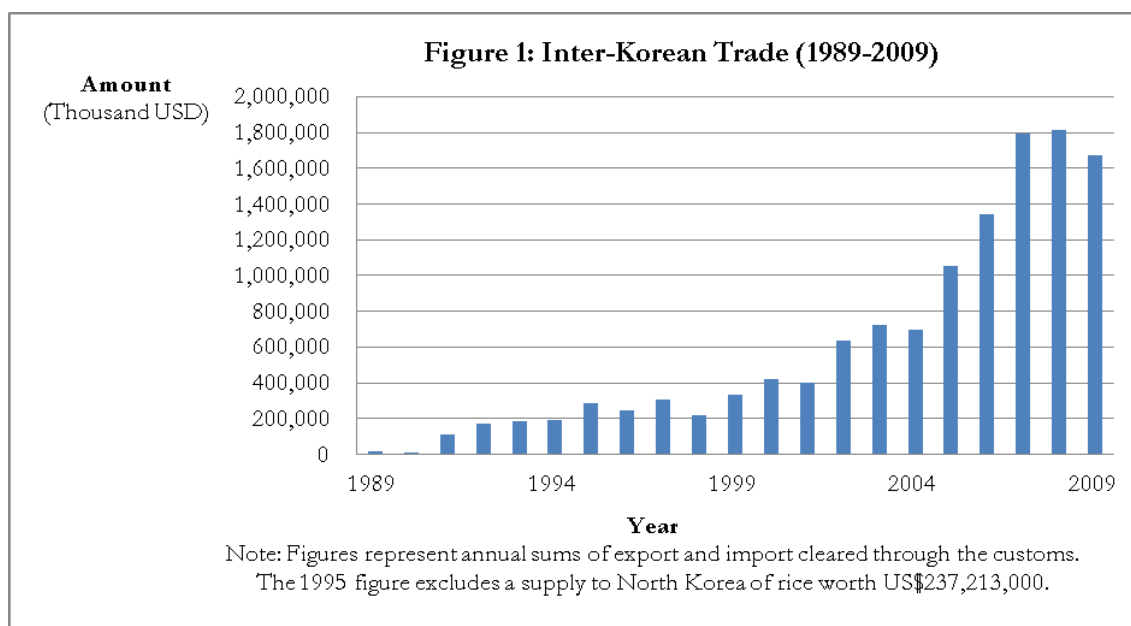
³⁷ The ROK sanctions imposed *after* the attacks cannot be regarded as causing the DPRK belligerence since the late 2009.

³⁸ Hyung-min Joo, “Is North Korea Putting All of the Eggs in One Basket?” *North Korean Review*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2011), pp. 21–35.

³⁹ Korean Statistics Bureau (www.kostat.go.kr). The exchange is made through the Kaesong industrial complex.

adventurism in Pyongyang. A confrontational policy toward North Korea was continually in place from the Korean War through 1994—the year when the Agreed Framework was concluded. Even afterwards, the George W. Bush administration pursued a hawkish North Korea policy. Nevertheless, North Korea did not previously show the type of belligerence seen recently.

Unconditional engagement under the previous ROK governments is not a chief cause of North Korean belligerence, either. Although it may have had the above-mentioned corrosive effects on South Korean defense and deterrence, North Korea did not act as aggressively during the period of full-fledged unconditional engagement (2000–2008).⁴⁰



This critical assessment of conventional wisdom does not mean that the discussed policies toward North Korea had nothing to do with the DPRK aggression of the past two years. What caused Pyongyang's recent belligerence is the sequential *combination* of unconditional and conditional engagements, as explained above. The earlier engagement raised Pyongyang's expectations

⁴⁰ The sole major armed attack of this period occurred when a DPRK patrol boat bombarded and sank an ROK naval vessel in June 2002.

to a politically unsustainable level,⁴¹ and the subsequent adjustment brought about acute disappointments, which were amplified and sustained in the context of the precarious leadership succession. This unique sequence of developments playing out in the critical juncture of DPRK history—the most precarious leadership transition—produced an unprecedented level of frustration and extraordinary aggressiveness. In this sense, *both* unconditional and conditional engagements were the causes and must share “responsibility,” along with the dysfunctional political system of North Korea.

