

Is a Second Korean War Inevitable?

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Introduction

The possibility of a second Korean War persists even sixty years after the first Korean War erupted in June 1950. Actually the war never ceased. The Korean War Armistice, signed in July 1953, only stopped the fighting and established the DMZ or De-militarized zone, a truce line that still divides Korea into two rival halves. But on March 26, 2010 the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) Korean People's Army (KPA) sank, according to an international investigation, the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) naval vessel the *Cheonan* in the West Sea not far from Incheon International Airport. Forty six ROK sailors died. The incident surprised many and excited international concern. Even more stunning was the November 23, 2010 KPA bombardment of ROK occupied Yonpyong Island in the West Sea not far from Incheon International Airport. In that incident, a KPA artillery bombardment killed two ROK Marines and two civilians, plus destroyed numerous civilian homes and businesses.

The DPRK has rejected allegations that it was responsible for these incidents, but compelling evidence suggests otherwise. In the Yonpyong incident which side fired first is less significant than the fact that the KPA bombarded civilian areas on the island, an unprecedented event since the Korean War. A flurry of international diplomacy after the *Cheonan* incident condemned the DPRK, but China and Russia block UN Security Council passage of a resolution. Tempers may be cooling, but tensions on the Korean Peninsula remain on the brink of war.

Indeed, the possibility of a second Korean War persists. But if it were to erupt again, the fighting and devastation would not be limited to the Korean Peninsula. War in the midst of the world's economically most dynamic region, Northeast Asia, would thoroughly disrupt the world economy. Tragically, not only would Koreans, both north and south, along with Americans and possibly Chinese would die in the fighting. The DPRK's possession of ballistic missiles means that Japanese could also become victims of the war. Ultimately, a second Korean War might even escalate to the brink of a nuclear war.

Today the nations of Northeast Asia – China, Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States – face a choice. They can either take the diplomatic steps necessary to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula, or persist in their current confrontational stance. Diplomacy would greatly improve prospects for sustaining peace and prosperity in the region. Confrontation, on the other hand, would only increase the risk of realizing the dooms day scenario sketched above.

Our purpose here is to look behind the headlines to better comprehend why these violent events occurred and whether they point to a trend that might eventually led to a second Korean War.

History's Long Tail

Events on the Korean Peninsula have a long historical tail. The *Cheonan* and Yonpyong Island incidents are connected to North-South disputes over the "Northern Limit Line"

(NLL) that dates from 1953. After the Korean War Armistice was signed in July 1953, the US Army commander of the United Nations Command (UNC) in Seoul, without consulting either the ROK government (which has never signed the Armistice) and the DPRK (which signed it) drew an imaginary line from the western tip of the DMZ just north of Seoul westward into the Yellow Sea and designated it the NLL. It runs westward parallel to the DPRK's southwest coast.

Just south of the line are five ROK occupied islands including Yonpyong Island which is no more than 13 kilometers south of North Korea's coast line. This places the island within the DPRK's internationally recognized territorial waters. The UNC's purpose was to prevent ROK military forces and civilians, i.e. fishermen, from venturing north of the NLL in the hope of preventing clashes between the two Koreas.

Eventually the ROK government came to view the NLL as a boundary that separates its sovereign territory from that of the DPRK. The DPRK has long rejected this view and demanded that the UNC or the ROK government redraw the line to move it further south away from the DPRK coast. The UNC has largely ignored the DPRK's proposals regarding the NLL, and serious naval battles occurred near the line between 1999 and 2007.

Fortunately for all concerned parties, the ROK administration of President Kim Dae-jung convened the first North-South Summit which produced the Joint Statement of June 15, 2000. This initiated a period of peaceful co-existence, economic cooperation and social exchange. Kim Dae-jung's successor President Roh Moo-hyun forged a second similar accord with DPRK leader Kim Jong Il in 2007. The two agreements greatly eased but did not entirely erase tensions between the two Koreas.

Tensions Rekindled

Two key developments in 2008 set the stage for a rekindling of North-South tensions along the NLL. First ROK President Lee Myung-bak succeeded Roh Moo-hyun and adopted a much more assertive and confrontational approach to North Korea than had been the case during the previous decade. Secondly North Korea's leader Kim Jong Il appears to have suffered a stroke in September 2008 which appears to have enabled the KPA to increase its influence on DPRK policy, both domestic and foreign. Ever since, North-South tensions have intensified to the brink of war.

