

Policy Forum 10-060: Korean Peninsula at a New Juncture of War and Peace: Between Aggressive Deterrent and Escalating Risk of War



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Recommended Citation

Tong Kim, "Policy Forum 10-060: Korean Peninsula at a New Juncture of War and Peace: Between Aggressive Deterrent and Escalating Risk of War", NAPSNet Policy Forum, December 21, 2010, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/korean-peninsula-at-a-new-juncture--f-war-and-peace-between-aggressive-deterrent-and-escalating-risk-of-war/>

By Tong Kim

December 21, 2010

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[I. Introduction](#)

Tong Kim, visiting professor at the University of North Korean Studies and visiting research professor at Korea University, writes, "If the South Korean government were operating in the wake of the Yeonpyeong incident with the assumption that the North Koreans would not be ready for a war, it would be too risky. President Lee said, "...a disgraceful peace achieved through intimidation only brings greater harm in the end. Only courage that defies retreat under any threat or provocation will bring about genuine peace." The South Koreans do not have to be intimidated or retreat from threats or provocation. Yet, they should be able to find a better path to achieve "genuine peace" with confidence that they can prevent a war that nobody wants. It will take courage to talk to the North in the current environment. Maybe dialogue should wait until the dust settles. Nevertheless, dialogue is the best solution. People want peace, not war. Peace is achievable."

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II. Article by Tong Kim

-“Korean Peninsula at a New Juncture of War and Peace: Between Aggressive Deterrent and Escalating Risk of War”

By Tong Kim

Escalating Tensions

The Korean Peninsula has been thrown again into perhaps the worst security crisis in decades that may even lead to an unwanted limited war, of which the scope and duration are unpredictable. There would be no guarantee against escalation of a limited war to an all-out war. The unbridled, belligerent rhetoric and more possible provocations from the North and the increasing military measures with a matching level of strong rhetoric by the South –although the South Koreans say their measures are designed to prevent future provocations – remind us of an often-quoted comparison of two trains rushing toward each other on a collision course. No countries in the region – including the United States and China – want to see a new war in Korea. Chinese President Hu Jin Tao told President Barack Obama “tensions on the Korean Peninsula could go out of control.”^[1] If China and the United States fail to play their responsible roles to rein in their allies in the North and South to maintain the stability on the peninsula, it seems at least for now that the Koreans on both sides are ready to go to war to fight each other again.

The stated purpose of bolstering of South Korea’s combat readiness in resolve and capability is to deter further provocations from North Korea, but also to counter-attack if the deterrence fails. The South hopes its renewed posture would scare the North Koreans enough to give up any future attack on its territory. The North is warned of an unbearable or humiliating price to pay if it provokes again. In theory, this approach may work to deter the North from launching further lethal attacks. However, the logic of the theory is based on the assumption that the North Korean regime would not opt for an all-out war at this time even if it were massively retaliated, for the reason of the North’s “instability factors including the political issue of succession and a severe economic problem” with

which the North Korean leadership is preoccupied [2].

Possibility of a war, limited or all-out?

Perhaps, a more plausible argument against the possibility of an all-out war might be: (1) the North Korean leadership understands that it cannot sustain offensive maneuvers for long and it understands its regime would be destroyed at the end of war; and (2) the average people on both sides care for the value of life, and they oppose a destructive war. The people in the South became angry against the North. They seem to contradict themselves by asking for strong military retaliation against future North Korean attacks, while opposing against war at the same time.

There is a military view that it would take as short as three days to a week for the combined forces equipped with high tech precision strike capabilities to defeat and destroy North Korea as we know it today. Some even argue that if the North provokes a war, it would provide the United States and South Korea with an opportunity to apply a military solution to the North Korean nuclear issue.

On the other hand, there is no certainty that the defiant North Koreans would be intimidated by military punishment from the South as to restrain themselves from taking lethal actions out of desperation. What if the North Korean military take South Korea's counter-attack for a signal of starting a war? There is no way to know whether the KPA soldiers are really ready to die in a battle of war to protect their leadership and their system, as their propaganda claims say they are.

