



Obama risks making the Korean crisis worse

International Studies *Adrian Hamilton*



The very worst response to the Korean crisis is to do what President Obama did yesterday: that is to announce a joint US-South Korean military exercise on the border this weekend. The State Department then explained that the exercise had been planned for some time and that its aim was one of deterrence rather than aggression. But it also announced that it would be moving an aircraft carrier from Japan to Korean waters forthwith.

We've been here before and it's never done any good. Certainly it's done nothing to change Pyongyang's behaviour: it was South Korea's military exercises this month, in response to the sinking of one of its warships by a North Korean submarine, that helped bring about the latest clash as the northern regime upped the ante by opening artillery fire on Yeonpyeong Island.

It was only a few months ago that the same US carrier was sent into the same waters in a demonstration of strength. It had no effect on the North's stance then, and it is unlikely to have any more this time round.

Of course this incident is more serious than others in the past. Tele-

vision pictures of whole villages burning and the loss of several civilian lives on the island have aroused popular anger in the South and the demand that the government "do something" in retaliation. But if history teaches you anything it is that gesture politics, when it comes to waving the military stick, is the cause of many a disaster.

And in the case of the Western response to North Korea it is gesture politics out of futility rather than determination. The joint exercise is taking place, the *USS George Washington* is speeding to the area, not to do anything but to create the appearance that Washington and Seoul are "doing something".

One can sympathise with their predicament. The West can huff and it can puff but there is very little that it can do to bring the North Korean house down. The regime has nuclear weapons and has recently displayed the fact that it has gone well down the road of uranium enrichment.

The US no longer has the power through its perceived military predominance to force change in the region. Yet it dare not risk total armed confrontation any longer. The UN is no use because of China's veto in the Security Council. Kim Jong-il's rule in Pyongyang is uncertain as he attempts to invest his younger son, Kim Jong-

un, with the succession. And yet it would be a mistake to dismiss all prospects of a peaceful resolution just as it is a mistake to dismiss North Korea either as a manipulative, evil, militaristic powerhouse or as a ramshackle failed state incapable of anything.

In reality it is neither, or rather something of both. There is nothing that it has done so far that is entirely irrational. Developing nuclear weapons and uranium enrichment may make no sense economically, but it has immeasurably increased its security from the outside attack it fears.

At the same time, from Pyongyang's point of view, all its actions have taken place in waters whose allocation to South Korea at the end of the Korean War it has never accepted and continues to dispute. Indeed, it has a point if you look at a map.

If the regime's main fear is, as it is, of foreign intervention, then playing the aggressive card makes sense. And if your main problem is, as it so often is, domestic power politics, then raising foreign fears is a well-established tactic for ensuring internal unity.

The truth is that no-one really knows what the political situation within Korea is. It may be that Kim Jong-il is seeking military support for his son by scoring some aggressive points against the



North Korea's attack has forced the US and South Korea to act in haste

South. It may be that the military is displaying their own muscle to the son by baring their teeth so dramatically.

We don't know. Beijing probably doesn't know. Which is why it has seemed so impotent to control its ally's actions.

It's very easy to declare that China should act as a parent to discipline its errant child, but having been through all this with South Africa and Zimbabwe, we should know by now that Beijing may be as constrained as we are in effecting correction. Pulling the plug on its neighbour could well be far more dangerous than letting it totter along whilst urging calm.

We should also know from Cold War experience that North Korea's behaviour is far from unprecedented. We had it all with the Communist regimes of South-East Asia and the Soviet Republics as the military dictatorships of Latin America. It proved very difficult

to know just what was going on inside or to tell whether engagement or confrontation was the best policy. All we could do – as we should with North Korea now – is to hold to our own principles and accept our limitations. Oppressive regimes (Burma, Saddam's Iraq, Mugabe's Zimbabwe) are far more capable of holding on to power than ever we expect. But economics, communication and generational evolution do eventually change things. Under these circumstances the best the outside world can do is to keep offering negotiations without expecting them to get anywhere and to keep hoping for internal change without intervening to effect it. It's not a brave course but it's a lot better than threatening military action because you can't think what else to do.

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= Mining tragedy =

The week New Zealand grew up



Tim Hume

New Zealanders like to conceive of themselves as a resourceful, self-reliant people, nowhere more so than on the South Island's rugged West Coast, a region famous for its remoteness and steady rain, where mining has been a way of life for generations.

