

North Korea's Tension Escalation and Thereafter

Park Hyeong Jung

Senior Research Fellow, Center for North Korean Studies, KINU

Online Series CO 13-12

The purpose of the North Korean regime pursuing a policy of escalating tensions is to ultimately control the agenda in future negotiations with South Korea and the United States, so that North Korea's demands can be forcefully attained. It is likely that the North Korean regime will continue making threats and provocations until this goal is achieved. However, the regime must also bear the burdens and risks of maintaining this policy. It is still too early to determine who won the recent tension-escalation game provoked by the North from the end of 2012 till now. The framework and agenda for future negotiations regarding the North Korean issue will be decided upon who wins the game. If North Korea is defeated, then the agenda would come closer to 'the Six-Party Talks for the denuclearization of North Korea.' If North Korea wins, then the relevant parties would have to negotiate the terms of 'recognizing North Korea as a nuclear weapons possession state.'

The Strategic Background of Threats and Provocations

The worst nightmare for the North Korean regime is becoming 'the agenda-receiving party' rather than 'the agenda-setting party' in relations with South Korea and other neighboring countries. The situation in which North Korea becomes the former would mean a red light for the survival of the North Korean regime. There is a profound mismatch between North Korea's internal system and its surrounding environment. If North Korea fails to dominate negotiations and becomes 'the agenda receiving party,' then the North will have no choice but to

accept demands for North Korea to change by aligning its internal system with its surrounding environment. Conversely, if the regime succeeds in dominating negotiations, then the North can reorganize its surrounding environment to meet its requirements for regime survival. What the North Korean regime is actually asking the outside world can be summarized as for South Korea's North Korea policy and the international order of Northeast Asia to be changed so that the survival and prosperity of the Kim Jong-un regime can be ensured. In other words, the North is claiming that the Northeast Asian international order has to be revised in order to meet the continued existence of the current regime of the weakest country, North Korea. Unlike North Korea, the case of most existing country is that the discrepancy between their internal system and their surrounding environment is not as serious. Thus, it is not difficult for these countries to shape their relations with other countries as those of mutual prosperity, instead of a zero-sum dichotomous structure of 'agenda-setting and receiving parties.' The dilemma for the North Korean regime is that this is very difficult to achieve.

The North Korean regime's second worst nightmare is that its adversaries do not give in to North Korea's threats and coercion. North Korea has faced situations in which it could not control the negotiations, or worse, was forced to be 'the agenda-receiving party'. In such a case, the North Korean regime attempted to bring the other party into submission through threats and provocations in order to be able to negotiate on favorable terms and conditions in the future. If this fails, then a red light for the survival of the regime would come on again.

Nuclear Possession, Strengthened Provocations, and Dilemma

North Korea's threats and provocations towards South Korea and the U.S. during the last five years and recently could all be understood from this context. However, there are certain differences than in the past; the North's threats and provocations have dramatically increased. The most important reason is that the North Korean regime has started to regard itself as a nuclear weapon state. When looking at past experiences, it can be observed that states that have just obtained nuclear weapons tend to cause more heightened levels of conflict with neighboring countries. This is because, now that they have nuclear weapons, they calculate that adversaries will be reluctant to actively retaliate even if they carry out bold provocations for a significant period of time. It seems that through its bold provocations, North Korea is also trying to force the recognition of itself as a nuclear weapon state, and to control future negotiation agendas by breaking the opponent's spirit and overpowering them.

The North Korean regime's dilemma is that South Korea and the U.S. are no longer becoming dragged into this 'game plan.' This is partly because the North has tried similar games in the past, and South Korea and the U.S. have become aware of how to handle the situation more effectively. The fact that the effects of the North's threats and provocations have weakened presents a serious dilemma for the regime. Instead of changing its strategy, the regime is continuing the same scheme, but with much more force. The North is increasing the level of threats and provocations to compensate for the decrease in effectiveness of threats and provocations.