"Nobody can beat us who are determined to fight to death," so goes a North Korean slogan. There is one peculiar characteristic of Korean culture when it comes to the subject of death. As a Korean proverb says to an enemy, "When I die, I will take you with me," or "You and I die together to settle the account." Under this kind of suicidal mentality, it is not impossible to imagine that the North Koreans might decide to fire up everything they have -missiles, multiple rockets, and long-range artillery pieces forward-deployed close enough to hit South Korea's capital with a dense population of more than 12 million people. The proposition that only those who are ready for a war can prevent a war may help those prepared win a war if it breaks out, but it lacks empirical data to support its validity. It is ominous that either Pyongyang or Seoul has not yet stated that they are committed to the prevention of a general war.

North Korea has an absolute superiority over the South in asymmetric offensive capabilities - with strategic weapons including nuclear weapons, missiles, chemical/biological weapons, as well as submarines and special forces for launching an unconventional warfare.[3] According to the new defense minister, Kim Kwan-jin, a 61-year-old former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a former field army commander, who has a tough soldier's bearing and a combat warrior's mind, there is a high possibility that the North Koreans would launch more surprise attacks against the South with their asymmetric capabilities anywhere across the border. He said the North's asymmetric capabilities pose the most serious threat to the South. Minister Kim reiterated President Lee's Myung-bak's earlier statement, "We do not want war but we are not afraid of war." And he added, "We are now facing the most critical crisis since the Korean War." [4] Seoul's highest intelligence official also said the North is highly likely to attack the South again.[5]

Since North Korea's November 23 attack on Yeonpyeong Island, South Korea has realigned its defense priorities with an increased budget and an enforcement of deterrence on the West Sea. Now the South says it is ready to punish any future North Korean attack with military might "until the

source of threat is eliminated or until the North surrenders.”[6] President Lee Myung-bak said, “If the North commits any additional provocations...we will make sure that it pays a dear price.”[7] Pyongyang also responded with a series of bellicose statements: “We do not fear war,” and “The Korean Peninsula is being driven to an uncontrollable extreme phase, as the South is so hell-bent to the moves to escalate the confrontation and to start a war that it is recklessly behaving bereft of reason. If an all-out war breaks out between the North and South, it will gravely affect the peace and stability in the peninsula and the region.”[8] The North had also made threats that the North Korean artillery remains ready to fire more shells in a second and a third attack to “wipe out the enemy with a stronger punishment of fire,” if its territory or its sovereignty is violated.

New Rules of Engagement for Self-defense

In support of President Lee Myung-bak’s determination not to tolerate more provocations from the North, Minister Kim Kwan-jin told the National Assembly on a nationally televised confirmation hearing that (1) in the event of another attack by the North, “we will surely employ air strikes and all other available combat power, including joint forces, to retaliate them in self-defense beyond the restrictions by the UNC rules of engagement”; (2) such an airstrike does not require approval of the UNC commander who has the wartime operational control over the Korean forces; (3) the rules of engagement will be revised for retaliation against similar attacks in the future; and (4) the South will fortify five islands close to the disputed waters along the Northern Limit Line (NLL) with enhanced defense capabilities.

The defense ministry has issued operating instructions to the South Korean forces “to respond to further North Korean provocations based on the principle of self-defense, in disregard of the current rules of engagement,” which Minister Kim said is “only a guideline for accidental situations” and should not be applicable in the exercise of the rights of self-defense. The South Korean government is obliged to protect the people’s lives and properties by the constitution. In addition, it may invoke Article 51 of the UN Charter, which provides the inherent right of a state to engage in military action in self-defense, subject to filing immediately a report of such action to the UN Security Council, until the Council “has taken measures to maintain international peace and security.” To decide to act in self-defense is a matter to be determined solely by the Republic of Korea, whereas revision of the rules of engagement would require cooperation and concurrence of the commander of the U.S. Forces in Korea, who also represents the United Nations Command. His job includes keeping the truce in effect in compliance with the 1953 Armistice Agreement. The defense ministry says it has U.S. support for acting in self-defense. It seems that South Korea will have to write a set of rules for actions in self-defense, in which the United States should have a critical interest. From the U.S. perspective, any rules of self-defense must not be written such a way that escalation of tensions from a deliberate provocation by the North may lead to a war to automatically involve the U.S. forces to fight along with their South Korean allies.

