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Korea on the Brink: Reading the *Yŏnp'yŏng* Shelling and its Aftermath

NAN KIM

By late December 2010, the truculence of brinkmanship between the two Koreas made it easy to forget that more auspicious signs of compromise had come as recently as this past autumn. The resumption of reunions among separated Korean families in late October and early November appeared to signal a modest improvement in inter-Korean cooperation, raising hopes that a program of cross-border family meetings would not only continue, but also expand. Yet, those hopes were dashed only weeks later when a military crisis escalated off the west coast of the Korean peninsula. On November 23 in a contested maritime zone, a South Korean military exercise was challenged by a North Korean artillery unit, which escalated the confrontation by shelling a South Korean island—killing four South Koreans including two civilians. In the artillery exchange that followed between the two sides, five North Korean soldiers were killed. The stark contrast between the pathos of the tearful family reunions and the panic and anger following the shelling of Yŏnp'yŏng Island, illustrated how quickly the inter-Korean situation had deteriorated. During the same month when South Korea hosted world leaders at the G-20 summit in Seoul to discuss the state of the global economy and the risks of a brewing "currency war," the family reunions and deadly artillery attack served as sobering reminders that the Korean War, never formally ended, still continues.

The crisis surrounding the Korean peninsula at the end of 2010 comprised a series of incidents that brought the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) to what many believe was the brink of war, or at least perilously close to the point of reigniting large-scale military conflict. The central story is bookended by two South Korean artillery drills—one on November 23 and another on December 20, 2010. The first South Korean military exercise became a source of renewed contention between the two sides—described as a "routine test-firing" by the South and as a "provocation" by the North—and was followed by a North Korean artillery unit's deadly shelling of Yŏnp'yŏng Island, which itself was widely regarded as a planned military provocation. By the time that South Korea held another scheduled artillery

Nan Kim (ynkp@uwm.edu) is Assistant Professor in the Department of History at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

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exercise one month later on December 20, both sides had exchanged bellicose threats and had undertaken apparent war preparations, each vowing to meet any territorial infringement or military challenge with devastating counterstrikes. Although the December drills ended without triggering a wider conflict, the crisis raised worldwide alarm over the risk of a second Korean War and focused global attention on a triangular maritime area of contested waters to which both Koreas lay claim. Why has this region become a crucible of recurring military conflict between the two Koreas, and why the flare-up of belligerence in 2010? Why did the North Koreans shell the island after the first South Korean drill but hold their fire after the second? Why did the South Koreans continue to stage military exercises during this period, despite threats of massive retaliation from the North and notwithstanding significant diplomatic pressure from China and Russia to cancel them? Finally, how can a reading of this crisis, as well as other contemporary legacies of Korea's unended war, challenge a conventional understanding of the temporality of the larger Cold War?

Crossing a line in the water: Disputes and confrontations over the West Sea boundary

Without a permanent peace treaty, the two Koreas have effectively remained in a protracted state of unresolved war (see Suh 2010)—in a sense, the "long Korean War" *after* the 1950–1953 Korean War—and they lack mutual recognition of formal maritime boundaries in the West (Yellow) Sea. On July 27, 1953, the Korean War Armistice Agreement was ratified by the military commanders of the United Nations Command (UNC), the Chinese People's Volunteer Army, and the Korean People's Army (KPA) of the DPRK. No representative from the Republic of Korea was a signatory because South Korean president Syngman Rhee had earlier protested the truce negotiations and withdrawn his side's delegates from the talks, believing instead that the ROK military should have continued fighting until Korea was reunified. The armistice was intended to be only a temporary military ceasefire agreement, pending negotiations for a permanent peace treaty. However, those treaty talks broke down in Geneva the following year, and the divide separating North Korea and South Korea has remained at the provisional 1953 Military Demarcation Line. The MDL straddles the peninsula for 248 kilometers at a jagged diagonal that lies south of the 38th Parallel on the west coast and north of the parallel on the east coast. Korea's Demilitarized Zone follows along the length of the MDL to create a 4-km buffer zone that, despite its name, is regarded as the most heavily militarized border in the world. Except for authorized personnel such as employees at the Kaesŏng Industrial Complex, border crossings are prohibited, and the closed border has cut off virtually all civilian communication with no direct telephone or postal contact.

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The Korean War Armistice Agreement made no provision for a sea border, and that omission created an opening for conflict, today apparent in the ongoing inter-Korean disputes over the West Sea boundary. Yŏnp'yŏng Island is one of a string of five small coastal islands in the West Sea that are held by South Korea even though they are geographically closer to North Korean shores. Located west of the DMZ, Yŏnp'yŏng Island is approximately 6 nautical miles from the coast of North Korea and 44 nautical miles from the South Korean port of Inch'ŏn. South Korea never lost control of the five West Sea Islands[1] during the fighting in 1950–1953, and its jurisdiction over these islands was authorized by the armistice. If another major military conflict were to break out between the two Koreas, it would most likely begin in the waters between two contested lines of delimitation, each drawn unilaterally by one side but rejected by the other: (1) the Northern Limit Line, which was drawn by the UNC — in 1953 or 1961, according to conflicting sources — to pass through twelve coordinates equidistant between the five islands and the shoreline, and (2) the "West Sea Military Demarcation Line," asserted by North Korea in 1999, which extends several miles south of the NLL and projects the Military Demarcation Line out to sea at a southwesterly angle that is roughly equidistant from the opposite Korean coasts (Van Dyke et al. 2003).

