

“March Madness”: the Korean Peninsula’s Annual War of Words

C. Kenneth Quinones^{*}

I. An Annual Event

“March Madness” threatens peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula each year. In the United States, the term refers to American basketball fans’ passionate support for their favorite college basketball team as each competes in the annual March tournament to decide the national champion. Here it refers to the annual verbal duels between North Korea (DPRK, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) and rivals South Korea (ROK, Republic of Korea) and the United States. The usual trigger is Seoul and Washington’s late February announcement that their annual joint military exercises Key Resolve and Foal Eagle will commence in early March. The DPRK predictably reacts with provocative rhetoric and placement of the nation on a “war footing.”

Occasionally “March Madness” turns violent as happened in March 2010 when the DPRK reportedly sank the ROK warship “*Cheonan*,” killing 46 sailors. In March 2012 “March Madness” undermined the US-DPRK agreement to resume cooperation and negotiations regarding the DPRK’s nuclear program. The DPRK Korean People’s Army (KPA), citing the start of the US-ROK joint military exercises Key Resolve and Foal Eagle, postponed the scheduled resumption of US Army-KPA joint operations to recover the remains of US soldiers who had died in North Korea during the Korean War. Also delayed was

* Akita International University

the US delivery of food aid. Then the DPRK launched a multi-stage ballistic missile, claiming the purpose was to orbit put a satellite. The US and ROK countered that the launch disobeyed UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions that called on the DPRK to halt ballistic missile tests. Subsequently the US cancelled the food aid delivery. “March Madness” had dashed hopes that US-DPRK cooperation and negotiations might resume.

II. Beginning Early

“March Madness” in 2013 continued from mid-January to the end of April and reached dangerous levels of intensity. Throughout March Pyongyang, Seoul and Washington exchanged provocative threats about preemptive nuclear strikes. Seoul’s military leadership declared it would retaliate for any DPRK attack by destroying Pyongyang’s leadership. The international news media, warned that a second Korean War could soon explode. By the end of March, the saber rattling convinced China and Russia to urge all sides to restrain themselves. Tensions remained high in early April, but the focus shifted to exchanges between the two Koreas. Here we examine the phenomenon’s dynamics, assess what contributed to the exceptional length and intensity, and what it suggests about prospects for peace or war on the Korean Peninsula.

The UNSC’s January 22 passage of Resolution 2087 aimed to condemn the DPRK’s late December 2012 launch of a multi-stage ballistic missile that successfully placed a satellite in orbit.¹⁾ On January 23 the DPRK’s Foreign Ministry accused the UNSC of infringing on the nation’s sovereignty, an often heard claim,²⁾ and warned that it would conduct a

1) Since 2006, the UNSC has passed the following resolutions on the DPRK:

- UNSC Resolution 1718 (October 9, 2006) after the October 9, 2006 nuclear test;
- UNSC Resolution 1874 (June 12, 2009) after the May 25, 2009 nuclear test,
- UNSC Resolution 2087 (January 22, 2013) after the December 12, 2012 satellite launch,
- UNSC Resolution 2094 (March 7, 2013) after February 12, 2013 nuclear test.

See also: “DPRK Foreign Ministry [FM] Spokesman Dismisses US Talk about Dialogue as Rhetoric Misleading World Opinion,” KCNA, April 16, 2013.

third nuclear test which it did on February 12.³⁾ Reacting on March 7 to Key Resolve and Foal Eagle “war games” in the ROK, the DPRK Foreign Ministry repeated Supreme Command Kim Jong Un’s January 1, 2013 “New Year Address” declaration that, “If the aggressors dare launch a *preemptive attack* against our sacred country, the People’s Army should mercilessly annihilate them and win victory in the war for the country’s reunification.”⁴⁾ The UNSC on March 8 passed, with China’s support, Resolution 2094 which condemned the DPRK’s third nuclear test and tightened barriers to Pyongyang’s trade in conventional weapons, and materials and technology related to nuclear bombs and ballistic missiles.⁵⁾ Pyongyang’s response was predictably defiant and consistent with its previous reactions.

