

Theatre of War

Smoke and mirrors on the Korean peninsula on the anniversary of the Yeonpyeong Incident

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Deception and knowledge, as the ancient Chinese strategist Sun Zi pointed out, is at the heart of war. Know yourself, know your enemy, deceive and destroy. This was much evidenced by recent theatrical displays around the island of Yeonpyeong, off the west coast of Korea.

23rd November 2011 marked the 1st anniversary of the Yeonpyeong Incident, an artillery duel between the two Koreas which was the first since the Korean War, and which to the minds of many, brought the peninsula perilously close to war again. However, what happened on 23 November, in 2011 and in 2010, was not quite what it seemed.

There are two main conduits of information about events on the Korean peninsula. One is North Korea's official, state owned news agency, Korea Central News Agency (KCNA), headquartered in Pyongyang. KCNA would make Goebbels sigh; it is pretty hopeless as a propaganda medium. Its (English language) releases are usually uninformative and wooden. Sometimes when it reproduces communiqués from the Foreign Ministry the arguments are lucid and coherent, but statements from the military tend to be flowery and blustering.

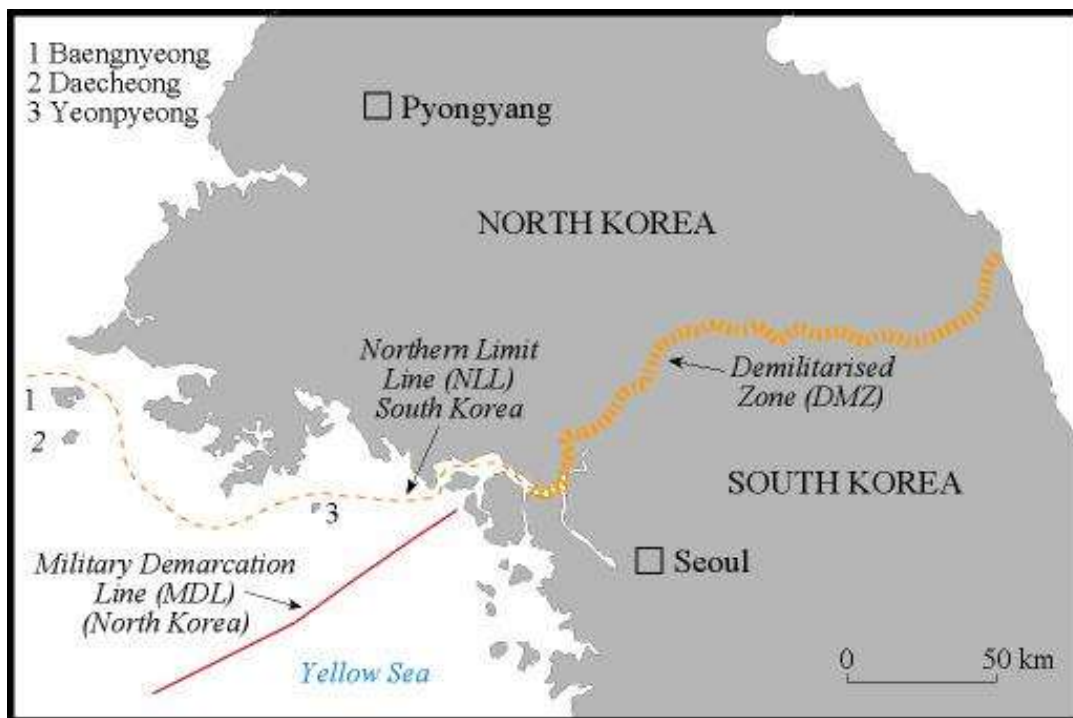
The other conduit is Yonhap News Agency, South Korea's official voice, headquartered in Seoul. It too is government controlled though newspapers that use its services are too polite to point that out. Yonhap is much better resourced than KCNA and its English is good. Its articles are professional and informative. It tells a much better story. However, that does not mean it tells a more accurate story. Indeed its description of the Yeonpyeong Incident, and its anniversary, are deeply deceptive. As is its coverage of, for instance, the Cheonan Incident of 2010. The South Korean naval ship Cheonan sank, killing 46 of its crew, probably having detonated a South Korean mine. This was falsely blamed on North Korea and the government went as far, it would appear, of fabricating evidence.¹ The Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents were major propaganda issues for the Lee Myung-bak government in Seoul, and Yonhap is the vehicle by which the government line is articulated and disseminated. Scratch an article in the South Korean press, or most of the international media, and you will usually find Yonhap provided the original.

