

National Security Group Lunch Transcript

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North Korea's Escalation and the U.S. Response

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BRUCE KLINGNER:

You know – there – right now there are many uncertainties about North Korea – certainly about their capabilities and about their intentions – but I think one thing we can say with certainty is that basketball diplomacy did not work and that despite the best efforts of Ambassador Dennis Rodman, it didn't prevent North Korea from issuing a lengthy series of threats. Every morning my list of threats is outdated and I have to add yet another one to it. Although who knows, there is currently a vacancy for the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and perhaps Mr. Rodman will be selected because he actually has more face time with the North Korean leader than any US diplomat at the moment.

As we know, if you've been following the paper, there have been many, many North Korean threats recently. And the thing is, on the one hand, neophytes to North Korea – and that includes most of the media because they have to cover so many issues they don't have a lengthy background or deep background in North Korea – so on the one hand, sort of the neophytes to North Korea risk hyperventilating the first time they read North Korean threats because they are bombastic and certainly sort of unique and being over the top in their rhetoric. On the other hand, the old hands like myself, we risk complacency because we've seen it all before and we sort of – at the extreme end it would be sort of, oh North Korean invasion, yawn, we've seen that one before in 1950. So we have to find sort of a middle ground where we are suitably nervous about the ever-present threat, but not over react just because of a new verbal assault.

What I find is – I've done a lot of interviews the last couple of weeks with these threats and what I tended to do was to sort of take the cue from the interviewer and then go the other way. So when the interviewer would sort of lead in with, oh my God Mr. Klingner, do we need to get the helmet and hide under the desk, I'd try to calm them down and say that we didn't think a nuclear threat was imminent. On the other hand, when someone would sort of be blasé and say, well you know this little runt up in Pyongyang, he can't do anything. You know, we don't have to worry about them at all. They don't have any kind of nuclear capability or missile capability. Those are the ones I try to make a little more nervous.

Let me take you on a bit of a rollercoaster of North Korean threat perceptions. We'll start high, then we'll go low, and then we'll end up high again. On the high, the initial high, that would be the media depiction; that's all of the recent statements, unilateral preemptive nuclear attack on the United States, turn Washington as well as Seoul into a sea of fire or a sea of flames, pile of ashes as it were.

And the other – and what is different in those threats is that in the last several months since their successful rocket launch in December and the successful nuclear test in February, is that – this new theme of we already have nuclear weapons. We already can hit the United States. That is really a new theme. And also another reason to be nervous is the precedent. The Cheonan [PH] the sinking of the South Korean naval vessel in South Korean waters, was during a military exercise and we have an ongoing US-South Korean military exercise now. And the shelling of a civilian island, Yeongjondo, in 2010 also was also during a South Korean military exercise. Also the recent technological breakthroughs, certainly the successful launch of – by being able to put a satellite in orbit, scientists will tell you that is the same capability needed to put a warhead anywhere on the face of the earth. And the latest nuclear test was larger than the last. North Korea claims it has miniaturized its warheads and that it has a diverse nuclear arsenal. That could mean that they have achieved a uranium-based nuclear warhead in addition to their existing plutonium base, but unfortunately we weren't able to determine that by scientific means because the last explosion didn't vent. So we don't know if it was uranium or another plutonium.

Also there is a precedent for doing some kind of strong provocation or even attack against South Korea during the first year of a South Korean president's term. Park Geun-hye was inaugurated in February. A North Korean defector said that they do that in order to train the new president like a dog.

Now, sort of going to the low side of the threat perception, is that we have circular history. There really is the precedent of precedent in North Korea. The recent abrogation of the armistice, well, maybe they should check their files because they already did that in May of 2009. The threat to rip up the inter-Korean non-aggression agreements, well, they also did that in 2009. So a lot of the threats they have already threatened before. Also, during these annual US-South Korean military exercises they always ramp up the threats and we saw that last March and the year before that and the year before that.