It appears that Pyongyang used the UNSC’s January resolution passage to ignite “March Madness” before the annual US-ROK joint military exercises had commenced. By the time Key Resolve and Foal Eagle had gotten underway, the atmosphere on the Korean Peninsula was already very turbulent. The size and length the two month long “war games” always intensifies tensions on the peninsula. Key Resolve is primarily a computer driven exercise that involves a relatively small number of combat troops, but Foal Eagle is massive, mustering the entire 655,000 ROK army, air force and navy personnel, the 28,000 US military stationed in South Korea, and tens of thousands of their air force and navy colleagues in Japan, Guam and the US mainland. The “games” practice continue until the end of April contingency plans designed to deter and to destroy the DPRK in the event it attacks the ROK.⁶⁾ The DPRK always reacts by putting the entire nation on a “wartime footing”

2) “DPRK FM Refutes UNSC’s ‘Resolution’ Pulling up DPRK over its Satellite Launch,” January 23, 2013; “Kim Jong Un Guides Consultative Meeting of Officials in Fields of State Security and Foreign Affairs, KCNA, January 26, 2013.

3) “DPRK FM Spokesman Urges US to Choose Between Two Options,” February 12, 2013.

4) “Second Korean War is Unavoidable: DPRK FM Spokesman,” KCNA, March 7, 2013; and, “New Year Address Made by Kim Jong Un,” KCNA, January 1, 2013.

5) “DPRK FM Slams UNSC’s Additional ‘Resolution’ on Sanctions,” KCNA, March 9, 2013.

6) *Foreign Policy Magazine*, “What is Foal Eagle and Key Resolve?” April 3, 2013. For a description of the B-2 bombers capabilities see: *Cbosun Ilbo. March 29, 2013. www.english.cbosun.com.*

and places the entire 1.2 million army, navy and air force personnel on full combat alert. It then conducts its own war games designed to defeat an attack by the “imperialist aggressors,” i.e. the United States and its “puppet south Korean army.”

III. Two Hands to Clap

To understand “March Madness” we must also look at the words and deeds of Pyongyang’s primary adversaries: Seoul, Washington and Tokyo. Even before March, Japan’s new, twice elected Prime Minister Abe Shinzo reportedly told Japan’s Diet that Japan needs to “consider acquiring the means to hit enemy (DPRK) bases in accordance with the changing international political situation.”⁷⁾ The conservative Japanese daily *Sankei shimbun* also reported that, “Tokyo is eyeing the development of cruise missiles to launch pre-emptive strikes on North Korean missile bases.” Later, on April 15, Japan’s former defense minister and the second highest ranking member of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party Shigeru Ishiba reportedly said in a TV interview that he considered preemptive strikes against enemy bases (DPRK) to prevent ballistic missile attacks “legally constitute self-defense.”⁸⁾ Pyongyang undoubtedly noted these reports.

On the Korean Peninsula, just as Seoul and Washington began their “war games,” and just before the UNSC passed resolution 2094 on March 7, ROK Defense Minister Kim Kwan Jin and the nominee to replace him, Kim Byung-hwan, reportedly told the ROK National Assembly Defense Committee that the ROK’s military policy is to retaliate against any DPRK attack by targeting and destroying the top levels of Pyongyang’s regime. In a press interview on March 5, ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff head of Operations General Kim Yong-hyun stated that “If North Korea pushes ahead with provocations that would threaten ... our citizens, our military will strongly and sternly punish the provocations’ starting point, its supporting forces and command.”⁹⁾ The widely read *Cbosun Ilbo* reported that

7) “Japan Eyes Cruise Missiles to Attack N. Korea,” *Cbosun Ilbo*, February 21, 2013.

8) “Japan Claims Right to Pre-emptive Strike on N. Korea,” *Cbosun Ilbo*, April 15, 2013.

the Defense Ministry spokesman had clarified, “When we refer to command, it usually signifies divisional or corps commanders. . ., but if Seoul comes under attack, the top levels of North Korea’s regime including Kim Jong Un could become targets.”¹⁰⁾ The intent may have been to deter an attack, but it also inflamed tensions.

