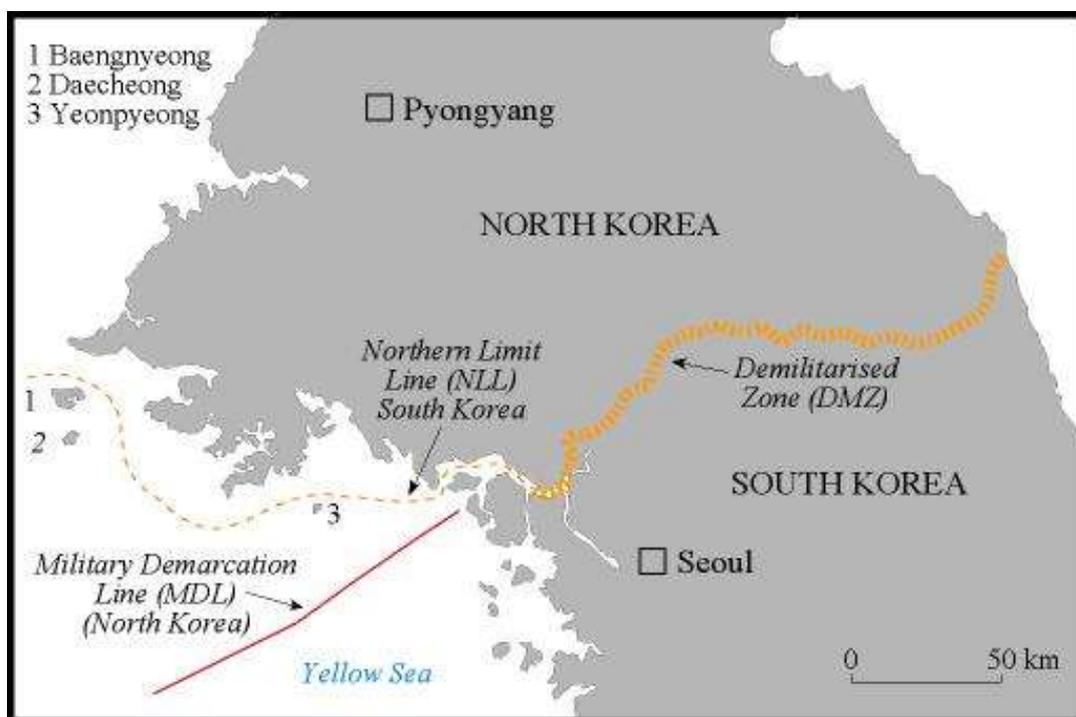


Anniversary of Contested Memories

Tim Beal

23 November 2011 marked the first anniversary of the Yeonpyeong Incident, an exchange of artillery fire which left 4 South Koreans and an unknown number of North Koreans dead. This was the first artillery battle since the Korean War and many observers considered the peninsula closer to war than it had been for decades. A war between the two Koreas would automatically bring in the Americans, who have control over the South Korean military, and an invasion of the North would almost certainly bring in the Chinese. This was the background to my book [Crisis in Korea](#).

Map: Sea of contention: the NLL,MDL, and the DMZ



Source: Beal, Tim. *Crisis in Korea: America, China, and the Risk of War*. London: Pluto, 2011.

What actually happened in November 2010 is a matter of some dispute. Truth, as they say, is the first casualty in conflict. According to the South Korean government, and this was the version promulgated by most of the international media and accepted by most governments around the world, this had been an unprovoked, surprise attack. The reality was somewhat different. The South had, in fact, precipitated the incident by holding 'live-fire' exercises into contested waters off the island. Yeonpyeong lies near the Northern Limit Line (NLL), a sea boundary drawn unilaterally, and [illegally](#), by the US in 1953. North Korea claims a line to the south, shown on the map as the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) so any firing into the waters around Yeonpyeong (apart from a lane of access) would be into what they considered their territorial waters. This is the sort of thing governments take very seriously (it has implications for fishing rights, seabed resources such as oil, and access to ports, etc.) and throughout history has been a major source of war. In this case the

North warned on a number of occasions that they would retaliate if the South fired into their waters – even making a telephone call on the morning of the incident. It is unclear whether the incident was a deliberate provocation by the South, to which arguably the North over-reacted, or some sort of failure of communication. But in any case the fallout from the incident was a godsend for the government in Seoul. It produced a lot of anger in the South, and around the world, against North Korea which was portrayed as bellicose and aggressive.

It was inevitable therefore that the anniversary would be commemorated, albeit in different ways. The North played down the occasion. There were reports of Kim Jong Il visiting an army base near the border – a message that if attacked they were ready – and the North Korean army issued a florid [declaration](#) that if the South were to

...fire one bullet or shell toward its inviolable territorial waters, sky and land, the deluge of fire on Yonphyong [Yeonpyeong] Island will lead to that in Chongwadae [South Korean presidential building] and the sea of fire in Chongwadae to the deluge of fire sweeping away the stronghold of the group of traitors.

The South, for its part, put on a big show in case anyone was inclined to overlook the anniversary. The *Washington Post* captured the mood with its [heading](#):

South Korea flaunts bolstered firepower as it marks anniversary of North Korea's island attack

And the firepower was [impressive](#):

South Korea is holding a massive military drill on Wednesday involving cutting-edge F-15K fighter jets and K-9 long-range artillery pieces to mark North Korea's shelling of Yeonpyeong Island a year ago. The Joint Chiefs of Staff on Tuesday said the exercise will be held "under real conditions" to deal with North Korean provocations. The F-15K fighter jets will train firing SLAM-ER air-to-ground missiles with a range of 278 km capable of knocking out targets in North Korea. ...

Marines stationed on the island will follow their new directives of responding first with a volley of rounds from their K-9 howitzers and only then reporting the incident to their commanders.

Army Cobra attack helicopters and Navy vessels will wrap up the drill by attacking North Korean special forces troops approaching Baeknyeong Island aboard hydrofoils

All exciting stuff and one might be forgiven for thinking that though war hadn't broken out in 2010 it had a better chance this time around.

However, when you read the fine print in the press reports you find out that much of this is simulation and there is no real firing; no 'live-fire' of the sort that set off the artillery exchange last year. So no chance of 'one bullet or shell [violating the North's] territorial waters, sky and land'

It was, in fact, a piece of theatre intended not to warn off Pyongyang but to excite Seoul. North Korea is, with justification, concerned that the much stronger South, and its American patron, will launch an invasion and moves with calculation and circumspection (thought they might not always get it right). The South Korean people, on the other hand, have to be persuaded that the North is a dangerous threat. Tension must be frequently stoked, even if, as on this occasion, care is taken to make sure things don't get out of control. The Korean peninsula is where the four great powers – the US, Russia, Japan, and China – meet and contest. Within this context the politics of the divided country are convoluted and confusing. Things are seldom as they are portrayed and memories are usually contested.

For a longer version of this blog go to [Theatre of War](#)

Tim Beal also runs a website focussing on the Korean peninsula and its place in international politics called [Asian Geopolitics](#).

He is the author of two books published by Pluto:

North Korea: The Struggle against American Power (2005)

Crisis in Korea: America, China, and the Risk of War (2011)