Which is why the sense of helplessness that has enveloped the nation this past week in the face of the country's greatest disaster in decades has felt so wrong. In the second crisis to hit the South Island since the 7.1 magnitude Canterbury earthquake in September, a gas explosion in the Pike River coal mine left 29 men stranded inside a mine tunnel. Although the miners were unable to exhibit any signs of life, the New Zealand public, buoyed by the recent fairytale in Chile, held out hope of bringing some of them back alive. Media reports enthusiastically discussed the possibility of air pockets, the location

of fresh water supplies and how much lunch the miners had packed.

But rescue efforts proceeded at an agonising pace, before descending into bleak farce. Drilling didn't start until two days after the explosion, while the first incursion into the mine was not until day five, via a military robot which ventured half a kilometre, struck water, and shorted out. When the quest resumed, the robot ran out of battery power. The miners' traumatised families were told that help was on the way, in the form of better, more sophisticated robots from America and Australia. The sense of national impotence grew and it was galling. Why were we relying on big brother to bail us out? Why hadn't the equipment already arrived? After five agonising days, with nothing to report despite the blanket coverage, frustration turned to disbelief and anger.

The mood was summed up by Geoff Valli, whose 62-year-old brother Keith was missing, and who called for views of the old-fashioned "bravery" of the

sort exhibited in the Coast's previous mine disasters. "I know the talk around town; there are a lot of guys prepared to go in and do it," he said. "They're not taking their mothers in there to rescue guys. It's time for men to do what men have got to do."

In a country of four million, the potential loss of 29 men leaves room for little else in conversation, and as office workers monitored newstickers repeating the same information, a certain water cooler bravado prevailed. Why were the rescuers hanging back when there were men in the ground? Weren't heroes meant to risk their lives? Some saw the hesitancy as emblematic of a national malaise, of a country emasculated of its frontier spirit, more concerned about checking off bureaucratic health and safety requirements than saving lives. The increasingly strident second-guessing peaked when an Australian journalist asked pointedly whether the 9/11 firefighters would have held back.

Well, more than 340 firefighters were killed at the World Trade Centre. Much

as the Pike River rescuers would likely have been had they ventured inside. The crisis was ended as dramatically as it had begun when a second massive explosion tore through the mine. When the authorities confirmed there was no chance of any survivors, shattered communities began bringing down the yellow ribbons that had adorned their trees and lampposts, confronting the sort of losses that previously only world wars had brought.

Prime Minister John Key described the outcome as an "agonising blow". But it was also a vindication of the rescuers' caution and proof that a gung-ho attitude can be outdated and worthless. As the country came to grips with the news there would be no repeat of the Chilean miracle, many of us concluded that the rescue team's judgement was not cowardly but judicious, that the sleeves-up approach would have only led to more bodies buried beneath Pike River. Although it was of scant comfort, a collective lesson was learned.

= Ireland =

Restore trust now, or Irish people won't buy the pain



Andreas Whittam Smith

The Irish Government has lost the trust of its people. When you are planning to borrow a massive amount from the IMF and your European partners, that loss of trust is a big problem. It puts at risk your ability to carry out the conditions of the loan.

There are two ways in which a government can lose its legitimacy and the present Irish Government has recently experienced both. The first happens when a coalition partner leaves a parliamentary alliance and exposes the remnant to defeat in a vote of confidence. This has happened to Fianna Fail, the largest party in the Irish assembly, now deserted by the Greens, who will stay only to pass the forthcoming budget. As a direct consequence there will be a general election in February or March next year.

The second method is uncommon and hard to describe in precise terms. It is when a government no longer has the respect of its electorate. You recognise such a situation when you see it and this is what has become visible in Ireland during the past few weeks. The Irish *Sunday Independent* described it in a leader column: "The Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Brian Cowen, and his Government are at risk of being ignominiously driven from office, such is the level of anger sweeping the country this weekend. The people have broadly welcomed the arrival of the IMF, are largely indifferent to emotive sentiment associated with a perceived loss of national sovereignty, but are roundly furious at the manner in which the Government has 'lied' about the unprecedented events of last week."

When an opinion poll enquired if there was tactical advantage in the Government "lying", 79 per cent said no and 21 per cent said yes.

Now given that people in democracies instinctively assume that their politicians are not always truthful, what has to be explained is the intensity of Irish anger. A glance at the timing of the Government denials that a bailout was being sought gives the answer. Remember that on Tuesday, 16 November, the eurozone's finance ministers released a statement confirming that negotiations were under way. IMF and EU officials arrived in Dublin on Thursday, 18 November. Yet on Friday, 12 November, Mr Cowen said: "We have made no application whatever for funding". Two days later, on Sunday, 14 November,



DARREN DISS

Enterprise Minister Batt O'Keefe told RTE Radio that he was "absolutely unaware of any moves from Europe. It's been a very hard-won sovereignty for this country, and this Government is not going to give over this sovereignty to anyone else". In a more explicit denial, Minister for Justice Dermot Ahern said speculation that Ireland was about to seek financial aid from Europe was "fiction". Minister for Tourism, Culture, and Sport Mary Hanafin followed this and also denied Ireland was discussing a possible bailout. "There is no question of it," she said. The following day, Monday 15 November, Mr Ahern again insisted nothing was going on. "I'm not aware of it [pressure]".