Pyongyang’s response was blunt.¹¹⁾ Referring to “hooligan” Kim Kwan Jin’s remarks, the DPRK Armed Forces Ministry spokesman concluded, “The DPRK cannot interpret those moves other than as a repetition of the long bankrupt confrontational stance of Lee Myung Bak (ROK’s former president).” He added, referring to the ROK generals as “warmongers,” that the policy was “in no way irrelevant with the swish of the skirt made by the owner of Chongwadae (sic),” a condescending reference to the ROK’s first female president Park Geun-hye, (inaugurated February 25, 2013). She was alleged to have sanctioned this “attack on the dignity of the DPRK leadership.”

Soon the tornado of nasty words sucked politicians, generals and journalists from all sides into the verbal dueling. Politicians felt obligated to warn their adversary, to support their generals, and to demonstrate resolute refusal to bow to the other side. Generals demonstrated their determination to defend their nation and to deter attack by matching their adversaries’ provocative words. Journalists, fulfilling their professional duties, fed the verbal tornado with reports of the other side’s “threats.” The DPRK government controlled Korea Central News Agency (KCNA), less concerned with facts and more with expressing ardent support for leader Kim Jong Un, repeatedly reported that the “American imperialists” were about to invade.

KCNA’s occasionally faulty translation of official versions of the Korean language version into English can greatly intensify fear and confusion. On March 5, the same day that ROK military authorities explained their policy of retaliation, the KPA Supreme Command re-

9) “Seoul Vows ‘Stern’ Response to N. Korean Provocation,” *Chosun Ilbo*, March 7, 2013, englishnews@chosun.com.

10) *Ibid.* March 7, 2013.

11) “Armed Forces Ministry Blast S. Korean Warmongers,” KCNA, March 13, 2013.

portedly declared it “will make the Korean Armistice totally nullified.”¹²⁾ But the KCNA English version was inaccurate. The Korean language version stated that the Command “considers the Armistice to have become a completely blank piece of paper.” The English version also claims that the Command “will totally stop the activities of the Panmunjom mission …” and “… cut off the Panmunjom DPRK-US military telephone.”¹³⁾ Again this is incorrect. The Command had only declared, according to the Korean language version, that it would “suspend” both activities. Later the DPRK Foreign Ministry issued a clarification of the statement but the ROK and international media ignored this. Also no one in Seoul apparently attempted to correct the KCNA’s translation errors, leaving English speaking readers to believe that the DPRK had unilaterally nullified the Armistice.

IV. Washington’s Mixed Signals

US generals remained generally quiet, but the Obama White House was slow to react to the worsening situation. The steps that it finally took actually sent mixed signals to Pyongyang about US intentions, thus heightening tensions. The Defense Department on March 8 sent B-52 strategic nuclear bombers from Guam to the ROK to participate in the war games. But a few days later President Obama on March 14 in an US ABC News interview called for confidence building measures to ease tensions.¹⁴⁾ Also on March 14, US National Intelligence Director James Clapper testified before a US Senate committee that it was the US intelligence community’s shared assessment that the DPRK did not appear to be making preparations to attack anyone.¹⁵⁾ Yet on March 15, Defense Secretary Hagel announced that US anti-ballistic missile defenses in Alaska and California would

12) “Spokesman for Supreme Command of KPA Clarifies Measure to be Taken by It,” KCNA, March 5, 2013, 2.

13) *Ibid.* 3.

14) “Obama Urges Pyongyang to End Nuclear Missile Testing,” *Chosun Ilbo*, March 14, 2013.

