The North Korean Dilemma

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By Steven Levine

North Korea has been in the news lately for the usual reasons, namely, its nuclear weapons program; its bellicose behavior toward South Korea; and its bizarre domestic politics. Because of its highly secretive political system, understanding North Korea is very difficult and misunderstanding North Korea is very easy. Since even the best experts disagree about how to interpret North Korea's actions this greatly complicates rational decision making in Washington, Seoul, and elsewhere. Paradoxically, the relative openness of the American political system with our diverse viewpoints makes it difficult for the North Koreans to understand us. In the worst case, mutual misunderstanding in evolving crisis situations can lead to war.

This is not a theoretical abstraction. Sixty years ago, North Korea's founding leader Kim Il Song and his Soviet patron Stalin misread American government signals and gambled that the United States would not respond to Kim's attack on South Korea which was intended to reunify the two halves of divided Korea by force of arms. Contrary to Stalin's and Kim's expectations, President Truman responded by committing U.S. troops under the UN flag to defend South Korea. The brutal three-year war soon drew in China on the side of North Korea. By the time an armistice was signed on July 27, 1953, over 36,000 Americans had lost their lives; several hundred thousand Chinese troops had been killed, and some three million Korean soldiers and civilians had died in the war.

Fast forward to the present. On March 26, a South Korean warship split in two and sank off the western coast of Korea with the loss of forty-six sailors. Although North Korea denied responsibility, a torpedo from a North Korean submarine is the likeliest cause of this disaster. In October North Korea's
ailing leader Kim Jong Il introduced his third son Kim Jung-eun, a twenty-seven year old with no credentials other than his family pedigree, as his designated successor. Last month the North Koreans unveiled to an American delegation a sophisticated and previously unknown facility to enrich uranium that can produce either reactor fuel or bomb-grade highly enriched uranium. At about the same time on November 23, North Korea shelled South Korea's Yeongpyeong Island near the maritime border with South Korea, destroying dozens of homes and killing two civilians and two troops. These events elevated tensions on the Korean peninsula to their highest level in years and raised the specter of war. The U.S. sent a naval task force led by the aircraft carrier U.S.S. George Washington to take part in joint exercises with South Korea to signal North Korea that the United States stands firm with its longtime ally. Some in South Korea and the United States renewed calls for an overwhelming military response to what many believe will inevitably be yet another near-term North Korean provocation. Such a response, rooted in anger and frustration, is understandable but extremely dangerous. Before we reach for our six-shooter, let us remember the toll of the Korean War and the stark reality that there is no military solution to the North Korean problem. The fundamental objective on which all sides must agree is to avoid another war on the Korean peninsula.

Since the early 1990s U.S. policy under both Democratic and Republican presidents has been to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear weapons. That policy has failed. In October 2006 North Korea exploded its first nuclear device and has been pursuing long-range missile delivery systems in defiance of UN resolutions and against the advice of China, North Korea's lone quasi-ally. After President Bush labeled North Korea a member of the so-called axis of evil and announced the doctrine of preemptive war, North Korea calculated that possession of nuclear weapons was its most reliable means of deterring the mortal threat they perceived the U.S. posed to its regime. North Korea is not alone in
believing in the deterrent value of nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, no amount of outside pressure is likely to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear deterrent.

China has made it clear it will not use its potential leverage to change North Korean behavior. Nor is the North Korean regime likely to collapse anytime soon much as some might like that to happen. Therefore, the most one can realistically hope for is to rein in North Korea's potential efforts to sell nuclear knowhow, nuclear materials, and missile technology. This can best be accomplished through a combination of military, intelligence, and diplomatic means, including a resumption without preconditions of diplomatic negotiations with North Korea. At best such negotiations will yield only partial results. They will also, alas, leave in place a hateful and repressive regime that will endure until conditions inside North Korea itself eventually lead to its transformation or demise. To quote Victor Cha, a respected American expert on North Korea, North Korea is a country that presents only bad options.

This is Steven Levine from the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at The University of Montana. Thank you for listening.