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The Next Major War: Korea Again?

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By [Timothy D. Naegele](#)[1]

A series of events has been unfolding for some months now, which may culminate in another shooting war on the Korean peninsula that might prove devastating. North Korea has warned that a war with South Korea would go nuclear[2]; and the ramifications are enormous. In discussing this potential tragedy of epic proportions, it is useful to review recent events that have brought us to the present state of affairs:

- The Sinking Of A South Korean Navy Vessel In March Of 2010—The facts were unknown when it happened, except that an explosion took place aboard the ship, and efforts were underway to save as many of the crew members as possible. Whether this would turn into an international incident, testing the South Koreans and President Barack Obama, remained to be seen.[3] However, the Wall Street Journal noted:

The possibility of a violent, potentially apocalyptic regime collapse in North Korea within the decade is one that all countries with an interest in the region should keep in mind.[4]

The Journal added:

The latest incident comes days after a conference in which some experts described the Kim dictatorship as being in the first stage of collapse. Americans should be paying attention: If North Korea decides to go out in a blaze of nuclear glory—and its current penchant for kamikaze rhetoric suggests it might—the enormous number of casualties would likely include many of the U.S. troops stationed on the peninsula.[5]

- South Korean Ship *Was* Hit By North Korean Torpedo—Among other publications, the London Times reported that North Korea had launched one of the worst military acts of provocation since the

Korean War, killing 46 South Korean sailors, which had amounted to a deliberate and unprovoked attack by North Korea.[\[6\]](#)

- Finally, In May Of 2010, South Korea Blamed North Korea For Launching The Torpedo At Its Warship, Causing The Explosion That Killed 46 Sailors[\[7\]](#)—The Wall Street Journal reported that South Korea had convincing evidence.[\[8\]](#)
- There Is Reason To Believe That North Korea’s Dictator Kim Ordered The Sinking Of The *Cheonan*, To Help Secure The Succession Of His Son—The New York Times reported that an American intelligence analysis of the deadly torpedo attack on the South Korean warship concluded that Kim Jong Il, the ailing leader of North Korea, must have authorized the torpedo assault.[\[9\]](#)
- China Shields North Korea—Bloomberg News reported that Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao was likely to resist pressure to acknowledge that North Korea had torpedoed the South Korean warship.[\[10\]](#)
- North And South Korea On The Brink Of War, Russian Diplomat Warned.[\[11\]](#)
- North Korea Fired At South Korea As It Prepared To Host G-20 Summit Of Wealthiest Nations.[\[12\]](#)
- North Korea Fired On South Korean Island.[\[13\]](#)
- China Warned U.S. About Joint U.S.-South Korean Military Exercise As Korea Tensions Rise[\[14\]](#)—In turn, North Korea responded angrily to the maneuvers: “The situation on the Korean peninsula is inching closer to the brink of war.”
- America’s Chairman Of The Joint Chiefs Of Staff, Admiral Mullen, Rebuked China For Failing To Curb North Korea.[\[15\]](#)
- Firing Drill Increased Korea Tensions—South Korea test-fired artillery from the island that North Korea attacked, defying North Korean threats of another attack and asserting its rights in a maritime area it has controlled since the Korean War of the 1950s.[\[16\]](#)
- North Korea Said It Would Not Strike Back—As the Wall Street Journal noted, North Korea stood pat after a South Korean artillery drill, easing fears of armed conflict and suggesting that the North Koreans might be using provocations to seek economic inducements.

The Journal added:

Fighter jets patrolled the air and destroyers sailed in nearby waters ready to counter another North Korean attack.

...

[F]or decades Pyongyang’s power has been tied to its ability and willingness to surprise Seoul. Analysts say it is more likely to stage another provocation when the South’s guard goes down in the months ahead, depending on its need to further its broad goals of securing economic assistance and security guarantees for its authoritarian regime.

For now, the episode appeared to take its place in a long series of provocations South Koreans have gotten used to.

...