After the armistice went into effect in 1953, the Northern Limit Line (NLL) was reportedly promulgated on August 30 of that year[2] based on a line drawn unilaterally by U.S. Army General Mark W. Clark, then the Commander of the US-led UN Command, chiefly out of concern over the movement of South Korean vessels, not North Korean ones. The NLL curves around North Korean territory on the Ongjin Peninsula, maintaining a distance of at least three nautical miles from the North Korean coast, which at the time represented the international standard for territorial waters. Two key UNC objectives for creating the NLL were to forestall accidental armed clashes between patrols from both sides, and to impede South Korean President Syngman Rhee from breaking the armistice by launching his own military expedition (Kotch and Abbey 2003, Ryoo 2009). In the months leading up to the signing of the ceasefire, Rhee had repeatedly attempted to sabotage the truce negotiations—most notoriously by unilaterally releasing more than 25,000 North Korean POWs in June 1953. In order to remove Rhee as a major obstacle to finalizing the armistice agreement, US officials considered a secret contingency plan, "Operation

[1]These islands, also called "Northwest Islands" in South Korea, include Paeknyŏngdo, Taech'ŏngdo, Soch'ŏngdo, Yŏnp'yŏngdo and Udo.

[2]Kotch and Abbey (2003) make reference to a UN Command statement dated August 30, 1953, but they do not include a full citation. In contrast, Jae-Jung Suh notes a declassified 1974 CIA report which states that the earliest official references to an antecedent to the NLL can only be traced to 1961 and that "no documentation can be found to indicate that the NLL was established prior to 1960" (CIA 1974, 3). I am indebted to Jae-Jung Suh and Yong Wook Chung for providing information on this issue and a copy of the 1974 report.

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Everready," which would have involved taking the South Korean president into military custody and declaring martial law. That plan was never implemented, and the US eventually secured Rhee's cooperation, though only after making several commitments to South Korea in the form of a mutual security treaty as well as military and economic assistance. Nevertheless, Rhee's earlier attempts to undermine the ceasefire process still made American officials uneasy. The UN Command thereby presumably authorized the NLL not as a boundary to contain its North Korean adversary, but rather as a "control line" to restrain its South Korean ally. Accordingly, UNC officials at the time did not bother to notify the North Koreans, who have never recognized the NLL.

In subsequent decades, UNC and South Korean patrol boats enforced the NLL to prevent southward crossings by North Korean fishing and naval vessels. Although a DPRK cabinet had issued a decree in March 1953 claiming the extent of their territorial seas by using a limit of 12 nautical miles, North Korea did not begin challenging the NLL until the early 1970s after it had built up its naval forces. As North Korea's maritime traffic expanded, the NLL also limited DPRK access to international shipping routes, forcing its merchant ships to take a lengthy detour that added to fuel costs and transit times. By 1973, an increasing number of coastal nations used the 12-nautical-mile limit for territorial waters, which today remains the international standard as codified in the 1982 United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). During the 346th Military Armistice Commission in December 1973, North Korea raised the stakes in attempting to assert further control over the contested waters by demanding that South Korean and UNC ships require North Korean permission in order to travel to or from the West Sea Islands (Van Dyke et al. 2003, 145). Meanwhile, South Korea reported that North Korean vessels had crossed the line a total of 219 times from October 1973 to February 1974 (Michishita 2009, 64). As the North Koreans tested the NLL, a difference in position emerged between South Korea, which regarded the North Korean crossings as armistice violations, and the US, which did not. In a recent analysis of the military and diplomatic conflicts over the NLL in the 1970s, Michishita Narushige quotes from a private U.S. State Department memo (2009, 64):

> We have reservations about [South Korean] MOFA's [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] attempt to give NLL validity as a "respected" element of "armistice regime" which has developed over past 20 years. We are aware of no evidence that NLL has ever been officially presented to North Koreas [*sic*]. We would be in an extremely vulnerable position of charging them with penetrations beyond a line they have never accepted or acknowledged. ROKG is wrong in assuming we will join in attempt to impose NLL on NK.

South Korea soon sought to shift attention away from the question over the line's legality by adopting in 1974 its "*sasu*" ("defense to the death") policy, insisting on

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the unconditional defense of the NLL as a matter of enforcing national policy, rather than justifying the line through an armistice regime.[3] The military fortification of the West Sea Islands began at that time, with the construction of military facilities, the deployment of artillery and the equipping of patrols with then state-of-the-art small arms. The recent pledge by South Korean President Lee Myung-bak in December 2010 to turn these islands into "military fortresses" therefore builds upon this earlier precedent of arming bases there as forward-deployed artillery installations, a process which began more than 35 years ago.