By the end of 2008, Lee Myung-bak's approach to the DPRK had rendered ineffective virtually all the North-South accords formulated over the previous decade. President Lee's offer to the DPRK of a "grand bargain" to pay each DPRK citizen \$3,000 if its government gave up its nuclear arsenal only angered the DPRK leadership. South-North tensions flared in July 2008 when a KPA sentry shot to death a wandering ROK tourist at the jointly operated Mt. Kumgang Park on the DPRK's east coast just north of the DMZ. Lee halted tours to the area which had earned the DPRK hard currency for its impoverished economy and demanded a joint investigation of the incident. The DPRK

did express its regret but declined Lee's demand for a joint investigation. The tours have yet to resume.

The DPRK retaliated by closing road and rail links between the two Koreas and restricted access from the south to the Kaesong Industrial Park, a joint South-North commercial venture that enabled some 250 small and medium ROK industries to manufacture goods in the DPRK using North Korean workers. Eventually, the DPRK blocked ROK access to Pyongyang and elsewhere in the north.

Simultaneously, the DPRK government alienated the international community by disengaging from the Six Party Talks aimed at achieving a peaceful diplomatic end to its nuclear weapons program. Instead, the DPRK disregarded United Nations Security Council resolutions aimed at halting Pyongyang's development of weapons of mass destruction.

Then in September 2008, DPRK leader Kim Jong Il apparently suffered a stroke. The international mass media became mesmerized by a guessing game focused on whom Kim Jong Il might designate as his heir and whether the succession might ignite political rivalry and instability in Pyongyang. Meanwhile, the KPA was focused on the NLL and the further development of its "nuclear deterrent capability."

Succession and the KPA's Belligerence

Kim Jong Il's apparent stroke compelled the DPRK to adjust its priorities. Although Kim was eventually able to resume his official duties, his failing health appears to have convinced him to quicken preparations for his succession. As we learned on October 10, 2010, his third son Kim Jong-eun is now his heir apparent and is expected to formally assume that role in 2012, the year that Kim Jong Il plans to celebrate the 10^{0th} anniversary of his father Kim Il Sung's birth.

But Kim Jong-eun's successful succession will require that he win the KPA loyalty and political support. Kim Jong-eun, like his father, is inheriting the DPRK monarchy without any significant accomplishments. Kim Il Sung, the DPRK's founder and Kim Jong-eun's grandfather, rose to power by commanding anti-Japanese patriots and then commanded the KPA during the Korean War. His military record in the face of "imperialist aggression" legitimized Kim Il Sung's power in the KPA's eyes. Kim Jong Il inherited power in 1994 as his father's only son and after having only managed domestic policy for a decade. Although lacking any military experience he was designed the KPA's Supreme Commander in 1991. Once he had become the DPRK's leader, Kim Jong Il sought to cement the KPA's loyalty to him by declaring in 1998 "Military First Politics" (*Songunjeongchi*).

This political deal greatly enhanced Kim Jong Il's ability to command the allegiance he needed to rule the DPRK. The deal also assured the KPA priority access to the nation's scare resources which the generals deemed essential for defending the nation against "American imperialists." Since 1998 "military first politics" has enabled the KPA to

develop its “nuclear deterrent capability” by conducting its first nuclear test in 2006 and just before that in July 2006 launching several ballistic missiles.

The KPA’s Growing Influence on Policy

Kim Jong Il’s political dependence on the KPA appears to have intensified after his September 2008 stroke. Ever since, the KPA General Staff and other KPA commands have issued increasingly assertive and belligerent policy statements as suggested in the chart below. Foreign Ministry statements, traditionally the primary means for announcing Pyongyang’s official policy, have also become more blunt and belligerent in tone.

DPRK Policy Statements 2005 – 2010

Government Agency	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Total
NDC	0	2	0	2	2	9	15
KPA GS	1	2	5	2	11	6	26
KPA Panmunjom	2	1	2	2	2	3	12
N-S Military Talks	0	0	0	3	2	7	12
KPA-US Military Talks	0	0	0	0	1	8	9
KPA Other	0	0	0	0	1	3	4
Military sub-total	3	5	7	9	19	36	79
Foreign Ministry	23	18	18	21	26	20	126

Source: Korea Central News Agency Daily Reports, 2005-10, www.kcna.co.jp.