There are threats that they have not carried out, not only the obvious; they haven't turned Washington or Seoul into a sea of fire, at least since 1950. But also last April there was very specific threats against South Korean media organizations. And they – even to make sure their point was getting across, they published the geographic coordinates of the headquarters of several of the newspapers. That was last April and I was in Seoul the morning after the threats were made and I was awakened very early in the morning to a very loud noise. My first thought was, oh my God they did it. Then as I was trying to lean out the window to see if there was smoke over the headquarters of the Dong-a Ilbo, I realized what it was is that there was construction going on at five in the morning behind the hotel and a forklift had

dropped a huge load of pipes on the parking lot. So it turned out it wasn't an attack. But I mention that story because it was an example of something that had us very nervous because it was such a specific threat, and yet it was not carried out.

Now, let's ramp up your anxiety again, though. Experts have frequently underestimated North Korea's threat, either because – sort of through prejudice. Ah the North Koreans, it's such a backwards country, they can't possibly master nuclear weaponry. They can't possibly master long-range missiles. They can't possibly master uranium enrichment capability, or it is dismissed because it would be inconvenient for North Korea to be a threat. So we had often, you know – dismissing that they were pursuing a uranium enrichment program because that would be a violation of about four or five international agreements.

One unfortunate analyst published an article saying there is absolutely no way they could have a room with 2000 or 3000 centrifuges. It was unfortunate because two months later North Korea revealed exactly that, a room with 2000 centrifuges to the visiting former director of the Los Alamos Nuclear Lab, so we have often underestimated. So now what we see is people who were saying we shouldn't fear North Korea's long range missiles because they hadn't had a successful test and that would be a huge breakthrough. Well, once they did that, then the script sort of changed to, well, okay that was sort of a minor breakthrough, but we know that they have not mastered re-entry vehicle technology etc. We don't know that. We don't know where they are on the path. We don't know if they already have that capability or whether it is next week, next month or next year. So I think we have to be careful about underestimating them because we have done so, so much in the past.

What has me more nervous is not that anyone really expects a nuclear attack on Washington, but another North Korean tactical attack on South Korea. And they will do it. It is only a matter of time. The thing is two factors though. I think there is a greater potential for miscalculation by the new North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, than his father. He is inexperienced. He now will be emboldened by having a nuclear arsenal, by having a successful long-range test. He'll be emboldened by the knowledge that South Korea and Washington have never retaliated, despite deadly attacks in the past. There is also a greater potential for a South Korean retaliation. Every South Korean president has said next time we will attack, but Park Geun-hye, I believe, will.

The previous president Lee Myung-bak was criticized heavily for not responding to the shelling of the civilian island. He put into place changes in the rules of engagement, made it much more likely that South Korea would respond. They even said that they would sort of do a three-for-one ratio. If one artillery battery attacked they would take out three, as well as supply elements. Whereas in the past the rules of engagement were literally South Korea was limited to one artillery shell of equal or lower caliber for every one incoming North Korean round. They have also pushed the decision to retaliate to a lower echelon of command. They increased the forces, so they're really sort of forward leaning to respond to the next attack.



And South Korea – the new president has publicly said, even though she is again reaching out an open hand of dialogue – that she will respond quite firmly. I met with her senior advisors when I was in Seoul in January and they emphasized that point that they will respond sternly, firmly and exponentially. And a South Korean general recently came out and said yes, they will also take out command elements, not just of the battery, but perhaps of the fourth core in the west sea area.

Recently North Korea has moved long-range artillery down to within this disputed area, these five islands in the west sea. Kim Jong-un visited several of them. He made very specific comments about you know, your target is the South Korean-6th Marine brigade on this island. So very specific telegraphing, which may indicate yet another attack in that area and then South Korea could respond. That is what I think is the more likely scenario than a lone nuclear missile coming to Washington’s area within the next few weeks.

So the Korean conundrum is trying to discern which threats are real and which are elusory. After studying North Korea for 20 years, what I’ve been able to conclude quite firmly is that North Korea always carries out its threats, except when it doesn’t. And North Korea never telegraphs its attacks ahead of time, except when it does. So the conclusion I would have is that when people ask is today more dangerous than yesterday? Maybe, maybe not. But that is because the Korean peninsula is always on the knife-edge of a crisis or a military clash, which could escalate into an all out conflict. On that less than optimistic and less than happy note I will conclude. Thank you very much.