In response to South Korea's institution of its *sasu* policy in the 1970s, North Korea countered by reasserting the standard of the 12-nautical-mile territorial waters, but it was not until July 1999 that the DPRK formally proposed its current maritime line as a military demarcation during UNC-KPA General Officer Talks. In a special communiqué issued on September 2 that year, the North Korean People's Army General Staff reiterated the July proposal by declaring a "West Sea Military Demarcation Line," which the DPRK military would defend by force (Van Dyke et al. 2003). These pronouncements came in the months following a 9-day naval battle south of the NLL on June 15, 1999, which resulted in the sinking of a North Korean torpedo boat and the deaths of an estimated 30 North Korean sailors. Victor Cha argues that the North Koreans initiated the 1999 naval altercation, despite the risk of military losses, in order to create a crisis that would later establish the NLL as an issue of negotiation (Cha and Kang 2003, 73). A second brief West Sea skirmish occurred on June 29, 2002, when, according to South Korea, North Korean ships opened fire after two South Korean navy vessels attempted to enforce the NLL. The naval clash, which lasted only 24 minutes, sank a South Korean patrol ship and damaged a North Korean vessel, killing 6 South Korean sailors and an estimated 13 North Koreans.

In light of more recent hostilities in the West Sea during Lee Myung-bak's tenure, it should be noted that the 1999 and 2002 naval battles occurred during the administration of Kim Dae-jung, the former South Korean president whose "Sunshine Policy" pursued engagement rather than confrontation with North Korea. The Sunshine Policy is most commonly identified with two of its defining principles: (1) cooperation and reconciliation with North Korea; and (2) no intention of absorbing the North. After the 1999 firefight, analysts speculated that the North Koreans were using the NLL to test US resolve, but for the South Korean government, its response served to demonstrate the Kim Administration's commitment to a third principle of the Sunshine Policy: (3) no tolerance of armed provocation by the North (see Son 2006, 97–100).

[3]Michishita 2009, 71. For an argument that the NLL is integral to the armistice, see Kim 1999, 103–104.

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The 1999 clash complicated South Korean efforts toward détente based on the Sunshine Policy, but by the following year relations between the two Koreas improved to the extent that leaders from North Korea and South Korea met in Pyongyang for the first time at the historic June Summit in 2000. Given the dramatic improvement of relations following the 2000 summit, the occurrence of another naval clash two years later at the end of President Kim's term stirred criticism among South Korean skeptics who questioned the effectiveness of the Sunshine Policy. The North, for its part, responded by accusing the US and South Korea of instigating the clash, but weeks later it issued a statement which expressed "regret" over the "armed clash incident that accidentally took place in the West Sea" and called for joint inter-Korean efforts to avoid the recurrence of similar incidents while reaffirming the June 15th Declaration (BBC 2002). The conciliatory tone of the North's response at the time, which was noted as unusual, evoked conflicting responses in South Korea: President Kim and his aides interpreted it as the apology that they had demanded of the North, and South Korean conservatives dismissed the DPRK statement as disingenuous. The timing of the 2002 battle furthermore chagrined many South Koreans, as it occurred on the same day as a highly anticipated World Cup finals match when South Korea played in a home stadium against Turkey. The South Korean Ministry of National Defense blamed the North for attempting to avenge the 1999 clash by initiating the 2002 firefight, charging it was deliberately timed to undermine the festive mood pervading South Korea as a co-host of the World Cup (Ministry of National Defense 2002).

Given that both the 1999 and 2002 battles occurred at the height of the lucrative crab-fishing season, however, the immediate cause of these clashes was likely to have been economic. Both skirmishes began as confrontations involving patrol boats guarding fishing vessels in areas where highly valued blue crabs are concentrated. Cash-strapped North Korea relies upon its fisheries for generating exports, with blue-crab fishing a major source of hard currency. In 2001 alone, the DPRK saw a six-fold increase in its crab exports to China, totaling $7.8 million with a similar amount sold to Japan (Glosserman 2003). Peak crab-fishing season is only weeks long and the intense competition is further exacerbated by the presence of Chinese fishermen, who pay for permission to fish in DPRK waters. In past years fishing boats have often drifted over the NLL to harvest crabs, though those vessels were usually turned back by patrol boats without causing further incident. At the time of the 2002 skirmish, two to three tons of crabs—enough to fill the hold of a single fishing boat—could fetch up to US $70,000 (MacIntyre 2002), an indication of why territorial claims over fishing grounds should not be discounted as a perennial source of conflict.

Although South Korean fisheries also draw significantly from these waters, ROK's chief concern over territorial claims is more strategic than economic. This area commands the Han River Estuary, which leads to the capital city Seoul, and also Inch'ŏn, Seoul's main shipping port and the location of a major

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international airport. South Korean conservative opposition to repositioning the NLL southward is based on fears that the South would be more vulnerable to infiltration and that the West Sea Islands would be left isolated and indefensible (Roehrig 2008, 26). The South Korean government position upholding the NLL relies on the 1991 North-South Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation, better known as simply the "Basic Agreement," which went into effect in 1992. The Basic Agreement committed both sides to respecting de facto lines of demarcation that had been observed up to that time. The Basic Agreement's compliance protocol further specified that "sea non-aggression zones" would stay intact until the maritime buffer areas were renegotiated.