15) “US Intelligence Chief Warns of N. Korean Provocation,” *Chosun Ilbo*, March 14, 2013.

be significantly reinforced.¹⁶⁾ Then on March 18, US Assistance Defense Secretary Carter visited the ROK to finalize with ROK Defense Minister Kim Kwan Jin contingency plans for joint retaliation against a limited DPRK attack on the ROK. Carter also proudly confirmed for the first time that the US was flying B-52 nuclear bomber sorties over the ROK during Foal Eagle.¹⁷⁾ On March 28, shortly after Carter’s departure, the first ever B-2A nuclear capable stealth bomber sortie was flown over South Korea.¹⁸⁾

Arguably these mixed signals worsened the situation. The DPRK Foreign Ministry on March 20, citing the B-52 sorties, Carter’s visit and the recently finalized “US-ROK joint reaction” accord, declared, “It is an unpardonable provocation against the DPRK ... introducing a strategic nuclear strike means to the Korean Peninsula at a time when the situation is inching close to the brink of war.”¹⁹⁾ DPRK Supreme Commander Kim Jong Un’s reacted on March 20 with an elaboration of what he had said in his January 1 New Year’s Address,

... if the enemies, ... make even the slightest movement, an order will be given to destroy not only the military installments (installations) and puppet reactionary ruling institutions in the operational theater in south Korea but the relevant facilities of countries following the US war moves for invading the DPRK, and the military bases of the US imperialist aggression forces in the operational theatre of the Pacific.²⁰⁾

He repeated the same order nine days later in response to the US B-2A bomber sortie.²¹⁾

16) “US to bolster Missile Defense to Counter N. Korea Threat, *Chosun Ilbo*, March 16, 2013.
 17) “US Committed to Defending S. Korea Despite Cuts,” *Chosun Ilbo* March 19, 2013; “B-52 Practices Bombing Raids on N. Korea,” *Chosun Ilbo* March 20, 2013.
 18) “US Flies Stealth Bombers over South Korea in Warning to North,” Reuters; and Thom Shanker, “US Runs Practice Sortie in South Korea,” *New York Times*, March 28, 2013.
 19) “DPRK FM Spokesman Accuses US of Letting Strategic Bomber Make Sortie to Korean Peninsula,” KCNA, March 20, 2013.
 20) “Kim Jong Un Guides Drone Attack, Self-propelled Flak Rocket Drills,” KCNA, March 20, 2013.
 21) “Kim Jong Un Convenes Operation Meeting Finally Examines and Ratifies Plan for Firepower Strike,”

V. Better Late Than Never

With tensions on the Korean Peninsula near the breaking point, Beijing and Moscow reacted belatedly, followed by Washington. China may have been working quietly to restrain the DPRK, but its efforts did not become evident until after March 30. China's Foreign Ministry spokesman on March 29, for the first time, called upon all sides to restrain themselves.²²⁾ Moscow did likewise the same day. Press reports quoted Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as having said,

We are concerned that alongside the adequate collective reaction of the UNSC, unilateral action is being taken around North Korea that is increasing military activity. The situation could simply get out of control, it is slipping toward the spiral of a vicious cycle, ...²³⁾

Then the Obama Administration's new Secretary of State John Kerry on April 2 began his previously scheduled visit to Seoul, Beijing and Tokyo. The DPRK topped the list of his talking points. At the beginning of his Seoul stay, Kerry said,²⁴⁾

... but I will start with North Korea. We've heard an extraordinary amount of unacceptable rhetoric from the North Korean Government in the last days. So let me be perfectly clear here today: The US will defend and protect ourselves and our treaty ally, the Republic of Korea. ... important to stay absolutely focused on our shared

KCNA, March 29, 2013.

22) "China Calls for Easing of Tensions on Korean Peninsula," Reuters, March 29, 2013.

23) "Russia Warns Against Military Activity Near North Korea," Reuters, March 29, 2013.

24) "Remarks of Secretary of State John Kerry with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea Yun Byung-se After Their Meeting," April 2, 2013, www.dos.gov. pp.1 and 4.

goal of a peaceful Korean Peninsula, free of nuclear weapons. ... North Korea needs to make it clear that they are prepared to have a serious discussion about denuclearization. And they know exactly what the goal is; ... President Obama has said repeatedly we are prepared to enter into a dialogue negotiation if they are serious, if they will stop the provocations and engage in a serious discussion. ... making peace does not involve having a nuclear north and a disadvantaged Republic of Korea in the south.

