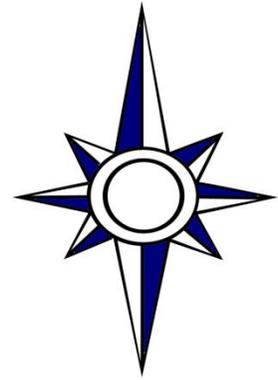


Comparative Connections

A Quarterly E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



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South Korea-North Korea Relations: Playing with Fire

Ten years have passed since Ralph Cossa first asked me to write for this esteemed journal. *Comparative Connections* was young then. Launched in mid-1999, then as now its remit was to cover and track East Asia's key bilateral relationships: with the US and regionally.

At the outset, inter-Korean relations must have seemed too insubstantial to be included. That changed in 2000: the *annus mirabilis* which saw the South's then president, Kim Dae-jung, fly to Pyongyang in June and hold the first ever North-South summit meeting with the man who still leads the North, Kim Jong Il. The former, but thankfully not the latter, was awarded the year's Nobel Peace Prize for this among other achievements.

At the time this seemed, and was, a breakthrough. The summit was not just a one-off photo-op. We did not yet know that money had gone under the table to bring it about. Even so, to write as I did then of "the wholly new phase of regular and substantive inter-Korean dialogue that has ensued – ministerial and defense talks, family reunions, economic deals, transport links, and more" – was not mistaken. Seven years followed in which inter-Korean relations moved forward. Not evenly, not enough, and not reciprocally – but forward, none the less.

Another sentence that I wrote a decade ago, on the broader vista, is painful to reread now:

In a for once happily inapt metaphor, diplomatically speaking the DPRK blazed away on all barrels in all directions during the past year, apparently seeking better ties across the board, both reviving old alliances and embarking on new ones.

And I concluded:

We are in a new phase, which has no pre-written script. The challenge in 2001 will be for the DPRK to show that its change is more than just cosmetic and tactical by imbuing its new formal ties with substantive content, and above all by moving to address at least some of the many real security concerns of its various interlocutors.

Merciless thunderbolt of revenge

That was then. A decade on, alas, talk of guns blazing away is not a metaphor. On Dec. 24, DPRK's *Central TV* featured some of the actual Korean People's Army (KPA) artillerymen who a month earlier on Nov. 23 shattered the fragile peace in the West (Yellow) Sea with a volley of shells onto Yeonpyeong, one of five Southern-held islands northwest of the ROK's main land-

mass, all too close to the North Korean coast. Two marines and two civilians died, 18 were wounded and there was widespread fire damage to the island's buildings, fields, and forests.

Here are the gunmen's own words, quoted by the Seoul daily *Chosun Ilbo*:

Fire burned in our eyes when we saw [South Korean] artillery shells fall into our territorial waters. We poured our merciless thunderbolt of revenge on them. When we saw the first shell hit the enemy's radar post and several pillars of fire soar there, shouts of 'Hurrah' celebrated our victory... We clearly demonstrated that our earlier pledge to fight was no empty talk and launched the attack without an ounce of mercy.

That is the mood in which the peninsula enters 2011. Moreover, the hostility is mutual. One hesitates to pronounce on public opinion in Seoul, which tends to be volatile politically, not least regarding the North. Yet some reckon the Yeonpyeong shelling – more so, oddly, than Pyongyang's earlier attack on March 28 when it sunk the corvette *Cheonan*, drowning 46, mostly young naval conscripts – has wrought a sea change in South Korean perceptions.

No more 'nutty uncle'

That may be another metaphor too hastily used, given how quickly the political weather can change on the peninsula. In a useful and varied recent edited volume on *New Challenges of North Korean Foreign Policy* (ed. Kyung-Ae Park; Macmillan, 2010), the doyen of liberal US scholars of Korea, Bruce Cumings, writes in the present of what is now the past:

[T]he stark reversal of Seoul's former anticommunist strategy created a sea change in their perceptions of the North – from evil enemy to long-lost cousin, led by a nutty uncle perhaps.

Or perhaps not. This particular sea-change now looks more of a tide that rolled in for a time, only to roll out again. Either way, it is history. As for nutty uncle, nasty now seems a better epithet – and arguably always was. We return to such wider issues at the end of this article.