But this is a business of more than lies and deception, though they figure strongly. It is also about the names of islands being rendered into English in a number of different variants, about a sea called

both the Yellow Sea and the West Sea, about the NLL, the MDL, and yes, 'the West Sea Special Zone for Peace and Cooperation'. In other words what is needed is a bit of background to what is quite a complicated situation.

Yeonpyeong (Yonphyong is the North's English version) is one of the four main islands held by South Korea off the North Korean coast. These islands were occupied by the United States during the Korean War and after the armistice was signed in 1953 they were handed over to the South Koreans. The US, worried that South Korean president Syngman Rhee would reignite the fighting (he opposed the armistice and wanted the Americans to continue the war and reunite Korea under his control) unilaterally established the Northern Limit Line (NLL). This demarcation line, instead of extending the ceasefire land on land in a straight line out to sea, curved up the North Korea coast and embraced the offshore islands (Fig 1).² The North Koreans subsequently proposed their own line, the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) which did, in effect, extend the demilitarised zone (DMZ) in a straight line out to sea, separating the two sides.³

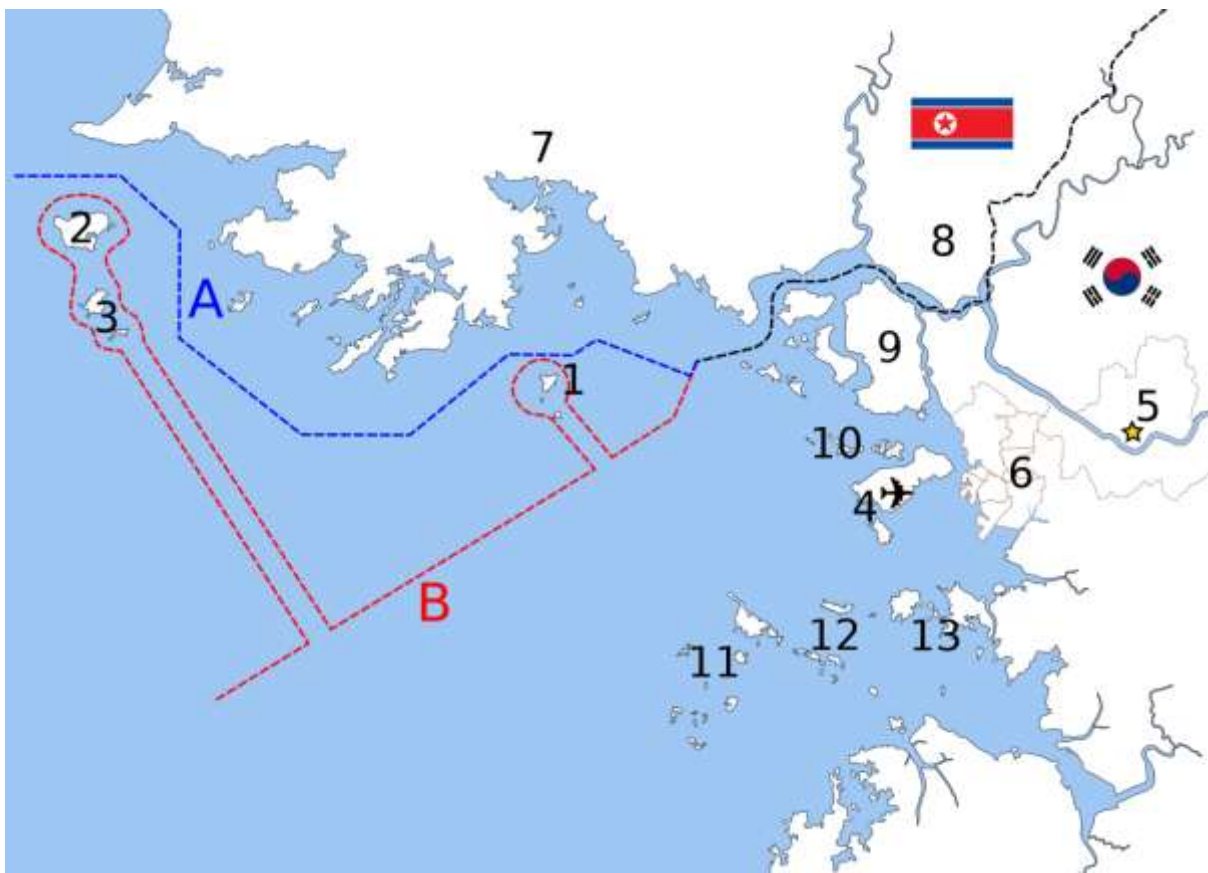
Fig 1: Sea of contention: the NLL, MDL, and the DMZ



