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Korean Brinkmanship, American Provocation, and the Road to War: the manufacturing of a crisis　朝鮮の瀬戸際政策--危機の製造

Tim Beal

Korean Brinkmanship, American Provocation, and the Road to War: the manufacturing of a crisis[1]

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The exchange of artillery fire between South and North Korea on 23 November, 2010 had predictable results – a great increase of tension on the peninsula, a show of force by the United States, and a torrent of uninformed media articles and pontificating from the security industry. Zbigniew Brzezinski, who as Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor armed the Mujahideen in order to draw the Soviet Union into Afghanistan, thereby starting that long and continuing war (and paving the way to 9/11 for that matter), opined that

> If these actions are deliberate it is an indication that the North Korean regime has reached a point of insanity. Its calculations and its actions are difficult to fathom in rational terms. Alternatively it is a sign that the regime is out of control. Different elements in Pyongyang, including parts of the military, are capable of taking actions on their own perhaps, without central co-ordination.2

Robert Kaplan , with a touch of wishful thinking, decided that the clash, and the earlier display of an experimental Light Water Reactor to US nuclear scientist Siegfried Hecker[3] revealed that the North Korean government was 'imploding' and would soon be ripe for plucking, though that would have to be shared, in some unexplained way, with China:

> An aggressive nuclear programme coupled with military attacks on South Korea, including the sinking of a South Korean vessel by a submarine last March, are also a way for new leader Kim Jong-eun to cement his credentials. In his twenties, and with little experience, his ascension is being spurred along by his powerful uncle and aunt, Jang Song-taek and Kim Kyonghui, each with their own networks of power relationships.
>
> This means that for the first time in its history, North Korea now has a multipolar leadership, in which power is not concentrated in the hands of one person. A regime that is illegitimate and divided best stays in power by keeping its people on a permanent war footing, which in turn encourages disparate elements of the power structure to pull in one direction.
>
> The heightened aggression shown by North Korea therefore may be a sign that the regime is in deep trouble. A sudden implosion could unleash the mother of all humanitarian problems, with massive refugee flows toward the Chinese border and a semi-starving population of 23m becoming the ward of the international community – in effect the ward of the US, Chinese and South Korean armies.

The Daily Telegraph's security guru Praveen Swami decided this was all about getting aid from the West:

> South Korea is one of the engines of Asian prosperity, on which the world's hopes of an early economic recovery rest on peace in the region. By attacking Yeonpyeong (Yonphyong[4]) island, a target of no strategic value, North Korea's dysfunctional regime is telling the world how much pain it could inflict if it isn't bribed to behave itself. It hopes that its sabre rattling will force talks where the West will agree to an aid package in return for a guarantee that Pyongyang will not produce further nuclear weapons.[5]

In London, the Evening Standard editorialised that

> North Korea wants a resumption of six-way talks between the regional powers, including the US and China, about its nuclear programme and its leaders may believe that a demonstration of strength, nuclear and military, can achieve it. The moves have, however, played predictably badly with the US.[6]

The writer was correct that the DPRK wants talks with the US, and the invitation to Hecker was part of the process of attempting to draw the Obama administration into negotiations. But claiming that the artillery clash was part of that strategy just did not make sense..If the Evening Standard can work out that such an incident would predictably push Washington away from negotiations, then Pyongyang would likely come to that obvious conclusion as well. This particular inherently contradictory analysis of the North's intentions is frequently repeated in the English-language media.

What is most striking in the above reports is a failure to attempt to analyse the context in which the event is embedded. This context has two aspects, the contemporary geopolitical environment, and the historical framework. Once you take an event out of its context, events and the actors that perform them can have their meaning and significance distorted, often to the point of inversion. Prey become predators, victims become villains, and war becomes peace.

In this case, the provoker is portrayed as the provoked and the origins of the crisis are obscured.

The fire fight at Yeonpyeong Island seems to have been a manufactured crisis. It appears that, for the first time, South Korea, alone or in tandem with the United States, carried out a military exercise part of which took place in territory claimed by the North.[7] There have been innumerable ROK and US-ROK military exercises over the decades, some of them very large, involving up to 200,000 troops.[8] These have taken place either in international waters, or in South Korean territory. The North has charged the South, and the US, numerous times with infringing its territory by plane or by ship, and the area between the West Sea boundaries is contested, as discussed below. However, the live fire exercise of the marine's howitzers on Yeonpyeong Island on 23 November, coinciding with the massive South Korean Hoguk exercise, seems to have been unprecedented. It appears that the North considered it a step too far and warned the South a number of times that they would retaliate. The warnings were ignored and the North shelled the marine base.

> The south Korean puppet group perpetrated such reckless military provocation **as firing dozens of shells inside the territorial waters of the DPRK side** around Yonphyong [Yeonpyeong] Islet in the West Sea of Korea from 13:00 on Nov. 23 despite the repeated warnings of the **DPRK while staging the war maneuvers for a war of aggression on it codenamed Hoguk**, escalating the tension on the Korean Peninsula.[9]

The Yeonpyeong incident, therefore, had two components. One was the actual live fire into contested waters. This, as discussed below, was a statement of a territorial claim which the North declared that it could not tolerate.

The other was the fact that this shelling took place during the staging of a major military exercise (Hoguk). This included large-scale amphibious landings: 'Marines will participate in regiment-level landing drills'.[10] The South brushed off complaints about Hoguk saying it was an 'annual routine drill which has been conducted by the South Korean military since 1996', as if that made it any less threatening.[11] The South also claimed that the marine live fire exercise at Yeonpyeong was not part of Hoguk. That was formally correct but really a matter of semantics. The marines firing howitzers from Yeonpyeong were under the same command as those practising beach assaults. The Guardian's Tania Branigan automatically made the connection between the two, as it would appear did the ROK military:

> The incident came during a routine drill by Southern forces in waters near the island, the military said.[12]

The howitzers were introduced to Yeonpyeong and at least one of the other islands in the disputed area in 2000, after the naval clash in 1999 which came to be called the 'First Battle of Yeonpyeong'. There was a 'test-firing' but whether this involved live shells is unclear. It also seems to have taken place in isolation, not in combination with major war exercises:

> Recently alone, they introduced a new type of 155 mm self-propelled howitzers and a large quantity of shells into Paekryong [Baengnyeong] and Yongphyong [Yeonpyeong] islets. On February 23 and 24 including mid-February, they staged a "test-firing" under the simulated conditions of a battle to "destroy" warships of the north.[13]

In 2004 the Navy Command of the Korean People's Army (KPA) complained about firing exercises in the area, and about the artillery installed on the island:

> In another development, the south Korean army has staged madcap firing exercises in waters west of Taechong [Daecheong] and Paekryong [Baengnyeong] Islands and in waters off the Yonphyong Islets with a flotilla of speed boats and guard craft involved.
>
> The purpose of the firing exercises staged by the south Korean army in the West Sea is to be proficient in firing at warships of the north with various types naval artillery pieces and 155 mm self-propelled howitzers deployed on the Yonphyong Islets.[14]

It is not clear from the KPA statement what role the howitzers played. They could scarcely have been using live shells against their own boats, so it may have been some sort of simulation.

A KPA statement in 2008 about 'combined firepower drills' suggested that this might be what is happening:

> Combined firepower drills for "striking and destroying" warships of the Navy of the Korean People's Army and drills for tactical naval maneuvers are staged on Paekryong, Taechong and Yonphyong Islets and in waters around them almost everyday.[15]

It is not until the Yeonpyeong incident that KCNA uses the phrase 'live shell' in connection with artillery drills on the island:

> The army of the DPRK warned several times that if even a single shell of the enemy is fired inside the territorial waters of the DPRK, it will take a prompt retaliatory strike in connection with the live shell firing drill they planned to stage from Yonphyong Islet while conducting the ill-famed war maneuvers for a war of aggression against the DPRK codenamed Hoguk.[emphasis added][16]

It is unclear from the available material in English whether the marines had actually fired shells into the contested waters before 23 November. If they had not, then this exercise on its own would be provocative. If they had, then it would appear that it was the combination of this local exercise and the large-scale Hoguk which triggered the DPRK warning. In addition it may be that the scale of this firing was unprecedented, though they would have found that difficult to know in advance. According the Nam Kim, quoting a Korean-language source, the marine's shelling was intense:

> South Korean artillery units located in the West Sea Islands, just seven miles from the North Korean coast, engaged in firing

> exercises on November 23, 2010, for four hours. According to the South Korean Ministry of National Defense, the units on those islands, including Yeonpyeong Island, fired 3,657 times, or over 900 shells per hour, into contested waters.[17]

While many details remain unclear, we do know that North Korea regarded the 23 November live fire exercise by the marines on Yeonpyeong as a provocation it could not tolerate and warned the South a number of times that it would retaliate. In order better to understand how this crisis came about, and what may follow, we must, in addition to scrutinising the evidence about the events, also examine the underlying drivers of the clash.