Earlier in the day the North made another conciliatory gesture—announced by a visiting U.S. dignitary, New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, making an unofficial visit—to let the international nuclear inspectors it kicked out last year come back to the country.

. . .

For longtime North Korea watchers, Pyongyang's official statement and offer to Mr. Richardson showed that it continued to operate in a familiar pattern: heating things up with provocative actions that draw attention, and then cooling them down with peace-making gestures in hopes of winning economic and security favors.^[17]

- WikiLeaks Cables Reveal China Ready To Abandon North Korea—The UK's Guardian reported:

China has signalled its readiness to accept Korean reunification and is privately distancing itself from the North Korean regime, according to leaked US embassy cables that reveal senior Beijing figures regard their official ally as a "spoiled child".^[18]

North Korea's latest series of provocations might prove little more than that, even as deadly as they were.

However, miscalculations may take place, which could be catastrophic. While America is tied down militarily in Iraq, and its forces are mired in the Afghan War, North Korea may feel emboldened to strike against South Korea and set the Korean peninsula ablaze. Similarly, other trouble spots around the world may flare up, such as a war in the Middle East involving Israel and Iran or its surrogates.

Given Barack Obama's perceived weakness and naïveté, as well as global economic problems confronting the United States and other countries, its enemies may choose now or in the not-too-distant future as an opportune time to strike. The use of nuclear weapons, or the ultimate EMP Attack^[19], would send America and its allies reeling. Let's hope and pray it never happens.

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^[2] See http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=CNG.4fb1629dc68392c48ffbd287f0cd9a66.931&show_article=1

^[3] See, e.g., <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article7077655.ece> and http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704100604575146940411764282.html?mod=WSJ_newsreel_world

^[4] See http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704100604575145672974954144.html?mod=WSJ_hps_MIDDLEForthNews

^[5] See *id.*

^[6] The Times article added:

[South Korean President Lee Myung Bak]'s government appears to be struggling to find an appropriate response that would demonstrate its resolve in the face of aggression but stop short

of a costly and unpredictable war.

...

The speculation is that this was an act of retaliation for a naval skirmish in November last year in which the North came off worse.

...

Some security officials favour a tit-for-tat response to any North Korean aggression. But the risk is that this could escalate into a war, which might result in eventual victory for the South and its US allies, but could be ruinously destructive and expensive.

A limited war might be exactly what the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Il, is hoping for. After decades of economic decline and famine in the 1990s which killed as many as a few million people, his economy is in chronic decline.

A military adventure against the routinely demonised “imperialist” US and its South Korean “lackeys” could serve as a welcome and unifying distraction.

...

“No one wants to say it out loud,” wrote Song Ho Keun, a professor at Seoul National University in the Joong-Ang Ilbo newspaper.

“We told ourselves to be patient and cool, not to jump to conclusions as there is no definitive evidence implicating the North. But if we find one little piece of evidence pointing definitely at North Korea, the rage we have forcibly suppressed will gush forth.”

See <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article7104498.ece>

[7] See <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/18/AR2010051803094.html?hpid=topnews>

[8] For example, the Journal noted:

[W]hen the South Korean joint military-civilian investigation team presented their findings at a nationally-televised news conference, they unveiled a surprise: virtually the entire unexploded portion of the torpedo that destroyed the ship.

Searchers found the torpedo parts—including its propulsion system, steering section and propellers—last Saturday in the waters where the ship was destroyed. A marking inside the propulsion system reads “No. 1” in Korean lettering and, investigators said, is consistent with markings in a North Korean torpedo that the South Korean military obtained several years ago.

See http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703691804575255162754594880.html?mod=WSJ_hps_SECONDTopStories

[9] See http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/23/world/asia/23korea.html?_r=1&hps=&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1274612566-rHxXHXr8DGOehpG3vtFz9Q

In an editorial entitled, “Lessons From a Torpedo”—and subtitled “Placating Kim Jong Il doesn’t change North Korea’s behavior”—the Wall Street Journal stated explicitly:

President Obama . . . sent Kim a personal letter spelling out a “future vision” for the two countries, including the promise of a peace treaty, a guarantee of regime security and economic aid in exchange for the North’s denuclearization. The North’s response arrived by torpedo.

