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THE PENINSULA

“Crap Attack” Against South Korea: North Korea Sends Balloons

Carrying Trash Across the DMZ

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Author: Robert King

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During the week from May 28 to June 2, North Korea released over 1,000 large balloons across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) into South Korea. The balloons carried payloads of manure, cigarette butts, used batteries, cloth and plastic fragments, and lots of scrap paper (including used toilet paper). One report said that even dirty diapers were included. Time Magazine has dubbed the North Korean effort a “crap attack.” Photographs released by South Korean military authorities showed inflated balloons with plastic bags attached. Other photos showed trash strewn around deflated balloons, and in one photo, “excrement” was handwritten on one of the packages.

The South Korean government’s response has been measured but cautious. Military teams trained to deal with chemical attacks and handle explosives have been sent out to check the balloons. Some of the balloons were equipped with timers, suggesting that the trash bags were designed to pop open in midair to more widely scatter their offensive contents. Government officials have urged South Koreans to exercise great caution with the balloons and the attached packages. Military officials said the balloons carried trash and manure but said no dangerous substances such as chemical, biological, or radioactive materials were found. There are, however, potential health risks from contact with excrement. South Korean officials issued warnings to avoid contact with the materials carried by the balloons.

South Korean government officials warned Pyongyang on June 2 that strong countermeasures would be taken unless the North ceased the balloon bombardment. Officials said that such actions were contrary to the 1953 armistice agreement that ended the Korean War. On that same day, the North Korean government announced that it would stop sending the trash-carrying balloons. A North Korean spokesperson called the balloons "gifts of sincerity," and another statement said that sending "discussive" messages had been an effective countermeasure against the efforts of hostile forces.

The Continuing Squabble over Leafletting from South Korea

Based on statements from authoritative voices in the North, sending these trash-laden balloons to South Korea was principally intended to discourage the South from sending balloons with propaganda leaflets into the North. In response to the South Korean government's statement on June 2, North Korea claimed to have scattered "15 tons of waste paper" using thousands of "devices." A statement by Kim Yo Jong, the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and his closest confidant and ally, said that North Korea sent the balloons to make good on its promise to "scatter mounds of wastepaper and filth" in reaction to previous campaigns by South Korean private citizens sending balloons with leaflets, US dollars, and videos into North Korea.

Private organizations and individuals from South Korea sending leaflets to the North has been taking place for some time now. In 2014, North Korea's National Defense Commission, its highest national security body, sent messages to the Blue House in Seoul demanding the end of leaflet distributions via balloons to the North. The message said this was a precondition for holding high-level discussions with Pyongyang. At that time, the Kaesong Industrial Complex was an important and successful element of North-South cooperation, and North Korea made it clear that unless steps were taken to end the private distribution of leaflets, cooperation at Kaesong would suffer.

A decade later, leaflets continue to be a point of conflict between Pyongyang and Seoul. First, Kim Yo Jong has been a leading voice in North Korea denouncing the sending of leaflets to the North via balloon by private South Korean activists. In the summer of 2020, Kim issued a vicious denunciation of North Korean refugees now in South Korea who were responsible for sending the leaflets. She called the North Korean refugees "human scum, hardly worth their value as human beings," "human scum little short of wild animals who betrayed their own homeland," and "mongrel dogs as they bark where they should not." (See The Peninsula Blog, June 2020.)

South Korean President Moon Jae-in (2017-2022) sought to improve relations with the North during his tenure. With his ruling party holding a majority in the National Assembly, legislation was adopted to prohibit the sending of balloons laden with propaganda leaflets, bible verses, and DVDs across the border into North Korea. The legislation imposed stiff fines and jail terms for violators. When a defector organization in South Korea launched leaflet balloons into the North in May 2021, the head of the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency investigated, and Kim Yo Jong issued another denunciation against the Moon government for not stopping the balloon launches.

Squabble over Leafletting in the Context of Rising North-South Tensions

The intensified polemics over leafletting into the North and the “crap attack” balloons being sent to the South in response are more likely a symptom than a cause of increased inter-Korean tension. The leafletting has been happening for well over a decade, but the information leaflets reaching North Korea via balloon are not the principal source for outside information.