Bearing in mind the importance of context three key drivers of the clash stand out. These are:

- Lee Myung-bak's policy towards the DPRK
- The DPRK's 'zero tolerance' strategy
- The reason for the perpetuation of the Northern Limit Line (NLL)

Lee Myung-bak's Northern policy

Unlike his immediate predecessors as president, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, Lee has adopted a strongly confrontational policy towards the North. This has been evident from the beginning of his administration, but it became increasingly manifest with his exploitation of the Cheonan incident.

A very important part of Lee's policy is the buildup of tension, especially through war exercises. But Lee and the South Korean military are only part of the decision-making process. War exercises take place because the US and ROK military want them. Given the vast disparity in power between North Korea and its adversaries (primarily the Unites States and South Korea but perhaps including Japan) what can be the motive for engaging in provocative military exercises? For the US the prime objective may be sending a message to China.[18] Lee's motives are probably threefold: to increase pressure on the North to produce a crisis of confidence and eventually collapse, to raise tension and fear of the North in the South, and to lock the Americans into his strategy.

ROK ships near Yeonpyeong Island in the aftermath of the shelling (Associated Press)

Frequent large scale joint exercises between the US and ROK militaries, under US command, which have been a feature of the peninsula for decades, stretch back in various forms to the late 1940s. The ROK military also has its own exercises, with little ostensible US involvement. Though since it is dependent on the US for high-tech intelligence – surveillance from aircraft and satellites, and signals interception – the Americans are never far away. In addition, the ROK military is under the wartime operational control (OPCON) of the US. Former President Roh Moo-hyun had negotiated for the US to relinquish operational control in 2012 but under Lee this has been pushed back to 2015.[19] Control of Joint military exercises was also scheduled to be transferred to the ROK, but this has also been rescinded.[20]

The DPRK has its own exercises, but not with China or anyone else. A recent report from the Congressional Research Service notes that there is still a formal treaty between the DPRK and China, but little more than that:

> …..the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance—which committed either party to come to the aid of the other if attacked. This military alliance, however, lacks key operational components, such as a joint headquarters, joint planning, or even joint military exercises.[21]

Indeed, when I raised the issue of the treaty with Chinese scholars in Beijing in November 2010, the replies were vague and it was unclear whether the treaty was still considered as binding. Whereas the US frequently makes a point of saying it will come to the aid of its ally the Republic of Korea, China makes no such public promises to the DPRK, calling instead for peace and stability.

Differentiating the involvement of the great powers, specifically the United States and China, is essential if we are to understand the security dynamics of the Korean peninsula. Treaties may be no more than scraps of paper. It is the establishment of implementation mechanisms – joint control, exercises, operational plans (OPLAN) and interoperability –that distinguishes the real from the merely formal. Neither Korea could invade the other without the support of its' patron', but clearly the commitment of the United States and China varies greatly. Moreover,

invasions don't just happen – they have to be planned and practised. It is only the United States and South Korea that does this repeatedly and on a large scale, not China and North Korea.

Sometimes it is difficult to disentangle the offensive from the defensive, and much depends on context, and interpretation. The US 'Missile Defense' programme is touted as defensive but coupled with the US offensive capability, which it allows to be utilised with impunity, it is rightly regarded by targeted countries as inherently aggressive.[22] The US-ROK military exercises are claimed to be 'defensive' but on close examination we see that they are quite the opposite. Here is a description from the Seoul newspaper *Hankyoreh* of the exercise held at the end of November:

> Joint South Korea-U.S. drills with the USS George Washington in the West Sea will be held from Sunday to Wednesday [28 November-1 December 2010]. North Korea has promised retaliation if both countries hold the drills in the West Sea.
>
> South Korea and the United States have stated that the drills are routine and **defensive in nature**, but with the drills being held in the middle of the West Sea for the first time, they strongly take on the character of a show of force against North Korea...
>
> Moreover, the South Korean military and U.S. military reportedly plan to limit the exercise to waters south of Pyeongtaek, Gyeonggi Province. This means they will conduct the exercise in waters **outside** the range of North Korea's Samlet (83~95km) and Silkworm and Styx (46km) **land-to-sea anti-ship missiles**.
>
> Participating in the carrier strike force will be the 9,600-ton Aegis cruisers USS Cowpens and 9,750-ton Aegis destroyers USS Shiloh and USS Stethem and USS Fitzgerald. One Aegis destroyer carries about **100 Tomahawk cruise missiles that can bombard North Korea's nuclear facilities with precision strikes**.
>
> The E-2C airborne early warning aircraft about the carrier is a "flying radar base" that detects and analyzes the situation in the air and ground from a far distance. The USS George Washington carries about **80 aircraft, including the fighter-bombers F/A-18E/F Super Hornets and F/A-18A/C Hornet**. South Korea will provide two KDX-II destroyers, a patrol boat, frigate, supply ship and anti-submarine aircraft.
>
> As the drill is taking place far from the NLL, the Marines on Baengnyeong Island, Yeonpyeong Island and the other Five West Sea Islands will not participate. **The Marine artillery drills on Yeonpyeong Island will restart during the middle of next month**, after the damage from Tuesday's attack has been repaired. On Sunday, the first day of the joint South Korea-U.S. drill, **the Marines will participate in regiment-level landing drills at Mallipo, South Chungcheong Province** as part of the Hoguk Exercise, a primarily South Korean drill that involves U.S. participation. [emphasis added][23]

On the one hand we have a task force headed by the giant nuclear-powered (and presumably nuclear-capable) carrier USS Washington, a 'warship capable of delivering air power anywhere in the world' as its official website proudly tells us.[24] The taskforce with its missiles and aircraft can bomb anywhere in North Korea (and much of China as the Chinese are well aware). Deployed against that we have North Korean artillery and shore-to-ship missiles, both of limited range, and unable to threaten the task force. And if there were any doubt about the message all this is designed to deliver, just note the marine landing drills.

The media often plays its role in disguising the threatening nature of these exercises by describing them as 'war games', as if they were playful, pretend, activities with no harm being done or contemplated.[25]

The US-ROK joint military exercises not merely prepare for a possible invasion of North Korea but they also serve as weapons of attrition. They force North Korea to devote much more of its resources to the military than it would if there were no palpable threat. An important component of the exercise is their element of ambiguity. The Korean People's Army (KPA) can never be sure when a feint might become the real thing, so every exercise has to be taken very seriously. The translation of this commentary from the Rodong Sinmun on the Key Resolve and Foal Eagle exercises in 2009 may be fractured, but the underling recognition of the danger of attack is clear:

> The said largest-scale saber rattling kicked off by the U.S. imperialists against the DPRK at a time when their scenario for the second Korean war is at the final stage of completion is a very adventurous and dangerous military provocation that can be seen only on the eve of a war, and this is an undisguised military threat and a sort of declaration of war against the DPRK.
>
> No one can vouch that the U.S. imperialist bellicose elements will not ignite a war against the DPRK by surprise while reinforcing armed forces and staging war maneuvers in south Korea and its vicinity as they did in Iraq.[26]

Indeed, the clash at Yeonpyeong Island coincided with a substantial military exercise, the Hoguk ('Safeguarding the Nation'):

> North Korea fired the artillery during South Korea's military drill called the Hoguk Exercise on Nov. 22-30 that involves 70,000 South Korean military troops, 50 warships, 90 helicopters and 500 planes. The 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) of U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Seventh Air Force will also participate in the exercise.[27]

The scheduled participation of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) is particularly significant.[28] The 31st MEU, based in Okinawa, is America's 'forward deployed rapid-response' unit in East Asia. It trains with the ROK marines practicing beach landings, but its specialty appears to be urban warfare.[29] One of its possible functions is to mount a commando type raid on the DPRK. A Japanese scholar writing in the authoritative PACNET newsletter of Pacific Forum CSIS (the Honolulu branch of the Washington think tank Center for Strategic and International studies) commented thus:

> As a collapse of North Korea -- rather than a North Korean invasion of South Korea -- has become a more likely scenario, the 31st MEU can search and seize the North Korean nuclear arsenal, and prevent proliferation of those weapons.[30]

It is not surprising, therefore, that the KPA was concerned about the Hoguk exercise and responded to the ROK live firing in line with the 'zero tolerance' strategy. However, concerns extend beyond specific military exercises, to the whole policy of building up of tension in preparation for a crisis that would lead to an invasion of the North. The KPA barrage can be seen as a message that an attack would be met by a devastating counteroffensive which would, at the very least, imperil Seoul; it was a reminder that 'Seoul [is] not safe from artillery attacks'.[31]

The DPRK's 'zero tolerance' strategy

The DPRK's 'zero tolerance' policy long predates the Lee Myung-bak administration, let alone the present crisis. Basically this strategy is to reiterate than no infringement of DPRK territory will be tolerated, and any intrusion will be met by force. There has been flexibility and restraint in implementing this strategy, especially in respect of the NLL (see below), but the underlying strategic calculation is that any sign of weakness will lead to further US and ROK moves against the DPRK.