Unfortunately for the concerned parties, the authors’ of Kerry’s talking points had not been reading the DPRK Foreign Ministry’s statements. They day after the UNSC’s passage of Resolution 2087, the DPRK Foreign Ministry on January 23 had declared,²⁵⁾

... the DPRK drew a final conclusion that *denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is impossible unless the denuclearization of the world is realized* as it has become clear now that the U.S. policy hostile to the DPRK remains unchanged. The September 19 (2005) statement adopted at the six-party talks on the principle of respect for sovereignty and equality has now become defunct and prospects for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula has become gloomier due to the U.S. hostile policy to the DPRK ... *There can be talks in the future for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and the region but no talks for the denuclearization of the peninsula.* (Emphasis added.)

The highest levels of the DPRK government, including Kim Jong Un, repeated this position numerous times before Kerry reached Seoul on April 2. The DPRK even reiterated its stance on the eve of his arrival at an April 1 UN Disarmament Commission meeting, and again on April 6.

Kerry’s trip also came late, largely because President Obama and he were previously

25) “DPRK FM Refutes UNSC’s ‘Resolution’ Pulling up DPRK Over Its Satellite Launch,” KCNA, January 23, 2013.

focused on the Middle East. By the time Kerry reached Seoul, Pyongyang had decided to resume operation of its old 5MW nuclear reactor at Yongbyon which it had shut down in 2007.²⁶⁾ Kerry also arrived two days after the DPRK moved to close the inter-Korean Kaesong Industrial Complex, something Pyongyang had warned as early as February 7 that it might do in retaliation for the UNSC's January 22 passage Resolution 2087. Only after the DPRK on April 8 blocked access to the complex did ROK President Park offer to discuss the situation, but with preconditions. Pyongyang bluntly rejected the offer on April 14, "As for the proposal for dialogue, it is nothing but empty words lacking content."²⁷⁾

As of April 28, all channels of communication between the two Koreas had been closed, and all joint agreements and projects declared nullified. The DPRK also repeatedly asserted that there could not be any further negotiation of denuclearization until the entire world was denuclearized, and that it considered the Korean War Armistice void. War had been avoided, at least temporarily, but the diplomatic price was indeed expensive.

VI. Inexperienced Leadership

The inexperience of political leaders in Pyongyang and Seoul helps to explain the severity of "March Madness 2013." In Pyongyang, Kim Jong Un inherited his position at the end of 2011. His authority remains weak because he has done little to convince his older, powerful advisers the generals, that he is worthy of their trust. He relies heavily on them for support because the generals dominate Pyongyang's powerful political elite. Kim may be

26) "DPRK to Adjust Uses of Existing Nuclear Facilities," KCNA, April 2, 2013.

27) For the DPRK's words and deeds see: "DPRK Warns Future of Kaesong Industrial Zone Depends on S. Korea's Attitude," KCNA, March 30, 2013; "CPRK Spokesman Slams S. Korean Group for Vociferating about Kaesong Industrial Zone," KCNA, April 4, 2013; "Important Steps Declared as Regards Kaesong Industrial Zone," KCNA, April 8, 2013; "CPRK Urges S. Korea to Drop Confrontational Stance," KCNA, April 14, 2013.

For the ROK's words and deeds see: "Park Says Door to Dialogue with N. Korea Still Open," April 12, 2013, *Chosun Ilbo*; and, "ROK-US Foreign Ministers Joint Press Conference, April 12, 2013 (www.mofat.go.kr), 6.

reluctant to restrain them for fear of eroding their support. He appears prone to follow rather than manage them. Also, the successful launch of a multi-stage ballistic missile in December 2012 and third successful nuclear test in February 2013 appear to have excessively inflated Kim and his advisers’ confidence in the KPA’s ability to deter and/or defeat any attack. This false sense of confidence combined with Kim’s inexperience and dependence on the military’s support makes the situation on the Korean Peninsula more dangerous than has been the case for several years.