Succession moves forward

Also by way of context-setting, let us remind ourselves that, in Rumsfeldian parlance, the last quarter of 2010 was when at least one North Korean known unknown became slightly less unknown. Kim Jong Il's third son, Kim Jong Un, having made his public debut on Sept. 28 at a rare delegates' conference of the DPRK's ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), cemented his raised status by appearing again soon after on Oct. 10 at a large-scale military parade marking the WPK's 65th anniversary. In a last-minute decision, about 80 of what Pyongyang sometimes calls the "reptile press" were flown in from Beijing, to see the 'young general' on the saluting dais with his visibly ailing father. (Also on the stand, less noticed, was a new top Chinese envoy, but that is another story – no doubt told elsewhere in this issue of *CC*.)

Had any doubt remained, two days earlier a veteran figure, Yang Hyong Sop, vice president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA, the DPRK's rubber-stamp Parliament),

confirmed Kim Jong Un's status as successor in an interview with *Associated Press Television News*: "Comrade Kim Jong Il and now the young general Kim Jong Un, who will follow him, is leading the revolution ... The North Korean people take pride in the great leadership that has continued for three generations from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un."

Throughout the quarter the young general made various appearances, always at his father's side – no solo roles, thus far – at public events or (more often) guidance visits. The official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)*'s English language service mentioned him four times in late September, 12 in October, 13 in November and 7 in December. These outings included one on Nov. 22, ostensibly to a fish farm in the southwest – close to the artillery bases which the next day rained fire on Yeonpyeong. A very thorough recent study by the International Crisis Group (ICG) of this and other West Sea incidents (including the *Cheonan*) reckons that "it is inconceivable for such a high-level delegation not to have visited nearby military units."

(*North Korea: The Risks Of War In The Yellow Sea*. Asia Report N°198, 23 December 2010, page 26. Summarized and downloadable at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/north-east-asia/north-korea/198-north-korea-the-risks-of-war-in-the-yellow-sea.aspx>)

Speaking of domestic politics, as the quarter began South Korea finally got itself a new prime minister, after a two-month hiatus, when the National Assembly confirmed Kim Hwang-sik in the post. (An earlier nominee was unable to explain his links to a businessman jailed for bribery.) That in turn cleared the way for a new foreign minister; there was none for nearly a month after Yu Myung-hwan quit on Sept. 4 over a nepotism scandal. The new man is Kim Sung-hwan, a career diplomat of moderate views, previously senior presidential secretary for foreign affairs and national security. Kim was nominated on Oct. 1 and in post by Oct. 8; he pledged to reform his ministry, as new ministers in Seoul invariably do. These damaging vacuums in key posts were just the latest, but would not be the last, in the Lee administration's lamentable and puzzling chronic mishandling of personnel appointments.

Flood aid for Sinuiju

Turning to inter-Korean relations specifically, it is hard to recall that a quarter which ended so abysmally had begun more optimistically; a fact that might offer some hope that today's stormy seas could, *malgré tout*, grow calmer in 2011. Despite serious tensions over the sinking of the *Cheonan* – for which North Korea continued to deny any responsibility, most recently in a lengthy and vitriolic document circulated at the UN in November – by early October both Koreas appeared to be seeking a way to mend fences, at least in part.

As mentioned last time, the catalyst for a thaw was the latest of the natural disasters which hit the North almost every summer. This year it was flooding in the northwest, including the city of Sinuiju. The modest Southern aid agreed in September was sent on Oct. 26, a day later than planned, delayed by stormy seas. A ship carrying 5,000 tons of rice – the first from Seoul for two years, if only 1 percent of the half a million tons that used to be sent every year in the 'sunshine' era – left Gunsan for Dandong in China, just across the Yalu river (Amnok, to Koreans) from Sinuiju. Another ship sailed from Incheon to Dandong with 3 million packets of instant noodles. ROK Red Cross officials flew to Dandong to supervise delivery. The rice was in 5 kg packs, each marked "Donation from the Republic of Korea."

September's aid agreement opened the way for wider talks. Not all were successful. The first military talks (at colonel-level) for two years, held at Panmunjom on Sept. 30, foundered on the wreck of the *Cheonan*. The South insisted on an admission and apology, while the North still demanded to send its own inspectors to examine the wreckage. Pyongyang wanted to hold further talks, but Seoul demurred unless there was first a confession for the *Cheonan*.