The case of the US invasion of Iraq is often cited by the North Koreans as indicative of the dangers of an appeasement policy. This is often raised in respect of North Korea's emphasis on nuclear deterrent. Alexander Frolov, writing recently in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs journal International Affairs on lessons from the Iraq war, for example, made the point that "The leadership in N. Korea also realized that nothing less than a nuclear status can guarantee the country against US aggression."[32]

However, the relevance of Iraq to the non-appeasement policy goes beyond developing a nuclear deterrent. In May 2003 after a breakdown in US-DPRK negotiations, the official Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) in a lengthy statement refered to Iraq:

> On March 20 this year the U.S. provoked a war of aggression against Iraq under the pretext of "finding out weapons of mass destruction" in a bid to topple the Saddam government.
>
> The Iraqi war taught the lesson that "nuclear suspicion," "suspected development of weapons of mass destruction" and suspected "sponsorship of terrorism" touted by the U.S. were all aimed to find a pretext for war and one would fall victim to a war when one meekly responds to the IAEA's inspection for disarmament.
>
> Neither strong international public opinion nor big countries' opposition to war nor the UN Charter could prevent the U.S. from launching the Iraqi war.
>
> It is a serious lesson the world has drawn from the Iraqi war that a war can be averted and the sovereignty of the country and the security of the nation can be protected only when a country has a physical deterrent force, a strong military deterrent force capable of decisively repelling any attack to be made by any types of sophisticated weapons.
>
> The reality indicates that building up a physical deterrent force is urgently required for preventing the outbreak of a nuclear war on the Korean Peninsula and ensuring peace and security of the world, now that the U.S. does not show any political intention and will to renounce its hostile policy toward the DPRK.
>
> The DPRK will increase its self-defensive capacity strong enough to destroy aggressors at a single stroke. Any U.S. aerial attack will be decisively countered with aerial attack and its land strategy will be coped with land strategy.[33]

In reality, the DPRK cannot hope to match US military power (especially in the air) so its response to attack would be asymmetrical, drawing on its strengths.[34] It would probably utilise its special forces, submarines, and in particular its artillery.[35]

As noted, the frequent US-ROK war exercises, the integration of the ROK military into the US command structure, and the associated operational plans, are recognised by the DPRK as very threatening:

> [The United States] made public "strategic guideline No. 1" in November 1978 and thus officially announced the formation of the "Combined Forces Command" in south Korea. . .
>
> The organization of the "Combined Forces Command" deepened the military dependence of south Korea on the United States and increased the danger for an outbreak of a new war on the Korean Peninsula.
>
> The Team Spirit joint military exercises for invading the north had been escalated as a large-scale war exercises involving huge armed forces over 100,000-200,000 strong from 1978. Such joint military exercises as the Reception, Staging, Onward Movement and Integration (RSOI), Ulji Focus Lens and Foal Eagle have been staged almost every day as planned and directed by the command.
>
> The aggressive and bellicose nature of the command has remained unchanged even after the June 15 era [the 2000 North-South summit], a new era of reconciliation and cooperation, was ushered in on the Korean Peninsula.
>
> Many war scenarios against the north including "OPLAN 5030", "New OPLAN 5026" and "OPLAN 8022-02" have been worked out and war exercises to carry them into practice conducted in a more frenzied way.
>
> This year the command changed the codenames of the RSOI and Ulji Focus Lens with Key Resolve and Ulji Freedom Guardian and is holding actual maneuvers to hurl U.S. imperialist aggression forces in the mainland and abroad into Korean front.
>
> It goes without saying that such war exercises and arms buildup had have negative effect on the north-south relations and chilled the ardent desire for the Korean people for reunification.
>
> The south Korean people thus press for the dissolution of the "Combined Forces Command" disturbing peace in Korea and obstructing her reunification.
>
> The south Korea-U.S. "Combined Forces Command", a tool for war of aggression and a source of permanent atmosphere of war and tension on the Korean Peninsula, should be disbanded without delay.[36]

The most famous example of the efficacy of the US-ROK strategy is the reported argument between President Kim Young-sam and President Bill Clinton in 1994. According to Kim, Clinton wanted to bomb the North Korea nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. A 2003 BBC report recounted the tale:

> "Clinton told me that he would launch an immediate bombardment on the Yongbyon area. Clinton was very determined about it, but I argued to him that such an attack should never take place," said Mr Kim.
>
> "So there was quite an argument between him and me. Sometimes the phone conversations lasted more than 40 minutes," he said.
>
> Mr Clinton first revealed the 1994 plan to attack North Korea last month, but said nothing of the alleged dispute with the South.
>
> Mr Kim said that a US attack would have led to a tremendous loss of life, and would have turned Seoul into a "sea of fire".
>
> "Finally I told him that if the United States attacks North Korea, I cannot send one single member of South Korea's 650,000 armed forces into battle."[37]

Kim's version of events was contradicted by Tong Kim (Kim Dong-hyun) a Korean-American who worked as an interpreter for the State Department for over 30 years, only to suggest that such plans were actually mooted at the defense minister level. According to him,

> It simply is not the case [...]. There was no discussion about a possible U.S. attack on North Korea between the two presidents via phone. Such discussions indeed took place between their defense ministers Kwon Young-hae and William Perry with the South Korean minister obviously opposed to the military action.[38]

The consequences of a Northern counterattack, and specifically an artillery offense against Seoul, was not the only consideration, although it was the main one. A South Korean simulation exercise predicted that 'bombing of North Korea's nuclear facilities could in the worst case make the whole of Korea uninhabitable for a decade'.[39] The bombing of Yongbyon was but one variant of the 'military option' that the United States has been examining, if perhaps the favoured one.[40] The release of radioactivity aside, a US attack would mean war with immense devastation of the Korea peninsula, so it is to be expected that there has been, in the past, opposition across the political spectrum, from progressive President Roh Moo-hyun to conservative legislator Park Jin.[41] There nevertheless remain those who pin their hopes on precipitating a collapse that they hope would prevent the North from making a counterattack. This is an ongoing issue but as long as the DPRK functions as a viable state, committed and able, to retaliate, the consequences of an attack would be weighty indeed. Part of the reason for the vigorous DPRK response at Yeonpyeong was presumably to demonstrate that the KPA was still in business.

The DPRK has been threatened, and blockaded, by the United States for decades, but unlike other countries that have been targeted as a threat to the United States, it has not been invaded, or bombed since 1953. To that degree the zero-tolerance strategy can be said to work. But it comes at heavy cost. It is a high-risk strategy. If there is a miscalculation or a misunderstanding, or 'maverick' action by soldiers on the front line, the situation could rapidly whirl out of control. War would be disastrous for North Korea, despite the brave words. It would also have grave consequences for the South, and Japan. If it spread to China the results for the entire Asia-Pacific and the world are incalculable.[42] In such a war, the DPRK would suffer most, but the ROK and the US would also suffer unacceptable damage and that could be considered sufficient to keep the peace.

The strategy has other disadvantages. It allows the DPRK to be portrayed as belligerent, and certainly the coverage of the Yeonpyeong incident, within South Korea, and internationally has been virtually uniformly hostile toward the dPRK. Not everyone has jumped on to the bandwagon and there are those, in particular Korean-Americans, who oppose the drift towards war and call for engagement.[43] But these are only a tiny minority.

The strategy also runs counter to the main thrust of DPRK strategy which is to negotiate the United States into accepting peaceful coexistence. Recourse to confrontation, and military action, makes that more difficult to prosecute.

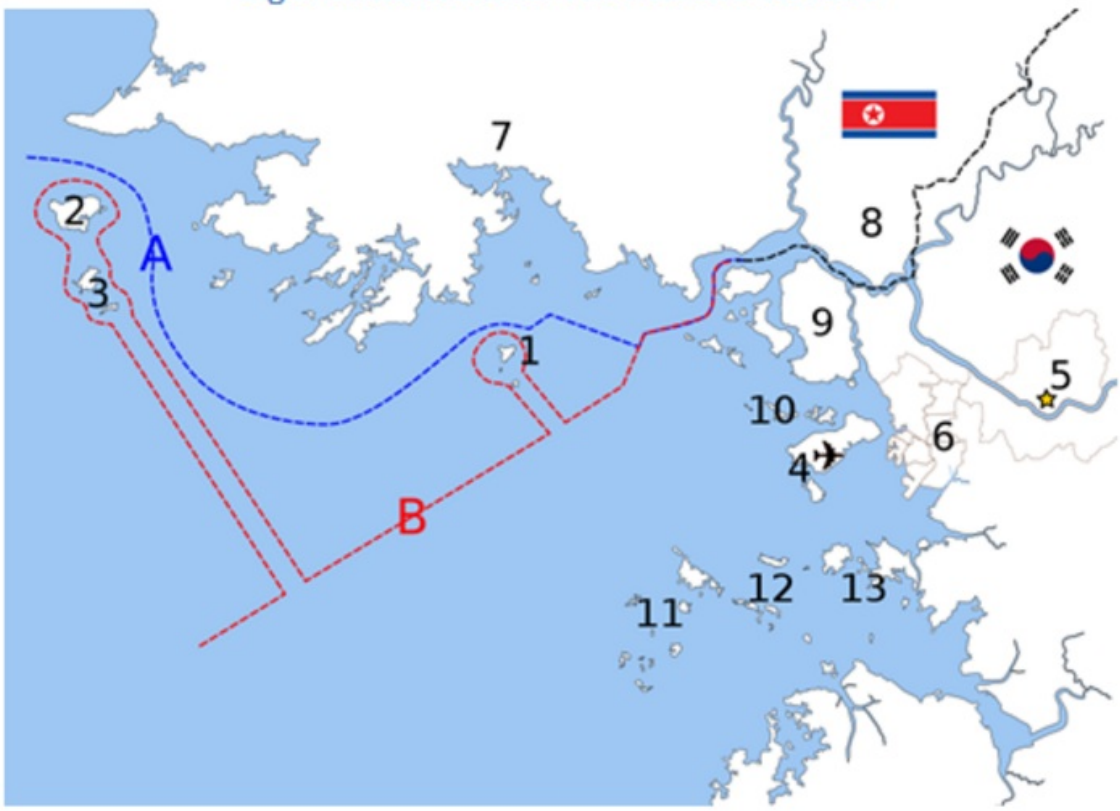
Finally, it gives a hostage to fortune. The other side (here South Korea but in other circumstances it could be the US) can construct a provocation knowing that it will trigger a response that can be labelled as belligerent. The trick for the ROK here is to do something which the DPRK will regard as provocative but which can be disguised as normal and legitimate. The military exercises in general fall within this category. For the DPRK (and China) they are intimidating and provocative, but that is not how they are described in the Western media. No doubt if the tables were turned and it was a North Korean carrier stalking up the American or even the South Korean coast, perceptions would be different.