NDC – National Defense Commission

KPA GS – Korean People’s Army General Staff

KPA Panmunjom Mission – formerly the KPA delegation to the Military Armistice Commission (MAC) of the Armistice Agreement

N-S Military Talks – North-South Military General and Working Level Talks

KPA-US Military Talks – Talks between KPA and US Army representatives

KPA Other – KPA naval and field commanders, and “military commentators.”

The chart above clearly indicates the KPA’s increasingly audible role in Pyongyang’s policy formulation, particularly since 2009 after Kim Jong Il’s stroke. In 2007, the KPA GS delivered four reports about the situation on the Korean Peninsula. This included the annual New Year’s Editorial which is jointly composed and published each year by the Korean Workers’ Party, KPA and Youth League. One of the four statements was issued by the KPA navy which warned the ROK not to venture north of the NLL.

But beginning in 2009 and continuing into 2010, the National Defense Commission (NDC) and the KPA General Staff (KPA GS) issued far more policy statements than previously. Kim Jong Il had elevated the NDC to the DPRK’s highest policy organ as part of his “military first politics,” and the KPA General Staff is the highest military command. Traditionally neither had issued formal policy statements except for the annual Joint Editorial. DPRK policy statements have become more assertive, even belligerent since early 2009.

This is apparent even in the usually tempered Foreign Ministry statements. For example, on January 13, 2009 the Foreign Ministry statement (“DPRK Foreign Ministry’s Spokesman Dismisses U.S. Wrong Assertion,” January 13, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp) asserted that the DPRK had “consented to the September 19 (2005) Joint Statement” of the Six Party Talks to achieve the:

denuclearize not only the northern half of the Korean Peninsula but the whole of it, and to this end, the United States committed itself to terminate its hostile relations with the DPRK, assure it of non-use of nuclear weapons and clear south Korea of nukes, etc.”

In other words, the price for Pyongyang’s cooperation in the Six Party Talks had risen to the “simultaneous nuclear disarmament” of both halves of the Korean Peninsula.

Shortly afterward, on February 2 the KPA General Staff shattered its usual silence in a statement entitled the “DPRK’s Principled Stand on Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula Reiterated.” (February 2, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp). It declared:

It is the unshakable stand already clarified by the DPRK that it will never show its nuclear weapons unless the U.S. rolls back its hostile policy toward the DPRK and the latter is completely free from the former’s (*sic*) nuclear threat, ...”

The statement concluded that, “The DPRK will never ‘dismantle its nuclear weapons’ unless nukes in south Korea are dismantled to remove the nuclear threat from the U.S.” These statements suggest that the KPA General Staff’s views had a significant impact on redefining the price Pyongyang now demands for denuclearization.

The KPA and the NLL

Arguably the most amazing aspect about the Cheonan’s sinking and the bombardment of Yonpyong Island is that the KPA, beginning on March 28, 2008, repeatedly warned the ROK that KPA military action along the NLL was a probability. Equally amazing is that the ROK government apparently dismissed these warnings’ significance.

The KPA Navy Command on March 28, 2008 called the Northern Limit Line (NLL), ... a bogus line as it was unilaterally drawn by the U.S. imperialists ... the NLL defends five islands in the West Sea and *Yonphyong Islet is like a dagger to be thrust into one’s throat* while Paekryong Islet the one to be thrust into one’s side. ... A situation in which an armed conflict may break out any moment is prevailing in the frontline waters in the West Sea. ... Any attempt (by the ROK) to protect the NLL at any cost would only spark off a clash in the said waters.

Two days later, ROK Armed Forces Joint Chief of Staff at his confirmation hearing before the ROK National Assembly declared that the ROK might launch a “preemptive strike” against the DPRK’s nuclear facilities. A KPA “commentator” countered in the DPRK media that all North-South dialogue should be suspended pending ROL clarification of the “preemptive strike” comment.

South-North tensions continued to escalate, particularly after a KPA sentry shot and killed a South Korea tourist at Mt. Kumgang Park on July 11, 2008. Subsequently on December 1, the KPA representative to the North-South General Level Military Talks informed his ROK counterpart that all overland passages through the DMZ would be closed.

The KPA's belligerency intensified in 2009. On January 17, 2009, the KPA General Staff repeated the KPA Navy's earlier warning regarding the NLL and reiterated that the NLL is "illegal." Responding to ROK President Lee's decision for the ROK to become a full participant in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), the KPA General Staff declared on April 18 that the decision is a "declaration of war against the DPRK ..." The statement concluded that the KPA "... has never pinned any hope on the six-party talks from their outset ...". The KPA also reacted very negatively to the UN Security Council's April 14 presidential statement that urged the DPRK to stop launching range ballistic missiles.

