

# Policy Forum 11-08: Analytical Failure and the North Korean Quagmire



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# Analytical Failure and the North Korean Quagmire

by John Delury and Chung-in Moon

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### I. Introduction

John Delury and Chung-in Moon write, “U.S. diplomats, lacking direct contact with North Korean counterparts, are in the dark about North Korea’s strategic intentions and negotiating positions. Even North Korea’s public statements are summarily dismissed as “empty words” or “blackmail”—even though North Korean behavior over the long term tends to conform to its high-level pronouncements. Instead of an engaged, empirical approach, policy decisions are being made on the basis of defector reports and disinformation, of preconceived ideas and wishful thinking. The response to the unsettling revelations at Yongbyon and tragic shelling of Yeonpyeong are case in point.”

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### II. Article by John Delury and Chung-in Moon

-“Analytical Failure and the North Korean Quagmire”

By John Delury and Chung-in Moon

Last year’s sinking of the Cheonan, the revelation of a new uranium enrichment program at Yongbyon, and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island brought North Korea back to the center of worldwide attention.[\[1\]](#) The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) has once again become scarlet-lettered as a rogue regime with evil and aggression encoded in its DNA. Few—outside Beijing—have the stomach to sit down and talk with the North Koreans. Although the Obama Administration shows signs of interest in dialogue, Seoul appears bent on more sanctions, military exercises, and contingency planning, premised on the belief that a North Korean collapse may be nearing.

Two major analytical failures—misreading Pyongyang’s intentions and misunderstanding its capabilities—keep the U.S. and South Korea stuck in a North Korean quagmire. The United States and Republic of Korea (ROK), particularly over the past two years, have failed to understand the logic behind the DPRK’s actions, which has aggravated the situation on the Korean peninsula. Wishful thinking and inflexible policies are driving the Koreas to the brink. The post-Cold War diplomatic record shows there are ample opportunities for managing and even gradually resolving disputes with North Korea—but it requires objective analysis and proactive diplomacy. Washington and Seoul need to rethink their strategy based on the actual situation, and then find a policy approach that more effectively advances their long-term interests. Correcting the analytical framework is the first step in revising the policy approach.

#### **Method in the Madness: Security First**

The primary analytical failure consists in a fundamental misreading of North Korea’s intentions. The DPRK’s objectives are regime survival, national security, and economic strength, in that order. Nuclear deterrence, military confrontation, and diplomatic negotiation are means to those ends. In the absence of a negotiated process that guarantees the North’s security, normalizes its diplomatic status, and provides it with energy and economic assistance, nuclear development and military

conflict are bound to continue. But the U.S. and ROK do not take North Korea's security concerns seriously, nor are the two governments exhausting diplomatic means to address those concerns in a way that advances their own interests. Instead, the North's actions are interpreted as "provocation" and official talks are held back as "punishment" for "bad behavior." The November crises over uranium enrichment in Yongbyon and artillery fire on Yeonpyeong Island are classic illustrations of this misguided thinking and counterproductive policy.

Almost two years ago, Pyongyang warned the world that it was moving ahead with uranium enrichment, but these claims were largely ignored. In defiance of the UN Security Council president's statement condemning North Korea's test launch of a satellite rocket on April 5, 2009, the DPRK announced on April 14 that it would begin construction of a light-water reactor power plant. On June 13 (a day after UNSC Resolution 1874 sanctioning North Korea for its second nuclear test), the DPRK announced commencement of uranium enrichment, and then in a September 3 letter to the UNSC, claimed to have entered the "completion stage" of uranium enrichment. At the same time, the North Korean leadership affirmed that Pyongyang stood ready to negotiate away its nuclear deterrence in return for security, aid and normalization. For example, Kim Jong Il stated at his October 2009 meeting with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao that his father Kim Il Sung's goal of denuclearizing the peninsula remained unchanged, adding that "hostile relations between the DPRK and the United States should be converted into peaceful ties through the bilateral talks without fail." The DPRK Foreign Ministry reaffirmed the North's readiness to return to denuclearization talks in meetings with a succession of unofficial American delegations to Pyongyang—including a September 2010 visit by one of the authors. In November, the Ministry took a team from Stanford University to visit the site of a new uranium facility. In meetings with New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson in December, the DPRK expressed a willingness to ship its store of fresh fuel rods for its plutonium-generating reactor out of the country and to accept an inspection of nuclear energy programs (both uranium and plutonium based at Yongbyon) by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Of course, these offers have to be tested, and the devil is in the details. But the Obama Administration has remained allergic to making direct contact with the North, sending its special envoy to Pyongyang only once in two years (in December 2009).