Exercise, Deterrent or Risk?

In the wake of the North’s artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island, South Korea and the United States conducted a 4-day combined naval exercise on the West Sea, with the aircraft carrier George Washington capable of striking all parts of North Korea with powerful missiles and fighter-bombers. However, the exercise was carried out way south of the NLL and no shells or bombs were dropped in the area that North Korea claims is its territory. The North alleged that they shelled Yeonpyeong

because the South Korean marines had first fired live ammunitions into its territorial waters.^[9] On December 5, the South began another military exercise on the West Sea and other areas, which includes firing from ships into seas, closer to Daechong Island near the disputed NLL. The South's Joint Chiefs of Staff had announced that the exercise -- planned as a routine drill -- would also exercise firing from Yeonpyeong Island. However, the South Korean press reported that the United States, which had quickly supported the South after the North's attack on Yeonpyeong Island, opposed the Korean forces' plan to practice firing K-9 self-propelled howitzer guns from the same island, in an apparent effort to control the escalation of tensions. The U.S. opposition came as a discouragement to the Korean government that was under public pressure to reinforce its military posture against another possible attack.^[10] At the time when Yeonpyeong was under attack, only three out of the six available K-9s were operative for return fire.

Motivations for North Korea's Provocation

There are several theories for the latest flare-up in the West Sea. Many pundits and government officials in Seoul and Washington see the provocation in the context of the succession plan for Kim Jong-Un, who may need some claims of bold leadership. Others see it as Pyongyang's scheme to draw attention and bring the United States to talks after the North revealed its uranium enrichment program in the middle of November. It is true that the North is undergoing an untested second succession process, but there is no concrete evidence showing that the provocation was designed for domestic consumption. On the contrary, some refugees' reports claim that the average people in the North are getting worried about the risk of war after the Yeonpyeong shelling and they are turned against the young, inexperienced Kim Jong Un. It is also true that North Korea does not want to be ignored of its existence, but getting attention was more likely a consequence, rather than a goal of the provocation. There is a consensus that an attack of such magnitude could not have been carried out without Kim Jong Il's approval.

As for the question of inducement to talks, the North Koreans know better themselves that their blatant attack on the island would diminish rather than increase any chance for dialogue with the United States and others, at least in the near future. China's call for an emergency meeting of the six party talks was quickly turned down by Seoul, Tokyo and Washington. That does not mean that the North Koreans are uninterested in negotiations that would earn them political and economic rewards. They are likely to return to the table if and when their conditions -- including lifting of sanctions and a U.S. commitment to discussion of a peace regime, and a right atmosphere and timing -- are met. Until then they will continue with their unpromising course of self-reliance, struggling with its inefficient economic system but focused on improving its nuclear arsenal, which they view is indispensable for survival.

However, the more plausible motivations are discussed as follows, albeit they should not justify the artillery attack of the North: (1) Pyongyang may have determined that it is hopeless to restore relations with the South, after experiencing some dialogue, reunions of separated families, and receiving some economic aid from the South prior to the hosting of G20. Seoul has stuck to its "principled" position of no compromise on the resumption of Mt. Geumgang tourism; (2) Pyongyang may have been disturbed by the talk in Seoul of redeploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Korea as a counter-weight to neutralize the efficacy of its nuclear programs, although this was never discussed between Seoul and Washington; (3) Pyongyang may have felt a need to follow verbal threats with action, so that it would be taken more seriously by the South and the international community; and (4) Pyongyang is determined not to accept the NLL, which was not a negotiated

settlement as part of the Armistice Agreement, but subsequently proclaimed unilaterally by the United Nations Command. (If the NLL had been agreed on as an extension of the Military Demarcation Line, could all the tragic lethal clashes in the West Sea have been avoided?)[11]

Consequences of Provocation

Whatever the real reason was, the consequences of the Yeonpyeong shelling, as did the sinking of the Cheonan ship, seem to have brought no gains to the North Koreans. It only brought them more international condemnations and angry resentment from the people in the South. The North Korean provocations have strengthened the U.S alliances with South Korea and Japan to further isolate and pressure the North with sanctions and stronger military measures. The United States has repeatedly renewed its commitment to the defense of South Korea by word and action -- even sending the George Washington battle group for a combined exercise as a show of force and as a symbol of the U.S. commitment. In addition, the United States on December 8 sent its JCS chairman, Admiral Mike Mullen, to Seoul to assure the South Koreans of U.S. support and commitment to deter North Korean provocations and to maintain the stability on the peninsula.

