

Only China can tame North Korea

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North Korea's penchant for irrational military strikes against South Korea is similar to the antics of a schoolyard bully. Intimidation and the use of force to compel obeisance or, better still, economic benefit has worked well for North Korea before. It should not be surprising to see this movie again, even though this is the first time since the Korean War that North Korea has attacked land-based targets. That is an alarming escalation of all too typical provocative behaviour by North Korea. The West responds with strong words while Pyongyang knowingly relies on the unflinching support of its neighbour, China.

The attack on the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong comes in the wake of reports from the former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, Siegfried Hecker, that North Korea's march to nuclear weapons status is accelerating. Persistent efforts by the six-party negotiators to contain North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and its equally nefarious habit of selling sensitive nuclear materials to the likes of Iran and Myanmar, are proving to be futile.

Just like the schoolyard bully, North Korea pockets the rewards from attempts to negotiate but adamantly and openly refuses to change its behaviour. Talk is no antidote to blatant aggression.

Whether the latest attack is yet another bait-and-switch or "provoke for reward" tactic or a means to prop up the newly designated and, except by heredity, completely unqualified successor to Pyongyang's Dear Leader is not important. More critical is what North Korea's neighbours, notably China, will do to contain and pressure better behaviour.

The United States and Japan have limited if not diminishing means of effective response. South Korea, because it is much more economically advanced, is far more vulnerable to sporadic attacks. North Korea, with an economy that is virtually dormant and a population that is mired in abject poverty, has less to lose. The North does have a mighty military, the backbone of its totalitarian regime. But it has little fear of military retaliation, given the limp reaction to previous attacks.

No one wants military hostilities to escalate, but nor should North Korea's irrational action be rewarded, as it has been in the past. China's priority has for too long been ostensibly to prevent the collapse of the North Korean regime and the potential flood of refugees into China.

The threat North Korea's provocations pose to instability in Northeast Asia and to nuclear proliferation on a global scale should command greater concern. China alone provides or facilitates virtually all of the foreign goods needed to sustain a meagre life for most North Koreans, along with luxuries for those who rule. If China genuinely wants to demonstrate that it can play a role as a responsible global power, commensurate with its rising economic strength, it should do more than urge others to re-engage the six-party discussions with the two Koreas, Russia, China, Japan and the United States. A public wringing of hands will have little effect in yet another fruitless round of negotiation.

China should, instead, exercise its tangible influence to rectify the erratic antics of its neighbour. No more bribes, no more blandishments, no more circular diplomacy. It is time to tame the bully with leverage only China is able to exercise.

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