These false denials so quickly followed by exposure mean that it is an Irish Government with no credibility that sets out to pass a budget. The measures will be the harshest set of proposals in living memory. They will be presented on 7 December, but the task will not be completed until two pieces of legislation are passed – a social welfare bill and a finance bill. These stages are likely to last until February 2011. The arithmetic of finding a majority is in any case complex, with five parties and 10 independent members in play. Moreover, members will know that their actions during the next few months will probably determine their success or failure in a spring election.

Now consider how the financial markets are likely to view this series of events. The first reaction would probably be favourable. No doubt on first reading, the budget would appear suitably draconian – or realistic, as bankers would say. This, however, would only be the start of the process. Then would come the realisation that the budget wasn't done and dusted as soon as published. So the next question in the minds of participants in the financial markets would concern timing. When is the budget likely to become law? But then, I fear, there could well follow a more damaging question: will the budget be so watered down in order to obtain a majority that it no longer accords with the conditions originally attached to the loan agreement?

The reason the debates on budgetary measures may become difficult is precisely because they will be immediately followed by a general election. The temptation for members to say and do what they believe will impress the electorate will be overwhelming. How easy will it be for them to put their signatures to very tough measures when they are likely to be campaigning for re-election a few weeks later? It is at this final stage of the budget process that Ireland is likely to pay the price for no longer having a government that can be trusted. Indeed, I cannot imagine anything worse – having to approve a severe budget just before confronting voters.

Turn again to the question of how financial markets are likely to react to this scenario. If the current opinion polls are to be believed, at some stage markets will begin to assume that the Government which passes the budget is immediately going to lose office. So then they are going to wonder – what next? Might a new Government reverse the measures so recently agreed? In those circumstances how likely are they to wish to buy Irish government debt or to make deposits with Irish banks? No chance at all, I would say.

There is, of course, a remedy, but it is going to remain strictly theoretical. That would be to have the general election straight away. In other words, achieve legitimacy first. Let Fianna Fail immediately place before voters its economic plan announced yesterday and its budget proposals shortly to be unveiled. Let the other parties state whether they would want to do things differently. Get as much "buy-in" as possible from the electorate before the pain begins. Otherwise Ireland will find that she is walking along a dangerous path, with the rest of Europe looking on with increasing anxiety.

If you ask me...
Deborah Ross



Bake your tarts all on a winter's day

If you ask me, it is time I gave Kate Middleton my advice on marrying a royal who will one day become King. It is good advice and it is sound advice, as handed down through the generations, and if she follows these tips she will have a most happy marriage:

* Don't summon the doctor should William ever call for his pipe and his fiddlers three in the middle of the night. Chances are, he is just being a merry old soul, for which there is no treatment.

* Sometimes, accidents happen. For example, if an egg-shaped being with spindly limbs were to fall off a nearby wall, you could order your husband to send all his horses and all his men, but it won't do any good. Have a cry, love, then move on.

* Should you bake some tarts, all on a summer's day, you'd do well to keep a close eye on all passing knaves. I hate to sound knavish, and I'm not – my fishmonger is a knave and he has never diddled me – but some can have nasty dispositions. However, as this is a seasonal problem, you can bake tarts all on a winter's day and they are perfectly safe to leave, so freeing you up to go shopping, have your hair done or order some beheadings. (John Lewis do good beheadings, as do Harrods, although they are pricier).

* Beware of any pies served in the counting house – between the ballroom and library; ext 5678 – and always stand at a safe distance when it is first cut. Live birds may fly out and if I had to hazard a guess at how many there would be, I'd say four and twenty.

* You may try to tempt your husband with all sorts of fancy spreads and Bonne Maman preserves, but the fact is he likes a little bit of butter on his bread, and that's that. It's a small thing, but if you keep this in mind, you'll save yourself and your dairy maid much to-ing and fro-ing over the years.

* A cat may always look at you. It's just the way it is.

* If your brother-in-law, Harry, insists on marching ten thousand men up a hill, down it, and then up it again, leave him to it. He has always been daft in the head and, this, at least, keeps him busy and amused.

* Should William ever show any inclination to trade his kingdom for a horse, tell him to stop being a big silly and to come inside right now, before it gets dark. You must be quite strict about this. A kingdom for a horse? Nuts!