



# THE LIMITS OF “STRATEGIC PATIENCE”

Roger Svensson

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The rather erratic, back and forth North Korean policy during President George W. Bush’s administration is not to be repeated. Strategic patience will squeeze China into putting pressure on DPRK when the regime ups the ante; and it certainly has. However, to put recent North Korean actions in perspective, one should remember that there is a long history: the 1968 raid on Seoul’s presidential palace; the 1974 attack on President Park Chung-hee that killed the President’s wife; the 1983 failed attempt on President Chun Hoo-hwan during his visit to Burma, and a number of military and naval skirmishes causing casualties on both sides.

There is a lot of debate about the reasons and factions behind North Korean actions in 2010. However, it is mainly interpreted as being a combination of domestic power games and attention seeking.

It began with the sinking of a South Korean naval vessel, the Cheonan. The U.S. response was first diplomatic, denouncing North Korea. Later South Korea and the U.S. conducted anti-submarine exercises in the Yellow Sea designed, according to U.S. Forces and South Korea, to send a clear message of deterrence.

The unexpected and voluntary disclosure of an advanced enrichment uranium facility brought the North

Korean nuclear arms program, again, to the top of the agenda. The response from Washington was that the Six-Party Talks could play an important role but only, as White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs put it, “if and when the North Koreans take the six-party process to move toward denuclearization seriously.” The same attitude was reflected in a statement from the State Department that this was an issue of concern but not a crisis.

And then the latest incident, involving artillery duels and civilian casualties.

Regardless of what the North Korean reasons are, these actions are a direct challenge to the U.S. policy of strategic patience. So far, the U.S. has avoided to be drawn into the old pattern of being seen as rewarding DPRK’s provocative behaviour and broken agreements with further concessions. Rather the U.S. has responded very coolly to China’s suggestions that the situation requires a resumption of the Six-Party Talks between North and South Korea, Russia, Japan, China and the United States. At the same time the U.S. government vowed to “forge a measured and unified response with major powers including China.”

If the U.S. can maintain its policy of “strategic patience” and couple such a posture with strong support for its allies, South Korea and Japan, including extensive military exercises, the greater the pressure on China to deal with the situation. It is debatable how much leverage China has vis-à-vis North Korea, but from Washington’s horizon, that is basically the only option. However, it is not unreasonable to suggest that China is the country that is hostage to the current regime in Pyongyang. It is a question of who blinks first. The U.S. must, in a convincing way, make China believe that it will not respond as usual, i.e. enter into the



Six-Party Talks or any other mechanism of a similar kind.

There are suggestions in Washington that the only option is a strategy for regime change. What such a strategy should look like is, as expected, quite unclear. Sanctions could probably be made more specific and target the North Korean leadership. Conditioning lifting the sanctions in order to improve human rights has been suggested but this sounds like a return to the old “modus operandi.”

Even if a policy of strategic patience might be smarter than the off and on again dialogues with or about North Korea, it has an inherent weakness. That is, it allows North Korea to set the agenda and it constrains diplomatic options. The United States and its allies are reacting to North Korea’s actions and have little opportunity to reduce tensions or use diplomatic tools.

In saying this, if the U.S. can stay the course, a policy of strategic patience might change the game, albeit at a high risk. The sequel of incidents this year has made the U.S. military connections with South Korea and Japan stronger. There is, at the time of writing, a U.S. battle group in the Yellow Sea. The U.S. “security umbrella” is rather welcome when the climate deteriorates. The United States might be overstretched militarily in Afghanistan and Iraq, but it is very much a Pacific nation and becoming more and more welcomed by the smaller nations in East and South Asia.

At the same time, the situation puts China on the back foot. It might be complaining about the presence of U.S. naval vessels in the Yellow Sea, and within the Chinese economic zone, but Beijing cannot do much about it. Any attempt would just make the situation much worse. The recent revelations on Chinese views on North Korea might not be surprising, but they do underscore the fact that North Korea is, and will increasingly be a difficult diplomatic challenge for Beijing.

Given such a situation, there is the obvious risk that the North Korean leadership, and the military, will do what might seem rational to them: react more aggressively when ignored. But previous efforts by several U.S. administrations to provide incentives for good behavior have not resulted in anything. So talk about sanctions and unified measures will continue, but a U.S. return to the Six-Party Talks is highly unlikely. That would be, in the famous words of Yogi Berra, “Déjà vu all over again.”

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*The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.*

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