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

The Northern Limit Line is a problem. It is not accepted by North Korea and it cuts off their fishing boats from rich crab grounds. It is illegal, as has been admitted in private by the Americans, including Henry Kissinger.⁴ After the Yeonpyeong incident of 2010 many commentators, including the staunchly pro-American International Crisis Group argued that it should be abandoned and replaced by a line acceptable to both North and South.⁵ The North's Military Demarcation Line is an obvious choice but a problem remains. The North does not contest the South's control of the offshore islands and it has suggested the solution to be lanes of access (fig 2).

Fig 2 The NLL, MDL, and lanes of access



Source: Wikipedia entry for Northern Limit Line,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Korean_maritime_border.svg

One important point to note is that the North considers the waters *surrounding* these islands, down as far as the MDL, to be theirs. This was a key issue in the 2010 confrontation.

When the South's Roh Moo-hyun and the North's Kim Jong Il met for a summit in October 2007 they agreed, amongst other things, to set up 'The West Sea Special Zone for Peace and Cooperation'.⁶ This was scrapped by Lee Myung-bak when he came into office the following year. If there were joint management of fishing and transportation in this area (it is the gateway to the Northern port of Haeju), and the area was demilitarised then the likelihood of a serious clash would be radically reduced. This was obviously not part of Lee's game plan. It seems that he wanted clashes as part of his strategy to produce a crisis that would lead to a collapse of North Korea and its takeover by the South. If the area had been demilitarised then the artillery incident of November 2010 could not have taken place. However, far from demilitarising the area Lee had continued with and even expanded the military presence on the offshore islands, and this expansion was greatly increased after November 2010.⁷

The South Korean version of the Yeonpyeong Incident contains at least two important inaccuracies. One is a deliberate falsehood, and the other more a matter of spin.

Firstly the falsehood. It is claimed that the North Korean shelling on 23 November was a 'surprise'. This has been reiterated so often that even liberal newspapers such as the *Hankyoreh* repeat it. Thus we read, in 2011, that:

North Korea's surprise artillery attack on Nov. 23, 2010, brought major changes to the thinking and routine of military personnel stationed on Yeonpyeong Island. K9 artillery company members alternate over three shifts a day at artillery installations. The barracks is just 150 to 200 meters away, but they eat and sleep by the artillery in order to be able to fire back within five minutes in the event of a North Korean provocation. The situation is difficult, but no one complains. The prevailing view is that they were taken unaware once before, and they need to respond comprehensively if another opportunity arises.⁸

