

This opinion piece by PCI Board Member Dr. Chung-in Moon appeared in Korea JoongAng Daily on May 15, 2012.

[Viewpoint] Understanding NK's motivations

What looms over our heads are ominous signs of military clashes. The state must do what it can to prevent the worst.

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A couple of days ago, I received an e-mail from an American journalist. He is someone who is trying to understand the true intentions of the pariah state in Pyongyang. But he was nevertheless shocked by a recent video from North Korea's national television agency that was picked up by CNN. In the footage, an angry mob of North Koreans hung an effigy of President Lee Myung-bak, had it ripped apart by dogs and run over by a tank. They then threw rocks at the dismembered head.

It is not the first time North Koreans have lashed out at Lee for his tough stance against Pyongyang. But the appallingly cruel video may help to excite antagonism among North Korean residents against their capitalist neighbors. It can hardly bode well for the precarious and paranoid state closely watched by the world that is now under the leadership of a son of Kim Jong-il who is in his 20s, my journalist friend noted.

North Korea has upped rhetorical attacks against South Korea to a scandalous level. The state media blatantly called Lee and the South Korean government "traitors," "rats" and "mobsters" and threatened to take vengeance against South Korean media organizations that have been critical of the Pyongyang regime. On April 23, it announced that it will initiate "special actions" by using unprecedented military means to destroy and wipe out the South Korean enemy. The wording and tone were too disturbing to be brushed aside as the usual whimsical propaganda from the North.

What brings forth such renewed bellicosity? We could perhaps find a hint from "A Cultural Theory of International Relations" authored by Richard Ned Lebow, professor at Dartmouth College. The leading expert on international relations constructs theories on risk-taking in foreign policy by states from as far back as ancient Greece to today by analyzing four motives - appetite, spirit, fear and reason. Appetite is whetted for material national rewards such as military and economic power while spirit is a self-indulgent purpose to satisfy self-esteem, reputation and dignity. Fear is triggered for self-protection from external risks and threats while reason is a balanced pursuit for happiness based on rational actions.

He concludes from studying wars over the span of 2,000 years from ancient Greece to the invasion of Iraq that military clashes were primarily motivated not by appetite, fear or reason, but by whims of spirit. He discovered that states went to war when people felt their self-esteem,

identity, reputation, status or standing was challenged and so therefore needed to avenge to restore their name and honor.

If Pyongyang's primary goal is military security and economic assistance, it wouldn't have taken provocative actions. If it feared and felt threatened by South Korea and the United States, it would have taken a defensive mode instead of turning more aggressive. The spirit involving its self-esteem issue could have been the spark. North Koreans may have felt the dignity of their supreme leader has been impaired and is willing to start a war to gain recognition for their state and leadership.

To apply this theory to North Korea, we have to consider the two distinct and peculiar factors of North Korea. First, the state runs on a single dynastic ruling system. The leader, party, citizens and military are one organ and therefore any discredit against the supreme leader would be considered disrespect against them all.

Secondly, the country is dominated by the so-called warrior culture due to the brainwashed legacy of military-first politics. Warriors pride honor and status. They would jump into a duel or fight even if they were bound to lose if they felt slight against their name. If their military power, which is their highest honor, is on the line, they would stake everything and turn themselves into even more aggressive and provocative actors.

These sensitive factors in North Korea have been discounted. Their proudly announced rocket launch, which was to demonstrate their prime pride in military capabilities, was scorned as a vain military plot for missile exports. North Koreans were treated by international leaders as a badly behaving whimsical child. Chun Yung-woo, senior presidential secretary for foreign and security affairs, described the Pyongyang regime as a hereditary personality cult and that Kim Jong-un as the newly anointed priest. Such public sneering by senior officials has helped little.

South and North Korea may be facing the end in the game of chicken. What looms over our heads are ominous signs of military clashes. The state must do what it can to prevent the worst.

Translation by the Korea JoongAng Daily staff.

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