MAN:

Bruce, thank you. That was super. There were several things that you didn’t mention that I’d just like to make sure you do before we open it up to fuller conversation here. Among the things that are in play here – we’re endlessly told – is the relationship between China and North Korea. I keep trying to figure out whether there is a good cop and bad cop sort of operation being run against us by the Chinese whereby they’re enabling some of this misbehavior at the very moment that they’re telling us that they are the only people who can sort of contain it. Would you speak to the relationship as you see it now, particularly with the new leadership on both the Chinese and North Korean sides?

BRUCE KLINGNER:

Right. The Chinese-North Korean relationship is complicated. It is not the lips and teeth relationship that some think it is. China does not control North Korea, it is not telling North Korea what to do. Perhaps surprisingly, it has although more influence than any other country of the world on North Korea, it has relatively little. Because North Korea, despite its small size, despite its economic reliance on China, really doesn’t listen to China that much. They are defiant and China finds that it feels it can’t do much because for them the priority is to prevent a crisis on their border. And they feel that any kind of

pressure on North Korea would create the crisis they don't want. So they turn a blind eye to the evidence, they facilitate economic engagement to try to keep the regime going, hoping that it will change its behavior. Obviously so far it's not worked.

What the US should try to do is convince China that its hands-off approach or its light touch approach is more likely to bring about the crisis they don't want, either because it emboldens North Korea who feels that it can get away with anything, as it has so far, so that it's just only encouraged to do more outrageous things, additional attacks. Also it will bring about US and South Korean military responses that China doesn't like. So, we saw when the Defense Department sort of reversed the earlier cuts to the missile defense program in Alaska that China reacted – said, you shouldn't do this. This will raise tensions. Well, we would have liked that China had been as angry at North Korea for violating the UN Security Council's resolutions as it is us for implementing defensive measures.

Right now the China watchers are kind of all atwitter that China will change its behavior because of some editorials in the Chinese press, because of debate within the academic world in China, that this will lead to a change. Well, we've been seeing that same kind of debate and dialogue for several years and so far China hasn't changed its behavior. I hope it does. I hope it finally gets so fed up with North Korea that it starts to tighten the screws. We've seen some indications the last couple of days. We don't know if that is window dressing or indications of a change, which we hope will occur.

MAN:

We will stay tuned. [UNCLEAR]

QUESTION:

A number of years ago General Li Wa Ching [PH] told me when I was – when they had the last change in leadership, nothing goes on in North Korea that we are not aware of or have a hand in, which really doesn't square too well with what you are saying. And I look at it, you know, there are certain advantages to China to keep North Korea from an asymmetrical threat standpoint of what China is trying to do elsewhere in the region. How do you see that?

BRUCE KLINGNER:

North Korea is perhaps the toughest of the tough intelligence problems. I was the Korea branch chief; I was the deputy division chief. So I disagree with people who say we know nothing about North Korea. On the other hand, there is a lot we don't know about and it really depends on the category: military movements, military activity which we can see through satellite imagery and signals intelligence. We would have a higher confidence of our knowledge than the internal workings of the leadership, as you would sort of expect. But with the change in leadership in North Korea, we are less certain about Kim

Jong-un than we were about Kim Jong-il, what makes him tick, what his red lines are, what his objectives are, and that is adding to a level of uncertainty.

QUESTION:

The other thing is you can't dismiss the nuclear weapon program and the assistance that China has provided to that development.

BRUCE KLINGNER:

The North Korean nuclear program, as its missile program, is largely indigenous. It has actually – on the nuclear program – it started with Soviet assistance back in the '60s and then was more of a North Korean program because they didn't trust either China or the Soviet Union. In the early '60s they felt the Soviet Union had abandoned Castro with the Cuban missile crisis, so they felt they couldn't rely on the Russians, so they needed an independent program. Similarly, when China would not provide any of the nuclear data from their 1964 tests at Lop Nur, they felt they couldn't trust China, so they figured they had to do it on their own and that is consistent with Chiu Che [PH] and some other things.

In tracing the timelines of their programs, a lot of it was interaction with Pakistan, the AQ Khan network, Iran, Syria, Burma, the bad boys of the international community. And in many cases it started with North Korea selling things to the other countries and then those countries developed their own programs so it became more of a back and forth equal relationship. And actually Iran put a satellite into orbit before North Korea, even though in the beginning their program was totally dependent on the north.

MAN:

Let's take another question. Dan?