The foreign ministers of the Republic of Korea, the United States and Japan agreed during a meeting in Washington on December 6 "to maintain and enhance coordination and consultation on DPRK related issues. The three countries expressed grave concerns and condemned the DPRK's November 23 artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island." [12] They urged the DPRK to cease its provocative behavior and abide by the terms of the 1953 Armistice Agreement. President Obama on December 6 called President Hu Jin Tao and asked him to work with the United States and others to send "a clear message to North Korea that its provocations are unacceptable."

On inter-Korean relations, Seoul will keep enforcing the May 24 measures taken in response to the Cheonan incident, which has cut off all trades with the North except for the continuing operation of the Gaesung Industrial Complex (GIC). [13] The South has cut off all government aids to the North and suspended Red Cross talks. In addition, the unification ministry has been restricting access by South Korean workers to the GIC. Even progressive proponents of engagement in the South, including the supporters of the Sunshine Policy, have condemned the North's provocation, although they still blame the Lee government for the deterioration of relations with the North to the point of inviting armed attacks from the North. President Lee has become even more adamant against dialogue with the North Koreans. He said:

"At long last, we came to a realization that it no longer makes sense for us to anticipate that the North would abandon its nuclear program or its policy of brinksmanship on its own...prolonged endurance and tolerance will spawn nothing but more serious provocations." [14]

Waiting Game Is Over -- Is Diplomacy Still Alive?

Washington has long waited according to its strategic patience for North Korea to turn around and show its serious interests in denuclearization. South Korea has maintained its policy of "denuclearization first" before improving inter-Korean relations, while hoping or waiting for a sudden change in the North which will give the South an upper hand on unification. The North

Koreans have been waiting for the U.S. to accept their conditions for talks to gain benefits. The Yeonpyeong incident has ended the waiting games, although no strategy of waiting by any of the three countries has worked anyway.

However, this does not mean diplomacy is dead. It was China that made the first diplomatic move immediately after the Yeonpyeong crisis. China sent its state councilor Dai Bingguo to Seoul, although his meeting with President Lee did not go well. Nevertheless, China the next day called an emergency meeting of the six party talks, to which the United States, South Korea and Japan showed a cold response. The United States, frustrated with China's unconditional support for the North and its silence on the continuing provocations by the North, started voicing complaints with China's inaction to rein in North Korea.[\[15\]](#) The United States has, unsuccessfully so far, tried to persuade China that coddling the hopeless North Korea would hurt China's long-term strategic interest. From China's perspective, China does not need to be told that a misbehaving North Korea is a liability to China or what China's long terms interest should be. China has its own strategic calculation - which for the time being is to maintain a stable Korean Peninsula.

Many believe that China is the key to the resolution of North Korea-related issues, including denuclearization, facilitation and management of collapse, or changing provocative behavior by the North Koreans. On the contrary to the alleged Chinese views on the future of Korea as reported by WikiLeaks that (1) China would not intervene in the event of a North Korean collapse, (2) China would accept Korean unification under Seoul's control, and (3) China is distancing itself from Kim Jong Il, [\[16\]](#) the Chinese leadership maintains a firm position to support Kim Jong Il's North Korea,[\[17\]](#) while it is concerned with the energized reinforcement of deterrent by the United States and South Korea. China was quieter in objection over the recent U.S.-ROK navy exercise on the West Sea, although it sees such an exercise as "provocative." Interestingly enough, China seems to be more concerned or scared by the prospect of instability on the Korean Peninsula than the two Koreas.

