

# Fire fight at Yeonpyeong: the manufacturing of crisis

## Korean brinkmanship, American strategic paralysis, and the road to war<sup>1</sup>

Tim Beal

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The exchange of artillery fire between South and North Korea on 23 November had predictable results – a great increase of tension on the peninsula, a show of force by the United States, and a torrent of silly 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 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.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>, decided 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:

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<sup>4</sup>) 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.<sup>5</sup>

Also in London, the Evening Standard, getting a bit confused, 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 in negotiations, but fitting the artillery clash into that was of course ridiculous; if the Evening Standard can work out that such an incident would predictably push Washington away from negotiations, then Pyongyang would come to that pretty obvious conclusion as well.

One could go on. If there is one thing the [Western] media is good at it is churning out a torrent of articles after an incident like this. If they regard it as newsworthy, of course. If there had just been North Korean casualties and no South Korean ones, the event would have scarcely caused a ripple. No deaths should be taken lightly, but a handful of casualties is just petty cash in Afghanistan, or Pakistan, and a drone killing a village leader and his family is so common that it is no longer remarked upon.

What most journalists and sundry pundits have in common is a lack of examination of the facts of the case – if you write what is essentially ideological polemic, facts can get in the way. On top of that, or perhaps part of it, is a failure to understand and 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 it often becomes impossible to comprehend it correctly. Worse still, 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.

Bearing in mind the importance of context it is necessary to focus on the three key drivers of the clash. 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 a very adversarial and confrontational policy towards the North. This has been evident from the beginning of his administration in all sorts of ways but it became increasingly manifest with his exploitation of the Cheonan incident. The fabricated investigation of the sinking is looking increasingly threadbare and the Yeonpyeong Island incident might have been an attempt to divert attention from that. Certainly it fits within his strategy of raising tension on the peninsula. The ultimate aim of that is to precipitate a crisis within which the DPRK would collapse, or at least could be portrayed to be in such a state that the US would agree to intervention.<sup>7</sup> As discussed below, the South Korean side knew that the North would actively respond if it went ahead with its live-fire exercises. Whether the decision to proceed with what would be considered an unacceptable provocation went up to the President for confirmation we don't know, any more than we know if the North Korean response was explicitly ordered by Kim Jong Il. An article in the *Chosun Ilbo* argued, on rather flimsy grounds, that Kim was personally involved, but that is just speculation.<sup>8</sup> In both cases, South and North, local commanders may have been acting within rules of engagement that did not require endorsement from the top.

A very important part of Lee's policy is the buildup of tension, especially through war exercises. Of course Lee himself is only part of the decision making process. War exercises happen because the US and ROK military want them, as does Washington. The exercises are justified on the grounds of protecting the South from the North but it is unlikely that anyone in authority actually believes that. The disparity in power between North Korea and its adversaries (primarily the United States and South Korea but perhaps including Japan) is huge and the North suffers an 'overwhelming military disadvantage'.<sup>9</sup> Even though the ostensible reason for the exercise is a sham, motivations may vary. For the US the prime objective is sending a message to China.<sup>10</sup> Lee's motives are probably threefold: to increase pressure on the North to produce a crisis of confidence and a collapse, to raise tension and fear of the North in the South, and to lock the Americans into his strategy.

Frequent and 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 – it seems likely that Americans are never far away. In addition, the ROK military is under the wartime operational control (OPCON) of the US. In other words for small clashes such as the one on Yeonpyeong island, they run the show on their own, but if war breaks out the US command takes over. Roh Moo-hyun had negotiated for the US to relinquish operational control in 2012 but under Lee this has been pushed back to 2015.<sup>11</sup> Control of Joint military exercise was also scheduled to be transferred to the ROK but this has also been rescinded.<sup>12</sup>

The DPRK also 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.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, when I raised the issue of the treaty with Chinese scholars in Beijing in November 2010, the replies were rather 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 promises in respect of 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 that does this, not China and North Korea.