The DPRK's second nuclear test followed on May 25, 2009. Again largely unnoticed in the test's wake was another KPA policy statement, this time issued by its Panmunjom Mission on May 27. It repeated the General Staff's allegation that the ROK's participation in PSI was a "declaration of war," and declared that the KPA "*will not be bound to the Armistice Agreement any longer ...*" Also ignored was the warning that, "*For the present, we will not guarantee the legal status of the five islands under the south's (ROK) control "Paekryong, Taechong, Sohong, **Yonpyong**, and U islands in our side's territorial waters northwest of the extension of the Military Demarcation Line in the West Sea of Korea ...*"

A May 29 Foreign Ministry statement confirmed the KPA's earlier declarations about the armistice, stating that, "Any hostile act by the UN Security Council immediately means the abrogation of the Armistice Agreement." On June 13, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1874 that imposed additional economic sanctions on the DPRK for having performed its second nuclear test. The Foreign Ministry responded, "It has become an absolutely impossible option for the DPRK to even think about giving up its nuclear weapons."

Later in 2009 the KPA repeated its challenge to the NLL's legitimacy and warned on November 10 and 13, and December 21 about possible military action along the NLL. The December 21 warning was specific. The KPA Navy Command declared its intention to conduct artillery practice in the vicinity of the NLL, warned civilian and military ships to take appropriate precautions and reiterated that the "northern limit line" is "illegal." The KPA subsequently converted bellicose rhetoric into deadly military action in 2010 by sinking the ROK navy's ship *Cheonan* and bombarding Yonpyong Island.

China's Altered Approach to the Korean Peninsula

Also contributing to the KPA's armed hostility in 2010 could be the shift in Beijing's DPRK policy. Until June 2009, China supported stern UN resolutions after the DPRK's

two nuclear tests, but then it shifted to a less coercive approach. In October 2009, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Pyongyang and soon after, Chinese investment in the DPRK surged. A month later China's Minister of National Defense Col. General Liang Guanglie visited the DPRK. Ever since China has been reluctant to diplomatically and to verbally chastise the DPRK, even after the *Cheonan* and Yongpyong incidents. Instead, Chinese diplomatic support for and economic engagement of the DPRK has steadily increased.

Conclusion

Given the secretive nature of policy formulation in the DPRK and its relationship with China, we can only guess what factors convinced the DPRK to adopt a much more belligerent attitude toward the ROK and to go so far as to launch military attacks against it. One factor is clear. Kim Jong Il's "Military First Policy" assured the KPA over the past 12 years that he would fully support efforts to modernize the KPA and to develop a "nuclear deterrent capability." Supreme Commander Kim's eagerness to have the KPA support his designated successor and son Kim Jong-eun may have reinforced Kim Jong Il's reluctance to restrain the KPA.

Also clear, particularly since early 2009, the KPA's role in policy formulation is becoming increasingly influential. At the same time, the KPA appears to have exploited ROK President Lee Myung-bak's "hard line" approach toward the DPRK. The KPA exploited former US President Bush's tough talk to justify the DPRK pursuit of an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. It now appears that the KPA is similarly exploiting Lee Myung-bak's rhetoric.

The KPA may have convinced itself that neither the United States nor China would punish the DPRK for armed action against the ROK. This conviction might rest on the belief that the KPA's "nuclear deterrent capability" and the United States' preoccupation in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Middle East will prevent the U.S. from taking military action. China's shift to inducements to influence the DPRK's conduct could further strengthen the KPA conviction that attacking the ROK would not cause harm to the DPRK.

Nevertheless, prospects for a second Korean War remain fairly slight. The nations of Northeast Asia, at least China, Japan, South Korea, Russia and the United States, prefer peace to sustain prosperity. The resolute armed deterrence of the US, ROK and Japan as recently demonstrated in joint military exercises will certainly temper the KPA's belligerence. China's diplomatic intervention with the DPRK and Pyongyang's dependence on Beijing's economic inducements will also restrain the DPRK. After all, Kim Jong Il's foremost priority is regime survival and his heir's successful succession. But war can never be ruled out entirely so long as the two Koreas remain hostile rivals and the KPA remains assertively confident of both its military and political prowess.