3

DPRK Provocations: Deterring the Cycle of Violence

Abstract: Most North Korean provocations have had four things in common: (1) they are intentionally initiated at moments when they have the likelihood of garnering the greatest attention on the regional and perhaps even the world stage; (2) they initially appear to be incidents that are relatively small, easily contained, and quickly “resolved;” (3) they involve continuously changing tactics and techniques; and (4) they deny responsibility for the event. The South Korean military and government have taken important measures to deter and defend against this rogue state behavior. North Korea’s tactics, techniques, and procedures indicate a successful violent provocation in the future.

Keywords: deterrence; military violence; provocations; rogue state

During 2012 and 2013, there was a great deal of attention in the international press regarding North Korea. Because the DPRK is a nation-state that presents security dilemmas on various issues for the international community, this is perfectly understandable. But the majority of the attention focused on North Korea during the first spring and summer of 2012 was because of the new leader in the country – Kim Jong-un.\(^1\) With the death of his father, Kim Jong-il, during December 2011, the succession process from father to son (and the ensuing power base within key institutions in the country that had to be built very quickly) occupied front page in the international press and remained there for much of 2012.

Despite the views of some pundits, as many experts have stated, Kim Jong-un is (and has thus far) likely to rule North Korea much as his father did.\(^2\) One of the key legacies of both Kim Jong-un’s father and grandfather was the pursuit of brinkmanship and provocations within the region – and particularly with the DPRK’s neighbor, South Korea. The first major incidents during the new Kim Chong-un era that could be considered acts of brinkmanship were the test-launches of a Taepo Dong 2 ballistic missile during April and December 2012 (the launch in April failed, while the launch in December was widely considered a success).\(^3\) While these acts created a great deal of publicity in the international press and caused angst in policy-making circles, they were not violent provocations. North Korea under Kim Jong-il showed that it was willing to carry out provocations – violent provocations – on a fairly routine basis. In fact, it could legitimately be stated that violent provocations were a strategy that North Korea used – frequently – under Kim Jong-il, and were a key part of the DPRK’s policy in dealing with the South.\(^4\) This leads one to make the assessment that since the youngest Kim (the “third Kim” in the DPRK dynastic government if you will) is almost certainly going to continue all, if not most, of the policies of his father, we can expect to see violent provocations to continue. These provocations, carried out as a matter of policy during the Kim Jong-il regime, have served to create instability on the Korean Peninsula – but perhaps as importantly, they have often served as incidents that caused the South Korean public to question the readiness and capabilities of their own military.\(^5\)

In this chapter I will analyze the provocations that North Korea has carried out in the past – and the lessons that can be learned from these incidents. In doing so, I will detail North Korea’s strategy in conducting