Reading this one would get the impression that the South Korean soldier were calmly going about their daily routines on 23 November when out of the blue the North Koreans opened fire. Not so. The North was reacting to a 'live fire' exercise conducted by marines on Yeonpyeong. It had issued a number of warnings prior to the exercise, including a phone call on the morning of 23 November.⁹ We do not know how explicit were the North's warnings although it did threaten a 'resolute physical counter-strike'.¹⁰ The exercise at Yeonpyeong happened at the same time as, but was not officially part of, a massive South Korean military exercise called *Hoguk* (defending the country). This involved:

... some 70,000 troops, 50 warships, 500 warplanes, and 600 tanks in the areas of Seoul, surrounding provinces and the West Sea. The war game included large-scale aerial and naval drills, including landing operations in the West Sea.¹¹

The US was also scheduled to be involved.¹² Of particular concern to North Korea was the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) which is charged with seizing nuclear assets in the event of an invasion of the North.¹³ However, whilst *Hoguk* certainly raised tensions (as it was presumably intended to) it was not directly linked to the North Korean action. This was related specifically to the live fire exercises and the implications they had for sovereignty in the waters around Yeonpyeong.

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]¹⁴

It appears that this was the first time that South Korea had conducted live fire exercises in this area so for North Korea it was a test case.¹⁵ It was clearly a provocation by the South but to what degree they anticipated the consequences is unknown. Did they think that the North would not react, thereby strengthening their territorial claims? Did they just blunder into it, not heeding warnings and not passing those up the chain of command¹⁶? Or did they welcome the prospect of a clash in order to stoke up tension and perhaps precipitate a crisis? We don't know but we can be sure that South Korea was not the victim of an unprovoked, surprise attack as it has portrayed itself. North Korea could well be accused of over-reacting, or perhaps walking into a trap, though it should be remembered that many more Northerners than Southerners have been killed by enemy fire in these waters over the years.¹⁷

The other misrepresentation was over 'civilian casualties'. President Lee Myung-bak, for instance, in an address to the nation expressed outrage over the North's ruthless attack on civilians, calling it an "inhumane" crime'.¹⁸ Much was made of 'civilian casualties' – 'Along with the two young Marines, two civilians were killed in the first North Korean attack on South Korean territory since the 1950-53 Korean War'.¹⁹ The reality was that these two unfortunate civilians were contractors working on the military base, and among the 18 wounded on the island that day, only three were civilians.²⁰ Indeed the South Korean government refused to recognise the dead contractors as 'men of national merit who sacrificed themselves', a quasi-military designation requested by their families; dead civilians make better PR.²¹ We do not know how many casualties the North suffered in the exchange of fire, or whether civilians were hit.²²

That was November 2010. Things were not what they seemed, certainly not as they were portrayed by the South Korean government, its Yonhap news agency, and accepted by most of the international media. The Wikipedia entry on 'Bombardment of Yeonpyeong' has a long list of governments around the world most of whom seem to have accepted the South Korean line.²³

Forward now to 2011 and the anniversary which was marked on both side of the border in distinctly different ways. There were reports of Kim Jong Il visiting an army unit – the 'Command of KPA Large Combined Unit 233 in the western sector of the front' presumably in the vicinity of Yeonpyeong.²⁴ The message was we will retaliate if attacked but there do not appear to have been any military exercises, or demonstrations in Pyongyang

The Korean People's Army (KPA) issued a bombastic statement:

They [South Korean military] should be mindful that If they dare to impair the dignity of the DPRK again and 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 and the sea of fire in Chongwadae to the deluge of fire sweeping away the stronghold of the group of traitors.²⁵

Chongwadae is the presidential office of South Korea, situated in Seoul.

One perhaps should not get too exercised about the ethics of all of this. After all, the Americans do this every day, assassinating political leaders around the world in what is euphemistically called 'high value targeting'.²⁶ In practical terms it is a different matter. The Americans have drones which are accurate enough just to engulf a few family members, colleagues, and unfortunate villagers in the deluge of fire, whereas if North Korea really shelled Chongwadae that would mean attacking Seoul. And the US only uses its drones in countries which cannot retaliate, whereas an attack on Seoul would mean war.