DAN:

I'm sometimes at a loss to understand what South Korea cards has to play. If they respond with a three-for-one artillery barrage and the north responds by shelling the suburbs of Seoul, what exactly can South Korea do? I mean, don't they have a really weak hand in that? And one more question, completely unrelated along the lines of Frank. Can the Chinese do a coup in Pyongyang if they choose to?

BRUCE KLINGNER:

On the first one, what can South Korea do, that is an excellent question and it's a debate we have all the time and we've had for decades. And you could also imply what can the US do? There has been self-limiting behavior. We're afraid of possible consequences so in many ways we do nothing. So, when I talked to General Walter Sharp when he was commander in chief in US forces Korea during the 2010



attacks, he said, even if we do a tactical level response that we think is measured and contained etc. we have to be prepared to go all in, meaning an all-out war. And that has inhibited South Korea and the US in the past. In South Korea there is really a greater sense, even amongst the populous, that they sort of reached the end of their patience. That's why Park Geun-hye, as well as [UNCLEAR] after the island attack have a sense of we really think we need to stand up for ourselves. So whether you limit yourself to one artillery battery or more or not, there is that sense of look, turning the other cheek hasn't worked. Our head is spun around because we've turned the cheek so many times. You know, maybe we should hit back and maybe that will prevent them from slaughtering our civilians again or our sailors or Marines – South Korea's. So there is that sense that they should hit back. They did feel inhibited by restrictions imposed on them by the US which since then they now feel those restrictions have been removed, so that they may not only hit back with ground forces, but they may use naval and air forces to hit back. Again, either a logical response or an increased risk of escalation, depending on how you want to interpret it.

I think what the US and South Korea have to do is a multi-dimensional strategy where you increase the punishment on North Korea for violating international law, UN resolution, etc. So we need a more effective sanctions program. We've been very timid, both the US and the UN in what we've been doing. You also, against all odds, maintain the offers of conditional not unconditional engagement. There is not a lot of optimism that the two of those working together will be as successful as perhaps we would have hoped. In the past they would have been. So your third track has to be sufficient defenses to protect yourself and your allies against the broad spectrum of North Korean military threats. So I mean, it's a real truncated answer but...

DAN:

A coup?

BRUCE KLINGNER:

Oh, I'm sorry. Whether they could do it or not, I mean, that would be really difficult even for the Chinese. I mean, I don't think they have that much better access to information and things than we do, but that would also go against their philosophy, their strategy of non-interference. And they don't want a crisis, so that's why they have been turning a blind eye and the other cheek. To do a coup would bring about such uncertainty of what could happen, far more than just cutting off food and fuel so that it would do something that is an extreme option, where they've been reluctant to even do baby steps. So whether they can do it or not, I mean, send in a sniper, send it special forces, whatever, send in armored divisions, but I just don't see it happening because it would be so risky in their eyes for a crisis that they have been really terrified about bringing about.

MAN:

Bruce, let me just ask Christine Brim to ask one quick question and ask you to do a quick answer because we need to move on.

CHRISTINE BRIM:

Given the recent North Korean cyber attacks and the ongoing massive and very sophisticated Chinese cyber attacks, is there any opportunity for South Korea to – I mean, how much does South Korea or North Korea possibly use those activities as well as EMP against each other’s grid?

BRUCE KLINGNER:

The news reports this morning say that South Korea’s watch dog for computers says that contrary to their earlier assertion that the IP address was in China, they are now saying this morning they think it was actually an internal to one of the company’s IP addresses. That’s just an update. That’s not to say that North Korea wasn’t behind it. We are pretty sure they were behind the attacks in 2011 and 2009. We know that they have a unit with 3,000 hackers. They’ve had some of the defectors into South Korea been debriefed. So North Korea certainly has the capability and South Korea says it’s actually a really good capability, contrary to perceptions that it is a backward nation.

Clearly, a cyber attack fits into North Korea’s strategy of asymmetric threats. It’s hard to detect, so there is deniability. It could have a massive impact, and it in a way is hard for the US and South Korea to respond because North Korea is largely isolated from international networks. And some of these defectors said that is exactly why they put such an effort into cyber warfare is because they can deny it, it has an impact and it is a lot cheaper than buying weapons.

MAN:

Bruce, thank you very much.