Washington and Seoul are treating the resumption of talks as a reward for North Korea, which underscores a fundamental misunderstanding of North Korea's intentions. For Pyongyang, dialogue and negotiation are a means to an end, not ends-in-themselves. What Kim Jong Il wants from the talks is security assurances, primarily through the termination of hostile relations and diplomatic normalization with the United States. Providing for the security of his regime would in turn create conditions conducive to a more successful push at economic development. In the absence of talks, the North will continue to develop a nuclear program quite openly, as minimal deterrence against the U.S. threat of "extended deterrence," i.e., the U.S. "nuclear umbrella" over South Korea. North Korea is also looking for asymmetrical advantages in the arms race with South Korea—whose reported annual defense spending [\$25.9 billion in 2009] nearly equals the estimated GDP [\$27.3 billion in 2009] of North Korea. North Korea's "uranium breakout" during the early Obama Administration, much like its plutonium breakout in George W. Bush's first term, is a consequence of misreading North Korean motivation, ignoring its security interests in negotiations, and treating engagement as a reward instead of a means to resolve the issue.

### **Threat Perception & the Yeonpyeong Tragedy**

A failure to understand the DPRK's security preoccupations is also evident in the reactions to the tragic shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. Seoul views the attack as a premeditated act to provoke the South, nullify the Northern Limit Line (NLL), and bolster the succession process by contriving external tension. North Korea claims that the attack was a justified act of self-defense against South Korea's aggressive move of shelling its territorial waterway. The North has never accepted the legitimacy of the NLL, and disputes the South's exclusive claim to waters around Yeonpyeong, which sits 11 kilometers off its coast. The U.S. shares South Koreans' outrage at the North's first shelling

of Southern territory since the Korean War, and worse still, firing on neighborhoods with civilian populations. The Korean People's Army's killing of two civilians and two marines was grossly disproportionate to the purported provocation of ROK firing into disputed waters. But moral condemnation is not enough. To prevent another tragedy, we have to understand the true causes of this one.

The Yeonpyeong incident is the latest in an escalating series of localized conflicts on sea and land along the DPRK's southwest coast. There is no mutually agreed upon or internationally recognized sea border between the two Koreas. The Armistice Agreement of July 1953 recognized the South's control over five small islands off the DPRK coast, but made no mention of the maritime boundary. In August 1953, the U.S. commander unilaterally drew a "northern limit line" (NLL) as an operational control line to prevent South Korean naval vessels from launching further attacks on the North, at a time when ROK President Syngman Rhee, who refused to sign the Armistice, continued to push for "northward unification" by military means. The DPRK began in 1973 to raise its grievances over the NLL. In 1975, the U.S. State Department wrote in a confidential cable that the, "Northern patrol limit line does not have international legal status. NPLL was unilaterally established and not accepted by NK. Furthermore, insofar as it purports unilaterally to divide international waters, it is clearly contrary to international law and USG law of the sea position." With passage of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea in 1994, establishing 12 nautical miles as the international norm for territorial waters, the NLL lost yet another measure of legitimacy.