Such a renegotiation was on the table at the second inter-Korean summit in October 2007, when South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il signed the October 4th Declaration that called for peace and co-prosperity while committing both sides to concrete measures toward developing inter-Korean relations.[4] Both pledged to negotiate a joint fishing area and to discuss "measures to build military confidence" to prevent further naval clashes. They also agreed to a proposal to create "a special peace and cooperation zone" in the West Sea, which was aimed at transforming the heavily militarized waters into a maritime region for economic cooperation. To achieve this kind of arrangement would offer significant economic gains for both Koreas, which could benefit from tapping the potential of the maritime region as a logistical hub adjacent to China's northeastern seaboard. Improved communication and commercial links across the ROK-DPRK divide along this part of Korea's western coast would also open up important routes for inter-Korean transactions. As Bruce Cumings has observed, this area west of Pyongyang and Seoul was once among the peninsula's most dynamic regions economically prior to Korea's division, and re-establishing such connections could restore this maritime area as a commercial crossroads by linking "the populous, productive, highly centralized city-state called Seoul and the hugely successful new airport at Inch'ŏn, with the growing export zone in Kaesŏng, the nearby port of Haeju and the Ongjin Peninsula, and the historically wealthy Hwanghae region" (Cumings 2007, 41). While the 2007 summit may have committed both sides to a vision for addressing the recurring sources of conflict and creating incentives for cooperation in this contested West Sea region, the responsibility for hammering out the nitty-gritty of implementation fell initially to delegates at subsequent ministerial meetings and later to a committee charged with realizing the October 4th Agreement. Negotiators differed on key issues such as the size and location of the joint fishing zone, but follow-up meetings

[4]At the first inter-Korean summit in 2000, Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il signed a landmark statement, the June 15th Declaration, which had earlier called for cooperation and reconciliation between the two states. However, Chung-in Moon has noted that the "June 15 Declaration is largely symbolic and general, whereas the 2007 document is concrete and specific." See Moon 2007.

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were suspended before they could narrow discrepancies on concrete details. The committee last met in December 2007 as the presidency was in transition, and it has not met since Lee Myung-bak assumed office in 2008. Lee, who came to power on a platform calling for a harder line against the North, annulled first the October 4th Agreement and later the June 15th Declaration, reversing the policy of engagement constructed by his liberal predecessors.

Pyongyang responded to Seoul's new policy of disengagement, according to Leon Sigal (2010), by making plain the volatility of confrontation and turning up the pressure in the West Sea's contested waters. Sigal argues that, after the Lee administration nullified the two summit accords, the North backed away from the provision in the Basic Agreement which stipulated both sides would abide by the NLL until the formal negotiation of permanent borders. In March 2008, North Korean military units fired short-range missiles into the disputed West Sea region while accusing South Korean vessels of trespassing DPRK territorial waters. Relations deteriorated further in 2009 when Pyongyang protested Seoul's decision to fully participate in a US-led naval interdiction initiative, which the North Koreans regarded as a violation of national sovereignty, prompting them to renounce all diplomatic and military agreements with South Korea. On November 9, a North Korean patrol boat crossed the NLL near Taech'ŏng Island, drawing warning shots from South Korean navy boats. The North Korean boat opened fire, and the two sides exchanged shots in a brief but intense firefight that left the North Korean vessel severely damaged. Mutual recriminations over territorial violations and accusations of military provocations ensued following this third West Sea skirmish, which had been the first such clash in seven years.

Prior to the events of this winter, worldwide media attention earlier in 2010 had focused on the elevation of military tensions surrounding this part of the West Sea. On March 26, the *Cheonan*, a 1,200-ton South Korean navy warship, was severed in half and sank in the waters off Paengnyŏng Island – the northernmost of the West Sea Islands – and forty-six South Korean sailors died in the sinking. The Joint Civil-Military Investigation Group (JIG), a multinational commission led by South Korea, concluded after nearly two months of investigation that a North Korean torpedo sank the *Cheonan*. Based on the collective findings of four teams of experts – led by South Korean investigators along with members of other "support" teams from the US, United Kingdom, Australia and Sweden – the JIG report (2010a) stated, "The evidence points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the torpedo was fired by a North Korean submarine. There is no other plausible explanation."[5] The DPRK National Defense Commission responded in a statement (KCNA 2010a) dismissing the report as based on "sheer fabrication," which it deemed part of an "anti-DPRK smear

[5]For the final report, released in September, see Joint Military-Civilian Investigation Group 2010b.

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campaign." In July, Seoul and Washington vigorously lobbied the United Nations Security Council to pass a resolution condemning the *Cheonan* sinking, but unable to override China's veto, they fell short of having the resolution name North Korea as the alleged perpetrator.

The JIG's investigation itself became a source of controversy when independent academic and scientific investigations by experts based in South Korea and the US raised questions over factual inconsistencies and tampered evidence (see Cyranoski 2010, Lee and Suh 2010). A Russian delegation also undertook a separate investigation of the *Cheonan* evidence and found it inconclusive for implicating North Korea. The most prevalent alternative theory held that the South Korean warship may have been sunk by one of the South's mines in a tragic accident after running aground in shallow waters (see Caprio 2010), and by September even the conservative daily *Chosun Ilbo* acknowledged widespread doubts among South Koreans about the international team's findings.[6] Despite the ongoing controversy, US and South Korean officials stepped up its series of planned joint military naval exercises in the fall of 2010 citing the need to respond to the *Cheonan* sinking. The US and South Korea have staged such combined exercises annually for training and practice in coordinated operations,[7] but they also serve as a show of force ostensibly against North Korea. The DPRK criticizes the war games as threatening – and China finds them unsettling – because they simulate what could be the prelude to a real attack.

