

Simmering tension in Korea

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With the Western media fixated by social disintegration and rioting in England, and the on-going global economic crisis, it is not surprising that little attention is paid to events in Korea. However, as with Czechoslovakia in 1938 this 'far off country of which we know little' in reality is very important to the rest of the world. The Korean peninsula is where the US, Japan, China, and Russia meet and a war between the two Koreas would inevitably involve the United States (because it controls the South Korean military) and that would almost certainly bring in China. A military clash between the US and China would have unpredictable, but surely profound, consequences for the world.

Korea surfaced in the media recently with headlines such as these on 10 August: [South Korea returns fire on North in disputed waters](#) [Guardian] and [South Korea Returns Fire After Shots From North](#) [New York Times]. The impression one would get from these articles was that a peaceful South Korea was responding to a provocation from a belligerent North Korea. The reality is both more complex, and at variance with the official line promulgated by the media. The process by which the official line is spread will come as no surprise to Pluto readers. Essentially, the South Korean Ministry of National Defence issues a statement which is translated and disseminated, embellished as necessary, by the official Yonhap news agency. This is then taken up by international agencies such as Associated Press, or directly by media, and usually accepted at face value. This is how the words of a South Korean general roll off the tongue of a British journalist. Statements by a North Korean general get very different treatment.

What happened on 10 August? According to the South Korean military the North fired three artillery rounds, one of which landed on, or south of, the Northern Limit Line (NLL), which is the boundary in the West (or Yellow) Sea claimed by the South, but rejected by the North. At first sight the idea that the North had tested coastal artillery was very plausible. What the Guardian and the New York Times both forgot to mention was that on 16 August another round of US-South Korea military exercises was scheduled to begin. These practise an invasion of the North, the seizure of its nuclear deterrent, and the unification of Korea under the Seoul government. Whether these invasion plans will ever be put into effect is uncertain because of the probable consequences. However, the North has to take the exercises seriously and always [protests](#). So, artillery exercises as a warning would be quite feasible. However, later that day the North came out with its version of events. There had been no artillery fired and what the South had heard was blasting from a construction site. The reports of artillery were 'a product of the deliberate moves of the belligerent forces of the south Korean military to vitiate the atmosphere of dialogue in the Korean Peninsula and its vicinity and push the inter-Korean relations to the worst phase of [confrontation and clash](#).'

Who is telling the truth? Since we have no impartial accounts we cannot be certain but it is likely that the North's account is basically correct. Firstly, there would be no reason to deny a defensive artillery practice prior to the US-South Korean exercises. They could dispute where the shells landed but why try to cover up the artillery practice itself? Secondly, the right-wing Seoul newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* claimed that 'What was distinctive about Wednesday's [10 August] shelling is that it happened late at night despite sea fog that restricted visibility to just 1 km. Normally, artillery drills take place during the day when the weather is clear so that it is easy to check whether the shells [reached their target](#).' This is rather confusing because the South Korea military had asserted that the shelling took place at 1pm. However, whatever time the incident happened, if there was fog then that would militate against an artillery exercise.

Thirdly, there is the mundane, but strong, possibility that the South Korean military, hyped up, overreacted to the sounds of blasting and opened fire. This has happened before, most recently when, back in June, South Korea marines in the same area fired on a South Korean airliner landing at Incheon International Airport outside Seoul, mistaking it for a North Korean military aircraft. The marines were not punished because 'because they [didn't do anything wrong](#)'. The marines, cheerfully explained the *Chosun Ilbo*, were '[Made Trigger-Happy by Inter-Korean Tensions](#)'. If marines were trigger-happy in June they could well be trigger-happy in August. This interpretation subsequently received further corroboration from this same paper. The *Chosun Ilbo* is always advocating for increased resources for the military. In the week after the incident it ran stories on how the army needed more radar equipment because The South Korean military's artillery firefinder radar systems [failed to detect the North Korean artillery shells](#) on 10 August. According to the *Chosun Ilbo* that was because there were not enough systems to detect all incoming fire. That is one possibility; another is that there was no artillery fire that day to detect.

But what is behind these 'inter-Korean tensions' that lead marines to such dangerous acts? That is a complicated subject which I discuss in detail in my latest book [Crisis in Korea](#). Very briefly, the current hardline president of South Korea, Lee Myung-bak, thinks that the North has been so debilitated by sanctions that a suitable crisis will precipitate its collapse and takeover by the South. That is behind, for instance, the apparent fabrication of evidence to incriminate the North in the sinking of the warship *Cheonan* in March 2010. According to the Russian investigation the *Cheonan* was probably sunk by a South Korea mine.

Lee needs to keep tensions bubbling along to raise chances of an incident which could escalate of its own accord to produce a crisis. The most likely place for that to happen is in the West Sea in the vicinity of the Northern Limit Line (see map). The NLL was unilaterally established by the Americans in 1953 in order, it has been claimed, to prevent then South Korean president Syngman Rhee from sending ships North to [reignite the fighting](#). We know that American officials (including Henry Kissinger) admit that [the NLL is illegal](#). Many Western observers, including the staunchly pro-American *International Crisis Group* argue that the NLL should be replaced by [a mutually-acceptable, non-confrontational boundary](#) in order to remove this cause of tension.

The West Sea and the North Limit Line



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

In October 2007, at a summit between then South Korea president Roh Moo-hyun and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il it was agreed to establish a [‘special peace and cooperation zone in the West Sea’](#) in the area between the South NLL and the North’s proposed Military Demarcation Line(MDL) to prevent further clashes. When Lee Myung-bak came into office in 2008 he reversed Roh’s North Korea policy, including the peace and cooperation zone.

The West Sea, and particularly the area in the vicinity of the NLL is rich in highly prized crabs. It is also an area where there have been many clashes in the past. The recent incident did not ignite a crisis. But, unless the NNL situation is defused there will continue to be incidents, and one of them may lead to a crisis, with devastating consequences for the Korean peninsula and the world.

This piece originally appeared on the Pluto Books [blogsite](#) on 16 August 2011. It was posted without links and without the map. This version has been slightly updated.