In the particular case of Yeonpyeong the ROK did something that was portrayed as legitimate and non-threatening but which the DPRK found intolerable. To understand why that was so we turn to the question of the Northern Limit Line (NLL).

Northern Limit Line

The Northern Limit Line is a very strange beast, as a glance at the map shows (fig 1).

Fig 1: Contested seas: The NLL and the MDL



1.Yeonpyeong Island (artillery clash)	2.Baengnyeong Island (Cheonan sinking)	3.Daecheong Island
4. Incheon Airport	5.Seoul	6.Incheon
7.Haeju	8.Kaesong	9.Ganghwa County
10.Bukdo Myeon	11.Deokjeok Myeon	12.Jawol Myeon
13.Yeongheung Myeon		

Source: Wikipedia, downloaded 30 November 2010

On this map #1 indicates Yeonpyeong Island where the artillery clash took place, and #2 Baengnyeong Island, off which the Cheonan sank. The upper(blue) line represents the Northern Limit Line (NLL) and the lower (red) one the West Sea Military Demarcation Line (MDL) claimed by the DPRK.

The NLL was unilaterally established by the Americans (officially the United Nations Command) in August 1953 and has been claimed by the US and ROK thereafter.[44] The NLL, instead of striking out directly from the coast at the end of the land Military Demarcation Line (MDL), snakes up the west coast of North Korea, through rich crab fish grounds, and taking in various islands the main three of which are Yeonpyeong (1) , Baengnyeong (2), and Daecheong (3). It has been argued that the line was set to prevent Southern incursions into Northern waters (Syngman Rhee had not signed the Armistice Agreement and wanted the war to continue), however, it seems more plausible to see it also, or primarily, as affording bases for inserting intelligence and commando teams in position to harass the DPRK. Be that as it may, by the 1990s commando raids were a thing of the past, yet the ROK refused to negotiate concerning the NLL. This was despite two major incidents in 1999 and 2002 which were a distinct threat to the 'Sunshine Policy of then president Kim Dae-jung.[45] A further clash occurred in November 2009 under the presidency of Lee Myung-bak.[46] This 2009 incident may have owed something to the more assertive North Korea policy of the Lee administration.[47]

The NLL did not receive much international attention until the Cheonan incident of March 2010. There were a number of reasons for this. Most of the casualties in previous incidents were Northern and so, in the eyes of most of the international media, warranted less attention. The Cheonan was the largest single disaster for the ROK navy.

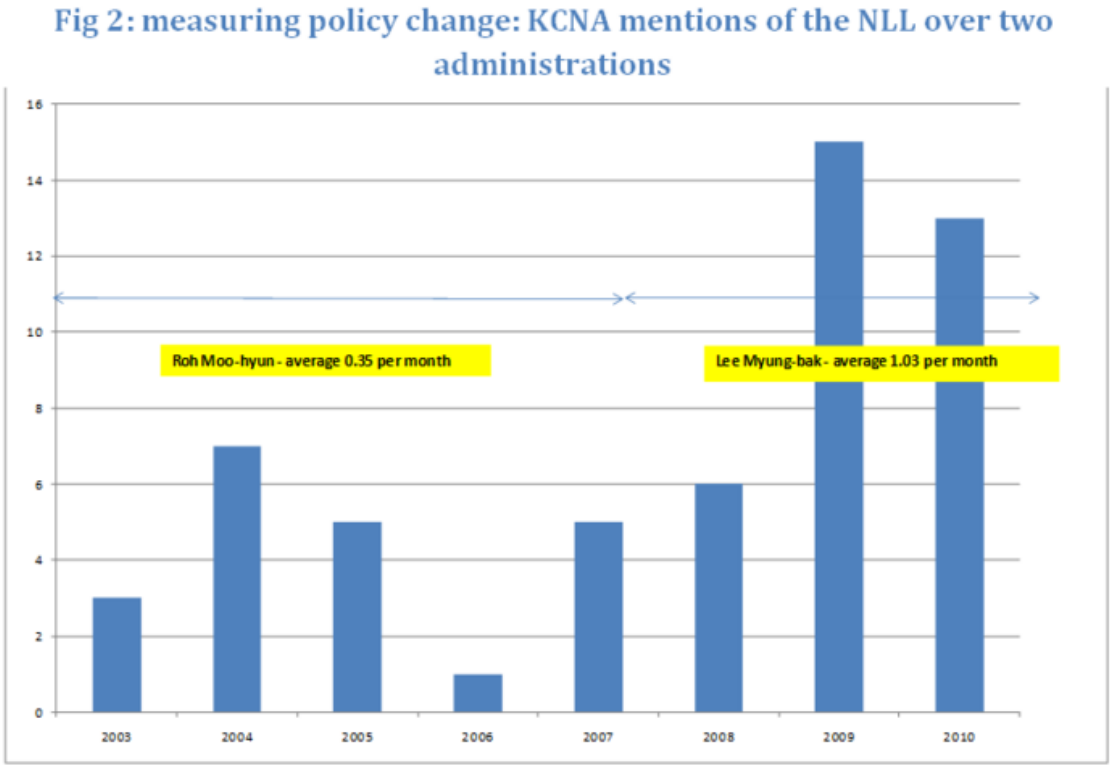
Many commentators were quick to point out what a dangerous situation the sinking of the Cheonan illustrated. Typical was Nicole Finnegan of the Washington-based Korea Economic Institute: 'Regardless of what we learn the true cause of the tragedy to be, the sinking of the Cheonan has revived fear and debates on how easily North and South Korea could lurch into war unexpectedly.'[48]

There is nothing new in these concerns. The NLL by its unilateral nature, its configuration close to the North Korean coast, and running through highly prized crab grounds, is a recipe for conflict. Fishing boats from both South and North sometimes ignore the NLL during the crab season and their respective navies tend to follow them. The NLL is also at variance with the now standard territorial sea limit of 12 nautical miles.[49] Writing in 2002, after the clash of June that year, John Barry Kotch and Michael Abbey, point out that:

> If the two Koreas are genuinely committed to reconciliation, these differences can be resolved through negotiation, thereby preventing future incidents. A line that was drawn more than a half-century ago for an entirely different purpose should no longer be allowed to fester as a source of conflict, thereby retarding the peace process.[50]

The differences were not resolved, so the question is why? If this failure to negotiate a resolution had occurred during the Lee Myung-bak

administration it might not have been surprising. But this was during the time of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. It is clear that a resolution would have meant the South abandoning the NLL in whole or in part, and agreeing to something more closely approximating the North's line. Whatever the role of Americans behind the scenes it seems clear that resolution of the NLL was opposed, successfully, by the ROK military. The logical conclusion is that there were strong forces in the ROK political elite, revolving around the military, who wanted to keep the NLL precisely because it would "to fester as a source of conflict, thereby retarding the peace process."



All of the previous conflicts around the NLL had been at sea, and the artillery duel at Yeonpyeong was the first one on land. To understand how that came about we must return to the map. It appears that the DPRK acknowledges ROK control over the islands, but claims these are its territorial waters, except for the access channels shown on the map.[51]

Whilst the NLL has long been a bone of contention, the situation greatly worsened since the Lee Myung-bak administration came into office. One rough way of measuring that is to calculate the number of times the official KCNA news agency mentions the NLL. Roh Moo-hyun was in office from 25 February 2003 to 25 February 2008 when Lee Myung-bak took over. Fig 2 shows the monthly average of NLL stories over those two administrations. This is admittedly an imperfect metric, but the difference between the two administrations is compelling: under Lee Myung-bak the number of North Korean complaints rose nearly three-fold.

