

North Korea as the 'Boy Who Cried Wolf': A Response

Written by Robert E Kelly

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ROBERT E KELLY, APR 17 2013

On April 10 I posted my thoughts on the North Korea crisis at the *Diplomat*. The piece enjoyed good traffic, and I am happy to take up the invitation of *e-IR* to write on the crisis by expanding my argument in response to the many critiques I received. Rather than respond individually, I thought I would provide some general follow-up to certain themes that showed up regularly.

1. You're just an arm-chair general, air-head liberal, cloistered academic hack, and so on

I was surprised that the essay was taken by some as 'liberal' or 'blind to the NK threat' and so on. I am actually fairly hawkish on NK. I think the Sunshine Policy failed and should not be tried again unless NK makes real concessions it did not last time. I also think the Six Party Talks were a gimmick to allow NK to play China, the US, SK, Japan, and Russia off against each other. For example, Kim Jong Il mentioned in the context of those talks that NK could be an ally of the US against China, and a lot of people think NK built nuclear weapons to prevent Chinese political domination even as NK becomes its economic colony.

Today's rough unity among Japan, SK, and the US not to deal with NK barring real concessions is a success in my opinion. With Russia no longer a meaningful Asian power, that has forced NK into the arms solely of China. That is real progress. We are slowly narrowing the diplomatic canvas against which the North can pull its shenanigans, and restoring some diplomatic space may in fact be one NK reason for the current crisis.

Usefully, this narrowing puts the onus overwhelmingly and clearly where it belongs – on Beijing. It also means only one more country – China – has to agree to not get played by NK, and NK will at last be isolated and pinned-down. (In game theoretic language, the Six Party Talks is a stag-hunt.) This too is genuine progress. One day China will fatigue of its dangerous, outrageous client, and the curtain will finally come down on NK, because it is permanently dependent on aid (which comes almost exclusively from China). A Chinese cut-off is probably at least a decade away, but the Chinese are already sending Track II hints that they are losing patience with NK.

It should also be noted how many civilian casualties a war would create in SK, and Seoul especially. I have noted elsewhere that the Southern government was very foolish in allowing Seoul's population to bloat so badly when its suburbs begin just thirty miles from the DMZ. That offers NK a convenient, permanent hostage for regular blackmail (the standard 'Seoul as a sea of fire' threat). Because of this hostage, it is very risky for SK to counter-strike, which is why they have never done it up to now. I have argued in SK conferences for years that the SK capital should be moved and that there should be restrictions on developing greater Seoul. But the situation is what is. So simply 'kicking their butt,' John Bolton-style, is a hugely risky option.

2. The conclusion of the story of the boy who cried wolf is that the wolf does in fact show up. So maybe NK will declare war after all

That is a good point in the metaphor, and one I probably should have addressed in the original piece. But the analytical purchase of the metaphor comes from the confusion the boy sows in his listeners by spreading so much false information. That leaves the listener (the rest of the world in NK's case) confused as to how to respond.

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However, the metaphor breaks down at the end-point, because if NK ever were to attack, there would be no final cry of 'wolf' which we would all ignore to our great misfortune. Instead, NK would surprise attack with everything they've got in one massive strike, akin to the Nazi assault on the USSR in 1941. Recall that NK is very far behind in the military balance, even against the South alone, much less with America in the fight. The only way NK could possibly win would be to catch the Americans and South Koreans off-guard – as happened in the first Korean war.

NK would have a short window of surprise in which to mobilize a gigantic all-front assault before the Americans could reinforce their ally (which was exactly the Soviet plan for victory over NATO as well). The Americans would have to rush in troops and material, giving NK perhaps a week to knock the South out of the war with a massive, Clausewitzian strike on the enemy's center of gravity, Seoul, for a lightning victory (i.e., a blitzkrieg). An opening salvo of nuclear strikes and a massive artillery barrage would pound the Southern army, cities, and transportation hubs simultaneously all over the country, supplemented by heavy use of special forces behind the lines to sow chaos. Then the North Korean People's Army (KPA) would have to march on Seoul using its conventional numeric superiority in a huge flood of infantry and armor (to overwhelm the Americans' air dominance) to try to knock SK off-balance quickly by taking its political and economic center. Hopefully crushing Seoul in a massive blitz would throw SK into chaos, making it impossible for the US to reinforce in the midst of a refugee disaster. The KPA would then push toward Busan, grinding to a halt at some point under the weight of US airstrikes most likely. Then NK could negotiate on favorable terms.