North Korea watchers often argue that generals initiated the recent attacks without political authorization. As Kim Jong-un empowered the party and emphasized the economy at the expense of the military, some analysts argue, disgruntled elements within the army launched the attacks to heighten international tensions and derail Kim’s scheme. Other pundits assert that the Kim family has lost control of the military, which prefers a heavy-handed approach toward Seoul and Washington.⁴²

This “runaway military” thesis is not plausible. There is little evidence suggesting that the emergent political leadership abandoned the military-first policy. To the contrary, political commitment to *songun* has been repeatedly reaffirmed and reinforced as noted above. A recent example was the 2011 New Year’s editorial jointly published by state-run newspapers, which mentioned *songun* fourteen times.⁴³ This is not surprising given the political importance of the military; in addition, the North Korean people harbor an acute sense of insecurity and tend to accept the policy.⁴⁴ Even if discontent elements exist within the military organization, their unauthorized use of force is improbable.

⁴¹ The largely unconditional engagement was difficult to sustain because no political consensus was behind it. While embracing engagement in principle, the South Korean public demanded greater reciprocation by North Koreans. The powerful conservative political forces including the Grand National Party also wanted to make inter-Korean cooperation conditional on North Korean denuclearization.

⁴² *Chosun Ilbo* (11 December 2010) [Fissure in the Kim Jong-il regime].

⁴³ KCNA (1 January 2011). The joint editorial is an authoritative statement of guiding principles and priorities for any given year.

⁴⁴ Sharon LaFraniere, “Visitors See North Korea Still Stunted by Its Isolation,” *The New York Times* (26 December 2010).

In the *suryong* system, power organs are constantly under tight control of the supreme leader. Kim Jong-il has maintained particularly close surveillance over military activities, knowing that only the army has the ability to overthrow his rule (as well as to protect it).⁴⁵ During leadership succession, the army must be put on an especially short leash: 2010 saw the most ever visits to military units by the ailing Kim. As such, the political importance of the KPA strengthened his determination for control—not its autonomy. Any attempt to use force arbitrarily would be difficult and suicidal under such circumstances.⁴⁶ Most importantly, no concrete evidence corroborates the thesis that the military is out of control; circumstantial evidence suggests otherwise. Take for example the Yeonpyeong incident, which is the poster child for the “runaway military” thesis. The Fourth Army Corps commander, who reportedly played a key role in carrying out the attack, was formerly a KPA chief of staff.⁴⁷ If he had been powerful enough to use force without authorization, he could have evaded such a demotion. According to news reports, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un visited the Fourth Army Corps-stationed area and met with its commander, shortly before the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island.⁴⁸ Also, the bombardment involved a high degree of inter-service coordination: shortly before the shelling, MiG-23 fighter planes and naval patrol vessels were deployed to the area.⁴⁹ Given these circumstances, it is hard to believe the political leaders did

⁴⁵ Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, “Pyongyang’s Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,” *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010), pp. 66-68.

⁴⁶ This does not mean that political control of the military is perfect. For instance, there reportedly was a coup d’état plot within the Sixth Army Corps in 1995. Nevertheless, no such plot has ever succeeded in North Korean history. Moreover, there were no undisputable instances of unauthorized major attacks on South Korea. Although the North Korean leadership claimed that hawkish officers had arbitrarily launched attacks on South Korea in 2002 and 1968, these accounts are not so credible. Given that the claims were made to South Koreans in times of détente, they might constitute North Korean leaders’ attempt to find scapegoats for past wrongdoings and reassure their good will.

⁴⁷ *Chosun Ilbo* (26 November 2010) [Generals responsible for artillery barrage].

⁴⁸ *Chosun Ilbo* (25 November 2010) [The Kims met commander of coastal artillery].