In March 2008, for instance, the KPA navy warned:

> Combined firepower drills for "striking and destroying" warships of the Navy of the Korean People's Army and drills for tactical naval maneuvers are staged on Paekryong, Taechong and Yonphyong Islets and in waters around them almost everyday.
>
> A situation in which an armed conflict may break out any moment is prevailing in the frontline waters in the West Sea due to the reckless military provocations of the south Korean military warmongers.
>
> Any attempt on the part of the south Korean military authorities to "protect" the "northern limit line" at any cost would only spark off a clash in the said waters.[52]

The following year, as the Lee administration moved to join the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), the KPA navy issued another warning:

> 3. For the present, we will not guarantee the legal status of the five islands under the south side's control (Paekryong, Taechong, Sochong, Yonphyong [Yeonpyeong] and U islands) in our side's territorial waters northwest of the extension of the Military Demarcation Line in the West Sea of Korea and safe sailing of warships of the U.S. imperialist aggression forces and the south Korean puppet navy and civilian ships operating in the waters around there.[53]

The PSI is in many ways similar to the NLL. It is unilateral and has no legal standing. The PSI claims that the US and its clients are above international law and may stop and search ships on the high seas. Ostensibly this is to stop the shipping of weapons of mass destruction which, given the United States pre-eminence in the international arms trade, smacks of a certain degree of chutzpah.[54] Indeed, as Hazel Smith has documented, 'There is little hard evidence that the government of North Korea is involved in the illicit shipping of WMD or components of WMD.'[55] The PSI seems to be really about harassing the DPRK and stoking tension, and that also holds for the NLL.

The NLL seems to have been much more successful in attaining these objectives so far than the PSI. The NLL was perhaps only peripheral to the Cheonan incident. True the ship sank in disputed waters, and had the NLL not existed, that is, had the two Koreas been separated by a mutually agreed maritime border, the sinking would probably not have occurred. It appears, as Russian investigators concluded, that it ran aground in shallow waters and in an attempt to extricate itself, may have been sunk by one of the South's mines.[56] If the actual sinking of the

Cheonan may have been an accident, the subsequent investigation was deliberately fraudulent.[57] The Yeonpyeong incident is different in that it occurred because of a deliberate provocation by the South.

The artillery duel at Yeonpyeong

Much remains contested about this incident. But the essentials can be traced. The media tends to give the impression that the North Korean barrage against the marine base on Yeonpyeong island on 23 November came out of the blue, with nothing preceding it. The Chosun Ilbo specifically makes that claim:

> … the latest artillery bombardment on Yeonpyeong Island came completely out of the blue, and there is no way of telling when, where and how North Korea will strike next.[58]

A slightly more nuanced version is the Washington Post narrative, with the North launching a barrage and the South responding:

> North Korea launched a massive artillery barrage on a South Korean island Tuesday, killing two South Korean marines, wounding at least 19 other people and setting more than 60 buildings ablaze in the most serious confrontation since the North's sinking of a South Korean warship in March.
>
> South Korea immediately responded with its own artillery fire and put its fighter jets on high alert, bringing the two sides - which technically have remained in a state of war since the Korean armistice in 1953 - close to the brink of a major conflagration.[59]

Yet there is no mention here of the South's arms buildup on the island, the North's warnings, the provocative nature of the Northern Limit Line, or the South's threatening military exercises preceding the barrage.

Back in 2008 the KPA complained about the ROK introducing new weaponry into the NLL islands: 'They also issued an order to batteries of 155 mm caliber howitzers and various type guided weapons deployed on the above-said five islets to be ready to go into action.'[60]

The KPA statement also claimed that:

> Combined firepower drills for "striking and destroying" warships of the Navy of the Korean People's Army and drills for tactical naval maneuvers are staged on Paekryong, Taechong and Yonphyong Islets and in waters around them [take place] almost everyday.
>
> A situation in which an armed conflict may break out any moment is prevailing in the frontline waters in the West Sea due to the reckless military provocations of the south Korean military warmongers.
>
> Any attempt on the part of the south Korean military authorities to "protect" the "northern limit line" at any cost would only spark off a clash in the said waters.[61]

The live fire drills that the ROK conducted on 23 November were not just artillery practice; they were specifically focussed on possible combat against KPA ships in waters around the island. However, it was the specific contested status of those waters, in a tense situation exacerbated by the military exercises since the Cheonan incident, which sparked the North Korean response. It appears that the North warned the South against the drills, but the warnings were disregarded.

The Seoul newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* reported on 24 November that,

> North Korea in a telegram on Tuesday morning [23 November] criticized an annual South Korean defense drill now underway. The same afternoon the North Korean military fired on Yeonpyeong Island.
>
> An official at the Joint Chiefs of Staff said, "At around 8:20 a.m. on Tuesday, North Korea sent a telegram that said they would not sit idly by and watch if South Korea fire at North Korean waters during the military training." North Korea already criticized the drill on Nov. 17 on the website of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland and again on Monday when the drill began.
>
> But the military dismissed North Korea's claims, saying an artillery firing drill by the Marine Corps that took place in Yeonpyeong Island on Tuesday had nothing to do with the annual drill but was a part of monthly training there. Moreover, the drill the North cited as an excuse for the attack is an annual routine drill which has been conducted by the South Korean military since 1996.
>
> A spokesman for the Joint Chiefs of Staff said, "The training was directed at South Korean waters to the southwest of Yeonpyeong Island, and the training site had been announced already through the international network of communication of merchant ships.[62]

To say that the marine artillery drills had nothing to do with the Hoguk exercise is surely sophistry. Moreover, the DPRK warnings stretched further back. The information available on the English-language KCNA website is only a portion of the published Korean-language material, and on top of that there are the direct communications between North and South (such as the telegram mentioned above). However, there is enough English-language for us to get a certain picture of preceding events, even though the English translation is often of poor quality.

Fig3: Smoke from rocket fire over Yeonpyeong island

This picture taken on November 23, 2010 by a South Korean tourist shows huge plumes of smoke rising from Yeonpyeong island in the disputed waters of the Yellow Sea on November 23, 2010. North Korea fired dozens of artillery shells onto a South Korean island on November 23, 2010, killing four people, setting homes ablaze and triggering an exchange of fire as the South's military went on top alert. (STR/AFP/Getty Images)

On the 4th of June 2010 a *Rodong Sinmun* editorial headlined 'S. Korea Accused of Dangerous Provocations' warned that:

> The puppet military is massively amassing offensive forces in the waters off five islets of the West Sea including Paekryong and Yonphyong [Yeonpyeong] islets while vociferating about "defence of the northern limit line" and ceaselessly infiltrating its warships into the territorial waters of the DPRK for the purpose of sparking off a new armed conflict.
>
> It is needless to say that the large-scale "demonstration of military muscle" and war maneuvers taking place under this situation are as dangerous acts as playing with fire by the side of a powder magazine. These moves are, in fact, a prelude to an all-out war.
>
> The DPRK loves peace and does not want a war. But it is the DPRK's spirit and mettle to react to fire with fire and punish the provocateurs with a merciless retaliation of justice.[63]

This is a generalised warning about retaliation 'for starting a war of aggression' rather than specifically threatening a response to military exercises at Yeonpyeong.

This warning was followed by another on 3 August which specifically threatened retaliation for 'naval firing maneuvers' from Yeonpyeong and other islands in the area:

> The Command of Forces of the Korean People's Army in the western sector of the front issued on Tuesday the following notice in this connection:
>
> The naval firing maneuvers to be staged by the above-said warmongers in the waters near Paekryong, Taechong and Yonphyong islets in August with all ground, naval and submarine attack means involved are not simple drills but undisguised military intrusion into the inviolable territorial waters of the DPRK and reckless politically motivated provocation to preserve the illegal "northern limit line" to the last. ….
>
> In view of the prevailing situation, the Command of Forces of the Korean People's Army in the western sector of the front made a decisive resolution to counter the reckless naval firing projected by the group of traitors with strong physical retaliation. ….
>
> It is the unshakable will and steadfast resolution of the army and people of the DPRK to return fire for fire.[64]

Whether the ROK marines carried out any firing exercises after that warning is unknown. The *Chosun Ilbo* report quoted above says the drills were held 'monthly' but the [London] *Telegraph* talks about 'monthly air raid drills', so the exercises on 23 November may have been the first since the August threat. As the Telegraph put it, 'The island, lined with tank traps and trenches, and equipped with 19 fully-stocked bomb shelters in which residents conduct monthly air raid drills, is permanently ready for war.'[65]

The South Koreans admitted carrying out live firing exercises on 23 November but justified these by saying they were fired into the sea, away from the direction of the North Korean mainland. There seems no doubt they were firing into the sea (on the technical level it was presumably

an anti-ship exercise), though the actual direction of fire is unclear. One report says southward.[66] Another says to the west.[67] Yet another has it to the southwest.[68]

In fact, as far as the North was concerned, the direction was irrelevant because in any case the shells landed in their territorial waters. And therein lies the rub. The DPRK argues that if it tolerated the exercise it would be relinquishing its claim to the waters.

