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North Korea? Not our problem

South Korea can defend itself these days

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By [Jack Kelly](#), Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It is, as Yogi Berra might say, *deja vu* all over again on the Korean peninsula.

On Nov. 23, North Korea fired artillery rockets at the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong, killing two South Korean marines and two civilians, and wounding 18 others.

South Korean President Lee Myung-bak said Monday South Korea will "sternly retaliate" if there are any further provocations from the North.

The North Korean artillery attack was a "provocative" show of force that "needs to be dealt with," said President Barack Obama.

This song has been sung before. On March 26, North Korea sank a South Korean frigate, killing 46. President Lee promised "resolute" measures then.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton condemned the attack on the frigate, and declared it would not go "unanswered."

But it did go unanswered. The North Koreans noted that, despite their stern words, all South Korea and the United States did following the attack on the frigate was to schedule the four days of naval exercises in the Yellow Sea which began Sunday. These are being held close enough to North Korea to give the appearance of a show of force, but not close enough actually to threaten the North Koreans.

Well might the North Koreans think "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." The policy of bluster and retreat followed by South Korea and the United States for lo these many years may encourage the North Koreans to commit more daring provocations.

"It is worrisome, if not frightening, how far Pyongyang is now willing to go to achieve its foreign policy objectives," said Bruce Klingner of the Heritage Foundation.

Why does North Korea behave as it does? Because it works.

North Korea is an economic basket case, incapable of feeding itself on a subsistence level. Without massive foreign aid, the regime would fall.

Most of that aid comes from China. But since the Clinton administration, much of it has come from South Korea, Japan and the United States. We've attempted repeatedly to bribe the North Koreans into good behavior, and each time failed. The North Koreans never will agree to abandon their nuclear program, or modify their aggressive behavior, because if they did so, they would lose the leverage that makes it possible for them to extort foreign aid.

Some pundits describe the leaders of North Korea as "crazy." But what's crazy is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result.

The South Koreans behave as they do because they are desperately afraid of war.

If the Korean War were to resume (what was negotiated at Panmunjom in 1953 was a cease fire, not a peace treaty), the United States and South Korea would win. But the South Korean capital of Seoul, a city of nearly 25 million people, is within range of some 10,000 artillery tubes the North Koreans have burrowed into mountainsides on their side of the border. In the first few hours of war, that artillery could devastate Seoul, inflicting hundreds of thousands of casualties and destroying the South Korean economy.

Unless something can be done to neutralize that threat in the first hour of a conflict, South Korea will be subject to extortion. So will Japan, if North Korea actually does develop a nuclear weapon. (The North Koreans already have ballistic missiles that can reach Japan.)

North Korea is a big problem. But it shouldn't be ours. When we intervened in Korea in 1950, we did so for two very good reasons. North Korea was then a part of an international Communist conspiracy aimed at world conquest. South Korea was incapable of defending herself.

Things have changed in 60 years. North Korea is the last truly Communist nation left standing. Its ambitions are limited mainly to self preservation. South Korea, which has more than twice the population of North Korea and more than 40 times the gross domestic product, is more than capable of defending herself.

But, notes Doug Bandow of the CATO Institute, "so long as America offers a security guarantee, maintains a tripwire troop presence on the peninsula and promises to do whatever is necessary to protect [them], the South Koreans have little incentive to take over their own defense."

North Korea is now just a regional problem. We gain nothing and risk much by continuing to make it ours, when the reasons for doing so have disappeared into history.

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