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Calculation and Miscalculation on the Korean Peninsula

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While it is sometimes tempting to see the regime of Kim Jong-eun as superficially comical, with its extravagant uniforms, dynastic worship and wild rhetoric, it is also important not to underestimate the serious risk of miscalculation and military escalation inherent within the current crisis. While there are many aspects of the present situation that are familiar to observers of the hermit state, there are also enough differences to give concern that this manufactured crisis could end differently.

What is familiar is the way in which North Korea has stoked tensions with its neighbour to the south and with the United States as a way of boosting the internal legitimacy of the regime and as a way of extorting concessions from the international community.

In the past such behaviour has drawn its adversaries into negotiations that led to concessions on fuel, food and technology. It has also allowed the Kim family to boast that as a result of its 'military-first' policy it has faced down and outsmarted the West. In short, Pyongyang has gained from its brinkmanship with Washington and Seoul. On the surface, this latest round of provocations seems to fit this well trodden path.

Last December, Pyongyang launched a ballistic missile, which the West interpreted as part of an effort to actualise North Korea's rhetorical threat to its regional neighbours. This was followed in February by the test explosion of Pyongyang's third nuclear device. The US response was to secure a UN Security Council Resolution condemning these actions and to impose tighter sanctions on the regime. What followed was a series of statements and gestures designed to raise the stakes of the confrontation. Kim announced that the Armistice that ended the Korean War in 1953 was over and consequently a 'state of war' now existed. He appeared in a photograph before a wall map titled 'Plans to Attack the Mainland US' and the state newspaper identified three US military bases in Japan as targets for military strikes.

What has been less predictable this time round has been the international response. While the sinking of a South Korean corvette, the Cheonan, three years ago killing 46 sailors was met with restraint, Seoul's new leader President Park authorised its military to retaliate without the need to seek political authority. Japan has also put its Defence Forces on a war footing and deployed anti-aircraft destroyers and Patriot missiles announcing that any missile that comes their way will be intercepted.

The US has also deployed nuclear capable B2 and B52 bombers to South Korea as a show of solidarity and capability to its Asian allies. After spending 12 years focused on the Middle East, President Obama's announcement of a 'pivot' to Asia is a major strategic shift in US foreign policy and one that Washington is determined to avoid being undermined by the latest antics of the well practiced blackmailers of the 'extortionary state'.

The US has also ruled out concessions to Pyongyang and even made any direct negotiations conditional on North Korea first announcing its intentions to de-nuclearise.

Washington's strategy has also involved an attempt to enlist China to induce restraint on North Korea and it has persuaded Beijing to support UN sanctions in condemnation of the latest crisis.

Where the crisis goes from here, however is far from certain. It might be that the new leader's hyperbolic rhetoric will be enough to satisfy his generals and domestic population that he is tough enough to stand up to his adversaries.

Previous crises, however, have ended after a 'culminary event' such as a missile launch, nuclear explosion or a military attack on the south — such as happened in 2010 on a border island. The uncertainty surrounding this crisis emanates from concern over how the young and inexperienced Kim-Jong-eun will play his diplomatic and military cards.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has warned that 'a small miscalculation or misjudgement may lead to an uncontrollable situation'. For Henry Kissinger 'there is now a real danger of an accident, incident or miscalculation on the Korean Peninsula. If that happened, there is a danger that China and the United States would end up reacting quickly, viscerally and in ways that might make things much worse — even lead to conflict.'

And for now North Korea's intermediate range missiles sit readied for the next move in this high stakes game of international poker.

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