

Guy Wilson Birks (a member of the UK Defence Forum researchers group on Facebook) explains why he won't be leaving South Korea any time soon.

Last week, on Tuesday afternoon, North Korea declared that foreigners based in South Korea should evacuate and return to their home country. As an English professor, working in Daegu, I was apprehensive when I saw this message. Daegu is the fourth largest city in South Korea. It contains a large US Army base and a significant South Korean air force base known as K2. It is a strong potential target for attack.

I had previously followed closely the various threats and provocations that had been laid down by North Korea. I had been concerned about the rhetoric, but did not feel directly threatened by the hyperbole. But, the proclamation on Tuesday directly referred to people like me. My anxiety increased. I therefore sought further information about the current situation. Through conversations with various South Korean colleagues and friends, and through an analysis of past North Korean provocations, my concerns have been assuaged. A key factor surrounding this crisis for me is how South Korea reacts to the provocations. In contrast to a number of western media forums, the reaction amongst South Koreans in Daegu remains calm and assured. North Korea's latest behaviour is seen to be commensurate with prior instances of North Korean rhetorical bellicosity.

Various academics, North Korean watchers, journalists, and commentators have put forward strong explanations which illustrate how and why North Korea is acting the way it is, in the aftermath of the latest round of sanctions implemented to hamper its nuclear programme. Briefly, the explanations include: the 'military first' option and the importance placed on nuclear weapons as a deterrent, a diplomatic weapon, and as a means to ensure the survival of the current regime. (These themes were explored by the U K Defence Forum team as part of an extended Wikipedia Grand Strategy competition in 2011 - see all the papers in section RS82 at http://www.ukdf.org.uk/Regional_Studies.html)

The current series of provocations are likely to be indicative of Kim Jeong Eun's desire to consolidate his vulnerable position and a need to placate internal opposition. Another explanation is that this current series of provocations reflects a desire to raise international alarm and fear of North Korea so it can be involved in discussions to debate its nuclear programme.

North Korea may also be utilising this approach in order to have round table discussions wherein it can extract concessionary economic aid from the United States. The provocative approach may also be used as a method to test the resolve and resilience of the new South Korean President, Park Geun Hye. North Korea has persistently lambasted her, her father Park Chung Hee (the South Korean President for much of the 1960s and 1970s), and the Saenauri (Conservative) Party that she represents. The regime in the North may also be testing the strength of Japan, which has also undergone recent changes in government. North Korea's suspicions of Japan are an oft overlooked part of the North Korea psyche. As a regime that has, in many respects, remained frozen in time, anecdotal and personal memories of Japanese occupation of Korea until 1945, remain raw and highly charged. There are therefore many reasons that suggest the possible rationale and motivation for North Korean actions.

In discussions and conversations with people in Daegu, a general sentiment is that much of the coverage that they see from western countries has been fevered, and at times, excessively alarmist. Historically, a regime, such as the North Korean regime, would not highlight and signal advanced notice of invasive intent. It has previously acted under much more discreet circumstances when it launched its attacks. The invasion of the South in 1950, and the shelling

of Yeonpyeong Island two years ago (as well as other examples) give credence to this viewpoint.

Another sentiment amongst some Koreans is that the presence of foreigners in South Korea does make it harder target for North Korea to attack. In the event of a nightmare scenario, if war erupted, the North would bring its conventional forces to bear on the South in a devastating way. It would shell and destroy Seoul. However, in doing so, it would be targeting the vast bulk of foreigners working in or settled in South Korea. An artillery attack would directly affect the governments of other countries who uphold a responsibility to safeguard their citizens as best they can, at home and abroad. Most pertinently, it would be firing on an estimated 500,000 Chinese citizens who are believed to be residing in Seoul. North Korea would be attacking a large number of people from their vital ally and key trading partner, China. China would therefore be likely to sever its support for North Korea - it would even possibly declare war on North Korea, if a large number of its citizens are indiscriminately slain.

A brief look at the history of tensions and crises between North and South Korea shows that there is a heightening of tension when the regime in North Korea is in transition. Kim Jeong Eun had comparatively a short time in which to assume power. His father, Kim Jeong Il, spent over a decade preparing to take over the reins of ruling North Korea after his father.

On a visit to the Demilitarized Zone and the Joint Security Area where the armistice agreement was signed in 1953 a visitor will be made aware of some previous examples of heightened tension on the Korean Peninsula. Visitors will be shown to a place where the 'axe murder incident' of 1976 occurred. This was a result of two US Army officers who were murdered by a group of Korean People's Army soldiers. The men were chopping down a tree when they were ambushed. The murders threatened a vast escalation. The USA ordered an additional 12,000 troops to South Korea and all UN command troops in South Korea were placed in battle readiness mode. Ultimately, the tensions subsided. However, a striking factor is that this incident was likely to have been developed, approved, and implemented by Kim Jeong Il. He did this as a means by which to garner support in an attempt to shore up his position as the definite successor to his father. Kim Jeong Eun, who has had less time to cultivate the support of the pre-eminent military, is more than likely following a similar approach to his father.

Overall, through conversations with friends and colleagues, and through an appreciation of some of the historical provocations caused by North Korea, I have decided that I will not follow the suggestion made by North Korea last week. North Korea's actions are serious and they do have an intent. However, there are many reasons to suggest that the regime is continuing in a familiar approach, but under different circumstances. North Korea would be signing its death warrant if it chose to attack mainland South Korea.