In the 1992 "Basic Agreement," both North and South Korea agreed to retain the NLL until a peaceful arrangement could be introduced. In 1999, Pyongyang proposed an "inter-Korean military demarcation line" that recognized the South's control of the five offshore islands along with southeastern sea-lanes, but would push the "limit line" away from its coast. Naval conflicts—many connected to competition over fishing interests—roiled inter-Korean relations even in the days of the "Sunshine Policy," leading President Roh Moo Hyun to put a top priority on resolving problems in the West Sea in his October 2007 Summit with Kim Jong Il (attended by one of the authors). Kim Jong Il initially resisted Roh's proposal to create a "special peace and cooperation zone" with a special economic zone, a common fishery zone, joint access to Haeju port, and joint use of the Han River estuary. But Kim eventually overruled internal opposition by the KPA and signed the agreement. When Lee Myung Bak came into office in early 2008, his administration decided to jettison Roh's framework for shared, peaceful use of the contested West Sea border.

Since 1974, South Korea has undertaken routine artillery exercises in disputed areas of the West Sea, but most have involved short-range artillery pieces (such as 155 mm artillery guns and Vulcan anti-aircraft guns). Both the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun governments scaled back these drills, even during the annual joint ROK-U.S. military exercises. But the Lee Myung Bak government increased the frequency and scale of artillery exercises. South Korea undertook artillery exercises ten times in 2009 and six times in 2010. President Lee's government moved the exercises closer to the North Korean coast—including the first live shell exercises on Yeonpyeong Island—and at the same time fired guns with significantly greater range. Previously, South Korea fired K-9 self-propelled artillery, with a range of 40 km, only from Baekryong Island. But the ROK doubled the number of K-9 self-propelled artillery pieces on Yeonpyeong Island from three to six. In a textbook case of military escalation, South Korea's increased exercises were both a response to provocation and a provocation of their own:

- In November 2009, the South Korean navy destroyed a North Korean naval ship. Four days after the clash, the KPA decried the South's "shameless provocation" to maintain the "illegal 'northern limit line'" and promised "merciless military measures" to defend its proposed "military demarcation line." On January 27, 2010, the North fired 100 rounds of coastal defense artillery, but none fell south of the NLL.
- On March 26, 2010, the South Korean corvette Cheonan sank near Baekryong Island, killing 46

seamen. A ROK-led multi-national investigation concluded on May 20 that the cause was a North Korean torpedo. A few days later, President Lee promised in a national address, "North Korea will pay a price corresponding to its provocative acts. I will continue to take stern measures to hold the North accountable. From this moment, no North Korean ship will be allowed to make passage through any of the shipping lanes in the waters under our control, which has been allowed by the Inter-Korean Agreement on Maritime Transportation." The DPRK responded with a statement that "the Korean People's Army (KPA) will make a prompt physical strike at the intrusion into the extension of the Military Demarcation Line under our side's control in the West Sea of Korea."

- On August 4, the KPA protested imminent firing exercises by South Korea as "a direct military invasion aimed at infringing upon the DPRK's right to self-defense," and announced a "decisive resolution to counter the reckless naval firing projected by the gang of traitors with strong physical retaliation." On August 9, South Korea staged artillery drills on Yeonpyeong Island, and the North responded by firing about 130 rounds, of which an estimated 10 shells landed south of the NLL.

A careful examination of the sequence of events on November 23, 2010 illustrates how North Korea was pushed beyond its threat perception threshold.

- At 08:20, the North Korean head of the North-South general-level military talks used an inter-Korean military hotline to demand the suspension of artillery exercises being conducted on Yeonpyeong Island as the large-scale Hoguk ("Protecting the Nation") military exercise was beginning.
- At 09:00, the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered South Korean forces to take a crisis management posture, but discounted the possibility of North Korean attack by recalling that the North issued a similar statement during previous drills, such as the joint ROK-U.S. Key Resolve exercise conducted each spring since 2008.
- Ignoring the warning from the North, the South engaged in firing exercises involving 11 types of artillery equipment from 10:00 to 14:34. South Korea fired to the southwest, in waters it considers its own south of the NLL.
- The South originally planned to fire 3,657 shells from 10:00 to 17:00, but stopped exercising at 14:34 when the North commenced shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, by which point, the ROK is estimated to have fired over 2,000 shells (522 per hour). The North's response came after South Korea began to fire powerful K-9 artillery shells at 13:00.
- From 14:34 to 14:55, the North fired 170 shells on Yeonpyeong Island and its surrounding waters.
- South Korea began returning fire at 14:47, and fired a total of 80 shells at batteries on the North Korean coast.
- North Korea paused firing at 14:55, and then recommenced from 15:12 to 15:41.
- The South resumed firing at 15:25 and continued until 16:42.