Military exercises also add unsubtle pressure to the diplomatic balance in the region. In September, China hastily organized its own live-fire artillery exercises in the Yellow (West) Sea, though not in coordination with North Korea. When it was announced that joint US-ROK military exercises off Korea's west coast planned for late October would include the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS *George Washington*, China and North Korea strenuously objected. US authorities initially downplayed such protests, asserting the right of the South Korean and US militaries to exercise in international waters, but they eventually called off that round of joint military exercises. Citing scheduling complications (C. Kim 2010), Pentagon officials later qualified that those joint war games had not been canceled, only postponed.

[6]A poll conducted by Seoul National University's Institute for Peace and Unification Studies indicated only 32.5% of respondents expressed some degree of trust in the JIG's conclusions about the *Cheonan* sinking. See *Chosun Ilbo* 2010. For a later analysis supporting the JIG's findings, see Bechtol 2010.

[7]"Team Spirit," the massive combined US-ROK military field-training exercises held from 1976 to 1993, were suspended in 1994 to avoid aggravating relations with the North. Large-scale joint military exercises have nevertheless continued, including "Hoguk" since 1996, "Foal Eagle" since 1997, and "Reception, Staging, Onward movement, and Integration [RSOI]," which was later renamed "Key Resolve" in 2008.

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Affronts and provocations: The North Korean shelling of Yŏnp'yŏng Island and South Korean military exercises

On the afternoon of November 23, 2010, the North Korean shelling of Yŏnp'yŏng Island stunned South Koreans and the rest of the world, stirring fears of renewed war on the peninsula. Initial South Korean reports assessed that the artillery barrage killed two South Korean marines and injured 16 other soldiers and three civilians. After a search of the rubble uncovered the bodies of two contractors, who had been building a barracks on the island's military base, the announcement of civilian deaths significantly raised foreboding over the bombardment. The North Korean shells mostly landed on Yŏnp'yŏng Island's artillery installation, but nearby civilian areas were also hit. Twenty-one homes and warehouses and eight public buildings were destroyed by the shelling, which crippled the island's telecommunications systems and led to power outages, adding to the sense of chaos. The attack sparked panic among the island's 1,350 civilian residents, who were evacuated to safe locations, many believing the attacks were the "outbreak of war." In global media outlets and the blogosphere, the most widely circulated image of the event's aftermath captured the perspective of a group of South Korean onlookers on an opposite shore as they witnessed plumes of gray smoke rising in the distance from the island's burning buildings, an ominous portent that a second Korean War could be imminent.

South Korea put its military on high-alert crisis status to prepare for retaliation in the event of any further salvos by the North, and the shelling soon drew international condemnation of the DPRK for launching an "unprovoked attack." North Korean statements charged South Korea with making the initial provocation by firing live artillery shells into North Korean territorial waters, despite warnings of retaliation. While South Korean authorities acknowledged that North Korea had raised objections to the November 23 military exercise, they countered that it was a routine drill, held regularly for years, and that ROK artilleries were aimed in a southwesterly direction away from North Korean land. Reportedly at issue for the North Koreans (KCNA 2010b) was whether the normally scheduled South Korean artillery exercise was connected with the staging of a major military exercise, the Hoguk ("Protecting the Nation") war games conducted jointly by the ROK and US, which had begun the day before. Involving 70,000 South Korean troops, 600 tanks, 500 warplanes, 90 helicopters, and 50 warships, these military exercises also included the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) of the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Seventh Air Force participating in simulations of large-scale amphibious landings, though far from the NLL in South Ch'ungch'ŏng Province (H.C. Kwon 2010).

Slated to take place over nine days, the Hoguk war games would normally have been held earlier in the fall, but because of Seoul's hosting of the G-20 summit on November 11–12, the military exercises were postponed to

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November 22. This change in scheduling resulted in the apparently unprecedented timing of the South Korean live-fire artillery exercise occurring in the contested waters near the North Korean coast while the major joint US-ROK military exercises were already underway elsewhere on the peninsula (Beal 2010). On the morning of November 23, the DPRK protested in a faxed message to the South Korean artillery unit, warning that the North Korean military would not "sit idly by" if South Korea went forward "with the live shell firing drill they planned to stage from Yonphyong Islet [*sic*] while conducting the ill-famed war maneuvers for a war of aggression against the DPRK codenamed Hoguk."(KCNA 2010c) The South Koreans simply replied that the artillery drills were unrelated to the Hoguk exercises and proceeded with the firing exercises as scheduled at 10:00 am. The South Korean live-fire artillery exercise lasted for over four hours until 2:34 pm, firing more than 3,600 artillery shells into the waters off Paengnyŏng Island and Yŏnp'yŏng Island (W. Kim 2010). Beginning at 2:34 pm, the KPA then opened fire on Yŏnp'yŏng Island from two bases, one on the North Korean coast and another on nearby Mu Island. Of the approximately 170 rounds fired by North Korea during the hour-long barrage, roughly 80 hit the island, with the rest falling into the surrounding waters (International Crisis Group 2010). The South Korean military returned artillery fire at North Korean bases on the coast across from the island, firing approximately 80 rounds.

