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To: "Dr. Baruch Fischhoff - Chair, National Academy Committee on Improving Intelligence"
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From: Lloyd Etheredge <lloyd.etheredge@policyscience.net>

Subject: The North Korea Chapter; Fwd: "Five Possible Ways to War" and the G-20 system

Dr. Fischhoff and Colleagues:

I am forwarding a copy of David Sanger's "**In the Koreas: Five Possible Ways to War**" from the New York Times. Evaluating these five possible forecasts/scenarios might be a useful way for the National Academy of Sciences to evaluate the databases and analysis methods that have been developed over the past 55+ years. [I assume that the maximum that can be achieved by electronic surveillance, wiretapping, etc. is available in the databases.]

Behavioral Science and G-20 Capabilities

It probably is the Chinese government that has the greatest capability and interest to penetrate and analyze North Korea, especially given the fallout if nuclear weapons are used. And, also, China could be the key actor to pre-empt or deter North Korea. I don't know whether you have had an opportunity to compare notes with social scientists/analysts in Israel re forecasting & modeling in their region, but (in the G20 spirit) if there are academic/intelligence analysts in China with an interest in North Korea, it might be interesting for the National Academy to discuss these five scenarios, the underlying behavioral models, and their implications for professional intelligence analysis, with your Chinese and several other G-20 counterparts.

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May 28, 2010

In the Koreas, Five Possible Ways to War

By DAVID E. SANGER

WASHINGTON

USUALLY, there is a familiar cycle to Korea crises.

Like a street gang showing off its power to run amok in a well-heeled neighborhood, the North Koreans launch a missile over Japan or set off a nuclear test or stage an attack — as strong evidence indicates they did in March, when a South Korean warship was torpedoed. Expressions of outrage follow. So do vows that this time, the North Koreans will pay a steep price.

In time, though, the United States and North Korea's neighbors — China, Japan, South Korea and Russia — remind one another that they have nothing to gain from a prolonged confrontation, much less a war. Gradually, sanctions get watered down. Negotiations reconvene. Soon the North hints it can be enticed or bribed into giving up a slice of its nuclear program.

Eventually, the cycle repeats.

The White House betting is that the latest crisis, stemming from the March attack, will also abate without much escalation. But there is more than a tinge of doubt. The big risk, as always, is what happens if the North Koreans make a major miscalculation. (It wouldn't be their first. Sixty years ago, Mr. Kim's father, Kim Il-sung, thought the West wouldn't fight when he invaded the South. The result was the Korean War.)

What's more, the dynamic does feel different from recent crises. The South has a hardline government whose first instinct was to cut off aid to the North, not offer it new bribes. At the same time, the North is going through a murky, ill-understood succession crisis.

And President Obama has made it clear he intends to break the old cycle. "We're out of the inducements game," one senior administration official, who would not discuss internal policy discussions on the record, said last week. "For 15 years at least, the North Koreans have been in the extortion business, and the U.S. has largely played along. That's over."

That may change the North's behavior, but it could backfire. "There's an argument that in these circumstances, the North Koreans may perceive that their best strategy is to escalate," says Joel Wit, a former State Department official who now runs a Web site that follows North Korean diplomacy.

The encouraging thought is the history of cooler heads prevailing in every crisis since the Korean War. There was no retaliation after a 1968 raid on South Korea's presidential palace; or when the North seized the American spy ship *Pueblo* days later; or in 1983 when much of the South Korean cabinet was killed in a bomb explosion in Rangoon, Burma; or in 1987 when a South Korean airliner was blown up by North Korean agents, killing all 115 people on board.

So what if this time is different? Here are five situations in which good sense might not prevail.

An Incident at Sea

Ever since an armistice ended the Korean War, the two sides have argued over — and from time to time skirmished over — the precise location of the "Northern Limit Line," which divides their

territorial waters. That was where the naval patrol ship Cheonan was sunk in March. So first on the Obama administration's list of concerns is another incident at sea that might turn into a prolonged firefight. Any heavy engagement could draw in the United States, South Korea's chief ally, which is responsible for taking command if a major conflict breaks out.

What worries some officials is the chance of an intelligence failure in which the West misreads North Korea's willingness and ability to escalate. The failure would not be unprecedented. Until a five-nation investigation concluded that the Cheonan had been torpedoed, South Korea and its allies did not think the North's mini-submarine fleet was powerful enough to sink a fully armed South Korean warship.