Sometimes it is difficult to disentangle the offensive from the defensive, and much depends on context, and interpreting it. The US ‘Missile Defense’ programme is touted as defensive but coupled with the US offensive capability, which it would enable to be utilised with impunity, it is rightly regarded by the targeted countries as inherently aggressive.<sup>14</sup> The US-ROK military exercises are claimed to be ‘defensive’ but if we look closely we see that they are quite the opposite. Here is a description from the Seoul newspaper *Hankyoreh* about 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]<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> 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 Korea artillery and shore-to-ship missiles, both of limited range, and unable to threaten the task force. And if we were to have 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.<sup>17</sup>

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 fear 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.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note that 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.<sup>19</sup>

The scheduled participation of the 31<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) is particularly significant.<sup>20</sup> The 31<sup>st</sup> MEU is based in Okinawa and it is America's 'forward deployed rapid-

response' unit in East Asia. It trains with the ROK marines practicing beach landings, but its major specialism appears to be urban warfare.<sup>21</sup> 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 rather gave the game away about the 'North Korean threat' by putting it 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<sup>22</sup>

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'.<sup>23</sup>

### **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 that 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 of the dangers of an appeasement policy. This is often raised in respect of the nuclear deterrent. For instance, Alexander Frolov, writing recently in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs journal *International Affairs* on lessons from the Iraq war made the point

The leadership in N. Korea also realized that nothing less than a nuclear status can guarantee the country against US aggression.<sup>24</sup>

However, the relevance of Iraq to the non-appeasement policy goes beyond developing a nuclear deterrent.

For instance, in May 2003 after a breakdown in US-DPRK negotiations, the official Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) in a lengthy statement included a reference 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.<sup>25</sup>

In reality, a North Korean counter offensive would not match like with like - 'aerial attack will be decisively countered with aerial attack and its land strategy will be coped with land strategy.' The DPRK cannot hope to match US military power (especially in the air) so its offensive would be asymmetrical, drawing on its strengths.<sup>26</sup> It would probably utilise its special forces, submarines, and in particular its artillery.<sup>27</sup>

As noted, the frequent war exercises, the integration of the ROK military into the US command structure, and the associated operational plans, are seen 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. It saw to it that the "Combined Forces Command" took over the "UN Forces Command's" Operation Control of the U.S. forces in south Korea and puppet army.

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.<sup>28</sup>

The most famous example of the efficacy of the 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."<sup>29</sup>

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. 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.<sup>30</sup>

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'.<sup>31</sup> The bombing of Yongbyon was but one variant of the 'military option' that the United States has been



examining, albeit the favoured one.<sup>32</sup> The release of radioactivity aside, an 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.<sup>33</sup> The exception to that have been those, such as Lee Myung-bak, who pin their hopes on a collapse that 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, then there will be no attack. Part of the reason for the vigorous 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 various other countries, it has not been invaded, or bombed. To that degree the zero-tolerance strategy can be said to work. But it has its disadvantages. It is a high-risk strategy. If there is a miscalculation or a misunderstanding, or 'maverick' action by soldiers on the front line, then the situation could rapidly whirl out of control. War would be disastrous for North Korea, despite the brave words. It would have grave consequences for the South, and Japan. If it spread to China the results are incalculable, but it might mean the end of the United States, that 'fragile empire' as Niall Ferguson recently termed it.<sup>34</sup> It is a variant of the mutually assured destruction of the Cold War period, a bluff that is effective because it is credible, but a bluff that if put into action would be catastrophic. In this case, the destruction would not be equivalent. The DPRK would suffer more than other countries, but the ROK and the US would 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. 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.<sup>35</sup> 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.