> The enemy fired shells from the islet which is so close to the territory of the DPRK that it is within each other's eyeshot despite the fact that there are so many mountains and rivers, sea waters and islets in south Korea. This powder-reeking saber-rattling cannot be construed otherwise than a politically motivated provocation.
>
> The enemy is claiming that they fired shells southward from the islet in a bid not to get on the nerves of the DPRK but Yonphyong Islet is located deep inside the territorial waters of the DPRK away from the maritime military demarcation line. If live shells are fired from the islet, they are bound to drop inside the territorial waters of the DPRK side no matter in which direction they are fired because of such geographical features.
>
> **The ulterior aim sought by the enemy is to create the impression that the DPRK side recognized the waters off the islet as their "territorial waters", in case that there was no physical counter-action on the part of the former.**
>
> Herein lies the crafty and vicious nature of the enemy's provocation.
>
> The army of the DPRK took such a self-defensive measure as making a prompt powerful strike at the artillery positions from which the enemy fired the shells as it does not make an empty talk. [emphasis added].[69]

As can be seen from the map (fig 1), the DPRK seems to accept ROK control of the island (but not necessarily sovereignty), but it rejects any claim over the surrounding sea.

It would appear that the DPRK claim to these waters has much to justify it; the Northern Limit Line is manifestly iniquitous; it is unilateral and provocative and should have been abolished years ago. But does that justify the DPRK artillery barrage?

An important point here is the number of warnings that were given and the nature of the ROK military exercise. We have already quoted the public statements, and mentioned a telegram, but the North also claims it made a telephone call to the South:

> The south Korean puppet warmongers' firing of shells into the territorial waters of the DPRK side in the West Sea of Korea on Nov. 23 was a premeditated and deliberate military provocation from A to Z and a war action in fact.
>
> On Nov. 22, the south Korean puppet forces made no scruple of announcing that they would fire shells into the territorial waters of the DPRK side with artillery pieces they deployed on Yonphyong Island while staging Hoguk exercises for a war of aggression against the DPRK, straining the situation on the Korean Peninsula.
>
> In this connection the DPRK side sent a telephone notice to the south Korean puppet military at 8 a.m. on Nov. 23, strongly urging it to immediately cancel the plan for firing shells into the territorial waters of the DPRK side. In the notice the DPRK side seriously warned that if it paid no heed to this demand, it would face a resolute physical counter-strike and would be held fully responsible for all the ensuing consequences.[70]

This telephone call, and the previous public warnings, have received very little coverage in the Western media, but they were reported by the Seoul newspaper Korea Herald quoting ROK military sources:

> In the morning [of the clash], the North sent a telephone message to the South, saying “The North would not just sit back if the South fired shots into the North Korean territorial waters,” according to JCS [South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff] officials.[71]

We do not know how explicit that warning was, but since it was a telephone call, the Southern officer could presumably have sought clarification.

Moreover, other reports indicate that the ROK military was aware that that DPRK had moved artillery into position. This was then followed by practice shooting:

> A senior military said several hours before the shelling began the North Korean military deployed one battery of six 122-mm MLRS shells and later two batteries of 12 112-mm MLRS shells. It also carried out preparatory shooting practice just before the attack. "As far as I know the South Korean military was aware of this," he said.[72]

It seems fair to assume that the local ROK military commander was aware of the possible consequences if the firing exercise went ahead. Whether he relayed this to higher levels and asked for confirmation to go ahead we do not know, but it seems likely. There was no great time pressure and taking action which would result in the first artillery exchange since the Korean War would surely have been referred up to higher levels.

The warning/foreknowledge issue become even more convoluted with revelations on 1 December that South Korean intelligence had known since August that the North would respond. The Director of the National Intelligence Service [NIS] gave testimony to a closed-door session of a committee of the National Assembly.

> Members of the National Assembly Intelligence Committee quoted NIS Director Won Sei-hoon as saying the agency knew from wiretapping that the North Korean regime ordered the military to **prepare to attack** the five islands in the West Sea. **He**

> **said the NIS submitted the intelligence report to President Lee Myung-bak**.[emphasis added][73]

The phrase 'prepare to attack' implies, and is meant to imply, a Northern provocation, an unprovoked assault. In fact, we have from another story a much more plausible formulation:

> The [Asahi Shimbun] quoted the source, who is familiar with North Korea-China relations, as saying, "Early last month, the North Korean military issued instructions in Kim Jong-un's name to senior military commanders **to get ready to counter the enemy's provocations any time**." The source quoted an unnamed North Korean Army officer as commenting on the artillery attack on Yeonpyeong. "It had been planned. We had been preparing for that for a long time." [emphasis added].[74]

This countering of what the North regarded as a Southern provocation is consistent with the published and telephone warnings. It gives a quite different take on who was provoking whom. This did not prevent the *Chosun Ilbo*, which ran the story, from heading it 'Kim Jong-un 'Ordered Attack in Early November'. Not the first time a newspaper has mendaciously given a headline which is contradicted by the actual story. In fact, the *Chosun Ilbo*, which has a virulent ideological position, often does this.[75]

The assertion that the NIS submitted the intelligence report to President Lee Myung-bak has to be taken cautiously. From the public account we do not know whether he was given it personally, and the warning drawn to his attention. It may have just been passed to his office, and he may never have read it. That is a generous interpretation. Whether Lee was aware personally, it is clear that the North Korean warning that they would retaliate if the exercises took place was known at the highest levels of the South Korean command.

Events of the day

The actual sequence of events is more complex than most press reports and commentaries suggest. According to the Korea Herald, the Northern shelling started at 2.34pm, but was perhaps not the 'massive onslaught' that it was often called:

> "As the North fired coastal artillery shells at around 2:34 p.m. **into waters off the Yeonpyeong Island** as well as on the island, we immediately fired back in full accordance with combat rules," said Lee Hong-kee, chief director for joint operations at the JCS, in a press briefing. [emphasis added][76]

Either the accuracy of the Northern artillery was poor, or firing into the water was deliberate.

According to the report, here is the sequence of events

After 8.00am and before 2.34 pm	South fires into sea
2.34 pm	North starts firing into sea (and land?)
2.47 pm	South starts firing at Northern coastal batteries – 'strong, concentrated' counterattack causing 'considerable damage'
2.55 pm	North ceases firing
3.11 pm	North recommences firing
3.42 pm	North ceases firing
3.48 pm	South telephones North urging it to stop its 'provocative acts'
By 9.30 pm	2 marines killed; while six others were seriously injured. Ten other soldiers and three civilians suffered minor injuries

This raises some intriguing questions.

- Did the North fire simultaneously at the island and into the sea, or did the land fire come later?
- Did the North fire onto the island only after the Southern counterattack on its positions?
- Why did the South make a telephone call asking the North to stop if it had already done so?
- Did the North recommence firing sometime after 3.42 pm?
- As of 9.30 pm we have three civilians reported with minor injuries but subsequent reports give two dead. Were the dead amongst these three, or were they discovered later?

The 'fog of war' no doubt produces confusion but these discrepancies suggest that we have not had the full story by any means.

The quite erroneous claim that this was an 'unprovoked attack' by the North has been repeated so many times by ROK officials, and by the media, that even independent-minded analysts such as the American investigative journalist Tim Shorrock have been taken in.[77]

The other main canard in the official narrative concerns civilians. The theme is set at the top with statements from Lee Myung-bak. On 29 November he gave a short address to the nation: 'During a seven-minute speech Lee expressed outrage over the North's **ruthless attack on**

civilians, calling it an "inhumane" crime [emphasis added].'[78]

Others were more circumspect. A JCS spokesman called the firing 'indiscriminate':

> "This provocation is a premeditated, intentional illegal attack in violation of the U.N. Convention, the Armistice Agreement and the inter-Korean non-aggression accord. It is also an inhumane atrocity, in which it indiscriminately fired shells into unarmed civilian residential areas."[79]

Song Min-soon, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade and currently a Democratic Party (i.e. opposition) member of the National Assembly attacked what he called an 'outrageous indiscriminate artillery attack against civilians and military alike.'[80]

The American author and Korea specialist John Feffer wrote of a 'disproportionate response' which killed 'two civilians and two soldiers'.[81]

Early reports (such as the Korea Herald one above) mention only minor civilian injuries, though they talk of a 'civilian area':

> ..killing two South Korean marines, wounding 16 soldiers and three civilians, and damaging homes and facilities. This was the first time since the Korean War that the North has fired artillery shells on a civilian area in South Korea.[82]

'Civilian area' is a rather elastic term. Most military bases have civilians living in the vicinity, some more than others. The giant US headquarters in South Korea, Yongsan Garrison, occupies 2.5 sq km in the centre of this city of 10 million people; the site was originally developed by the Japanese Imperial Army.

By 24 November the casualties changed to four – two military and two civilians. 'In addition to the two marines killed, the bodies of two men, believed in their 60s, were pulled from a destroyed construction site, the coast guard said. At least 18 people - most of them troops - were injured.'[83]

It was not stated where this construction site was in relation to the marine camp. If it were on the other side of the island, then that would indicate fire that was either indiscriminate or highly inaccurate. If it were close by, or even on the camp, then this would be quite different.