Is it unreasonable for North Korea to feel threatened by full-day, live-ammunition, heavy artillery firing into disputed waters seven miles off its coast, carried out in conjunction with war games involving 70,000 troops, during a period when inter-Korean relations are hostile? If North Korea's purpose were to provoke and destabilize Seoul, why not attack just prior to the G-20, as was feared

at the time? If the shelling were an undiluted act of aggression, why request a cessation of exercises on the morning of the altercation? The failure to take North Korea's threat perception and security concerns seriously, ignoring explicit warnings, pushed the Korean peninsula closer to war.

## **The End is Not Nigh**

The second category of analytical failure is chronic underestimation of North Korea's capabilities—including its very survival as a regime. End of North Korean-ism, which first emerged in the early 1990s, is back in fashion, appearing in the columns of Fareed Zakaria, Robert Kaplan, and the like. The Jasmine Revolution across the Middle East is yet the latest wind to fan the fires of this apocalyptic thinking in South Korea, as newspaper editorials over the past weeks demonstrate. Think tanks are eager to organize workshops on Korean "contingency planning," a euphemism for absorption of the North by the South. Most striking of all, South Korean President Lee Myung Bak recently asserted that "an unstoppable change is taking place among the North Korean people, and the time has come for South Korea to prepare for unification." The South Korean policy of pressure and sanctions is justified, in turn, by the presumption that regime change may be imminent, so long as the DPRK remains isolated.

This policy approach is by and large predicated on wishful thinking. Despite economic hardship, food shortages, and a welter of sanctions, the Kim Jong Il regime seems stable, and the succession process is, by all appearances, taking place smoothly. Broad-based elite cohesion, including the military, has maintained regime resilience despite a hostile international environment. Formidable mechanisms of state surveillance and control, combined with the absence of civil society organs, make the prospects of organized popular revolt slim. Last but not least, China is actively engaged on diplomatic and economic levels in supporting North Korea's survival, stability, and development. It is true that Pyongyang's economic policy is self-destructive, as evidenced by the botched currency redenomination and failed efforts at market restriction in late 2009 and early 2010. The DPRK's fiscal and monetary problems are immense, and bottom-up marketization is transforming socio-economic realities even as the government holds on faithfully to centralized socialist planning. But in spite of all this, foreign visitors to Pyongyang over the past year report modest improvements in standards of living and no overt signs of crisis or instability.

Sanctions, meanwhile, may be doing more to strengthen the regime than hasten its demise. As is self-evident to anyone who has visited the DPRK, sanctions play an important role in generating domestic support for the Kim regime and maintaining socio-political cohesion. And if one thing should be clear by now, international sanctions and increased interdictions have failed to deter North Korea from enhancing its military and nuclear capabilities. In May 2009, North Korea carried out its second nuclear detonation (more successful than the previous one in 2006), and a barrage of missile tests. Undetected torpedoing of an ROK frigate (if indeed carried out as concluded in the Joint Investigation) as well as the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island testifies to formidable asymmetric military strength. A military parade in Pyongyang on October 10, 2010 (celebrating the 65th anniversary of the founding of the Korea Workers' Party) displayed an array of new advanced weapons systems, featuring the Musudan intermediate-range ballistic missile (with the range of up to 3,000 km).

Then, in November of last year, North Korea unveiled a new "ultramodern" uranium enrichment facility to American scientist Sig Hecker. The DPRK successfully ramped up its uranium program despite financial sanctions vigorously pursued by the U.S. Treasury Department, interdictions in Burma, Thailand, and the UAE related to the Proliferation Security Initiative, and "tough" sanctions from the UN Security Council. Those who expected such measures to constrict or destabilize North Korea are instead confronted with clear evidence of significant improvements in the DPRK's military and nuclear capabilities.