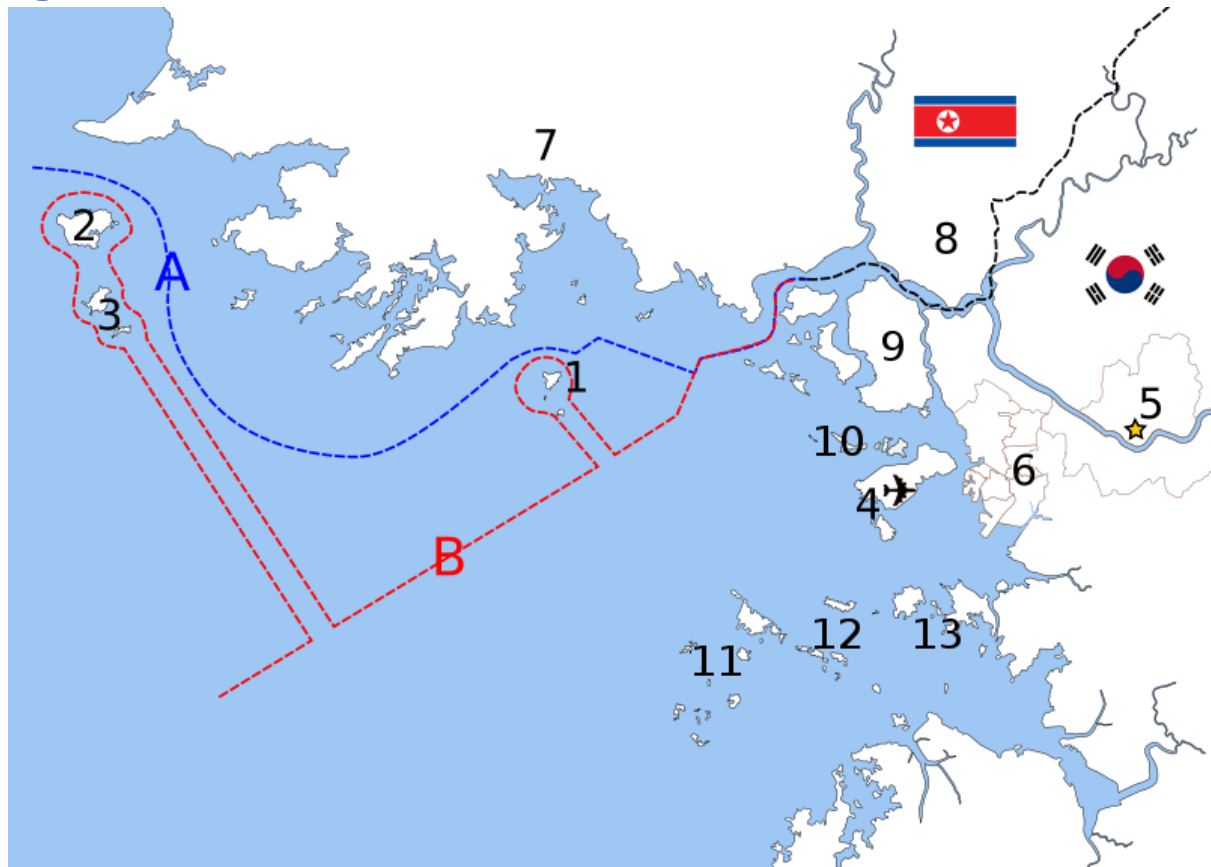
Finally, it gives a hostage to fortune. The other side (here South Korea but in other circumstances it could be the US) can construct a provocation knowing that it will trigger a response that can be labelled as belligerent. The trick here is to do something which the DPRK regards as provocative but 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 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 must turn to the curious case 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.Daechong 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 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_Korean\\_maritime\\_border.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Korean_maritime_border.svg)>, 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.<sup>36</sup> 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 rice crab fish grounds, and taking in various islands the main three of which are .Yeonpyeong (1) , Baengnyeong (2), and Daechyeong (3). It has been argued that it was set up to prevent Southern incursions into Northern waters (Syngman Rhee had not signed the Armistice Agreement and wanted the war to continue), although it would be more plausible to see it also as affording bases for inserting intelligence and commando teams. Be that as it may, by the 1990s commando raids were a thing of the past, and yet the ROK refused to negotiate. This despite two major incidents in 1999 and 2002 which were a distinct threat to the 'Sunshine Policy of then president Kim Dae-jung.<sup>37</sup> There was a further clash in November 2009 under the presidency of Lee Myung-bak.<sup>38</sup> This 2009 incident may have owed something to the more assertive North Korea policy of the Lee administration.<sup>39</sup>

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 the past were Northern and so, in the eyes of most of the international media, perhaps 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.<sup>40</sup>