It is clear that the main target was the Marine camp, as this quotation from the JCS indicates:

> Many landed on a military camp but others on a civilian village on the island. Flames and thick columns of smoke were seen rising above the village and a nearby mountain. "The North must have carefully premeditated the provocation against the camp," a JCS officer speculated.[84]

Fig 4: Damage at the Marine base

A K-9 Marine artillery base on Yeonpyeong Island under attack by North Korea on Tuesday /Courtesy of the Ministry of Defense ["N.Korean Shelling 'Aimed for Maximum Damage to Lives, Property'." *Chosun Ilbo*, 26 November 2010.

The Washington Post went one step further and reported that '**Most** of the shells landed on a military base on Yeonpyeong island [emphasis added].'[85]

However, most reports either did not mention the marine base, or gave no details. For instance, another Washington Post article talked of 'civilian-inhabited Yeonpyeong Island' without any reference to the marine base.[86] In fact the military installations were significant as a New York Times article makes evident.

> … [Yeonpyeong Island] houses a garrison of about 1,000 South Korean marines, and the navy has deployed its newest class of "patrol killer" guided-missile ships in the Western Sea, as the Yellow Sea is also known.[87]

This New York Times article gave the civilian population as 1,600 but this was later revised down to 1,350.[88] Most appear to be connected, as

one might expect, to fishing (the area is famous for crabs); how many work on the base is unclear.

The most detailed, technical, assessment of the artillery duel is given by the US 'geopolitical intelligence' company STRATFOR. It released a report, accompanied by a pdf file showing satellite images taken after what it called the 'North Korean attack on Yeonpyeong Island'.

The STRATFOR reports are interesting partly for what they reveal, but also for what they hide or obscure, and for what might be considered a surprising lack of geopolitical intelligence in an organisation in the business of selling intelligence. It admits that 'A [South Korean] battery of six K9 155 mm self-propelled howitzers, which was conducting live-fire drills on a Yeonpyeong Island military base, fired some 80 rounds.'

And then, a bit further down:

> Significantly, the South claims its Yeonpyeong Island drill was not part of the larger Hoguk exercises under way simultaneously throughout South Korea. North Korea has occasionally protested these drills — including recently — and claims dozens of shells fell in North Korean waters near the island, provoking it to fire. However, as the North does not recognize the Northern Limit Line and considers the entire island and its surrounding water to be North Korean territory, it does not seem to be clear that this particular incident was any more provocative than any other drill.[89]

This is a curious argument. Hoguk and the other military exercises over the decades have taken place in South Korean territory or international waters. This one was being held in what the North considered to be DPRK territory. It was not merely provocative from a military point of view, but as they made clear in their statement of 24 November, from a legal one as well. That is a very important distinction which differentiated the Yeonpyeong exercise from others.

Although the STRAFOR report mentions the military base in passing, it is absent from the satellite images document. We have satellite photos of destroyed houses, but nothing that shows the base, which is not even identified. Since the base was the main target of attack, and early reports focused on military dead and wounded, this is a rather telling omission.

The STRATFOR report and images do, however, throw considerable light, albeit inadvertently, on the issue of civilian casualties. It would appear from this, and other sources, that the North Korean fire was not very accurate. The North Koreans either exclusively, or mainly (it is not clear which), used Multiple Launch Rocket System [MLRS] artillery. These are, as the name suggests, basically a bundle of tubes which can fire rockets. Interestingly, it is said that they can be traced back to the 15th century Korean hwacha ('fire vehicle'), which could fire a hundred or more projectiles in one salvo.[90] The most famous example in modern times was the Soviet Katyusha, used in the Second World War and nicknamed the 'Stalin organ'.[91] The Americans used them in 1991 in the Gulf War, and the ROK military is equipped with them.[92]

MLRS can deliver formidable devastation but are not very accurate, especially the older versions with which the KPA is equipped:

> The initial barrage consisted of 150 rounds, followed by 20 more intermittently — meaning that while a full battalion appeared to be in position, a fully armed single battery could have conducted the entire attack. Of these 170 rounds, 80 struck Yeonpyeong Island, though 20 failed to detonate…..
>
> With a few modern exceptions, artillery rockets are unguided and achieve results through massed fires rather than exceptional accuracy. Here, North Korea had no opportunity to register targets or adjust fire based on input from forward observers; South Korea has subsequently conjectured based on the targets that the North's maps of military positions on the island may have been dated. The failure of so many rounds to reach the island and a dud rate of roughly a quarter of those that did suggest issues of quality control in manufacture and/or poorly controlled storage, as well as the potential for there to have been issues in the fire direction or on the gunline.[93]

So it would appear that the reason that shells fell on the town was not so much that that the firing was indiscriminate, as that it was inaccurate.

The North Koreans do not have a monopoly on this, indeed there was anger in the ROK National Assembly Intelligence Committee when they were presented with the satellite photo (Fig 5) which showed that Southern shells fired from their much more accurate howitzers had missed their target, the North Korean artillery positions: 'Committee members reportedly reacted angrily since they show impact points scattered mainly in paddy and dry fields.'[94]

Fig 5: Evidence of inaccurate fire

In this satellite photo released by the U.S. private intelligence agency Stratfor, rice paddies and fields in North Korea bear traces of South Korean artillery shells ["Spies Intercepted Plans for Yeonpyeong Attack in August ". *Chosun Ilbo*, 2 December 2010.

There was also much dispute about the damage suffered by the North. The DPRK has released no statement about casualties. In the South, some pointed out that ROK military equipment was far superior and more deadly and hence there must have been many casualties, while others pointed to various satellite photos showing hits missing targets.[95]

Sometimes military action is intended primarily to terrorise and demoralise the civilian population – the London blitz, the firebombing of Tokyo, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the 'shock and awe' bombing of Baghdad prior to invasion – are just a few well known examples. If the DPRK fired on Seoul to unleash 'a sea of fire' it would be the civilian population that would be hit, and the military impact would be secondary. However, much military action is aimed primarily at the enemy military, and if this occurs in a populated area, civilians become, in the US euphemism, 'collateral damage'. Clearly the distinction between the two is often blurred in practice, and it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to be sure, but the available evidence suggests that the target for the North Korean fire was the marine base and that civilian casualties and damage were accidental.

There are several reasons for assuming this. Firstly, the inaccuracy of the MLRS. Secondly, if the intention had been to cause civilian causalities as a warning about the consequences of Lee Myung-bak's confrontational policy – 'today Yeonpyeong, tomorrow Seoul' – we would expect that point to be made. There is little point in giving a warning unless it is reasonably explicit. I can find no indication that the DPRK has made any suggestion that the Yeonpyeong incident carried such a lesson for the people of the ROK. On the contrary, the public statement expressed regret for civilian casualties and laid the blame on the Southern side:

> The DPRK side warned several times against the enemy's plan for shelling in the sensitive areas around Yonphyong Island and sent a telephone notice on the morning of the very day the incident occurred as part of its superhuman efforts to prevent the clash to the last moment, but the south side preempted the firing of shells into the territorial waters of the DPRK side. The enemy side, however, has kept silent about all these facts.
>
> Moreover, it is now working hard to dramatize "civilian casualties" as part of its propaganda campaign, creating the impression that the defenceless civilians were exposed to "indiscriminate shelling" all of a sudden from the DPRK side.
>
> If that is true, it is very regrettable but the enemy should be held responsible for the incident as it took such inhuman action as creating "a human shield" by deploying civilians around artillery positions and **inside military facilities** before the launch of the provocation.
>
> The fact that there were human casualties inside the military base clearly proves itself the ulterior intention of the enemy. . .[96]

This statement brings up a third factor. The claim about a 'human shield' doesn't carry much weight. Civilians live on the island for historical and economic reasons and there is no reason to suppose that they were used to shield the military. However, the claim that civilian casualties occurred *within* the camp is not implausible. Civilians must have worked at the camp. Indeed, one report from the United States said of the shelling that 'this resulted in the killing of two South Korean soldiers **and two civilian contractors working on a military base'** [emphasis added].[97] As with the Cheonan incident we need a proper, impartial, investigation if we are to draw any firm conclusions, but as with the Cheonan no such investigation is likely.

It is interesting to note that the DPRK statement does not claim that it suffered any civilian casualties, merely that enemy shells 'dropped in the area close to civilian houses'. North Korean propaganda is frequently portrayed as dishonest and deceitful. Here is surely a case where it would have been to their advantage, in terms of international opinion, to fabricate civilian casualties, but they did not do so.

Finally, it should be remembered that the ROK military on Yeonpyeong Island are not just ordinary soldiers, they are Marines, an elite force trained for amphibious assault. Indeed, back in 2009 *Rodong Sinmun* commented on the buildup up in the area.

