



## ARTILLERY EXCHANGE ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

*Niklas Swanström*

*North and South Korea have been involved in a significant exchange of artillery fire since 02:30 local time November 23rd, over the disputed Northern Limit Line (NLL). There have been confirmed casualties on the South Korean side (two dead and 10 injured) although the information at hand is very sketchy and constantly being updated. There is also a lack of information from the North Korean side regarding casualties. Parts of the Yeonpyeong Island that has been shelled is allegedly on fire and large material destruction has been reported; but no reports on the damage have been issued by North Korea. Both the South Korean cabinet and the North Korean leaders have met independently to discuss the crisis. Both sides seem to have unilaterally decided to de-escalate. It is unlikely that they have had any bilateral contact to discuss the issue.*

This incident is not without a background. Partly it could have been expected. Even if it is a testing of regional security, it should by no means be disregarded. Firstly, the Cheonan incident with the 46 South Korean casualties in March adds a grim background. That incident makes it virtually impossible for South Korea to back down during a crisis of emergency, even if escalation at this moment is very dangerous. The situation is also made very delicate for the South Korean, and U.S., side with North Korea's acknowledgement of 2,000 centrifuges for their nuclear program that would put the North Korean much further in their nuclear development than previously thought. This, in combination with the proclaimed willingness to test a new nuclear weapon in the near future, puts South Korea, the United States and the international community in a jittery mode.

There is a lot of speculation in the South regarding the situation, and also how the appointment of Kim Jong Il's youngest son Kim Jong Un has played into this. It is speculated that Kim Jong Un is desperate for the support from the military and that these incidents together with the development of nuclear weapons would strengthen his position. Although the position of the military is likely to benefit as well, the Cheonan incident and the apparent advancement of the nuclear program would have been enough and today's incident may very well prove to have been too much. It could also be speculated that Pyongyang knows that South Korea is divided on how to deal with North Korea and that a crisis could promote the dialogue between North and South. While some contacts may be the result, it will also decrease trust and any eagerness to cooperate on the South Korean side.

The reason for this have to be found somewhere else. North Korea is concerned, not only over yesterday's U.S.-ROK naval exercise that they see as a direct threat to North Korean security, but also the forthcoming annual Hoguek exercise. Pyongyang did contact Seoul and asked them to end yesterday's exercise, but apparently ROK continued the exercises on territory that they claim and which North Korea disputes. There have been repeated warnings from Pyongyang that if such exercises continue, North Korea will have to resort to force. This might very well have been the reason for initiating the tension. North Korea has seen these exercises as directed against them. It seems as if ROK and the U.S. have tried to use this as leverage to push DPRK into the fold, something that apparently seems to have failed today. Is this then the only reason? There are a multitude of reasons for the conflict on the North Korean Peninsula. The exercises are only one of them but potentially the most important of them all. What allowed for this to go too far was simply the lack of trust and confidence between the parties to the conflict. Escalation has done nothing to improve the climate.

### Implications

The response from South Korea has been in accordance with what could have been expected. No excess of force had been detected so far. It would not be in DPRK's interest to further escalate the conflict. North Korea is most likely happy with the result of this military escalation. They have sent a clear message to Seoul and Washington that they will not accept continued military exercises on what it perceives to be its terri-



tory, or at least disputed territory. This would speak for a short, even if intensive, artillery exchange.

The implications of this are on the other hand not as short and possibly even more intensive. With the background of the earlier tension and the paramount lack of trust between North and South Korea there is no, or little, possibility that we will see any constructive actions in the short term. The Six-Party process is probably dead in all practical terms, even though it is needed now more than ever. Added to this, there is no substitute ready to pick up the flag at this moment and there is an almost sentimental attachment to the Six-Party Talks from many quarters.

It is likely that tension will continue in the region. More clashes can be expected before the conflict calms down. North Korea is not happy with the current border delimitations and the restraint that the South Koreans have shown in the past may not continue. South Korea will probably further limit its economic interaction with North Korea – aid, technical support, etc. – which North Korea will take as nothing less than a provocation. With a number of governments having different perceptions and agendas, a positive development cannot be foreseen in the short term.

It is possible that today's incident may have terminated what is most needed now in the Korean Peninsula – communication. There seems to be few real opportunities to discuss bilaterally long-term solutions between North and South Korea. The Six-Party Talks have seen another hard push in its soft belly. Despite Chinese attempts, the continuation of the Six-Party Talks has been a failure, not least due to actions taken by the actors involved. In much the Chinese has been the only party to the talks working actively for continued and constructive dialogue. There is a need for other governments, side by side with the Chinese, to call for greater communication and assist in promoting the dialogue between North and South – but not limited to a bilateral dialogue.

## Future needs

There is no doubt that North and South Korea will need opportunities to talk, now more than ever. With the Six-Party Talks thrown overboard, there is not much else they can utilize. There will be a need for both regional as well as bilateral solutions to future problems and crisis situations. This is not something that can be achieved without direct contacts between the involved parties.

A new structure has to be established on the Korean Peninsula that can effectively deal with crisis management, both at a formal level but also at more informal levels. Very few such

mechanisms are in place today. There is a vacuum in terms of contacts. Arguably the most important bilateral relations are the military to military relations between North and South Korea. It is well established that most incidents happen because of misunderstanding of intent and it is arguably nothing different here. Miscalculations and misunderstandings of intent and perceptions are only too common on the Korean Peninsula. The more exchange and dialogue that can be established on a military level, the more is the potential for stability.

Finally, this incident has clearly shown the need for direct lines between leaders, both on the military and political level. While the North Koreans attempted to contact the South Koreans and warn them about the exercise, it is unclear whether it was done at the right level and through the right channels. Communication and contact between North and South needs to be established in order to promote stability and crisis management. This is something that is not only lacking now but seems to be more difficult than ever to establish.

*Niklas Swanström is Director of the Institute for Security and Development Policy.*

*The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.*

## The Institute for Security & Development Policy

Västra Finnbodavägen 2, SE-13130 Stockholm - Nacka

E-mail: [info@isdpeu](mailto:info@isdpeu) / Tel: +46(0)8-41056953

Website: [www.isdpeu](http://www.isdpeu)

### Directors:

Svante E. Cornell & Niklas L.P. Swanström

### Chairman, Advisory Council:

S. Frederick Starr

### Deputy Director:

Johanna Popjanevski