The problem is that this best-case scenario for the North is still highly unlikely. To knock the much wealthier and demographically larger South off-balance enough for a real chance at victory, the North would have to use most or all of its nuclear weapons in a crushing first strike. NK is simply too far behind conventionally to have a chance at victory without that. But using nuclear weapons that way would make it impossible for China to continue supporting NK, and it would likely incur a US nuclear second strike, tactical at first, strategic if necessary. NK would have to ride that out, plus the KPA would have to operate in a radioactive environment while conquering the South. Worse, NK would face extremely limited fuel supplies for its armor, no air cover, and the possibility of uprisings at home with the KPA away and US airpower destroying the NK state's command-and-control. Overcoming these hurdles would be all but impossible, and by telegraphing a war for weeks and weeks now, the North would have an even harder time winning against a prepared enemy. In short, all the recent bluster and war threats are completely contrary to what would be in their interest if they really wanted a war. Hence my no war prediction.

3. There is a tension in the original essay between the first section that says NK could be trapped into escalation by its own rhetoric, and the second section that all but dismisses the possibility of war

This is the strongest criticism made and is correct. But that is less an artifact of the essay than a paradox in the reality of the Korean situation. It is correct that the North Koreans do not want a war for the reasons given in the first essay and above. They are likely to lose badly and quickly, and NK elites will face capital punishment afterward. And if they did want a war, it would be a massive bolt from the blue as described above, not this slow-motion replica of the Cuban Missile Crisis. That is why every serious analyst thinks they are bluffing.

On the other hand, the very fact that we all think they are bluffing may make war more likely by increasing pressure on them to do something just for credibility's sake. And here is the irony: If we take the threats seriously, that would be empirically inaccurate, but politically safer. But instead, by telling the truth and calling the North chicken and bluffers, we the media and analyst community are almost certainly creating pressure inside the National Defense Commission to do something rash they would otherwise not want to do. The more they feel embarrassed and humiliated, the more likely they may strike out of pride alone, in some pique of rage. As I said in the first essay, this is a model case of perception and misperception in world politics, somewhat similar to the tightly interactive spirals of the summer of 1914 or the Cuban Missile Crisis.

This is almost certainly why NK closed Kaesong; they were rhetorically entrapped into the closure, because no one believed they would do it. That belief was correct; they did not want to close it – until we started mocking them over it, and then they felt compelled to do it to save face. Very indicative of this dynamic whereby hurt pride itself becomes a driver of recklessness is the repeated statements from the NK foreign ministry throughout the crisis, saying in effect

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'yes, we really do mean our threats; we are not bluffing.' In other words, Pyongyang is paying attention to the media coverage, especially in SK; they are in fact upset that we are blowing them off as bluffing dilettantes; and they are responding to our wave of cynicism this past month. So if disproving that cynicism and salving their hurt pride become a policy driver, they might strike after all – probably something small in the Yellow Sea, not the blitzkrieg. But a tit-for-tat spiral might then occur between NK and its provocation target (likely SK). That in turn could spin out of control and bring the war.

4. So what should we do?

This analysis suggests downsides to both accepting NK threats at face value and calling them as bluffs. The first course of action, which has been the response particularly of the American media, is both empirically incorrect and gives NK the attention it craves so desperately, as well as de facto partial recognition of its nuclear status. The second is attractive because it is true, but it also includes a negative feedback effect, whereby the more we disbelieve them, the more they feel compelled to act to disprove us. It is a catch-22.

So what to do? Nothing; benign neglect. Ignoring NK is the worst sleight of all. It reminds Northern elites what they know in their hearts and hate – that no one takes them seriously, that we think they are ridiculous, that they are lost in time with ideological grievances no cares about anymore, that they are little different from gangsters now, etc. Simultaneously, disinterest gives them no psychological *casus belli* from hurt pride. North Korea is another 'Upper Volta with nuclear weapons,' and we should treat it as such.

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