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How to View North Korea's Recent Military Provocations



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From February 21 to March 26, 2014, North Korea launched approximately 90 rockets and missiles over the span of eight separate occasions, beginning at the start of the ROK-US joint military exercises, Key Resolve and Foal Eagle. On March 31, North Korea again fired hundreds of artillery rounds toward the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the West Sea. This level of military provocation by the DPRK is unprecedented.

On February 21, the first day that a new round of reunions of the separated families had taken place, North Korea fired four projectiles from surface-to-surface multi-rocket launchers -- assumed to be a new generation 300mm MRL, also known as the KN-09. On February 27, North Korea launched another four scud-B ballistic missiles. On March 3, another two scud-C ballistic missiles were launched, and another seven 240mm and 300mm MRL. On March 16, 22, and 23, North Korea in total fired 71 FROG-type surface-to-surface rockets. On March 26, North Korea again fired two Rodong missiles from Sukchon, an inland area north of Pyongyang, that flew 650 km before dropping into the East Sea. Also, during the ROK-US combined amphibious military exercise -- the Ssang Yong or "Twin Dragon" -- on March 31, North Korea fired more than five hundred rounds of artillery into the sea off its west coast, one-fifth of them landing in the southern waters south of the NLL.

Because of North Korea's provocations, the friendly atmosphere that we had hoped for as a result of the restart of separated families' reunions has turned into a hostile one, illustrating that crisis can break out under any circumstances on the Korean Peninsula. It also shows how unstable the Korean armistice system is at the moment.

Why did North Korea fire so many rockets and missiles? What is it that North Korea wanted to achieve through these unprecedented provocations? It is difficult to assume that these incidents occurred solely for the purposes of improving the quality of missiles or regular military exercises. It is obvious that North Korea conducts its exercises as a way of making provocations. It is true that North Korea seems to possess a new 300mm MRL; but most of the rocket and missile types that were fired have been used before. Given the circumstances, one can interpret that the threats and provocations are being made in response to the ROK-US joint military exercises.

While North Korea's intentions could be various, the recent firing of artillery into the west sea seems to be a military response to the Ssang Yong exercise. The North Koreans are illustrating that they have the capability to incapacitate ROK amphibious operations at any time. North Korea gave prior notice to South Korea that it would be conducting a shooting exercise in the northern part of NLL, and they responded to the ROK request for a cease fire with an argument that they were conducting regular military exercises -- an "action-for-action" response. North Korea's intention appears to be to demonstrate that South Korea is to blame for the imminent and dangerous situation.

It would appear that the North Koreans want to show that they cannot overlook the ROK-US military combined exercise, as they want to maintain the upper hand in the inter-Korea

relationship. North Korea said on numerous occasions how simply absurd it is to hold the reunion meeting of the separated families at the same time that the ROK-US combined military exercises are being held. The reason why North Korea has shown unprecedented military threats and provocations is because North Korea is afraid it might lose the pretext to raise any future objections about the ROK-US military exercises by allowing the reunions to take place simultaneously.

Although the missile launches clearly violate the UN resolutions, North Korea chose to launch Rodong missiles the day before the beginning of the Ssang Yong exercise. This time, North Korea tried to prove the Rodong missiles are stable mid-range missiles with high success rates, as the missiles were fired from western inland of North Korea and traveled 650 kilometers to the East Sea. The Rodong missiles are known to have a maximum range of 1,300 km, which means that most of Japan including Okinawa, where the U.S. marine bases are located, is within their range. They are also suspected of being capable of carrying a nuclear warhead.

The firing of the Rodong missiles seems to be connected to the statement by North Korea's foreign ministry on March 30 regarding the medium long-range missiles and nuclear test. As North Korea anticipates having a dialogue with the United States in the near future, it seems that North Korea wants to appeal to the importance of its nuclear status. The fact that the North mentioned a "new form of nuclear test" along with the firing of the medium long-range missiles signifies how North Korea hopes to force the US into re-opening the Six-Party Talks to resolve the nuclear issue. Ultimately, North Korea is sending a message to the US, who is putting a lot of pressure on North Korea by strengthening its alliance relationships with the Republic of Korea and Japan, and through its involvement with the nuclear security summit and UN resolutions.

On the other hand, the recent launching of missiles also seems to serve an alternate purpose, that being to heighten internal solidarity. On April 1, the day after North Korea fired missiles into the West Sea, Kim Jong Un stated that he will not tolerate the hostile policy of the US and its allies. This statement shows how North Korea views the security environment. On the surface, the decision seems to be made in response to the ROK-US combined military exercise and the international sanctions against North Korea for its missile launches and nuclear tests; however, the actions of North Korea can also be interpreted as a means for the regime to consolidate its military.

The recent military actions by North Korea should be seen as a planned and intentional decision to achieve a political objective rather than simply as a military response to the ROK-US exercise. North Korea took this opportunity to deliver a message to South Korea and the US of what its true intentions are, and also to use it as a way to strengthen its internal system. The only way to break this vicious cycle of provocations is to figure out exactly the true intentions behind the North's military threats and provocations and to respond calmly.

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