

The Crisis in Korea: Rapid Military Escalation, Dangers of an All Out War

By [Alliance of Scholars Concerned about Korea](#)

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ASCK Steering Committee Statement

The armed forces of North Korea, South Korea, and United States stand poised to wage a war that could destroy the Korean peninsula and engulf the world in a nuclear holocaust. It is a war that can and must be avoided.

Last week, a joint U.S-South Korean military exercise escalated into artillery exchange between the two Koreas. North Korea's artillery bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island killed four and wounded many more. South Korea's response left an as-yet unknown number of casualties in the North. Now the United States and South Korea have begun joint war games in the Yellow Sea. U.S. forces include the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit based in Okinawa, the 7th Air Force stationed in Osan, and the aircraft carrier USS George Washington based in Yokosuka. U.S. and South Korean marines will stage a combined amphibious landing exercise on the west coast of Korea.

These massive military maneuvers are escalating tensions and threaten to trigger general armed conflict. We appeal to all sides to desist immediately from warlike actions and stop this cycle of ever-increasing threats and shows of force. All parties must back down before sparking a conflict that would threaten millions of lives.

Background to the Rapid Military Escalation

On November 22nd, the South Korean and American armed forces began annual military exercises involving 70,000 soldiers deployed throughout the South, including the West Sea. Fifty warships, 90 helicopters, 500 warplanes, and 600 tanks were being mobilized for the war simulation exercises, scheduled to last until the end of the month.

Amidst the tension heightened by the exercise, South Korean marines on Yeonpyeong Island, just seven miles from the North Korean coast, fired an unknown number of artillery shells into waters claimed by both Pyongyang and Seoul. Hours later, the North Korean military began shelling Yeonpyeong, an island with military bases as well as a fishing community of 1,300 residents. The South Korean military responded by firing its own artillery at North Korean bases.

North Korea's attack on Yeonpyeong Island left two soldiers and two civilians dead and over fifteen wounded. Most of the civilians have had to flee the island. The number of casualties and the level of destruction in the North are not known but could be higher, given the technological superiority of the South's artillery.

Immediately following the artillery exchange, President Barack Obama dispatched the George Washington, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, and President Lee Myung-bak announced that the rules of engagement for the South Korean armed forces have been changed, allowing for an asymmetrical response to a North Korean attack. The North ratcheted up the tension with the statement that it “will wage second and even third rounds of attacks without any hesitation, if warmongers in South Korea make reckless military provocations again.” As the US-South Korea joint military exercises get underway, tensions are rising yet higher.

The Imperative for Negotiations

We deplore all actions that lead to the loss of lives. We denounce the provocative military actions directed at North Korea by South Korea and the United States. We denounce North Korea’s artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island that killed at least four people. We call on the governments of North Korea, South Korea, and the United States to halt their reckless introduction of even greater military force that escalates tensions and risks further loss of life.

We call on all three governments – North Korea, South Korea, and the United States – to stop inflaming an already dangerous situation through their provocative actions and heated rhetoric. They should immediately cease the military exercises and maneuverings that will inevitably escalate tensions.

We call on the three governments to resume negotiations immediately in order to defuse tensions and to work toward finally ending the Korean War. The recent incident on Yeonpyeong is a deeply tragic reminder of the perilous state of ongoing conflict on the Korean peninsula. Since Korea was divided after World War II, a continuing state of war has been the structural cause of artillery exchanges and border clashes. A heightened risk of conflict will remain unless the Korean War is finally brought to an end with a peace treaty, which would establish the mutual recognition of borders and the normalization of relations.

The current crisis therefore underscores the imperative for diplomacy to transform the fragile armistice into a durable structure of peace based on the negotiation of a peace treaty, normalized relations, and the denuclearization of the peninsula. Talks may seem improbable under the present circumstances, but they are needed most when they seem hardest to start. This is such a moment.

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