
North Korean Vulnerability?

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TENSIONS BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH KOREA ESCALATED RAPIDLY IN THE LATE SUMMER OF 2015 AFTER AN AUGUST 4 LANDMINE BLAST IN THE DEMILITARIZED ZONE (DMZ), THE FORTIFIED BORDER THAT SEPARATES THE TWO SIDES OF THE PENINSULA. The explosion blew off the legs of two patrolling South Korean soldiers and triggered a heated exchange between the two sides. After an 11-year hiatus, South Korea began broadcasting propaganda on loudspeakers along the border toward the North. Pyongyang promptly fired on the speakers, declaring it was entering “semi-war” status, which prompted a return of fire from the ROK.

The crisis was diffused after the announcement of an inter-Korean accord reached on August 25. The agreement, in which Pyongyang consented to end its semi-war status in exchange for a promise from Seoul to stop broadcasting propaganda, followed 43 hours of negotiations between the two Koreas. Are we likely to see more of these crises in 2016?

The two Koreas have clashed along the DMZ many times since the signing of the 1953 armistice. But this latest series of events is striking in at least one way. The most telling aspect of the 2015 crisis is how it offered insights into North Korean fragility. Contrary to popular opinion, Seoul’s desire to stem the



downturn in the country's stock exchange, and other untoward effects of North Korean saber-rattling on capital outflows, did not stop the crisis. Nor did the U.S. decision to temporarily halt military exercises with South Korea that were taking place in mid-August. The key to defusing the tense situation was actually Pyongyang's desire to stop the South Korean loudspeaker broadcasts. To accomplish this, the regime took the unusual step of acknowledging the August 4 landmine blast.

The North has not offered similar statements of regret over actions in the past, including the March 2010 sinking of the warship the *Cheonan*, which killed 46 South Korean soldiers, or the November 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, which killed four South Koreans. The inter-Korean agreement is even

Korean government propaganda of the Cold War. The recent broadcasts featured young females, who identified themselves as defectors, criticizing the Kim regime for its poor governance, human rights abuses, and isolation.

A recent broadcast segment featured a well-known North Korean journalist-turned-defector, Ju Seong-ha, who mocked photos of the rotund Kim's getting off planes like an exalted state guest. Sweet voices carrying powerful messages from 11 locations along the DMZ penetrated the minds of young, undernourished, and overworked North Korean soldiers. With better technology than the Cold War days, these broadcasts went deeper than before, blasting messages—and sometimes K-Pop music—more than a dozen miles into the country.

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more striking because North Korea took a deal without having its demand met for a cessation of the U.S.-South Korean exercises.

Before the crisis abated, the North issued an unusual ultimatum directly to South Korean national security adviser Kim Kwan-jin, threatening to attack not in response to U.S.-ROK military exercises, but if the speakers were not silenced. Propaganda broadcasting had been a staple of the two Koreas' psychological warfare during the Cold War. But the new broadcasts were different from the knee-jerk anti-North

This certainly rattled Pyongyang.

The normal North Korea playbook would have been to ratchet up tensions, play tough, have Kim visit military field units, draw missile strike lines to U.S. cities, and milk the crisis for as long as it can to get something—food, energy, a seat at the negotiating table with the United States. But this time, the sole issue was to stop the broadcasting.

This is not the first time North Korea has demonstrated such sensitivities. The U.N. Commission of Inquiry's Feb. 2014 recommendation to refer North

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Korea's leadership to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity greatly disturbed North Korea, forcing them to do things they do not normally do. The regime sent its foreign minister Ri Su Yong to Russia for the first time in four years, and dispatched seasoned diplomat Kang Sok Ju to tour European capitals to lobby against the resolution. And finally, there was Pyongyang's apoplectic late 2014 rage in response to the movie *The Interview* that ridiculed the leadership, and that led to the North's cyber attack on Sony Pictures.

The lesson here is that the North Korean concession may mask a deeper vulnerability—and potentially larger crisis—down the road. Ultimately, the crisis demonstrates that the regime, under the 32- or 33-year-old Kim Jong-un, is vulnerable to attacks on its legitimacy. The fiery rhetoric, belligerence, and unpredictability of Kim, who took power after the death of his father in December 2011, belies an apparent hypersensitivity to criticism about his qualifications to run the country.

These responses reflect weakness, not strength. The regime has proven hypersensitive to questions about Kim's legitimacy, suggesting difficulties in the leadership transition. Four years into his rule, Kim has purged and executed around 70 of his top lieutenants, including his influential uncle Jang Song Thaek, and his defense minister Hyon Yong Chol. And these are Kim's people—not those of his father and predecessor Kim Jong Il.

The regime is tightening political control at a time when North Korean society is slowly but surely changing. Markets have been embedded in society for over two decades, but a nascent civil society may be growing around these markets as they become more central to peoples' lives. Defector testimonies indicate that people gain more of their livelihood from the markets than from government handouts, which means greater separation from the state.

Despite crackdowns by the regime, more news is finding its way into and out of North Korea. News about the outside world is slipping into the closed society through advanced technology and other smuggling methods. A hot item in North Korea today is the \$50 Notel portable media player—which can play thumb drives with news about the outside world, movies, and South Korean soap operas. There are also now nearly 3 million cellphones in North Korea. Some smuggled cellphones are used not only for business and trade but also to gain outside information and communicate with relatives who have fled the North. These communication channels funnel news from the inside to the outside, allowing the world to understand more about North Korea's internal situation. The work of the U.N. Commission of Inquiry, NGOs, and several high-profile defectors have also brought much-needed global attention to issues like North Korean human rights.

The growing space between the people and the regime, the core elite and Kim Jong-un, as well as increasing external pressure are all good reasons for the North Korean leadership to be concerned. These conditions may not lead to the immediate collapse of the North Korean regime but they are certainly evidence of its growing vulnerabilities. And the last thing that North Korea wants to do is project weakness under a new leader.

Thus 2016 may witness the regime pursuing a strategy that is designed to do the opposite, that is, attempt to project an image of North Korea's military strength and Kim Jong-un's control over the elite. A new series of low-level provocations designed to showcase North Korea's military capabilities without provoking a full-scale war may be in the offing. The danger of escalation from such provocations is ever-present on the peninsula, but miscalculation by the young and unpredictable leadership is equally if not more concerning, and could determine the tenor of the crises to come in 2016. □