

Spiralling out of Control: The Risk of a New Korean War

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An artillery duel between North and South Korean forces on November 23 has set in motion a series of events which threaten to spiral out of control.

On November 22, South Korea began its annual military exercise, involving including 70,000 troops, dozens of South Korean and U.S. warships and some 500 aircraft. The following day, South Korean artillery stationed on Yeonpyeong Island began a live ammunition drill, firing shells into the surrounding sea.

The island is situated quite near to the North Korean mainland, and lies in disputed waters. At the end of the Korean War in 1953, U.S. General Mark Clark unilaterally established the western sea border to North Korea's disadvantage. Rather than in a perpendicular line, the Northern Limit Line was drawn to curve sharply upwards, handing over islands and a prime fishing area to the South that would otherwise have gone to North Korea. The North, having had no say in the delineation of its sea border, has never recognized the Northern Limit Line. (1)

South Korean troops have been based on the island since the end of the Korean War. There is also a small fishing village in close proximity to the military base; unavoidably so, given that the island is less than three square miles in size.

In response to the South Korean announcement of an impending artillery drill, North Korea telephoned the South Korean military on the morning of November 23, urging them to cancel plans to fire shells into what the North regarded as its territorial waters. The North warned that if the drill proceeded, they would respond with a "resolute physical counter-strike." (2)

Nevertheless, the artillery drill proceeded and four hours later, North Korean artillery fired on the island. In the first round, 150 shells were shot, of which 60 hit the island. Then 20 more shells were fired in a second round. In all, four people on the island were killed and 18 wounded. (3)

The South Korean military telegraphed the North, asking them to cease, but to no avail. Then their artillery returned fire at the North, firing 80 shells. One shell directly hit a North Korean military barracks. Although many of the shells appeared to have inflicted little damage, an official at the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff noted, "Satellite images show our shells landed on a cluster of barracks in North Korea, so we presume there have been many casualties and considerable property damage." (4)

Facing a barrage of criticism from domestic hawks for having responded in too tepid a

manner, South Korean Defense Minister Kim Tae-young resigned from his position. Yet the South Korean response probably could not have been increased significantly without risking a wider conflict.

During the drill, South Korean artillery on Yeonpyeong Island fired in a southward direction, away from the North Korean mainland, and this was not the first time that such drills had been conducted. North Korean forces could have made their point sufficiently by splashing some shells into the sea. Instead, they overreacted in a manner that manifested an inexcusable disregard for human life by targeting the island.

years, so something led to it.

President Lee Myung-bak of the conservative Grand National Party took office in February 2008, vowing to reverse the Sunshine Policy of warming relations with North Korea. The government of Lee's predecessor, Roh Moo-hyun, had signed several agreements on economic cooperation with North Korea, including joint mining operations in the North. Lee killed every one these agreements, ensuring that they would never be implemented. The railroad leading from the South to the North, which had just been reconnected under former President Roh, is now closed for good. That project had promised to benefit both Koreas, providing the South with a cheaper and more convenient route for shipping goods to China and Russia, and giving the North added income through user fees. South Korean tourist operations at Mt. Kumgang in the North are closed. Reunions of family members separated by the border have stopped. The only remaining remnant of the Sunshine Policy is the presence of South Korean firms operating at an industrial park in Kaesong, North Korea, and its days are probably numbered.

Then there was the incident in which the South Korean corvette Cheonan was sunk, in May of this year. In a stacked investigation, South Korea concluded that a North Korean submarine had targeted the vessel with a torpedo. The evidence, however, does not fully back that assertion and a Russian team's investigation determined that an accidental encounter with a sea mine was a more likely cause. (5) North Korea's repeated requests to participate in an investigation, or to at least view the evidence, were consistently rebuffed. Instead the Lee Administration utilized the incident to further sour relations between the two Koreas.

Perhaps most significantly, when Roh Moo-hyun was president of South Korea, emergency communication channels were established between the two Koreas, specifically for the purpose of opening dialogue and limiting or preventing armed conflicts whenever they arose or threatened to do so. On a number of occasions, those communication channels stopped potential conflicts before they either occurred or escalated. Those channels no longer exist, thanks to Lee's dismantling of agreements with North Korea, and as a result four South Koreans and an unknown number of North Koreans are now dead. (6)

That North Korea would feel threatened is not surprising. Its economy is crippled by the imposition of draconian Western sanctions, and the annual South Korean-U.S. military exercises are intended to intimidate. Furthermore, the rhetoric from Washington has been unremittingly hostile, and now with a more conservative government, so is South Korea's.

