



A 'Bloody Nose Strike' Would Be Futile



Dong-Yub KIM
IFES, Kyungnam University, Professor
donykim@kyungnam.ac.kr

Hopes and expectations are high on the Korean peninsula ahead of the start of the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics. The Moon Jae-in administration is seeking to use this opportunity to change the tone of conversation with the United States, not just with North Korea. Yet, despite hopes for a peaceful Olympics, within the United States, there continues to be controversy over a potential military option with respect to North Korea. In early January, three B-2s were deployed to Guam from the Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri in what was claimed to be a scheduled rotation. In addition, two B-52 strategic bombers and two B-1B Lancers undertook joint training exercises involving practice strikes near the Korean peninsula with the Japanese Self-Defence Force. The nuclear aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, will also arrive in the region around the time of the Olympics' opening festivities, to join up with the Ronald Reagan Aircraft Carrier Battle Group. Nuclear submarines are also deployed as reinforcements.

North Korea has indicated its discontent at the deployment of US strategic assets in the lead up to the PyeongChang Olympics. The North Korean ambassador publically warned on January 23rd at the Conference on Disarmament at the United Nations Office in Geneva that "throwing a wet blanket on the positive atmosphere in North-South relations is dangerous behavior." On January 31st, North Korea's Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho sent a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that included the following: "there are threatening military moves that counteract the positive changes—improvements in relations and tension reduction—in the inter-Korean relationship."

It is amidst such circumstances, there is now even talk that the United States may be considering a 'Bloody Nose Strike', i.e. a limited strike on the DPRK. To summarize what has been reported, the plan would be to hit places of symbolic not military importance/nuclear-related facilities. The purpose of such a strike would be to arouse fear, rather than actually inflict physical damage. In a way, this would not hurt North Korean leader Kim Jong-un directly, but rather show him that the United States is able and willing to hit whenever it desires, and due to an expansion of hostilities, Kim Jong-un would dare not retaliate.

Many argue that such a strike is based on the overly rationalistic assumptions about North Korean actions—i.e., that they wouldn't dare retaliate. Kim Jong-un is not so rational as to give up on retaliation in such circumstances. Indeed, Kim Jong-un is no idiot, and not giving up on retaliatory options would be rational. Indeed, the image of a North Korea hit first, crouching down with a bloody nose is very far from the audacious North Korea that declared its nuclear program complete. Either way, it would wipe away the blood from its nose, and respond. The risk is not of an escalation or total war, rather it is of North Korea reacting in a way that is undetectable. That's North Korea's modus operandi.

The issue is that even if there were no impending threat of North Korean provocation, the chances of such an event mean that a 'bloody nose' attack is perceived as a 'preventive strike' in some quarters. Although it will be claimed that it is a limited action, it is different to a 'preemptive strike' where there are definite signs that the enemy is preparing to attack. Even if

such an attack caused little damage, it would unavoidably be condemned as an act of aggression if there were no proof that it was undertaken to forestall a first-strike from North Korea. The withdrawal of Victor Cha as nominee for the Donald Trump administration's US ambassador to South Korea, even after the South Korean government had signaled their support, has been linked to Cha's negative attitude regarding a 'bloody nose strike', and has sparked further controversy.

Like any administration, the Trump administration has considered a range of military options, hid them in the draw, and now has put them on the table. However, it is not clear whether this is the option that is being considered. A high-level US government official said that a 'bloody nose strike' is not a tactic that would be used by this White House or administration. They claim it is an invention of the media. Victor Cha has also pushed back on claims that his nomination was withdrawn due to opposition to such a strike.

However, in spite of such denials, there are sufficient grounds to be suspicious of the fact that such talk is occurring now, alongside talk of a peaceful Olympics. It is symptomatic of a negative view regarding the prospects of improving relations between the Koreas and the United States. One wonders where some US hardliners and media may not believe that improving relations between the Koreas as a result of North Korean participation in the PyeongChang Olympics could have a negative impact on the prospects for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue and American influence in the region.

You do not win by giving your opponent a bloody nose, nor do you win by just getting blood on your fist. If talk of military options is widespread among US hardliners, then assessing the prospects for a 'bloody nose strike' option itself seems futile.

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2(Samcheong-dong) Bukchon-ro 15-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul 110-230,
Republic of Korea
TEL. +82-2-3700-0739 FAX. +82-2-3700-0707
EMAIL. ifes@kyungnam.ac.kr