Seoul’s democratically elected new president Park Geun-hye is less dependent on generals for political support, but given the newness of her administration and being the ROK’s first female president, she must avoid alienating Seoul’s military leadership. After all she must rely on them to counter any possible armed DPRK action. Also she must reassure the ROK people that she is neither naïve nor “soft” in her dealings with the DPRK. Otherwise her authority at the beginning of her five year presidency could be seriously eroded. Park’s hesitancy is evident in her postponed replacement of her predecessor’s hawkish defense minister Kim Kwan Jin, but by early April she had quieted the chatter about “pre-emptive” attacks on the DPRK’s leadership.

Also contributing to the situation has been the Obama Administration’s sensitivity to Republican criticism and slow pace of filling vacancies in the White House Cabinet and at the National Security Council and State Department. Republican criticism of President Obama’s former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and Defense Secretary nominee Chuck Hagel appears to have made the Administration hesitant to pursue foreign policy initiatives. Reinforcing this hesitancy was the lack of expertise among NSC and State Department officials concerning the Korean Peninsula. Instead, President Obama began his second term focused on domestic issues, particularly budget problems. In foreign policy, he and Secretary of State Kerry concentrated on the Middle East. When it came to dealing with Pyongyang, the Defense Department was given the lead. Hagel, new to the job and wishing to win the support of the Pentagon’s generals while minimizing the risk of Republican criticism, allowed the generals to take the lead regarding the worsening situation on the Korean

Peninsula. Not surprisingly, their assertive displays of deterrent capability over shadowed diplomacy and the advice of cooler heads.

“March Madness” 2013 thus became a contest of who could shout the loudest and display the biggest weapons, at least until Beijing and Moscow warned everyone that a second Korean War was a real possibility.

VII. Deterrence's Limitation

All sides claim that their words and deeds during “March Madness” are designed to deter war. Thus the UNSC passes sanctions resolution for the avowed purpose of impeding and deterring continuation of the DPRK's ballistic missile and nuclear weapons development. The DPRK responds that its sovereignty is being crushed and its existence threatened. Pyongyang claims it needs a nuclear deterrent to deter a combined US-ROK attack. Washington and Seoul claim counter that they must maintain strong conventional and nuclear “deterrent capabilities” to deter a DPRK, which includes the annual two month joint military exercise.

Reliance on “deterrence” has become a merry-go-round that spins fastest during “March Madness.” During the Cold War the United States and Soviet Union relied on deterrence to avoid nuclear war by building and maintaining nuclear equipped arsenals. Theoretically neither side wanted to attack the other because this would unleash a massive retaliatory strike that would destroy the attacker. The Cold War has ended but the United States maintains a powerful nuclear and conventional deterrent capability in Northeast Asia primarily to deter a second Korean War, i.e. a DPRK attacking on anyone. The DPRK is building an equally dangerous capability for the exact same purpose – deter the US alleged hostile policy toward it from becoming war.

Deterrence may have prevented a “Cold War” nuclear war, but it could soon set the stage for a second Korean War, one that would affect not just the Korean Peninsula, but all the world's superpowers not to mention disrupting the world economy. If anything,

deterrence as pursued in Northeast Asia is sustaining an increasingly dangerous arms race. It is also perpetuating Korea’s division while increasing the possibility of a second Korean War, particularly during “March Madness.” The only logical exit from the deterrence merry-go-round would seem to be through diplomatic dialogue and economic engagement. (3,900 words)

NOTE: A short version of this study appeared as an op-ed essay in the April 2, 2013 Asabi shimbun (English language version) under the title, “March Madness on the Korean Peninsula.”

References

Chosun Ilbo. (www.english.chosun.com).

Foreign Policy Magazine. (www.foreignpolicy.com).

Korea Central News Agency (KCNA). (www.kcna.ac.jp).

New York Times. (www.nytimes.com).

ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. "Press Conferences." (www.mofat.go.kr).

Reuters News Service. (www.reuters.com).

U.S. Department of State, "Statements of the Secretary of State." (www.dos.gov).