The problem is that this stronger measure also raises the amount of burden and potential dangers that the regime has to face. First, the North Korean regime faces the danger of spinning out control amid the escalation of tensions ‘through a principle of action and reaction.’ Second, it could cause accidental clashes that neither the North Korean regime nor its adversaries want or predict. Third, the more that North Korea heightens the intensity of threats and provocations, the more it could invite retaliatory measures. Fourth, the longer North Korea prolongs a confrontation, the less favorable it is to North Korea given its relatively weak national power. It is highly likely that the North may encounter political and economical challenges in maintaining its internal conditions if the confrontation extends over a long period of time.

North Korea’s Burdens and Risks

In reality, it seems North Korea’s recent escalation with threats and provocations is actually causing increased burdens internally. First, the burden stems from prolonged maintenance of high-level internal tension and semi-wartime mobilization. As the level of fatigue among North Korea’s soldiers and citizens is increasing, cases of dollar hoarding is emerging, which reflect unrest among some of North Korea’s wealthy citizens. Second, the North Korean regime is squandering its war reserve stock as it maintains a high-level of combat readiness and training of the military. It appears that the war reserve stock is also used to relieve North Korean citizens’ precarious lives caused by prolonged semi-wartime mobilization. In addition, disturbances in production and commercial activities due to military mobilization are also emerging. Third, there seems to be some debates even within the leadership on pursuing the current policy. Fourth, amid the squandering of the budget and resources caused by the policy of tension escalation, both domestically and abroad, North Korea will soon enter the period of spring-hardship due to the lack of food, and will then have to focus its energies towards ‘nation-wide rice-planting combat’ in May.

Next, the burdens and dangers with regards to its external relations are also increasing. First, as the North is steadily increasing its threats and provocations, the level of tension and danger could grow beyond what the regime can handle. While Pyongyang has seemingly increased its level of threats, Kim Jong-un has reportedly issued a secret order "not to provide any excuses for the U.S. and South Korea to retaliate." Second, the regime’s behavior irritates both the Chinese government and its people. While the increased alertness among the Chinese will not change China’s policy toward North Korea right away, it could pose great burdens on North Korea’s relations with China in the future. Third, North Korea’s increased threats and provocations have justified the U.S. to adopt policies which can significantly increase suffering of the regime. Aside from the UN sanctions against North Korea, it seems the U.S. will strengthen its financial sanctions and restrictions on the North’s illicit activities. Furthermore, the more that the international community distrusts the North’s ability to think and act rationally, the more they will actively increase the revelations of human rights abuses and the influx of outside information into the country. In addition, as skepticism about negotiating with North Korea has grown within the international community, it will be difficult for the regime to have an opportunity to control the agenda in negotiations.

Determinants of Future Development

Then when will the North Korean regime's tension escalation policy stop? Many observers think that there could be a lull in the North's threats and provocations after the joint ROK-U.S. military exercises end sometime in April. North Korea could also wait and see after President Park Geun-hye's visit to the U.S. and how South Korea and the U.S. gauge their North Korea policies. In any case, it seems that there could be more signals and gestures by both the North and the South in order to transition from a phase of tension to that of negotiation. The North Korean regime, as well as South Korea and the U.S., will weigh what they have gained and lost during the phase of tension escalation. Depending on the political and strategic spoils gained or lost during the past phase of high tension, the terms of negotiations for a new phase of diplomacy will be decided. If North Korea feels more confident than before, it might propose the resumption of negotiations with Seoul and Washington to discuss its agenda such as the recognition of North Korea as a nuclear weapon state. Alternately, South Korea and the U.S. may also propose new suggestions in order to alleviate tensions.