In the aftermath of the shelling, most South Koreans were appalled by the attack, outraged that civilians were killed, residents displaced, and homes destroyed. In a South Korean poll taken at the time, over 80% said that the ROK army should have undertaken a stronger military response to the shelling, and nearly 65% favored the government maintaining a hard-line policy against the North (*The Korea Herald* 2010). Tensions ran high over the possibility of another confrontation when South Korea announced that artillery drills would again take place at Yŏnp'yŏng Island on November 29, less than a week after the shelling. This presented another scenario whereby live-fire drills near the NLL would again coincide with joint US-ROK military exercises, which were scheduled to resume from November 28 to December 1. Further putting the region on edge, the US-ROK war games would be expanded this time in the West Sea to include participation of a US aircraft carrier strike group led by the nuclear-powered USS *George Washington*. At the last minute, however, South Korean authorities postponed the November 29 artillery drills on Yŏnp'yŏng Island, offering no explanation for the change, and the joint US-ROK military exercises in the West (Yellow) Sea concluded without incident.

In the wake of the shelling, analysts widely speculated that recent DPRK maneuvers appeared to reflect a power shift currently underway, centering on the succession of leadership to Kim Jong-il's third son Kim Jong-un, who is identified with *sŏn'gun chŏngch'i* or North Korea's "military first politics." Another interpretation, suggested by Sheila Miyoshi Jaeger, holds that North Korean military actions may have been directed toward a domestic audience but for

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reasons that have received far less attention; namely, to offset internal concerns about the country's growing dependence on China (Miyoshi Jaeger 2011, see also Foster-Carter 2010). Brinksmanship is also consistent with North Korea's past strategies to seek the attention of the U.S. and to gain leverage for future negotiations (Paik 2006). Significantly, the shelling occurred only days after the prominent American nuclear scientist Siegfried S. Hecker made public his report from an invited trip to the DPRK earlier that month. Hecker, former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, recounted being "stunned" by the scale and sophistication of an ultra-modern uranium enrichment facility with 2,000 new centrifuges (Hecker 2010a). Although North Korea had been suspected of enriching uranium, Hecker had expected to find only a few dozen centrifuges at most. He was also shown a new project under construction, an experimental light-water reactor (LWR), which Hecker noted North Koreans have long prized as the modern path to nuclear power. Under a 2007 agreement negotiated at the multilateral Six-Party Talks, North Korea had disabled its gas-graphite reactor and destroyed a cooling tower in 2008 (Bong 2009, 26), and Hecker found no sign that North Korea had resumed producing plutonium. Since LWRs are less suitable for producing bomb-grade plutonium than North Korea's dormant gas-graphite reactors, the new uranium program appeared chiefly intended to produce nuclear electricity. Hecker thereby assessed that the new facility was designed primarily for civilian use rather than military use, but his findings nevertheless raised alarm that sanctions had not slowed the expansion of North Korea's nuclear program, which now included another path toward producing fissile materials (Hecker 2010b). Rudiger Frank speculates that, by going public with a credible verification of its advanced enrichment capacity, Pyongyang was effectively sending the message that the DPRK wanted finally to achieve results in its relations with the US. More specifically, North Korea has sought bilateral negotiations with the US, stipulating that progress on denuclearization would be contingent upon improved relations with the US—including economic aid, the end of sanctions, diplomatic relations with the US, and a peace treaty to end the Korean War (Frank 2010, see also Bong 2009, Cha and Kang 2003). These objectives have become more pressing for the DPRK leadership as North Koreans have prioritized the revival of their economy prior to 2012, an upcoming landmark year. In January 1999, months after Kim Jong-il formally assumed leadership as head of state, the DPRK's annual New Year's Day joint editorial heralded the collective goal of building "a powerful and prosperous nation" (*kangsong taeguk*) (S. Kim 2000, Koh 2005), a campaign which would receive repeated emphasis in subsequent New Year's editorials, with the year for achieving that vision anticipated as 2012, the centenary of Kim Il-sung's birth.

Whatever motives or circumstances compelled North Korean actions, the bombardment of Yŏnp'yŏng Island intensified an already escalating turf war. After the South Korean military was criticized for its inept response to the

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attack,[8] Lee Myung-bak replaced his top military brass with more hawkish advisors, as the shelling and in particular the killing of civilians soon became the pretext for changing South Korea's rules of engagement. Whereas South Korea had previously been restricted to responding with comparable weaponry, the ROK revised its rules of engagement to allow for their fighter jets to bomb North Korean territory immediately in response to another artillery attack (T. Kwon 2010). Unlike his pro-engagement predecessors Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, Lee Myung-bak has pursued a reunification agenda that aims to hasten North Korea's collapse, with the ambition of reunifying the Koreas by force or of triggering a crisis that would lead to the South's absorption of the North. Hence, in the run-up to the December military exercises, Lee's bellicose rhetoric, revival of civilian air drills, and repeated exhortations of the South Korean public to be prepared for war.