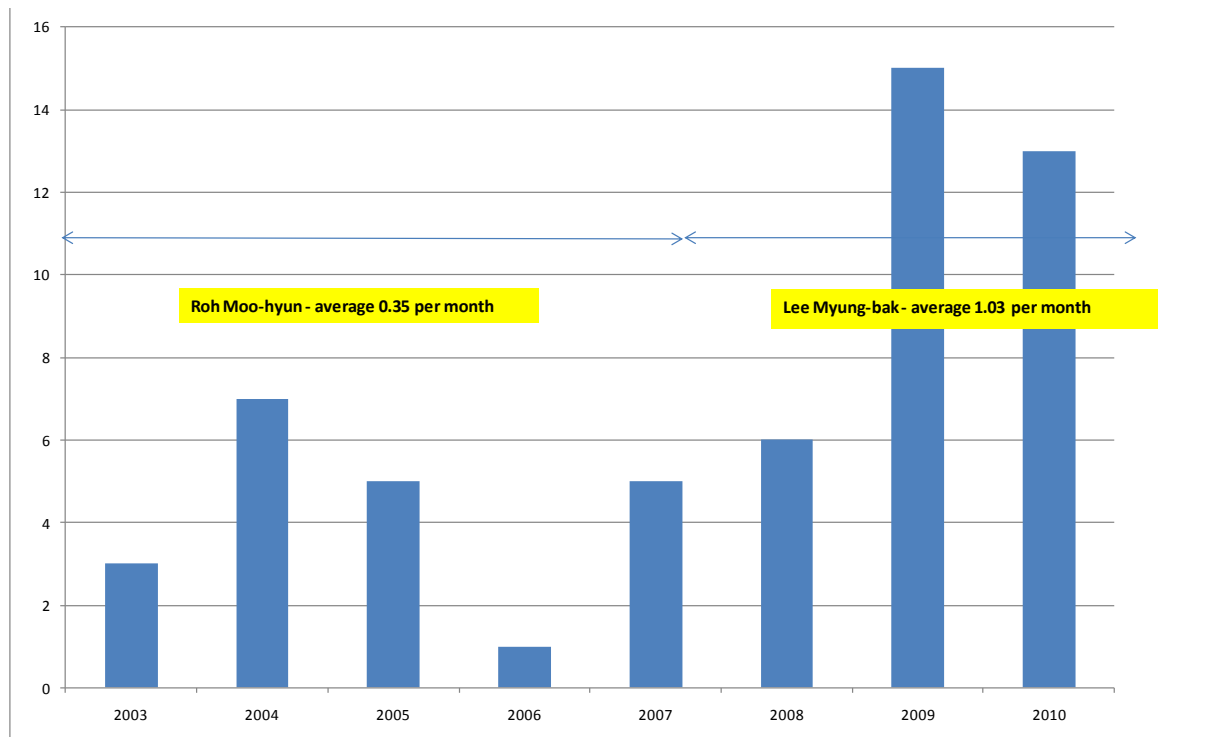
There is nothing new in these concerns. The NLL by its unilateral nature, its configuration close to the North Korean coast, and running through highly prized crab grounds, is a recipe for conflict. Fishing boats from both South and North sometimes ignore the NLL during the crab season and their respective navies tend to follow them. The NLL is also at variance with the now standard territorial sea limit of 12 nautical miles.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

The differences were not resolved, so the question is why? If this failure to negotiate a resolution had just 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 and agreeing to something approximating the North's line. It seems extremely unlikely that anyone in the DPRK would have opposed that. Although the NLL was established by the UNC, it appears that it is not longer involved, officially at least. It may well be that unofficially it is very much involved; the relationship between the US and ROK military seems to be unexplored territory. Whatever the role of Americans behind the scenes it seems clear that resolution of the NLL was opposed, successfully, by the ROK military. This opposition presumably was partly due to natural inertia – nobody likes giving up territory – but it must have gone deeper than that. 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”

**Fig 2: measuring policy change: KCNA mentions of the NLL over two administrations**



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.<sup>43</sup>

Whilst the NLL has long been a bone of contention, the situation has 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 North Limit Line. 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.<sup>44</sup>

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 [ 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.<sup>45</sup>

The PSI is in many ways similar to the NLL. It is unilateral and illegal. The PSI claims that a set of nations – 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 ofchutzpah.<sup>46</sup> 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'.<sup>47</sup> 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, but the two Koreas had been separated by a mutually agreed maritime border, the sinking would probably not have occurred. It appears that it ran aground in shallow waters and in an attempt to extricate itself was sunk by one of the South's mines.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the actual sinking of the Cheonan appears to have been an accident; it was the subsequent investigation that was deliberately fraudulent. The Yeonpyeong incident is different in that it occurred because of a deliberate provocation by the South.