## **Wishful Thinking & Biased Sources**

Misreading North Korea's intentions and capabilities can take the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hard-line thinking about policies toward the North gained currency starting with the new administration in Seoul three years ago, and were met with hard-line responses from Pyongyang. The combination inspired hard-line conventional wisdom in Washington. The news media has, for the most part, been content to play up the storyline about the illness, insanity, or imminent collapse of the North Korean leadership. Moderate voices in favor of dogged engagement—including many Clinton Administration officials who have actual negotiating experience with North Korea—have been drowned out. Messages sent directly by Pyongyang are being ignored. Washington has failed to listen to what North Korea really wants, and instead projects its own fears and interests onto the “black box” of the DPRK. North Korea's demonstrated capabilities are being ignored in favor of imagining the day when its government no longer exists.

Today, there is an increasing danger that wishful thinking has become embedded in the intelligence process—a problem the U.S. should be particularly sensitive to in light of missteps in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq. Key decision makers in Seoul seem to have anchored their North Korean policy on the imminent collapse of the North. Washington has slipped into de facto endorsement of this approach. The push to transform Concept Plan 5029 into an Operational Plan, through which joint U.S.-ROK forces would intervene militarily in the case of “contingency” in North Korea, underscores this point. When political leadership demonstrates wishful thinking, intelligence agencies' collection and analysis are at risk of being politically tailored to satisfy those preferences.

Feeding this confusion are serious problems with information collection about the domestic situation in North Korea. Policymakers in Seoul and Washington rely heavily (whether they know it or not) on testimony or information provided by North Korean defectors. Defectors and networks of informants who move across the China-North Korea border, are key sources for a new constellation of media organizations like Daily NK, Open North Korea Radio, Free North Korea Radio, Good Neighbors, Radio Free Asia (U.S.), Asia Press (Japan), and other internet media. To be sure, people coming out of the DPRK can be important sources of information—for example, these networks brought out information about the 2009 currency reform. However, the new “media” organizations are not staffed by independent, professional journalists. To the contrary, they are propaganda organs and advocacy organizations designed to undermine regime stability in the North. Their reports frequently lack verification, yet regularly appear in Yonhap News, the leading South Korean government news agency, without any filtering. Major conservative newspapers, such as Chosun Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo, and DongA Ilbo, quote them as is. International news media, including the wire services and leading American newspapers, in turn, reprint them as world news. Unverified reports and politically motivated characterizations of North Korean instability are transmuted into truth. There are even cases of defectors reportedly being pressured to tow the official line. For example, Yonhap News was pressured to remove a senior reporter, herself a defector, from its North Korea desk when she discounted exaggerated reports by defector organizations of instability around the Kim family succession and currency reform failures.

### **Fix the Framework, Then the Policy**

Today, the arteries of engagement with North Korea are clogged. U.S. diplomats, lacking direct contact with North Korean counterparts, are in the dark about North Korea's strategic intentions and negotiating positions. Even North Korea's public statements are summarily dismissed as “empty words” or “blackmail”—even though North Korean behavior over the long term tends to conform to its high-level pronouncements. Instead of an engaged, empirical approach, policy decisions are being made on the basis of defector reports and disinformation, of preconceived ideas and wishful thinking. The response to the unsettling revelations at Yongbyon and tragic shelling of Yeonpyeong are case in point.

Ultimately, both Seoul and Washington will need to overhaul their policy approach on North Korea.

We do not see signs of that happening anytime soon. In the meantime, analysts, academics, journalists, and other members of civil society have a critical role to play in correcting the analytical framework for understanding North Korea, so that when a policy review comes, it can be based on a pragmatic and empirical basis.

### III. Citations

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### IV. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: [bscott@nautilus.org](mailto:bscott@nautilus.org). Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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