After South Korea announced that its next live-fire artillery drill would be held on December 20, North Korea threatened "brutal consequences beyond imagination" if the South Korean artillery exercises were to proceed. Based on its prior statements, North Korea was opposing the South Korean drills because letting them go unanswered could signify "acquiescence," in international legal parlance (Roehrig 2008:38), tantamount to ceding their territorial claim on the disputed waters in the West Sea. In response to the fallout over the November shelling, one KCNA statement read: "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 counteraction on the part of the former" (KCNA 2010b) The shelling in turn meant that the South Koreans would also adamantly refuse to back down or else risk the perception of being coerced into conceding ground on the North's territorial claims. It therefore appeared that the two Koreas were on a disastrous collision course. South Korea remained undaunted and vowed to press on with the drills, as Yŏnp'yŏng civilian residents were again evacuated to safer harbor in Inch'ŏn. Though war seemed impending, foggy weather delayed the drills and created an opening for a frenzied round of international diplomacy led by China and Russia in a last-ditch effort to persuade South Korea to cancel the military exercises. On December 19, an eight-hour emergency session of the United Nations Security Council ended without an agreement for resolving the Korean crisis.

By the time that the ROK military completed its 94-minute artillery drill the following afternoon; one South Korean blogger wearily conveyed the episode's psychological strain, writing from Seoul, "This smothering day is finally passing away. I feel bitter that ordinary people who have no idea about the big picture

[8]South Korean Defense Minister Kim Tae-young resigned two days after the attack amid intense criticism of the military's relatively feeble response in the artillery exchange, when only three of the six artillery guns stationed at Yŏnp'yŏng Island managed to function properly.

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spent the whole day worrying."[9] The lack of North Korean response, however much a relief, presented a new enigma: Why didn't the North Koreans follow through with their threats? A statement from the DPRK explained that it was "not worth reacting" to the drills since the North "did not feel the need to retaliate against every despicable military provocation." Another factor for the December 20 drills was the presence of 21 US soldiers along with UNC observers from seven countries, installed as a check against the possibility of "a chain reaction of firing and counter-firing" that could have escalated out of control.[10] The recent crisis in Korea seemed to augur war so ominously because this time it was not only North Korea practicing brinksmanship, but also South Korea upping the ante. While some analysts claimed that this was a clear case of South Korea deterring a North Korean attack (Luttwak 2010), others argued that the North Koreans no longer needed to respond because they already demonstrated they would defend their territory, allowing them to shift tactics. As Erich Weingartner (2010) writes, "Their brinkmanship had already achieved its purpose: to re-focus American attention to the North Korean issue and to expose South Korea's empty cupboard of options."

South Korea's options were limited because its markets depend upon stability, and headlines screaming threats of war send its stock exchange into a tailspin. With its economy heavily exposed to the global market, brinkmanship is not a sustainable inter-Korean strategy for the South. But for Lee to change course and come to the negotiating table after he had pushed his hard-line stance toward North Korea so doggedly, the South Korean president needed a face-saving way out of the corner into which he had painted his government. With fighter jets and attack ships patrolling nearby – not to mention the tripwire safeguard of US military participants as "trainers and observers" in the drills, Lee knew his saber-rattling had armed cover when he sent the South Korean military into the December 20 exercises because North Koreans are not suicidal and would not walk into a scheduled battle only to be outgunned. Meanwhile, at the eleventh hour, former Ambassador to the United Nations Bill Richardson was in North Korea on an "unofficial" trip to work out a deal, in an evident attempt to reprise Jimmy Carter's peacemaker role in 1994 when the former president helped defuse an earlier Korean crisis. For the South Korean government, holding the military exercises played on popular sentiments critical toward the North following the Yŏnp'yŏng shelling, while defiance of international pressures took on a nationalist bent. As one headline in *JoongAng Ilbo*, a South Korean daily, put it, "South Korea shot 1,800 rounds of national sovereignty for 94 minutes" (quoted in S. Lee 2010).

[9]Comment by Jay H. Kim (@Narciman), a noted Twitter user based in Seoul, as reported by Y. Lee 2010.

[10]Quotation attributed to Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General James Cartwright in U.S. Department of Defense 2010, as cited by Shorrock 2010.

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With the South Korean news media crediting Lee's hawkish stance for a rebound in his approval ratings, Seoul went on to announce that, just three days after the nerve-wracking December showdown in the West Sea that could have sparked a wider war, the ROK would again hold artillery drills on Yŏnp'yŏng Island. A statement issued by progressive South Korean civic and political groups disparaged the repeated military drills as "armed demonstrations" that the Lee administration arranged in order to rally more political support behind its government and its recent increase in the military budget (People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy 2010a, 2010b). The December 23 events would in fact represent the largest South Korean military exercises of that year, with an expanded assemblage of howitzers, fighter jets, military personnel, and multiple launch rocket systems pressed into service for yet another live-fire artillery drill. Unlike the cliffhanger that had occurred a few days prior, however, this final round of drills elicited relatively little suspense or anxiety about the risk of further military conflict and instead seemed to be staged as a peculiarly emphatic encore production. Indeed, on the ground, the military exercises took on an air of theatricality, with the Associated Press reporting how "dozens of schoolchildren in bright yellow jackets were shuttled to the site to watch from bleachers" (J. Lee 2010). Given the gravity of civilian casualties for the significance of the initial military crisis following the shelling of Yŏnp'yŏng Island, the presence of young students in proximity to the military sites was disturbingly ironic and evoked the mobilization of schoolchildren in anticommunist campaigns a generation earlier as part of South Korea's cultural Cold War. Shortly after those military exercises finally ended, Lee would make his surprise about-face announcement: South Korea was now ready for diplomacy, and it was time to go back to the multilateral Six-Party Talks.

