

Opportunity and Peril in the North Korean Standoff

Written by Dan G. Cox

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DAN G. COX, APR 9 2013

Most pundits have determined that Kim Jong Un has consolidated power and is now about to (irrationally) strike out militarily against South Korea and/or one or more of her allies. Admiral Samuel Locklear leads the chorus in this camp concluding that Kim Jong Un has used the past year to “successfully consolidate his power.” When this assumption is coupled with recent military moves by North Korea such as moving forces closer to the South Korean border, especially artillery which has the South Korean capital of Seoul in range, and moving some medium range missiles to the Northeastern coast, the logical conclusion many are drawing is that Kim Jong Un is about to irrationally start a war. The extremely provocative rhetoric from the Kim Jong Un administration seems to lend further support for such a conclusion.

When one couples these facts with the ominous warning to the few remaining embassies in Pyongyang that they should have an exit plan in the case of a calamity and the fact that North Korea shut down its industrial zone, which is a shared project with South Korean entrepreneurs, near the South Korean border, an irrational war seems imminent. The North Korean government even went so far in this case to bar any South Korean workers or administrators from entering the shared industrial zone project.

I have to admit I initially fell into the line of thinking that espouses Kim Jong Un is an irrational young dictator drunk on power and hell bent on a path toward his own destruction until I read a thought provoking piece in *Foreign Policy* magazine by Josh Rogin. In this article, Rogin meticulously lays out how annoyed the Chinese government is becoming with the Kim Jong Un administration. Like the United States and South Korea, China is having a hard time figuring out, let alone controlling, the actions of the North Korean government. In this article, Rogin rightly determines that Kim Jong Un can ill-afford alienating one of North Korea’s few strategic partners in the world, even though Un is on the precipice of doing exactly that.

Again, one is left to conclude that North Korea will either back down in the last minute or *irrationally* enter into war. Rogin seems to be leaning toward the former. But what if the original assumption regarding Kim Jong Un’s consolidation of power is in error? If we simply change that foundational assumption, a new light is cast on Kim Jong Un’s actions. If he has not successfully consolidated power, he may need to sabre rattle or even a little more in order to convince the generals, and perhaps the public, that he is every bit the great leader his father was. Political science is rich with case studies that show dictators who are suffering domestic economic woes commonly lash out against either indigenous groups or neighboring states in order to enter into wars of distraction and retain their power.

There is another possibility that opens up as well if one simply assumes Un has a tenuous hold on power. Perhaps, and this is a far more intriguing possibility, the wily old Generals are goading Un into a suicidal military action in order to remove him from power. In this case, the war is irrational for Un alone but he cannot see that through the cacophony of support for military action he is receiving from his trusted military leaders.

North Korea is a closed society so it is impossible to tell which scenario is correct or exactly what Kim Jong Un and the Generals are thinking. But if America and her allies only plan for one contingency based on one nearly universally accepted assumption, then surprise is likely to meet everyone on the battlefield. If the military leadership is challenging Kim Jong Un’s leadership or attempting to subvert it, then any war with North Korea would be far shorter ripe with greater post-war opportunities than if the military and Un agree on aggression. Figuring out which military

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leaders America and her allies can work with should be of prime importance in any planning effort. Determining signals during battle, such as this battalion is not firing on us, even if they do not immediately surrender but allow for easy bypass of allied troops is paramount to an accurate risk assessment and to shortening any conflict that might ensue.

Unfortunately, if we only plan for the irrational Kim Jong Un scenario, then the military options are far more constrained and a longer more aggressive response will be the order of the day. During the Cuban missile crisis there was at one point a four hour debate over three options for dealing with the Russians: 1) a full pre-emptive nuclear strike, 2) a partial nuclear strike, and 3) a tactical nuclear strike on military targets only. After four hours of group think, Robert McNamara finally explained to the group that they were falsely debating three separate options. He argued all options were actually the same leading to total nuclear war and the annihilation of all life on earth. After he spoke, a new conversation ensued in which no one proscribed any use of nuclear weapons.

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Dan G. Cox is a professor of political science at the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies. He is interested in systems thinking, operational art, strategy, and anticipating the future of conflict. He is currently working on a book anticipating future pandemic shocks and their implications tentatively entitled *Breaking Point*.