⁴⁹ Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr., “The Yonp’yong-do Incident, November 23, 2010,” 38 *North Special Report* 11-1, (Washington, DC: The US-Korea Institute, 11 January 2011),

not know about the attack plan beforehand. It is also reported that Pyongyang has made efforts to give Kim Jong-un full credit for the successful armed attacks.⁵⁰ Considering all these developments, it makes more sense to interpret the recent attacks as originating from the converging political interests of politicians and generals, rather than from a runaway military. The rise of militarism did not lead to a breakdown of civilian control.

Another widely held view posits that North Korean belligerence originated from confidence boosted by nuclear armament and Chinese backing. This argument has a modicum of plausibility: historical and theoretical studies have shown that military strength and foreign support tend to embolden states.⁵¹ Pyongyang indeed has frequently threatened a “nuclear war,” and Beijing has repeatedly opposed punitive measures against its ally. Nonetheless, it is hard to establish that nuclear weapons and Chinese support are primary causes for aggressiveness. North Korean nuclear development long predates the latest attacks. Pyongyang presumably constructed nuclear devices in the early 1990s, boasted of possessing “enough nuclear bombs to defend against a US attack” in 2005, and conducted its maiden nuclear test in 2006.⁵² Also, the current period of North Korean belligerence has not witnessed a marked strengthening of Chinese patronage. For all its bravado, Pyongyang lacks a reliable second-strike capability and therefore has no firm basis for being confident about its deterrent. The repeated nuclear blackmails that Pyongyang issued after its provocations can be seen more as a sign of anxiety than an expression of confidence.

p. 10.

⁵⁰ *Donga Ilbo* (28 December 2010) [Five North Korean soldiers were killed during artillery fire exchange].

⁵¹ For example, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

⁵² John S. Park and Dong Sun Lee, “North Korea: Existential Deterrence and Diplomatic Leverage,” in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *The Long Shadow: Nuclear Weapons and Security in 21st Century Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008). The second nuclear explosion of May 2009 does not constitute a remarkable leap in nuclear capability.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that an extraordinary combination of militarism and frustration amplified by a precarious leadership transition has caused Pyongyang's astonishing aggressiveness since late 2009. The uncertain succession process provided North Korean politicians and soldiers with powerful incentives to use force. Emerging politicians needed to obtain soldiers' loyalty by making tangible military accomplishments and signaling their commitment to military ideals. Soldiers, for their part, pushed for military operations in order to signal their allegiance to the emergent leaders. The armed attacks resulting from the ascending militarism were particularly destructive and bold, because North Koreans were frustrated due to their unmet expectations. Amid the crucial leadership transition, Pyongyang lost those valuable gains that it previously had made while Seoul had been pursuing unconditional engagement. Also, the Obama administration did not fulfill Pyongyang's high expectations regarding bilateral talks and rapprochement. The emerging political leadership in Pyongyang could not acquiesce to these disappointing realities for fear that the military would question their competence and toughness. Consequently, the politicians became inclined to accept high risks in their effort to recover perceived losses with force. I also have argued that North Korean aggressiveness was channeled toward South Korea (rather than the United States) and particularly its western maritime frontier, because there are especially acute grievances and safer grounds for implementing a militaristic policy. I found little empirical support for alternative accounts pointing to either excessive or insufficient engagement or an uncontrolled military as the primary cause for North Korean belligerence, nor can these accounts explain the target of the aggression.

These findings imply that an effort to mitigate North Korean aggressiveness has to begin by addressing the dual problems of frustration and militarism. Reducing frustration requires narrowing the expectation-reality gap by limiting policy oscillations. The best way to do that is to forge a post-

partisan consensus on North Korea policy and implement it consistently over time. Insofar as South Koreans are sharply divided on the preferred nature of engagement, North Koreans will likely maintain a lingering hope that appeasers would return to power in Seoul and reinstate unconditional assistance. Toward that end, Pyongyang could resort to coercive diplomacy. In contrast, if the ROK maintains a consensus policy for long enough, the DPRK cannot avoid accepting it as an unalterable reality. In the more likely event that a consensus proves impossible to reach, South Korea should at least avoid adopting radically dovish or hawkish policies that cannot muster solid popular backing for an extended period of time. Also, it is imperative to shun words or actions that give the impression that the ROK government lacks a firm commitment to its chosen course—presently, conditional engagement. In this regard, it is a bad idea to talk about a “grand bargain” or an inter-Korean summit (which are reminiscent of the old days of appeasement) before North Korean belligerence subsides. However, holding a dialogue is not problematic in itself, unless South Korean representatives waver, thereby feeding North Korea’s false hopes about appeasement. Talks can have a positive impact if Seoul takes the opportunity to signal a strong resolve to uphold its stance. On the other hand, refusing to engage with Pyongyang can present a pretext for further aggression and undermine Seoul’s diplomatic position when concerned parties including Washington desire talks.⁵³ These suggestions are equally valid for Americans, who appear to be less divided on North Korea at the moment.