...

Engaging Kim has done little to improve his behavior, except in brief intervals, and if anything that behavior has become worse since Mr. Obama took office.

...

The larger strategic insight is to recognize that North Korea won't change until Kim dies or his regime falls. The goal of the West should be to increase pressure on the North toward the latter goal, especially given signs of increasing discontent in the North.

...

[T]he long U.S. attempt to persuade Beijing to control its client has nothing to show for it.

...

If Kim and his generals can sink a South Korean ship without serious consequences, they might well conclude that they should escalate. The proper response is to give up the illusions of engagement, and methodically and coolly treat the North as the rogue state it is.

See <http://www.naegele.com/documents/LessonsFromaTorpedo.pdf>

In an article entitled, “Kim Jong-il ‘laying the ground for succession’ with military attacks”—and subtitled, “Palace power-struggles between North Korea’s new-generation political leadership and its hawkish military establishment could spark off a full war on the Peninsula, South Korean and US authorities are warning”—the UK’s Telegraph reported:

Last week’s attack on Yeonpyeong island, a senior South Korean defence official told The Daily Telegraph, was personally approved by North Korea’s supreme leader, Kim Jong-il and his son and heir-apparent Kim Jong-un, in an effort to curry favour with hostile military hawks.

“I fear we’re going to see much more fighting in weeks to come,” the official said.

...

Kim Jong-il, US government sources said, is determined not to rejoin talks aimed at curbing North Korea’s nuclear programme in return for aid, fearful of upsetting military leaders. He hopes precipitating a crisis will lead the generals to rally behind his son and compel South Korea and the West to engage in dialogue on his terms.

Kim Jong-un was made a four-star general and named vice-chairman of the country’s National Defence Commission in September—even though the Swiss-educated 27-year-old had no military experience. “The generals saw Kim Jong-un as a puppy who wasn’t even lavatory trained,” said Kongdan Oh Hassig, a North Korea expert, “not a credible leader. There was lots of fuming.”

Bruce Bennett, another North Korea specialist, said the succession left generals “asking themselves how much longer they would have a role in government”. He noted that replacements of officials in North Korea “usually occur as the result of a purge or a ‘traffic accident,’ so that could be cause for some instability.”

“Every time there’s been a succession in North Korea,” Dr. Hassig noted, “you’ve had trouble, because the leadership has needed to reassure the military.”

Kim Jong-il ordered the bombing of a Korean Air plane in 1987, killing all 115, and an attack on officials which left 17 dead.

Little noticed in the West, tensions with the military have often threatened North Korea's ruling family. In 1991-1992, there were reports that a group of generals had been planning to assassinate Kim Il-sung, in order to implement a programme of radical modernisation. Later, in 1995, elements of North Korea's VI corps in famine-hit North Hamgyong province almost revolted.

"The Kims are playing the Crazy Fearsome Cripple Gambit," a US military official told The Daily Telegraph, referring to a term coined by the strategic analyst George Friedman.

North Korea's regime, Mr Friedman argued, wilfully chose to be an economically-crippled state to make itself unattractive as a target for intervention. Then it sought to inspire fear by developing nuclear weapons.

Finally, Mr Friedman argued, "having established that they were crippled and fearsome, the critical element was to establish their insanity". Since no one would wish for a nuclear-armed North Korea to engage in a crazy military adventure, it would give the regime what it wanted.

Both Koreas are now holding out threats of further fighting. North Korea's official news agency warned on Saturday that the "situation on the Korean peninsula is inching closer to the brink of war".

Lieutenant General Yoo Nak Joon, commander of the South Korean Marine Corps, meanwhile, called on his troops to "put our feelings of rage and animosity in our bones and take our revenge on North Korea".

