New Ways Are Needed To Deter Provocations
By Bruce Bennett

AFTER YEARS OF PROVOCATIONS, North Korea’s apparent sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan, which killed 46 sailors, marks a new low. North Korea has again become the major source of Northeast Asian instability.

The North Korean leaders use provocations to deal with their own internal weaknesses, trying to depict the regime as empowered but suffering from attacks by external enemies: the United States and South Korea. Unfortunately, the decaying economic and political situation in North Korea could well lead to further and more serious provocations.

But how might the US and its allies deter these actions? Even China, North Korea’s closest ally and major benefactor, has been unable to dissuade the North from many provocative actions. While the US and South Korea have successfully deterred high-level North Korean threats, North Korea has exploited a deterrence gap with low- to mid-level provocations.

It is time to fill this gap. The US and South Korean response to the Cheonan sinking should follow the advice of the ancient Chinese strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu: “Thus, what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy’s strategy.”

Because the North Korean government is so opaque, we can only speculate as to Kim Jong-il’s objectives and strategies. Provocations appear to be how Kim deals with his personal weaknesses, and those of his regime. He has used them to demonstrate his power with nuclear weapons tests and this naval “victory.” He has sought to divert the attention of the North Korean elites, blaming external enemies for his regime’s failings, and recently trying to support the succession of his son, Kim Jong-un. He has tried to secure US and international attention to the plight of North Korea, aiming to increase aid to his country and have it recognized as a nuclear power. And with the Cheonan sinking, it would appear he hoped to dishearten the South Korean military and the government of President Lee Myung-bak for failing to protect the ship.

Kim has sought a Cold War-like condition with South Korea and the US as a form of “diversionary conflict.” But the Cheonan sinking suggests that he may be experimenting with a more serious escalation to a limited war footing, perhaps to rally military support for his son’s succession. If so, Kim may already be planning an escalated military attack, just as he used nuclear tests after the initial provocations of missile tests in 2006 and 2009. To keep the escalation limited, he would likely pursue another plausibly deniable attack, perhaps using submarines again or special forces.

Attacking Kim’s strategy requires some creativity. For example, economic sanctions hurt the North Korean people and especially the elites, demonstrating that the US and South Korea are their enemies, which is exactly what Kim wants. Alternatively, retaliation by military attack on North Korean forces would likely do limited damage to the North Korean military, but would support Kim’s strategy by rallying his military behind the regime. Such an attack could also lead to serious, unintended escalation.

A different approach is needed. South Korean President Lee has already taken the first step and
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promised defensive actions to prevent repetition of this kind of provocation. He should now promptly invest in: 1) the sensors that could detect submarine penetrations of the Northern Limit Line (NLL) that is the de facto maritime border between the two Koreas; 2) the ability to make a response to such penetrations; and 3) enhanced defenses against other possible North Korean provocations. The absence of easy provocations may deter some North Korean actions.

Lee could attack the North Korean strategy by announcing that North Korea sank the Cheonan because Kim is trying to manage his weaknesses and North Korean instability. In response to Kim’s desire for greater attention, the US and South Korea could give him attention he does not want by declaring that North Korean instability is forcing both governments to prepare for a collapse of its regime, without trying to cause a collapse. This policy is like buying fire insurance: I don’t expect my house to burn down this year or even in the next five years, but I have insurance to recover from such a catastrophe should it occur. Similarly, more preparations are needed for a North Korean government collapse, and for subsequent South Korean-led unification of the peninsula.

Lee should announce that the baseline preparation for a collapse of the North Korean government involves humanitarian aid (including food, feeder grain and medicine), which is already desperately needed. Because the roads that lead across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) are inadequate to carry all of the food aid that would be needed, Lee could task South Korean and US Marines to prepare to deliver food and other humanitarian aid along the coasts of North Korea by practicing aid delivery along South Korea’s east and west coasts, filming these exercises, and broadcasting/sending pictures and film into North Korea.

The message would be clear: South Korea and the US are not your enemies and are not causing your problems. They are instead preparing to help you when your government no longer interferes.

There will be those who say that such an approach is hardly an adequate punishment of North Korea for the outrageous act of sinking the Cheonan. Yet this action would directly attack Kim’s strategy, and he would, presumably, be furious. If the US and South Korea wish to deter future North Korean provocations, they need to convince Kim that he will suffer further personal costs from such actions.

There will also be those who oppose this approach as too extreme. They feel that North Korea is more likely to respond to carrots than sticks. But realism suggests otherwise. With its currency revaluation last December, the North Korean regime rejected the markets that the international community offers and China has recommended. Even as North Korea had begun to experience the importance of markets, it rejected the economic strength they provide in favor of political control. And who can believe that North Korea will give up all of its nuclear weapons, given the huge leverage they afford the regime both internally and externally?

The conclusion seems clear: It is time to take action that imposes political costs on Kim, putting him on notice that further provocations will only increase the price he has to pay.

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