But the statement should not be taken literally. It was a rhetorical flourish akin to a Maori haka before an All Blacks rugby game. A piece of theatre because what was happening on the other side of the border was also designed to frighten, excite, and impress whilst at the same time making it known that it was just theatre.

The Yeonpyeong incident in 2010 had been a big boost for the South Korean government. Many people, especially the young and better educated, had remained very sceptical about the government's version of the Cheonan incident.²⁷ The ruling party had also done badly in the June 2010 elections despite (or because of) the Cheonan fabrication.²⁸ The Yeonpyeong incident did much to restore the government's standing as there was a lot of public anger at what was perceived

to be an unprovoked attack.²⁹ Indeed, there were reports that some changed their mind over Cheonan after Yeonpyeong.³⁰

It was inevitable that the government would seek to capitalise on the anniversary. And did they ever.

SKorea flaunts firepower year after NKorean attack

South Korean attack helicopters screamed through the skies above the Koreas' disputed Yellow Sea waters Wednesday in a display of power exactly a year after North Korea launched a deadly artillery attack on a front-line island.....

Wednesday's drills involving aircraft, rocket launchers and artillery guns took place off Baengnyeong Island, another front-line territory near the disputed maritime border, and were meant to send a strong message to North Korean rivals stationed within sight just miles (kilometers) away.

The exercises represent far greater firepower than the South Korean military mounted last year...³¹

Massive Military Drill Marks Yeonpyeong Attack Anniversary

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.³²

Wow! Hold onto your hats boys, we're off to World War III!

Well not quite. Looking at the small print we see that this is more like a film than the real thing.

At 1 p.m., a **mock** marine firing exercise is being held with crew-served weapons such as the K9 self-propelled artillery. A **hypothetical** North Korean response with a launch of dozens of rounds of 122 mm artillery at the Gaemeori area 12 kilometers off Yeonpyeong Island is planned for 2:33 p.m [Emphasis added].³³

And again

The JCS [South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff] said the exercise will begin with the Yeonpyeong Marine Unit **simulating** firing its K-9 self-propelled howitzers and other artillery in a regular exercise at 1 p.m. Then at 2:33 p.m., the time when North Korea began firing at Yeonpyeong a year ago, the JCS will **simulate** North Korean launching shots from its artillery base in Kaemori [Gaemeori], only 13 kilometers from Yeonpyeong....

The JCS said the Yeonpyeong Marine Unit will **simulate** bombing Kaemori base five minutes after the North's first strike, and the South's fighters will also launch missiles.

The JCS said the **simulated** drill will wrap up with the shooting down of a North Korean aircraft attempting to land on Baengnyeong Island, using an AH-1 Cobra attack helicopter and other naval and aerial weapons....

The Army said in a statement that the Capital Corps exercise will involve **simulated** firing drills with self-propelled guns and ground-based air defense weapons, under the **scenario** of North Korean maritime infiltration and aerial provocation.³⁴

So no live firing of the sort that brought North Korean retaliation in 2010. So no possibility of South Korean forces 'fir[ing] one bullet or shell toward [North Korea's] inviolable territorial waters, sky and land'. So no 'sea of fire in Chongwadae'³⁵. All smoke and mirrors. The South Korean government made a big splash about the anniversary but did it in such a way that the North had no 'legitimate'

reason for taking action. The word 'legitimate' in this context raises all sorts of arcane issues which are not entirely legalistic in the Western sense but perhaps relate more to Confucian concepts of acceptable behaviour. The North did not respond to the South's resumed live fire exercise in December 2010 because the other side was :

.....firing shells left unused during the military provocation on November 23 after shifting by stealth the waters to be a scene of the projected shelling and its target (sic).³⁶

This might mean that the South was firing not into what the North considered its territorial waters but into the 'lane of access' (see Fig 2). The fact that the South merely finished off the shell left over from the first exercise seems to have been a factor, but why is unclear. By the time of the anniversary it seems that both sides had reached some unspoken agreement about what was acceptable, and what would cross the line in the sand. Simulations were annoying, but bearable; live fire might have been another matter.