See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/8166343/Kim-Jong-il-laying-the-ground-for-succession-with-military-attacks.html>

[10] Specifically, Bloomberg reported:

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao is likely to resist pressure to acknowledge that North Korea torpedoed a South Korean warship when he flies to Seoul tomorrow to meet South Korean President Lee Myung Bak and Japan's Yukio Hatoyama.

...

China wants to avoid a conflict on the Korean peninsula, and is concerned that taking South Korea's side may provoke North Korea into further escalations and even lead to war, said Shen Dingli, vice dean of the Institute of International Affairs at Shanghai's Fudan University.

"North Korea is dying, and we can make things worse," Shen said. "We have assumed North Korea is not a rational actor."

See <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-05-26/china-may-shield-north-korea-as-lee-clinton-seek-action-over-ship-sinking.html>

[11] See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/8020972/North-and-South-Korea-on-the-brink-of-war-Russian-diplomat-warns.html>

[12] The AP reported:

North Korea fired two rounds toward South Korea at their tense border and South Korean troops immediately fired back, an official said Friday.

The exchange of fire at the heavily armed border highlights the security problems faced by Seoul as it prepares to host the Group of 20 economic summit next month.

North Korean troops fired at a South Korean guard post in the Demilitarized Zone, said an official at the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Seoul.

...

The guard post is 73 miles (118 kilometers) northeast of Seoul.

...

The spike in tensions Friday came two weeks ahead of a global economic summit in Seoul to be attended by President Barack Obama and other leaders.

...

In May, a multinational investigation led by Seoul concluded that a torpedo fired by a North Korean submarine sank the 1,200-ton Cheonan warship. North Korea has denied involvement in the sinking, which killed 46 South Korean sailors.

The sinking heightened tensions between the rival Koreas, which remain technically at war because their 1950-53 war ended with a cease-fire, not a peace treaty.

See <http://apnews.myway.com/article/20101029/D9J5B8OG0.html>; see also <http://www.naegele.com/documents/NorthKoreaFiresShotsAcrossBorder.pdf> and http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-10-29-north-south-korea-fire_N.htm?loc=interstitialskip

[13] The Los Angeles Times reported:

North Korea on Tuesday fired dozens of artillery rounds onto a populated South Korean island, killing two and injuring 19 others after Pyongyang claimed that Seoul was readying for “an invasion,” officials said.

South Korean President Lee Myung-bak called an emergency session of his national security-related ministers in an underground bunker at the presidential residence late Tuesday to devise a response to the attack, which occurred near the disputed western border between north and south.

The Seoul government later called North Korea’s artillery attack a “clear military provocation” and warned that the secretive regime would face “stern retaliation” should it launch further attacks.

...

The South Korean military was placed on high alert, with fighter jets sent into the air, after officials confirmed that two Marines were killed and 19 others—including three civilians—were injured.

...

The White House . . . said the U.S. would stand by South Korea. “Earlier today North Korea conducted an artillery attack against the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong. We are in close and continuing contact with our Korean allies,” said a statement.

“The United States strongly condemns this attack and calls on North Korea to halt its belligerent action and to fully abide by the terms of the Armistice Agreement.” It added that the U.S. “is firmly committed to the defense of our ally, the Republic of Korea, and to the maintenance of regional peace and stability.”

See <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-korea-shelling-web-20101124.0.958943.full.story>; see also http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703904804575631763523837910.html?mod=WSJ_hp_LEFTTopStories and http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20101123/wl_afp/nkoreaskoreamilitarynuclearweapons_20101123092327

A USA Today article added:

The skirmish came amid high tension over North Korea's claim that it has a new uranium enrichment facility and just six weeks after North Korean leader Kim Jong Il unveiled his youngest son Kim Jong Un as his heir apparent.

...

The existence of North Korea's new uranium enrichment facility came to light over the weekend after Pyongyang showed it to a visiting American nuclear scientist, claiming that the highly sophisticated operation had 2,000 completed centrifuges. Top U.S. military officials warn that it could speed the North's ability to make and deliver viable nuclear weapons.