Balloons are a very dramatic and particularly photogenic symbol of the efforts being made to get information into the hermit kingdom. Far more important for getting information into North Korea are radios and, to a lesser extent, television broadcasts from South Korea, Radio Free Asia and Voice of America broadcasts in Korean by the United States, and Chinese government broadcasts in Korean for ethnic Koreans living in China near the border with North Korea. None of these information sources are as visually dramatic as balloons rising and being wafted along by the wind.

Recently, North Korea has strengthened ties with both Russia and China. Though Moscow and Pyongyang deny it, the North is providing ammunition and weapons to Russia for its ongoing war against Ukraine. Russian production lines are having difficulties keeping up with the demand for weapons and ammunition. North Korea uses Russian specifications for the weapons they produce, and the Russian purchases are helpful for the North Korean economy.

In March of this year, Russia exercised its right of veto in the UN Security Council to prevent extending the UN Panel of Experts an additional year to enforce UN sanctions against North Korea, which ended UN sanctions on North Korea for its development and testing of nuclear weapons. Russia had supported these UN sanctions for over a decade and a half.

In addition to more cordial and closer ties with Moscow, ties with Beijing are also positive, and China is North Korea's largest trade partner. As China becomes more assertive internationally, relations with the North have remained cordial, while China's relations with the United States and Europe have become strained.

While North Korean ties with Moscow and China are improving, relations between the two Koreas are becoming more difficult. This is not the result of a change in South Korea's president. Moon Jae-in came into office in May 2017 with the intention of improving relations with the North. Despite his outreach to Pyongyang, relations did not markedly improve. In fact, it was during President Moon's term that the Inter-Korean Liaison Office in the Kaesong Industrial Region was dramatically blown up by North Korea. Current South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol has focused less on relations with the North. There has been little change in North-South relations under President Yoon.

Early this year, in a historic break with its policy on inter-Korean relations over most of the past eight decades, North Korea disbanded government organizations whose purpose was related to reunification with South Korea or that reflected a special relationship between the two Koreas. In a lengthy speech, Kim Jong Un said that the North Korean people must understand that South Korea is the “primary foe and invariable principal enemy.” Several organizations for North-South economic cooperation and reunification were disbanded by the North to reflect that change in policy.

More than anything, the trash balloons from North Korea are a gesture of contempt directed at South Korea. The balloons sent by non-government organizations from South Korea toward the North had minimal impact on the North Koreans. Although South Korean NGOs that send balloons to North Korea argue they are an important source of information for North Koreans, research suggests that balloons are of limited value in disseminating information.

Balloons as a Source of Information and Potential Risk to Trigger Violence

A RAND Corporation study completed in 2018 and based on publicly available information assessed the state of balloon and drone technology and the effect of delivering information into North Korea. The study compared efforts in Korea with early Cold War efforts using balloons to deliver information to Central European countries. Based on modeling, it concluded that balloons launched under favorable wind conditions could potentially penetrate deep into North Korea, but based on anecdotal reports, balloons do not get far beyond the border region. The study suggested that balloons are “saturating” the border area with leaflets and do not reach further into the country.

Studies conducted by US international information organizations have assessed how North Koreans are getting external information based on interviews with refugees and travelers who recently arrived from North Korea. There are limitations to information access because the North Korean government severely limits access to information about the country, but these studies represent the best available sources of information. This first study was done in 2012, and more recent information continues to suggest that balloon-delivered leaflets are not an important source of external information.

However, the balloon launch events do have value in South Korea for organizations focused on North Korean human rights. They provide valuable media attention with frequent photographs and videos of huge balloons carrying information leaflets and other information into North Korea. For such groups, the media events are useful in calling attention to their cause. While they may not be the best means of getting external information into the North, they do play an important role for the North Korean human rights community in the South.

Although the amount of information disseminated by balloon launches is modest at best, the balloons are a very visible symbol of the real contest between democratic South Korea and totalitarian North Korea. An unfortunate consequence of the confrontation between the two Koreas is that symbolic information balloons could result in the reality of much deadlier violence.

On June 4, the South Korean government suspended a previously signed military agreement with North Korea limiting actions that might lead to conflict “in order to resume front-line military activities” because of the rising tensions between the two governments over the trash balloons. In the recent past, live-fire military exercises and cross-border loudspeakers have not been used by either side. It would be unfortunate to have this current symbolic confrontation lead to serious violence.

Robert R. King is a Non-Resident Distinguished Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI). He is former US Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights Issues (2009-2017). The views expressed here are the author's alone.

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