However, from the point of view of the South, simulations provided the necessary drama and photo opportunities.

It is all really to do with sustaining and increasing tension, partly in order to precipitate some further military clash that might in turn lead to a takeover of the North. It is also designed to instil in the South Korean population a feeling of being under threat from the North.

Thus we have the military build-up in the West Sea:

While the situation at the very front is one of fighting spirit based in hostility, the military leadership is moving to fortify the five West Sea islands. In June, a Marine-centered Northwest Islands Defense Command was set up, and an additional budget of 100 billion won (\$87.2 million) for 2011 was allocated just for reinforcement of military strength around the islands. An additional 1,000 military personnel were stationed there, and K9 units were more than doubled. Also brought in was an AH-1S Cobra attack helicopter with Vulcan and grenade-launching capabilities, a multiple rocket launcher and new Artillery Hunting Radar (ARTHUR), and daytime and nighttime observation equipment for monitoring the front. Plans are under way to bring in Spike missiles, tactical aerial vehicles, and unmanned reconnaissance aircraft.³⁷

This is justified by reference to the 2010 clash and by creating scare stories such as the idea that North Korea is poised to invade the islands:

Analysts said North Korea has brought in thousands of additional special forces soldiers for overseas invasion and hovercrafts, while South Korea is stepping up its exercises in anticipation of a surprise land attack by North Korea.³⁸

'Analysts' in this context presumably means spokespersons for the military. A glance at the map (Fig 1) will show how implausible a land attack is, except perhaps as a counterattack to neutralise attacking forces in the case of an invasion of the North. It should be noted that the troops on these islands are not some sort of Dad's Army, a decrepit Home Guard, but marines, specially selected and trained amphibious assault troops.³⁹ From the South, the offshore islands in the West Sea could conceivably lie on the road to Pyongyang, and a landing from them would outflank Northern forces along the DMZ. But for the North the islands lead nowhere except out to sea. Moreover, given the South's sea and air superiority, an invading force from the North would be isolated and easily mopped up.

One consequence of this geographical asymmetry is that the West Sea is a good place for the South Korean military to build up tension without there being much danger of it getting out of hand, unless they so desire.

Whether they do desire an explosion, so that the situation in the West Sea goes from tension to conflict, presumably depends on their reading of the state of affairs in Pyongyang, in Washington, in Beijing, and to a lesser extent in Moscow. If it is considered that serious fighting there will produce a crisis in Pyongyang leading to a collapse, or what could be portrayed as such, and if this is endorsed by the Americans (and no military action is possible without the Americans) then we might see a provocation to which the North would be forced to react. That still leaves the Chinese reaction. The right wing press and the government in South Korea (and friends in the US) frequently claim that China (and Russia) would not oppose the takeover of the North.⁴⁰ Sometimes they wheel out a tame Chinese academic to offer reassurance:

"I believe China will call for a diplomatic solution even if the North is attacked by South Korea or the U.S.," [Prof. Chu Shulong of Tsinghua University] said. "Most Chinese don't think a reunited Korea would stand against China, even if the U.S. keeps stationing troops or bases on the peninsula. China won't mind Korean reunification, even if it is led by South Korea."

In reality such acquiescence is unlikely.

So it comes down to a game of bluff and feint to see the reactions in Pyongyang, Washington, Beijing and Moscow. At the same time it is necessary to keep things stirred in the South, to make people think they are under threat and need exercises such as the Yeonpyeong one to keep them safe.

This time it was all theatricals but next time, through miscalculation or because of a perception of changing opportunities, it may be the real thing. No longer theatre, just war.

This short essay was occasioned by the anniversary on 23 November 2011 of the Yeonpyeong Incident. A longer essay on the current situation on the peninsula, within the context of contemporary geopolitics, is under preparation.

Tim Beal

Wellington, 3 December 2011

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¹⁷ The Wikipedia entry on the Northern Limit Lines gives 53 dead on the North and 54 of the South, but the latter seems to include the 46 on the Cheonan; "Northern Limit Line," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Limit_Line.

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