## The artillery duel at Yeonpyeong

As to be expected there is much that is uncertain and 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.<sup>49</sup>

A rather 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<sup>50</sup>

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 threatening military exercises.

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.<sup>51</sup>

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.<sup>52</sup>

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."<sup>53</sup>

To say that the marine artillery drills had nothing to do with the Hoguk exercise seems to be a sophism. Moreover, the 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 often the English translation is 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 headed 'S. Korean 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.

If the puppet group finally opts for starting a war of aggression against the DPRK in league with foreign forces, defying its warnings, the group will not be able to escape a thousand-fold indiscriminate retaliatory blow, warns the article.<sup>54</sup>

This is a generalised warning about retaliation 'for starting a war of aggression' rather than specifically threatening a response to military exercises at Yeonpyeong. 'Indiscriminate' in this context presumably means 'all-out war'.

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. ....

As regards the expected DPRK's counteraction for self-defence, the command warns in advance all the civilian ships including fishing boats not to enter the theatre of naval firing fixed by the group of traitors in the waters close to the five islets in the West Sea of Korea.

It is the unshakable will and steadfast resolution of the army and people of the DPRK to return fire for fire.<sup>55</sup>

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.

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.<sup>56</sup>

The South Koreans admitted carrying 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.<sup>57</sup> Another says to the west.<sup>58</sup> Yet another has it to the southwest.<sup>59</sup>

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].<sup>60</sup>

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 does not recognise 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. 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.<sup>61</sup>

This telephone call, and the previous public warnings, have received very little coverage in the Western media, but there is no doubt that it took place, since it was reported by the Seoul newspaper Korea Herald:

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.<sup>62</sup>

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, we have other reports 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.<sup>63</sup>

It seems fair to assume that the local ROK military commander knew what would happen 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]<sup>64</sup>

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 phrase:

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]<sup>65</sup>

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 under it. In fact, the *Chosun Ilbo*, which has a very virulent ideological position, often does it. On 3 December it ran a story about an interview Russian Prime Minister Putin gave in the United States in which it was reported that 'Putin said that he finds the **situation** in the Korean Peninsula "very acute and disturbing"'. The headline was 'N.Korean **Attack** 'Acute and Disturbing,' Says Putin'.

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 never got to 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 report 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]<sup>66</sup>

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 liberals such as the American investigative journalist Tim Shorrock have been taken in.<sup>67</sup>

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].<sup>68</sup>

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."<sup>69</sup>

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.<sup>70</sup>

The American liberal John Feffer wrote of a 'disproportionate response' which killed 'two civilians and two soldiers'.<sup>71</sup>

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.<sup>72</sup>

‘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.<sup>73</sup>

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 very inaccurate. If it were close by, or even on the camp, then this would put a different complexion on things.

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.<sup>74</sup>

**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]<sup>75</sup>

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.<sup>76</sup> In fact the military installations were very 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.<sup>77</sup>

This NY Times article gave the civilian population as 1,600 but this was later revised down to 1,350.<sup>78</sup> Most appear to be connected, as one might expect, to fishing (this area is especially 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 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 the stuff. 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.<sup>79</sup>

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 STRATFOR report mentions the military base in passing, it is absent from the satellite images document. We have satellite photos of destroyed houses, but nothing about 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 suspicious omission.

The STRATFOR report, and images, do however throw considerable light, albeit inadvertently, on the issue of the 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 15<sup>th</sup> century Korean hwacha (‘fire vehicle’) which could fire a hundred or more projectiles in one salvo.<sup>80</sup> The most famous



example in modern times was the Soviet Katyusha, used in the Second World War and nicknamed the 'Stalin organ'.<sup>81</sup> The Americans used them in 1991 in the Gulf War, and the ROK military is equipped with them.<sup>82</sup>

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.<sup>83</sup>

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

The North Koreans do not have a monopoly on this, and there was anger in the 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.<sup>84</sup>

**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 not released any statement about casualties. In the South, some pointed out that their military equipment was far superior and more deadly and hence there must have been many casualties, and others pointed to the various satellite photos showing hits off target.<sup>85</sup>

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 Bagdad prior to invasion – are just a few 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 happens 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 it appears from the available evidence 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 casualties 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.

