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30 November 2010

REPLY TO:

JFSTRAT-E (J5)

ATTENTION OF:

MEMORANDUM FOR NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR

SUBJECT: Deterrent Policy toward North Korea During Kim Succession

1. References.

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2. Summary. U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), being the primary office for strategic deterrence issues^a, has become starkly aware in the recent days of the need for reappraisal of US policy towards North Korea. In the wake of the violence perpetrated at YeonPyeong (and recalling other recent breaches of the terms of the ceasefire), contingency planning concerning U.S. responses to North Korean belligerence must be reevaluated. Existing strategic responses to dramatic North Korean actions (e.g. attacking Seoul, a nuclear strike) should be maintained, but US policy must adapt tactical policies to deter both continued patterns of aggression, and new attempts at trade in nuclear technologies, materials, and products in the coming years.

2. Background. Kim Jong Il's recent hiatus from public appearances has led speculation that he is experiencing severe health issues^b. The DPRK's "Dear Leader" has thus anointed his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, his successor^c. When the younger Kim succeeds his father, the world will face an inexperienced leader open to political actions the elder Kim has abandoned or not considered. For example, the new

Kim could consider increasing border attacks in order to rally domestic support for his new regime (a suggested explanation for the bombing of YeonPyeong^d). North Korea's recent acts of aggression have increased the urgency of need for dialogue in this vein.

The March 26, 2010 sinking of the ROKS Cheonan^e, for example, did not solicit any military response. The reasons for this were two-fold: first, there was a legitimate question of attribution during the appropriate time for crisis response (the hours and days immediately following the incident), with initial reports explicitly indicating that the cause of the Cheonan's destruction was not known^f. Second, considering the international condemnation the DPRK received after its guilt was established by a team of Analysts from the Republic of Korea, Australia, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the ROK could not respond militarily without provoking a symmetric response and international condemnations. The November 28, 2010 bombardment of Yeonpyeong was different in both of these respects. Because the response time fell within the time of crisis, ROK leaders had no option but to respond in kind. North Korea had publically denounced the annual US-ROK war games as acts of aggression and made no attempt to deny its hand in the attack^g, eliminating any questions of attribution which might have halted a spontaneous South Korean response. The exchange has fortunately not lead to military escalation by either side, though diplomatic channels have experienced increased aggressive language.

Beside the potential for more armed skirmishes, the DPRK is known to have both bought and sold nuclear technologies in the past. In the 1990s the DPRK accelerated its uranium enrichment program by importing centrifuges from Pakistan^h. In 2007, the Syrian government constructed a nuclear reactor modeled on North Korea's Yongbyon reactor. While the Syrian complex was destroyed by Israeli airstrikesⁱ, the danger it introduced persists. North Korea's newly revealed Uranium Enrichment facility at YongByon^j is a clear revelation of the strength of North Korean smuggling networks. North Korea could fill a market niche by trafficking nuclear technologies, materials, and products to other unfavorable parties.

3. Relevance. In the interest of establishing reputation (indicating that the succession will change nothing), the younger Kim can capitalize on the weak response to the Cheonan incident with other showings of force. Deterrence against this sort of behavior is a major gap in existing US policy. If the ascension of Kim Jong Un ends the ceasefire on the peninsula, the US must respond with force. While tragic, this strategy is an obvious necessity for deterrence. If the younger Kim enacts the more subtle defiance of periodic strikes between times of shaky armistice or selling nuclear materials or knowledge, the appropriate responses become less clear.

While economic sanctions have been the traditional reaction to North Korean misbehavior, the threat of sanctions will not deter the Kim regime from selling nuclear technologies. The fact that it has enacted these strikes in the midst of a near-absolute embargo^k leaves the US with no more unarmed punishment with which to leverage deterrent policies. And even if conventional deterrence could stymie the pattern of violence, the sale of nuclear technology will be even more difficult to thwart. Such sales are both a financial life-raft and an attractive market niche. Further restricting the financial support available to the regime incentivizes the sale of nuclear arms and technology. The US must therefore examine delicate, nuanced strategy options coordinated between the Department of State and the Department of Defense in order to maximize the deterrent effects against both of these North Korean tacks.

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