See http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-11-23-korea-artillery_N.htm?loc=interstitialskip

[14] The Wall Street Journal reported:

Beijing [has] lodged its first official protest of a joint U.S.-South Korean military exercise planned for Sunday, even as the aircraft carrier USS George Washington steamed toward the region.

North Korea also responded angrily. "The situation on the Korean peninsula is inching closer to the brink of war," the state controlled Korean Central News Agency responded Friday to the maneuvers, which are set to take place in the Yellow Sea between the Koreas and northeastern China.

The strong talk was the latest fallout from North Korea's hour-long artillery attack of a South Korean island on Tuesday that killed four people. The next day, the U.S. and South Korea said planned joint exercises would go ahead over the weekend, heightening fears in some quarters that already-tense relations between North and South Korea—and their respective international protectors, China and the U.S.—could be heading for a showdown.

Yet China's outwardly defiant response belies a more delicate political reality: Beijing's continued support of North Korea's erratic, martial regime is beginning to extract real costs. China's statement Friday included a face-saving formulation that appeared to open the door for a scenario China has long sought to avert—a U.S. aircraft carrier, a potent symbol of U.S. military might, plying the edge of Chinese waters.

...

China has long frustrated U.S. efforts to bring its nuclear-armed neighbor to heel, fearing any radical change could sow chaos in the region and potentially lead to a unified Korea with a U.S. military presence directly on its border. Beijing refused this week to blame North Korea for Tuesday's attack. Privately, its officials maintain, the weekend's exercises could be a grave mistake that risk further provoking the North.

But current and former U.S. officials who have worked on North Korea said Friday that they saw China in a growing quandary in how to square its support for Pyongyang with the regime's continued provocations.

Beijing has sought in recent months to deepen its economic and strategic relationship with

North Korea, despite U.S. objections, arguing it would help contain leader Kim Jong Il's nuclear work and military provocations. As Pyongyang has continued to challenge the international community, however, China has been placed in an increasingly weakened position to protest U.S. military action.

"China is having a much harder time in defending its policy, but they only have themselves to blame," said Michael Green, who oversaw Asia policy for the White House during George W. Bush's first term. "You talk to any Chinese official, and they're furious with the North Koreans."

Beijing is also facing renewed criticism from Chinese foreign-policy experts, journalists and Internet activists who question whether unqualified support for North Korea is still in China's interests.

China's apparently softened stance on Yellow Sea exercises appears to demonstrate a concern that the North Korean crisis will overshadow a planned trip to Washington in January by President Hu Jintao. It may also reflect an acknowledgment that China would be unlikely to prevent the U.S. and South Korea from staging their drills following the week's attack, requiring a compromise to avoid appearing weak before an increasingly nationalist and demanding Chinese public.

"The very recent developments put China in an awkward position," said Jin Canrong, an international relations professor at Renmin University in Beijing. "China's not pleased to see that, but it has to face it. So its immediate concern is to contain the crisis."

U.S. military officials insisted Friday that the exercise scheduled for this weekend shouldn't be interpreted as anything but an attempt to deter North Korea from further attacks on the South.

"This exercise is not directed at China," said Capt. Darryn James, a Pentagon spokesman. "The purpose is to strengthen the deterrence against North Korea."

U.S. officials on Friday said the Obama administration continues to focus its diplomacy in Northeast Asia on gaining China's cooperation to exert more pressure on North Korea.

...

[In] a speech by [Secretary of State Hillary] Clinton[,] she said that the U.S. had a national interest in protecting freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Ever since, China and the U.S. have been engaged in a tussle for influence in the region, where many Southeast Asian nations that have territorial disputes with China are looking to beef up defense relations with the U.S.