> The puppet military reinforced warships and armed forces along and near the "northern limit line in the West Sea" and **formed a "task force to be ready to go into action in half an hour" and deployed it on Yonphyong Islet** [emphasis added].[98]

The road behind, the road ahead

There have been frequent naval clashes around the Northern Limit Line, indeed it seems likely that it has been preserved by the current ROK and US authorities for that purpose. President Roh moo-hyun and Chairman Kim Jong Il, at their summit on 4 October 2007 agreed to a 'special peace and cooperation zone in the West Sea', but this peace initiative was overturned, as so many others, by incoming president Lee Myung-bak.[99]

Preserving the NLL as an area in which incidents are likely to occur is one thing, but utilising the NLL deliberately to create an incident is another. Warnings and intelligence reports aside, it must have been known that a military exercise within the NLL area would be provocative. The legal implications, moreover, made it intolerably provocative. This suggests that the crisis was planned, not necessarily in great detail, but with sufficient surety of outcome. This reading is quite consistent with Lee Myung-bak's policy, which is one of building up tension in order to precipitate a crisis on the peninsula that would lead to a collapse of the DRPK, and its absorption by the ROK.

The DPRK is well aware of this, hence the reaffirmation of the zero tolerance policy at Yeonpyeong. On 23 November, in the aftermath of the clash, the KPA issued a communiqué which reiterated the policy:

> It is a traditional mode of counter-action of the army of the DPRK to counter the firing of the provocateurs with merciless strikes.
>
> Should the south Korean puppet group dare intrude into the territorial waters of the DPRK even 0.001 mm, the revolutionary armed forces of the DPRK will unhesitatingly continue taking merciless military counter-actions against it.[100]

This is a calculated policy of brinkmanship that is designed to avert war by threatening war. The danger is, of course, that the momentum of events will bring war about. That, unfortunately, is becoming ever more likely

Lee Myung-bak is a consummate politician. He has set things in motion to produce, and replicate crisis, while giving the appearance of being reluctant. His address to the nation on 29 November used the same rhetorical device as Antony's speech about Julius Caesar, in which he states "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him," but of course is doing just that; he wants to turn the crowd against the killers of Caesar but has to dissemble. Lee combined 'humility' with an aggressive stance in such a way as to suggest he was reluctant to exacerbate the situation but was being forced into it.

> President Lee Myung-bak's address Monday is being summarized as consisting mainly of "humility toward the people of South Korea" and an "ultra-hardline response to North Korea." Analysts say it shows the president's perception of the current crisis facing him and its solution following the North Korean artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island.
>
> **Although even North Korea acknowledged the attack to be a "provocation,"** President Lee has faced harsh criticism domestically. Surveys show that more than 70 percent of South Koreans, conservative and progressive alike, feel that the military and Lee Myung-bak administration did not respond appropriately at the time of the attack. The fact that the president began his address Monday with what amounted to an apology to the people of South Korea reflected a consideration of this situation. [emphasis added]

The performance so impressed the reporter from the liberal *Hankyoreh* that he made the manifestly false statement that 'North Korea acknowledged the attack to be a 'provocation' (on its part).

Throughout the crises of 2010, especially over the sinking of the Cheonan and then Yeonpyeong, Lee Myung-bak adroitly fanned the flames while giving the impression that he was attempting to put them out. In respect of the Cheonan incident President Obama was reported as saying, 'I think President Lee has shown extraordinary restraint given these circumstances.'[101]

To be sure, this was a public statement and politicians often say in public the opposite of what they think in private. However, there does seem to be a consensus among Western observers at least that Lee is a reluctant warrior being driven into taking steps by the provocative obduracy of the North.[102] Consider, for instance, this STRATFOR interview where the interviewer comments: 'I talked to three former [US?] envoys to Seoul this week and all of them agreed that South Korea had handled this in a pretty cool and sensible fashion.'[103]

The South Korean public is rather more sceptical.

One of the WikiLeaks cables [09SEOUL59] illustrates the confusion in the minds of US officials:

> President Lee is determined not to give in to North Korean pressure. Our Blue House contacts have told us on several occasions that President Lee remained quite comfortable with his North Korea policy and that he is prepared leave the inter-Korean relations frozen until the end of his term in office, if necessary. It is also our assessment that Lee's more conservative advisors and supporters see the current standoff as a genuine opportunity to push and further weaken the North, even if this might involve considerable brinkmanship.[104]

On the one hand we have Lee facing up to North Korean pressure, but we also get the admission that the 'current standoff' (this was in 2009) is seen as ' a genuine opportunity to push and further weaken the North, even if this might involve considerable brinkmanship'.

Lee's brinkmanship is, in fact, far more profound and aggressive than the US diplomat realised. Both North and South are engaging in brinkmanship, but the nature of the two is very different. Pyongyang is far poorer and weaker than its adversaries, which include not merely

South Korea but the United States, and Japan.[105] North Korea's brinkmanship is therefore inherently *defensive*. It is designed to protect the country (or regime) from attack and conquest. That does not mean that it is wise, or will be successful, that is a matter of debate. But it is important to recognise its essential characteristic of defensiveness.

South Korea's brinkmanship, on the other hand, is *offensive*. It is designed to bring about the collapse of the DPRK and its takeover by the ROK. Lee Myung-bak does not have to do this. His immediate predecessors (Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun) had very different policies. Indeed, his aggressive brinkmanship is arguably a new development because even in the days of the military dictatorship, while there was hostility towards the North because the balance of forces if anything favoured the North at that time, there was not such an aggressive policy.

We discern three factors that may be propelling Lee Myung-bak to accelerate the buildup of tension on the peninsula.

> • A desire to renew the anti-North momentum after the relative failure of the Cheonan incident. His setback in the May elections, the widespread public scepticism about the investigation, and the failure to get the UN Security Council to condemn North Korea must rankle. The Yeonpyeong incident is seen as away to rekindle anti-North Korea sentiment.
>
> In his address on 29 November he specifically made the point: 'There was a split in public opinion over the torpedoing of the Cheonan. Unlike that time, our people have united as one this time.'[106]
>
> • Despite frequent assertions of implosion and crisis, the DPRK is not facing collapse. Whilst sanctions must have caused huge damage, the economy appears to be recovering. Certainly Pyongyang, from personal observation on a visit in November 2010, is manifestly economically improved over my last visit three years ago, with more motor vehicles, bicycles, and shops. The electricity supply is much better and there is a very noticeable increase in street lighting. These observations are broadly corroborated by many recent American visitors.[107] If the South is to take over the North then something must be done to reverse this recovery.
>
> • Time is not on Lee Myung-bak's side. His term of office comes to an end on 25 February 2013 and under the present constitution he is ineligible to run again. Moreover, there are indications that because of demographic changes the conservative ascendancy represented by the Lee administration may not be sustainable and South Korea might then move to more progressive administrations. The older generation, with childhood memories of the Korean War embellished by decades of indoctrination during the military dictatorships, is dying off. The younger generation is more educated and less persuaded by the notion of a threat from the north.[108]

Since the North's brinkmanship is defensive, it is reactive and this leaves the initiative in the hands of the South. Seoul has reinforced its forces on the island at the NLL and has announced that there will be artillery exercises from Daecheong Island, and again on Yeonpyeong.[109] It seems inevitable that Pyongyang will feel compelled to respond. The new ROK Defence Minister, Kim Kwan-jin, has threatened what he calls 'self-defense air raids' in the event of another clash; 'self defense' being used in a euphemistic sense reminiscent of Japanese defence posture.[110] It will be recalled that Article 9 of the Japanese constitution prohibits the establishment of armed forces, so the Japanese army, navy and air forces all have 'self-defense' in their titles thus solving the constitutional problem, while allowing them over the years to push the boundaries of what is considered defence.

Kim Kwan-jin's air strike policy is all part of what the New York Times rather approvingly, and with a professional use of euphemism, called a new 'muscular military posture'.[111] The implications of this new policy are obvious. Not merely has the South great superiority in aircraft, but the new rules allow great flexibility for escalation.

However, there are limits to the ROK military's freedom of action. There is the legal issue of operational control – when would war be deemed a war and thus trigger US control of the ROK military? Even before that stage is reached, the ROK air force is dependent on US intelligence to operate. Thus any serious escalation of the situation on the Korean peninsula would require US endorsement.

Would this be forthcoming? Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that it would. The Obama administration has termed its policy towards Korea as one of 'strategic patience'.[112] It might be better described as 'strategic paralysis'. It appears to have effectively relinquished control of events to Lee Myung-bak while thus far ruling out bilateral or multilateral negotiations with North Korea.[113] It might be said that 'strategic paralysis' is not confined to US Korea policy, and rather is the defining characteristic of Obama foreign policy. But perhaps nowhere is this more perilous than in Korea.

Because ultimately Korea is China. A second Korean war would, like the first, soon become a Sino-American war.[114]

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Other articles on the sixtieth anniversary of the US-Korean War outbreak are:

• Mark Caprio, *Neglected Questions on the "Forgotten War": South Korea and the United States on the Eve of the Korean War.*

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• Nan Kim with an introduction by John McGlynn, *Factsheet: West Sea Crisis in Korea.*

• Tanaka Sakai, Rekindling China-Japan Conflict: The Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands Clash

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Notes

[1] I am very grateful for comments and corrections from Don Borrie, Steve Gowans, Ankie Hoogvelt, and Peter Wilson. This revised version owes much to the comments of Mark Selden and John McGlynn All mistakes, of course, remain my responsibility.

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