Although one cannot manipulate the succession process and reduce militarism, it is still possible to decrease the chance that militarism would translate into an armed attack. The best method for doing so is to strengthen the ROK defenses and reduce military vulnerabilities. It is important to remember that only successful attacks can politically benefit North Korean politicians and generals; a failure would damage their political interests. Therefore, a robust ROK capability to fend off DPRK attacks or deny victories

⁵³ Michael Wines and Mark Landler, “U.S. Shifts Toward Talks on N. Korea,” *The New York Times* (6 January 2011).

would diminish North Korean aggressiveness. This is what Glenn Snyder dubbed “deterrence by denial”—the most effective method of using conventional arms to dissuade a potential aggressor.⁵⁴ The Lee government instead has responded to the recent DPRK attacks by resorting to “deterrence by punishment”—i.e., posing the threat of painful retaliation.⁵⁵ This approach is not effective against a risk-acceptant adversary such as North Korea, especially given the limited prowess of conventional reprisal.⁵⁶ Also, the threat of severe punishment against attacks on warships and small islands (and other targets of equivalent value) is not credible when North Korea has the ability to counterstrike with potent conventional arms and weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Even the US nuclear arsenal would not reliably deter such attacks, because Washington has no important interests at stake in protecting those small islands and ships. Deterrence by punishment also carries considerable political costs. Repeated military threats and offensive strike capabilities that a punishment strategy requires could be mistaken as signs of hostile intent and heighten Pyongyang’s sense of insecurity, thereby reinforcing militaristic tendencies further.⁵⁷ They would unwittingly provide North Korea with pretexts for armed provocations. When related efforts continually involve US forces (for instance, US aircraft carriers dispatched to the Yellow Sea), relations with China and Russia could deteriorate; American commitment to the ROK alliance might weaken in the long run due to fatigue and concern about entrapment.⁵⁸ Pressuring or wooing China to chastise North Korea can antagonize Beijing or

⁵⁴ Glenn H. Snyder, “Deterrence and Defense,” in Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz, eds., *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics*, 4th edition (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), pp. 350–368.

⁵⁵ The New Year’s presidential address manifests this approach.

⁵⁶ Prospect theory implies that it is more difficult to deter a risk-acceptant adversary trying to recover losses than to deter an attempt to make new gains. Levy, “Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations,” p. 93.

⁵⁷ Paul B. Stares, “Military Escalation in Korea,” *Contingency Planning Memorandum No. 10* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, November 2010).

⁵⁸ This statement does not mean that the recent dispatches of the USS George Washington to South Korea after the North Korean attacks were ill-advised. Those moves were necessary for deterrence and alliance credibility. My concern is about repeated American involvements designed to shore up general deterrence in non-crisis situations.

increase its influence. Therefore, a deterrence posture against Pyongyang should not rely primarily upon punishment, although it certainly has a significant role to play. Denial based on South Korean capabilities is a far more effective approach.

Although both problems call for serious attention, managing the adverse effects of militarism deserves a higher priority over reducing frustration. In the event that South Korea acquires robust denial capabilities, even a militarist, risk-acceptant regime in the North could not help but cease physical attacks that hold poor odds for success and political gain. Although lingering militarism and frustration then would probably find alternative expressions, including WMD development and verbal outbursts, Seoul and Washington could live with these nuisances as they have for decades. Moreover, the allies have greater control over their own defenses than over a recalcitrant Pyongyang's expectations.