The U.S. regarded the death of innocent civilians as a common practice in the past in a bid to serve its military purposes in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and other parts of the world. This inhuman atrocity of the U.S. repeated itself on the Korean Peninsula this time.

While the incident occurred, the shells indiscriminately fired by the enemy dropped in the area close to civilian houses far from the artillery positions of the Korean People's Army.[emphasis added]<sup>86</sup>

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].<sup>87</sup> 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 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 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]<sup>88</sup>

## The road behind, the road ahead

The fire fight at Yeonpyeong Island seems to have been a manufactured crisis. It appears to be the first time that South Korea, alone or in tandem with the United States, has carried out a military exercise in territory claimed by the North.<sup>89</sup> There have been frequent naval clashes around the Northern Limit Line and it is fairly certain that it has been preserved for that purpose. If 'Seoul' had really been anxious to avoid incidents and preserve peace then the NLL would have gone long ago. President Roh moo-hyun and Chairman Kim Jong Il, at their summit on 4 October 2007 agreed to '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.<sup>90</sup>

Preserving the NLL as an area where incidents were likely 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. On top of which, the legal implications 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 through tension in order to precipitate a crisis on the peninsula, 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.<sup>91</sup>

This is a calculated policy of brinkmanship, 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, where he claims to be burying Caesar, not praising him, but of course is doing just that. 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 we get manifestly false statement that 'North Korea acknowledged the attack to be a 'provocation'.

Throughout the crises of 2001, especially over Cheonan and then Yeonpyeong, Lee Myung-bak has been very adroit in fanning the flames while give 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."<sup>92</sup>

It may be objected that this was a public statement and should not be taken too literally; 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.<sup>93</sup> Take, 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<sup>94</sup>

The South Korea 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.<sup>95</sup>

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.<sup>96</sup> North Korea's brinkmanship is therefore inherently *defensive*. It is designed to protect the country (or regime if you prefer that) 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 dictatorships while there was hostility towards the North because the balance of forces if anything favoured the North, there was not such an ambitious policy.

However, Lee Myung-bak is reputedly pragmatic and opportunistic. Soon after he won the presidency he was described in the New York Times thus:

Mr. Lee has a reputation as a pragmatist who, in contrast to President Roh Moo-hyun, holds few strong ideological positions. As mayor, he created parks and reformed the public transportation system. As president, he said, his main agenda would be to revive the country's economy.<sup>97</sup>

If that is correct, his brinkmanship has been a response to events and opportunities, rather than a considered strategy. In addition, we may discern three factors which may be propelling him 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.<sup>98</sup>

- Despite the frequent assertions of implosion and crisis, the DPRK is not facing collapse. Whilst sanctions must have caused huge damage it appears that the economy is 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 series of recent American visitors.<sup>99</sup> 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 suggestions that because of demographic changes the conservative ascendancy represented by the Lee administration may not be sustainable and that South Korea will move to more progressive administrations.<sup>100</sup>

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 NLL island and has announced that there will be artillery exercises from Daechong Island, and again on Yeonpyeong.<sup>101</sup> 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 the Japanese sense.<sup>102</sup> It will be recalled that clause 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.



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'.<sup>103</sup> 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? But 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 it looks as if it would. The Obama administration has termed its policy towards Korea as one of 'strategic patience'.<sup>104</sup> It might be better described as 'strategic paralysis'. Not merely has it ignored that calls of a many Korea experts to engage with the DPRK, but it has effectively relinquished control of events to Lee Myung-bak.<sup>105</sup> It might be said that 'strategic paralysis' is not confined to US Korea policy but is the defining characteristic of Obama foreign policy, and that would be true, but nowhere is it more perilous than in Korea.

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

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful for comments and corrections from Don Borrie, Steve Gowans, Ankie Hoogvelt, and Peter Wilson. All mistakes, of course, remain my responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, "America and China's first big test," *Financial Times*, 23 November 2010.

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<sup>7</sup> This is the theme of my forthcoming book on the Cheonan incident

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- <sup>20</sup> There have been suggestions that the US withdrew from Hoguk after the clash
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