The trilateral foreign ministers' meeting in Washington, although conducted to China's chagrin, still expressed a joint interest in dealing with the North Korean issues through diplomacy. The three ministers upheld "their commitment to the September 2005 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks and reaffirmed that resumption of the Six-Party Talks will require the DPRK to make sincere efforts to improve relations with the ROK as well as taking concrete steps to demonstrate a genuine commitment to complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization."[\[18\]](#)

The focus of U.S. diplomacy is now on China - to press it to do more on North Korea. There is one thing that is true in the recent revelations from WikiLeaks -- that is, the Chinese have "much less influence on the North than most people believe; China's influence with the North is frequently overstated."[\[19\]](#) Yet, the United States thinks it can deal with the North Koreans through China, rather than directly with them, at least for now. There will be more diplomatic flurries between Washington and Beijing prior to Hu Jin Tao's meeting with Obama in Washington January 2011. Right now, North Korea is a top priority, but there are several other difficult issues that need to be addressed between the world's two most powerful countries.

Now is the time to diffuse the mounting tensions in a crisis of war and peace. It has been proven that the strategy of waiting did not resolve any issue. It is necessary to strengthen the defense against North Korean provocations, but it also requires wisdom to avoid war. The recent WikiLeaks

confirmed that the Seoul government was operating based on the notion of an instability/collapse situation in the North. Its ranking officials were predicting that Kim Jong Il would die in five years at the most and the North would collapse in two or three years after Kim's death. There is no scientific evidence that these predictions would turn out to be true.

If the South Korean government were operating in the wake of the Yeonpyeong incident with the assumption that the North Koreans would not be ready for a war, it would be too risky. President Lee said, "...a disgraceful peace achieved through intimidation only brings greater harm in the end. Only courage that defies retreat under any threat or provocation will bring about genuine peace."[\[20\]](#) The South Koreans do not have to be intimidated or retreat from threats or provocation. Yet, they should be able to find a better path to achieve "genuine peace" with confidence that they can prevent a war that nobody wants. It will take courage to talk to the North in the current environment. Maybe dialogue should wait until the dust settles. Nevertheless, dialogue is the best solution. People want peace, not war. Peace is achievable.

III. Citations

[1] Reuters' dispatch on Hu's telephone call with Obama on December 6.

[2] New defense minister Kim Kwan-jin's testimony during the National Assembly confirmation hearing, December 3.

[3] The same confirmation hearing as above.

[4] Minister Kim made this comment on his first day in office, December 4.

[5] Director of the National Intelligence Service Won Sei-hoon's testimony at the National Assembly on December 2, as reported by Reuters.

[6] Minister Kim's inaugural speech, December 4.

[7] President Lee's speech on November 29.

[8] KCNA report of December 5. The KCNA said this statement was authorized by the North's highest authority.

[9] KCNA report on November 24 by a DPRK foreign ministry spokesman's statement, which claimed that the NLL was drawn illegally. The statement also said the North had warned several times that "even if a single shell of the enemy is fired inside the territorial waters of the DPRK, it will take a prompt retaliatory strike."

[10] Donga Ilbo, December 3.

[11] Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong Il in their summit of 2007 agreed to establish a common fishing zone around the NLL to avoid clashes. Im Dong Won, a former unification minister under the Kim Dae Jung government, and other liberal realists argue that the Yeonpyeong shelling would not have occurred if the Lee Myung bak government had followed a policy line supportive of the Sunshine.

[12] The Trilateral Statement Japan, Republic of Korea and the United States, released by the U.S. Department of State on December 6, 2010.

[13] A question was raised during Minster Kim's confirmation hearing regarding the fate of South Korean workers in GIC in the event of a limited hostility. The question was whether the workers would become hostages by the North in an emergency, which might constrain options by the South. Minister Kim said, it could pose a problem and said he would study its impact under different possibilities.

[14] President Lee's statement of November 29.

[15] The Washington Post, December 6.

[16] The Guardian, November 29, reporting on WikiLeaks Cables

[17] The Nelson Report, December 6.

[18] The trilateral statement of December 6.

[19] The Guardian, November 29.

[20] President Lee's speech of November 29.

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. 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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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org