While it is yet unclear how the new phase of confrontation through diplomacy will develop specifically, there are several possibilities. The future developments will be decided by who gained more and who lasted longer during the tension escalation phase. If the regime has been able to win over South Korea and the U.S. in escalating anxiety through psychological warfare, then the future situation will be in the North's favor. On the other hand, if South Korea and the U.S. are not shaken despite the North's threats and provocations while the North is faced with increased internal problems and external pressures, then the situation will be favorable for South Korea and the U.S. Broadly speaking, there are two possibilities regarding the development of the future situation.

Possibility 1: Continued Escalation of Tension

It is possible that there could be a continuation of high-level tensions, although less intense. First, the North Korean regime may conclude that it has yet to achieve its intended political and diplomatic goals by May. In other words, this means that South Korea and the U.S. have not given in to the North's threats at all. Furthermore, if the punitive measures from the international community against the North become more extensive and strengthened as May comes around, then the regime may react strongly. These punitive measures against the North may include strengthening the uncovering of human rights abuses in North Korea, increasing the influx of outside information in the North, and exposing and tightening regulations against North Korea's illicit activities and financial transactions. In this case, the North may decide to continue its threats and provocations. North Korea may intentionally expose its activities related to missile and nuclear weapons development. The country may also show off its enriched uranium output in implying that the North is able to sell nuclear related technologies to other countries. The regime could enhance exchanges and cooperation with Iran. The North could also continue escalating tensions in the West Sea. The North may intensify cyber-attacks on organizations in South Korea or other countries, or carry out clandestine activities in order to cause internal panic within South Korea.

Second, the North could continue escalation of tensions due to increased internal challenges. Since the North has experienced prolonged semi-wartime-mobilization, its internal economic conditions must have worsened and therefore, the level of public discontent may have increased significantly. Furthermore, if the North faces the situation that its tough strategy has failed to produce results, there can be attacks and criticisms to the group within the leadership that led the hostile policy. In order to control for such internal problems, the North may be tempted to continue maintaining the high levels of tension. In any case, the moment of greatest danger for the regime is when the North can no longer carry out threats and provocations at higher levels than before. If this moment arrives, the level of accumulated internal burdens and discontent would fully appear, and at the same time, the regime could be faced with more intensified punitive measures from the international community. If the regime would have to halt its provocations amid threats without producing any results, the North Korean leadership will be faced with a much higher domestic risk. Indeed, this does not mean that this increased domestic risk will jeopardize the North Korea regime, per se. However, there is a possibility that the many internal conflicts could rise to the surface, which would inevitably bring about the restructuring the North Korean leadership system and changes in policy.

Possibility 2: The Resumption of a New and Uncertain Negotiation Phase

If all countries directly involved could assess the limits of their power and the benefits of compromise, then, rocky, complicated, lengthy, and uncertain negotiations could resume once again after May. The agenda of the new negotiations may be set somewhere in the middle of the two extremes. The one extreme is the resumption of the Six-Party Talks for denuclearization, and the other extreme is talks to recognize North Korea as a nuclear weapon state. To which extreme the negotiation agenda sways can be determined by which side wins the past phase of high tension from the end of 2012 to early 2013. If the agenda sways closer to the Six-Party Talks for denuclearization, then it can be said that the North Korean regime lost. The opposite can also happen.

Summary and Conclusion

The necessary conditions for securing the survival of the North Korean regime are incongruent with the North's surrounding environment. The regime seeks to shape its surrounding environment to be aligned with its survival needs through threats and coercion. These are used as tools to control the agenda in negotiations with the neighboring countries and push the North's demands by force. Even since the North has become confident in its possession of nuclear weapons, its provocations have become much bolder than in the past. However, because South Korea and the U.S. have learned from similar experiences, it has become increasingly harder for the North to force its requests even through heightened provocations. Moreover, the North Korean regime has to bear the various costs and burdens as it escalates the level of threats and provocations. It is yet unclear who won in the phase of high tension at the end of 2012 and early 2013. The winner can be determined depending on how the agenda for resumed negotiations pan out at the end of the current situation of tension escalation. (First published in Korean on April 11, 2013). © KINU 2013

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely that of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).