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Yeonpyeong: Dealing with North Korea

By Lee Dongmin

Synopsis

North Korea's recent actions, including the intensification of the uranium-enrichment programme and the artillery bombardment on the Yeonpyeong Island has raised international concern. It is time that concrete measures are taken to deal with the Pyongyang regime to maintain stability in the region.

Commentary

ON 20 November 2010, the international community was stunned by revelation of a new uranium-enrichment facility at North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear complex by Dr Siegfried Hecker, a Stanford University nuclear scientist. The facility had more than a thousand centrifuges that were said to be producing low-enriched uranium (LEU) for use to meet the country's energy shortage, but which could also be converted for producing bomb fuel. Three days later, on 23 November, North Korea launched an artillery assault on the Yeonpyeong Island near a disputed western maritime border area, killing two South Korean marines and two civilians as well as injuring 16 others. The South Koreans responded with artillery fire on North Korean positions. Tensions rose and China called on both Koreas to exercise restraint and open dialogue.

Hyper-Sensitive Response to a Military Drill?

Although the real intention of North Korea's attack is not clear, there is the possibility that the regime may have reacted hyper-sensitively to South Korea's annual maritime military exercise near the disputed maritime border, the Northern Limit Line (NLL). The NLL currently recognised by South Korea, dates to August 30, 1953 when the then Commander of United Nations forces drew a virtual maritime border for South Korea. However, during the Armistice negotiations of July, 1953, there was no formal discussion of the maritime borderline, while the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) was agreed upon and signed. The resulting ambiguity sowed the seeds for future conflict.

North Korea first raised the issue in 1973. In an attempt to resolve the dispute, the two Koreas held numerous talks, which only confirmed the stark differences in their respective positions. On 15 June, 1999, the first major maritime conflict occurred in the area. Following the incident, on 2 September, North Korea totally annulled the NLL and unilaterally declared its own version of a "Maritime Military Demarcation Line". Since then, the two Koreas have engaged in several other maritime conflicts, in 2002 and 2009 – the latest being the Cheonan incident in March this year. The conflict will continue to smoulder in the coming years unless the problem is carefully managed.

Calculated Attack

On the other hand, the Yeonpyeong assault is quite different from the previous skirmishes, as it is the first artillery assault on South Korea's territory since the Armistice in 1953. One view is that North Korea exploited the maritime border dispute as a pretext to act upon its political objectives. As the regime is in the midst of a leadership transition which could lead to a power struggle, the regime could have launched the assault to divert attention from its domestic problems. However, considering the smooth conclusion of the Worker's Party Meeting on 28 September 2010 that saw the appointment of Kim Jong-un as the vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, this theory of tactical diversion may be a bit far-fetched.

The regime's leaders may have wished to send a message to the international community that Kim Jong Il is still in charge, and the development of the nuclear programme will continue. They may also have intended to send a warning that any external military operations against the regime, including an air strike against its nuclear facility, would not be tolerated. Taking into account North Korea's use of force, this interpretation deserves some credence, since nearly all major military manoeuvres must get the personal prior approval of the "top supreme commander". Whether the Yeonpyeong assault was a well-planned, deliberate act or not, it unquestionably served its purpose as the regime's show of strength.

Dealing with the Regime

North Korea's provocation puts South Korea and other countries in an awkward position as they seek to maintain peace and stability in the region. Without much room for manoeuvre left, the international community has made strident calls for China to exert its influence over the regime. Many regional countries including the United States assert that China must be a "responsible world power". Meanwhile, China appears to be composed and restrained; it chose not to respond directly to the US-South Korea joint military exercise while calling for talks. China appears to be carefully weighing the negative consequences of pressuring the regime.

Over the past decade whenever there has been perceived international pressure against North Korea, the regime has taken it as a threat and often responded with rather extreme measures. It may be recalled that the regime reacted vehemently even against China leading up to the second nuclear crisis in 2009. The regional states therefore face a dilemma in dealing with the regime: exerting external pressure in retaliation for the Yeonpyeong assault may provoke a heightened crisis. On the other hand, passively pursuing the current policy of "strategic patience" also inevitably allows the regime more time to further its nuclear programme.

Anyone dealing with the regime must proceed on the premise that the sole motivation for the regime is survival, not the maintenance of peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Therefore, rather than treating the Yeonpyeong assault as an isolated case, regional states need to manage the situation in a way that will be conducive to overall stability in the region. The international community should resume dialogue with North Korea so as to manage the regional security challenges ahead.

The next step is to monitor the new "civilian" nuclear development programme that has broader dual-use functions. It is time to deal with the regime directly in managing various problems in the region. No less important is to demand an apology from Pyongyang for the civilians deaths from its Yeonpyeong assault.

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