The time and space of an unresolved Korean War

For all its fiery bluster, recent brinkmanship in divided Korea did not trigger an inevitable escalation toward the cataclysm that each side threatened, and for the time being, international diplomacy is again carrying the day. On December 29, Lee Myung-bak was quoted describing a return to Six-Party Talks as the only viable choice for the ROK to pursue North Korean denuclearization and South Korean Unification Minister Hyun In-taek acknowledged the "need to restore inter-Korean dialogue" (Yonhap 2010) In their annual New Year's Day joint editorial, North Korea's *Rodong Sinmun, Korean People's Army Daily* and *Chongnyon Jonwi* called for diplomacy with the South and an easing of tensions "as soon as possible" while pursuing "an atmosphere of dialogue and cooperation" (KCNA 2011). In the deal brokered through Richardson at the height of the crisis, Pyongyang indicated that it would allow the return of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and to negotiate the sale of 12,000

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fresh fuel rods, which would be shipped to a third country. Yet, Siegfried Hecker has noted that, while it is apparent that the North Korean leadership is ready to give up its plutonium program, it will almost certainly insist on keeping its recently disclosed uranium-enrichment facility and experimental LWR program, thereby complicating international diplomatic efforts toward the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Hecker writes, "Shutting down the plutonium program was within reach, but the same is not likely for the uranium program, because the justification for its peaceful nature is more credible than for the plutonium program, even though it is no less problematic" (Hecker 2010c).

Meanwhile, the NLL remains both the most likely flashpoint in the event of further inter-Korean clashes and the most formidable stumbling block for any future Korean peace negotiations, and these twin challenges reflect the contradictions inherent to the line as an inter-Korean West Sea boundary. To borrow terms used by Valérie Gelézeau (2010), it is simultaneously a "non-border"—which, like the temporary cease-fire line on land, is not determined by international treaty—and a quintessential "hot border" (Foucher 1991 [1988]). which remains contested and susceptible to eruptions of conflict. Gelézeau writes, "To some extent, the Korean border is still in the making: it is indeed an unfinished border of an 'unfinished war'" (2010, 5). At the inter-Korean divide, which is often assumed to be a fixed and hermetic border, the fiercest conflicts now occur at the point where the line of demarcation is potentially vulnerable to change, whether through international arbitration or future negotiated settlement (Kotch and Abbey 2009, International Crisis Group 2010).

On a regional scale, the recent crisis in Korea was borne of intensifying friction along shifting geopolitical fault-lines in Northeast Asia amidst a revival and reconfiguration of Cold War alliances in Northeast Asia. Since 2008, the South Korean government has advocated a more hard-line strategy toward North Korea while consolidating its partnership with the United States and more recently with Japan, holding tripartite security talks that also serve to address the rise of China. During the same period, North Korea and China have strengthened economic and diplomatic ties – and symbolic bonds, as a friendship "forged in blood" (Miyoshi Jaeger 2011) – while aligning diplomatically with Russia on several prominent inter-Korean controversies. In observing these shifts underway, it must be noted that South Korea and China have developed their own complex bilateral relationship since normalization in 1992 (Chung 2007, Snyder 2008) and a US-China rivalry should not be unrealistically overstated. As the recent US-China summit indicated, both countries are invested in engagement and mutual cooperation for the sake of regional stability and Korean denuclearization, not to mention enormous economic stakes. Notwithstanding these dynamics, one could also argue that it has been these recent crises concerning divided Korea that have most clearly revealed the divergence of interests between China and the US in the region (P. Lee 2010).

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Such layered developments are suggestive of the unevenness of the Cold War's passing in Northeast Asia (Morris-Suzuki 2009; see also Kwon 2010). Tessa Morris-Suzuki refers to the opening of previously impermeable borders in describing the slow thaw of the Cold War as a "radical reshaping of our social experience of space," whereas the Korean divide, which was previously only one of multiple Cold War barriers in the region, has now proven to be the last and most enduring (Morris-Suzuki 2009, 122). It is therefore striking to consider how the risks inherent to unresolved war in Korea, as an abiding residue of the Cold War in Northeast Asia, have effectively outlasted the unipolar "post-Cold War" era to become a focal point around which older alliances and Cold War imaginaries are being reanimated. This wider context counters the assumption that the conflict over the NLL, like Korean division itself, can be relegated as merely a Cold War relic, an anachronistic curiosity that remains frozen in time and out of place in the borderless, post-ideological 21st century. Rather, it raises the question of whether Korea's disputed maritime line should instead be reconsidered as a kind of spatial hinge connecting the old Cold War and the new Cold War in Northeast Asia, to underscore continuities between these geopolitical alignments and historical eras. Whether or not violence again erupts south of the NLL, it is clear that the contested waters surrounding the West Sea Islands are where—militarily, diplomatically, economically, and through propaganda—the most recent battles of the unresolved Korean War have been waged.

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