Nor is North Korea unaware of the fact that in February 2003, President Bush told Chinese President Jiang Zemin that if the nuclear issue could not be solved diplomatically, he would "have to consider a military strike against North Korea." (7) One month later, Bush ordered a fleet into the region, including the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson. Six F-117 Stealth bombers were sent to South Korea, and nearly 50 fighters and bombers to Guam. The possibility of military action was on the table, Bush told a South Korean official. (8) Due to the efforts of China and South Korea's progressive president at the time, Bush chose dialogue, albeit offset to a large degree by his imposition of further sanctions against North Korea. It has also certainly not gone unnoticed by North Korea that any halting diplomatic efforts have ceased altogether once President Obama took office. And with the pronounced deterioration in relations set in motion by President Lee Myung-bak, his administration has made it clear that he has no interest in diplomacy either.

Following the clash over Yeonpyeong, China called for dialogue and a reduction of tensions, sending envoys to both South and North Korea. It proposed that the six nations that had at one time participated in denuclearization talks, South and North Korea, the U.S., Japan, China and Russia, meet for emergency discussions “to exchange views on major issues of concern to the parties at present.” The meetings would not be a resumption of talks on denuclearization, although China hoped that “they will create conditions for their resumption.” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei stated, “The starting point for China proposing emergency consultations is to ease the tensions on the Korean Peninsula and provide a platform of engagement and dialogue.” (9)

The Chinese proposal should have been welcomed as the only sensible approach to the problem. But officials of the Obama Administration condemned China for being “irresponsible” by putting forth such a proposal. Instead, they urged China to get on board with the program of pressuring North Korea and further escalating tensions and the risk of war. White House spokesman Robert Gibbs snottily dismissed the proposal by saying that the U.S. and other nations “are not interested in stabilizing the region through a series of P.R. activities.” (10)

South Korea, too, rejected China’s proposal. The U.S., South Korea, and Japan willfully misrepresented China’s proposal as merely being a call for a resumption of the six-party talks on denuclearization. Domestic audiences were not hearing that the proposal’s purpose was to prevent further conflict. Instead, Japan said that talks would be “impossible” under the circumstances, while a South Korean official said that President Lee “made it clear that now is not the time for discussing” six-party talks. (11) Indeed. Not when one’s goal is to further inflame the situation. To further that objective, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is meeting with the foreign secretaries of South Korea and Japan to map out a common program in dealing with North Korea. (12) It goes without saying that dialogue with North Korea will not be part of that program.

President Lee has promised to take a much harder line on North Korea, and already the South has sent 400,000 propaganda leaflets across the border on balloons. (13) There has also been talk of resuming loudspeaker broadcasts across the border. The sending of leaflets was in violation of a 2004 agreement between the two sides to halt propaganda campaigns aimed at each other.

By the end of December, South Korea plans to hold another round of artillery drills on islands lying in disputed waters, including, dismayingly enough, Yeonpyeong Island. Nothing could be calculated to be more provoking under the circumstances. In preparation for the response to the drills that are expected from North Korea, island defenses are being beefed up. South Korea has added multiple rocket launchers, howitzers, missile systems and advanced precision-guided artillery to the Yeonpyeong arsenal. (14)

According to a South Korean official, “We decided to stage the same kind of fire drill as the one we carried out on the island on November 23 to display our determination.” (15)

The new drills appear calculated to provoke a conflict, and this time South Korea is intent on an asymmetrical response. The military is revising its rules of engagement so as to jettison concerns about starting a wider conflict. If former Defense Minister Kim Tae-young is to be believed, if there is another North Korean strike, then warships and fighter jets of both South Korea and the U.S. will launch attacks on the North. (16)

Incoming Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin is if anything even more determined to fan the flames of conflict into a wider conflagration. The South Korean military will immediately launch “psychological warfare,” including, presumably, loudspeaker broadcasts across the border. The North has promised to target loudspeakers if they are put in operation, and that would in turn provide the pretext for the South Korean military to launch combat operations. If there is another exchange of fire with the North, Kim announced, “We will definitely air raid North Korea.” All combat forces available would be mobilized, he promised. The newly minted rules of engagement are also going to permit “preemptive” strikes on North Korea based on the presumption of a possible attack. In other words, if North Korea fails to provide a pretext for military action, the Lee Administration can attack the North without provocation, if it chooses to do so. (17)

Lee Myung-bak has already achieved his dream of demolishing the Sunshine Policy. Relations between the two Koreas are at their lowest point since the end of military dictatorship in South Korea. Now he aims to deliberately trigger armed conflict in order to demonstrate “toughness,” and not incidentally, drive the final nail into the coffin of the Sunshine Policy. Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin feels that the risk of war is low. “It will be difficult for North Korea to conduct a full-scale war because there are some elements of insecurity in the country, such as the national economy and power transfer.” (18) Those may be arguments against North Korea’s ability to successfully sustain a long-term war over the course of a year or two, but it seriously misreads the ability and will of the North Korean military to put up a determined fight. The extent of possible South Korean air strikes on the North is not clear, but anything other than an extremely limited and localized action is likely to trigger total war. And that is a war that the U.S. will inevitably be drawn into. Even presuming a quick defeat of the North (which would be unlikely), eighty percent of North Korea is mountainous, providing ideal terrain for North Korean forces to conduct guerrilla warfare. The U.S. could find itself involved in another failing military occupation. With both sides heavily armed, the consequences could be much worse for Koreans, and casualties could reach alarming totals. Four million Koreans died in the Korean War. Even one percent of that total in a new war would be unconscionable, and Lee Myung-bak is deluded if he believes he can ride the tiger of armed conflict and remain in control of the path it takes.