See <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704008704575638420698918004.html>

[15] The Los Angeles Times is reporting that the chairman of America's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in Seoul that Beijing's inaction gives tacit approval to its ally North Korea's aggression:

The most senior U.S. military official delivered a sharp rebuke to China on Wednesday, blaming Asia's top power for failing to rein in its North Korean ally in the escalating dispute over the fate of the Korean peninsula.

Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, blasted China for refusing to condemn North Korea over the Nov. 23 artillery barrage that killed four people on the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong. He spoke in Seoul, where he met with his South Korean counterpart in a public display of resolve to deter any North Korean aggression.

But Mullen directed some of his most pointed criticism at Beijing.

“The Chinese have enormous influence over the North, influence that no other nation on Earth enjoys,” said Mullen at a press conference at the South Korean Ministry of National Defense. “And yet, despite a shared interest in reducing tensions, they appear unwilling to use it.”

“Even tacit approval of Pyongyang’s brazenness leaves all their neighbors asking, ‘What will be next?’ ”

At the joint news conference Wednesday, Han Min-koo, South Korea’s own top commander, said that rules of engagement are being strengthened to allow commanders on the ground to fire back immediately in case of another North Korean attack.

...

“It is not just that China is turning a blind eye to what North Korea is doing, they are enabling North Korea,” [L. Gordon Flake, a Korea specialist with the Mansfield Foundation] said. “China’s overt support for North Korea is blunting the effectiveness of diplomatic measures to curb their behavior.”

...

The U.S. administration has also signaled that it is not ready to return to the previous diplomatic path of the six-party talks, a position Mullen reiterated Wednesday.

“We first need an appropriate basis for the resumption of talks,” he said. “There is none so long as North Korea persists in its illegal, ill-advised and dangerous behavior. I do not believe we should continue to reward that behavior with bargaining or new incentives.”

See http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-mullen-china-korea-20101209.0.6920379.story?track=rss&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+latimes%2Fmostviewed+%28L.A.+Times+-+Most+Viewed+Stories%29

[16] See http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704138604576029240348016046.html?mod=WSJ_hp_LEFTTopStories; see also http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304879604575582343372934982.html?mod=WSJ_hp_LEFTTopStories (“A History of Korean Tensions”)

[17] Also, the Journal article stated:

With its Nov. 23 attack on Yeonpyeong Island and in statements since, North Korea has tried to effectively redraw a maritime border in the Yellow Sea that it has long disputed with South Korea. Four South Koreans, including two civilians, died in the attack.

North Korea claimed that waters around the island, into which South Korea has test-fired artillery since the mid-1970s, belong to it and that any South Korean military test amounts to an attack on its territory. South Korean officials insisted on continuing the drill on the island to assure that North Korea’s attack wouldn’t create a de facto change of its territory in the maritime border area.

...

North Korea’s statements caused more alarm in other countries than they did in South Korea, where North Korea’s rhetoric is part of the daily noise. Analysts in Seoul over the weekend noted that Pyongyang’s threats were issued by lower-level sources than the agencies affiliated with its dictator Kim Jong Il. As well, military officials said they saw no unusual preparations by the North’s military over the weekend.

As a result, no special precautions were ordered on South Korea's mainland and in the capital city of Seoul, just 30 miles from the border, and business proceeded as usual Monday.

...

North Korea's offer to restart international nuclear inspections may have less impact now after its announcement last month of a uranium enrichment program. When the North's nuclear-weapons development work was confined to plutonium reprocessing, it was easy for inspectors to monitor.

But, analysts note the uranium program Pyongyang revealed last month is likely housed in multiple locations and easily hidden, making the inspections process less reliable as a means of holding North Korea to disarmament agreements.

See http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703886904576031232770698532.html?mod=WSJ_hp_MIDDLENexttoWhatsNewsForth

[18] See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/29/wikileaks-cables-china-reunified-korea>

[19] See <http://naegeleblog.wordpress.com/2010/01/19/emp-attack-only-30-million-americans-survive/>; see also <http://naegeleblog.wordpress.com/2010/01/19/emp-attack-only-30-million-americans-survive/#comment-1170>



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