Shelling the DMZ

American and South Korean war planners still work each day to refine how they would react if North Korea's 1.2 million-man army poured over the Demilitarized Zone, 1950s-style. Few really expect that to happen — the South Koreans build and sell expensive condos between Seoul and the DMZ — but that doesn't mean the planning is unjustified.

In one retaliatory measure last week, South Korea threatened to resume propaganda broadcasts from loudspeakers at the DMZ. In past years, such blaring denunciations, of Kim Jong-il's economic failures, were heard only by North Korean guards and the wildlife that now occupies the no-man's land. Still, the threat was enough to drive the North's leadership to threaten to shell the loudspeakers. That, in turn, could lead to tit-for-tat exchanges of fire, and to a threat from the North to fire on Seoul, which is within easy reach of mortars. If that happened, thousands could die in frenzied flight from the city, and investors in South Korea's economy would almost certainly panic.

American officials believe the South is now rethinking the wisdom of turning on the loudspeakers.

A Power Struggle or Coup

Ask American intelligence analysts what could escalate this or a future crisis, and they name a 27-year-old Kim Jong-un, the youngest of Kim Jong-il's three sons, and the father's choice to succeed him. Little is known about him, but his main qualifications for the job may be that he is considered less corrupt or despised than his two older brothers.

One senior American intelligence official described the succession crisis this way: "We can't think of a bigger nightmare than a third generation of the Kim family" running the country with an iron hand, throwing opponents into the country's gulags, and mismanaging an economy that leaves millions starving.

It is possible that on the issue of succession, many in the North Korean elite, including in the military, agree with the American intelligence official. According to some reports, they view Kim Jong-un as untested, and perhaps unworthy.

“We’re seeing considerable signs of stress inside the North Korean system,” another official reported.

And that raises the possibility of more provocations — and potential miscalculations — ahead.

One line of analysis is that the younger Kim has to put a few notches in his belt by ordering some attacks on the South, the way his father once built up a little credibility. Another possibility is that internal fighting over the succession could bring wide-scale violence inside North Korea, tempting outside powers to intervene to stop the bloodshed.

Curiously, when Kim Jong-il took the train to China a few weeks ago, his heir apparent did not travel with him. Some experts read that as a sign that the Kim dynasty might fear a coup if both were out of the country — or that it might not be wise to put father and son on the same track at the same time, because accidents do happen.

An Internal Collapse

America’s most enduring North Korea strategy isn’t a strategy at all; it’s a prayer for the country’s collapse. Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy hoped for it. Dick Cheney tried to speed it.

The regime has survived them all.

But could the North collapse in the midst of the power struggle? Sure.

And that is the one scenario that most terrifies the Chinese. It also explains why they keep pumping money into a neighbor they can barely stand.

For China, a collapse would mean a flood of millions of hungry refugees (who couldn’t flee south; there they are blocked by the minefield of the DMZ); it would also mean the possibility of having South Korea’s military, and its American allies, nervously contending with the Chinese over who would occupy the territory of a fallen regime in order to stabilize the territory. China is deeply interested in North Korea’s minerals; the South Koreans may be as interested in North Korea’s small nuclear arsenal.

A Nuclear Provocation

With tensions high, American spy satellites are looking for evidence that the North Koreans are getting ready to test another nuclear weapon — just as they did in 2006 and 2009 — or shoot off some more long-range missiles. It is a sure way to grab headlines and rattle the neighborhood. In the past, such tests have ratcheted up tension, and could do so again. But they are not the Obama administration's biggest worry. As one of Mr. Obama's top aides said months ago, there is reason to hope that the North will shoot off "a nuclear test every week," since they are thought to have enough fuel for only eight to twelve.

Far more worrisome would be a decision by Pyongyang to export its nuclear technology and a failure by Americans to notice.

For years, American intelligence agencies missed evidence that the North was building a reactor in the Syrian desert, near the Iraq border. The Israelis found it, and wiped it out in an air attack in 2007. Now, the search is on to find out if other countries are buying up North Korean technology or, worse yet, bomb fuel. (There are worries about Myanmar.)

In short, the biggest worry is that North Korea could decide that teaching others how to build nuclear weapons would be the fastest, stealthiest way to defy a new American president who has declared that stopping proliferation is Job No. 1.

It is unclear whether the American intelligence community would pick up the signals that it missed in Syria. And if it did, a crisis might not be contained in the Korean Peninsula; it could spread to the Middle East or Southeast Asia, or wherever else North Korea found its customers.

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