Notes

(1) For a map of the Northern Limit Line and Yeonpyeong’s placement, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_shelling_of_Yeonpyeong.svg The blue line identifies the Northern Limit Line recognized by South Korea and the U.S., and the red line, the border as recognized by North Korea. Yeonpyeong Island is marked #1 on the map.

(2) “Panmunjom Mission of KPA Sends Notice to U.S. Forces Side,” KCNA (Pyongyang), November 25, 2010.

(3) “Military Under Fire for Response to N. Korean Attack,” Chosun Ilbo (Seoul), November 25, 2010.

(4) “Military Suggests Counterfire Caused ‘Many Casualties’ in N. Korea,” Yonhap (Seoul), December 2, 2010. Jung Sung-ki, “Satellite Image Shows Damages in NK Artillery Site,” Korea Times (Seoul), December 2, 2010.

(5) <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=20367>

- (6) "Containment After N.Korea's Unacceptable Provocation," Hankyoreh (Seoul), November 24, 2010.
- (7) Hwang Doo-hyong, "Bush Expresses Frustration at China's Reluctance to Dissuade N. Korea from Going Nuclear: Memoir," Yonhap (Seoul), November 10, 2010.
- (8) "Bush Admits He Considered a Military Strike Against North Korea," Korean Broadcasting System (Seoul), March 18, 2004. "Carl Vinson Strike Group CVN-70 'Gold Eagle'," www.globalsecurity.org Will Dunham, "U.S. Military Operations for N.Korea Fraught with Peril," Reuters, April 25, 2003.
- (9) Kim Young-gyo, "China Calls for Emergency Talks on N. Korean Nukes," Yonhap (Seoul), November 28, 2010. "China Calls for Resumption of Dialogue, Negotiations for Korean Peninsula Situation," Xinhua (Beijing), November 30, 2010. "Chinese FM Talks with DPRK, ROK, U.S. Diplomats on Korean Peninsular Situation," Xinhua (Beijing), November 26, 2010.
- (10) Helene Cooper and Sharon LaFraniere, "U.S. and South Korea Balk at Talks with North," New York Times, November 30, 2010.
- (11) Hwang Joon bum and Park Min-hee, "Lee Administration Rejects Six-Party Talks Proposal," Hankyoreh (Seoul), November 29, 2010. Tania Branigan, "US Rejects Talks with North Korea," The Guardian (London), November 30, 2010.
- (12) "Kim, Clinton Agree to Reject China's Proposal for Talks on N. Korea," Yonahp (Seoul), December 1, 2010.
- (13) "S. Korea Sent Propaganda Leaflets to N. Korea After Artillery Attack," Yonhap (Seoul), November 26, 2010.
- (14) Jung Sung-ki, "Seoul Plans Live-Fire Drill Next Week," Korea Times (Seoul), December 1, 2010. "New Defence Minister to Decide When to Stage Firing Drills in Yellow Sea," Yonhap (Seoul), December 3, 2010. "Tension Mounts as Firing Drill Planned," JoongAng Ilbo (Seoul), December 2, 2010.
- (15) "S. Korea to Stage Fresh Firing Drill on Yeonpyeong Island," Chosun Ilbo (Seoul), November 30, 2010.
- (16) Jung Sung-ki, "Seoul Vows Naval, Air Strikes on NK," Korea Times (Seoul), November 29, 2010.
- (17) "Defense Minister Nominee Vows Air Strikes if Attacked by N. Korea," Yonhap (Seoul), December 3, 2010. Kim Kwang-tae, "SKorea Defense Nominee Vows Airstrikes on North," Associated Press, December 2, 2010. Song Sang-ho, "Kim Warns Air Strike on North Korea," Korea Herald (Seoul), December 3, 2010. Na Jeong-ju, "Defense Chief-Nominee Vows Air Strikes if Attacked," Korea Times (Seoul), December 3, 2010. Mark McDonald, "South Korean Outlines Muscular Military Postures," New York Times, December 3, 2010.
- (18) "Defense Minister Nominee Vows Air Strikes if Attacked by N. Korea," Yonhap (Seoul), December 3, 2010.

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<http://www.amazon.com/Strange-Liberators-Militarism-Mayhem-Pursuit/dp/1595265708>

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