Family reunions resume

By contrast, a day later the two sides' Red Cross bodies, meeting for a third time after initial talks in September, agreed to hold a fresh round of reunions of separated families – the first such for over a year – at the end of October, and also to discuss doing this on a regular basis, as the South would like. So, the world once again witnessed – insofar as it noticed – a by now familiar sorry spectacle. On Oct. 30, 435 South Koreans, ranging in age from 12 to 96, were bussed along a road less travelled these days, across the eastern end of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to the North's Mt. Kumgang resort to meet 97 elderly North Korean kin – husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, parents and children – of whom they had seen or heard nothing for over half a century, since the end of the Korean War in 1953. They came home on Nov. 1. Two days later, another 96 aged South Koreans crossed the border to be similarly and briefly reunited with 207 of their long-lost relatives living in the North.

Why “a sorry spectacle”? For at least three reasons oft rehearsed in these pages before. First, these events are not nearly frequent enough. This latest was the 18th since 2000, but only the second since Lee Myung-bak took office in Feb. 2008. *KBS*, the South's main broadcaster, summarized the statistics as of Oct. 27: so far 3,573 families and about 17,100 individuals have participated, half each from the North and South. Yet, in South Korea alone, a total of 128,232 people have applied to the program, of which 44,940 or 35 percent have since died. Of those still living, 5 percent are over 90, 35 percent are over 80 and 36 percent over 70. (For the North, of course, we know no overall numbers.) At this snail's pace, with meetings few and far between, most are doomed to die disappointed and un-reunited.

Even the lucky few who do get to meet face two further problems. What should be a deeply private encounter is played out in part in public, as a kind of reality TV show awash in tears. The families do get just one day to themselves, but both their first meetings the day before, and fond farewells as they leave, are in full view of the cameras. And then that is it. Cruelly, they are allowed no further contact of any kind, not even letter, phone or email, much less to meet again in the flesh and hold each other close. Does brief joy outweigh renewed sorrow?

No more regular tourism

A complicating factor this time was the venue's status. Expensively developed by Hyundai, Mt. Kumgang used to be a thriving resort. Over a decade, 1.9 million South Korean tourists crossed the once-impermeable DMZ for a brief taste of a (stylized and sanitized) North. That stopped abruptly in July 2008 when the KPA shot and killed a middle-aged female tourist, Park Wang-ja, and refused to let a Southern team come and investigate. The Lee Myung-bak government suspended tours and there have been none since. Pressure – typically perverse – from Pyongyang to have this cash cow resume culminated in April with formal confiscation of Southern-owned

assets at Mt. Kumgang, including the ROK government's new purpose-built family reunion center costing over \$50 million, hardly ever used as yet. Seoul insisted that this be the venue for the latest reunions and Pyongyang reluctantly agreed.

Seoul rejects aid linkage

In November the North kept pressing for regular tourism to resume, but the South insisted that the asset confiscation must first be rescinded. Then came the shelling, which means that tourism – or even talks about it – will not soon resume. The same doubtless goes for family reunions. Even before this, indeed before the latest reunion itself, the two sides had failed to agree on holding such events regularly. Talks to that end on Oct. 27 stalled on two issues. The South would like to vary the venue – instead of always going North, it proposed its own border town of Munsan. The North, as ever, wants to be paid. It demanded resumption of the half a million tons of rice and 300,000 tons of fertilizer aid that Seoul used to send each year during the sunshine era. Seoul refused this linkage, or rather reversed it. On Nov. 4 Vice Unification Minister Um Jong-sik said regular reunions of separated families would be “conducive to creating public sentiment [in the South] for aid provision to the North.”

Unwillingly Northern, formerly Southern

A different kind of problem is that, not for the first time, the North produced four old men as DPRK citizens who are in fact ex-ROK prisoners of war (POWs), captured during the Korean War and illegally held ever since while the South thought they were dead (and paid pensions to their grieving families accordingly). This is the tip of a large iceberg. The Korean Institute for National Unification (KINU, a state think-tank under the Unification Ministry, MOU) in its latest and always invaluable annual *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2010* (available online at http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/pub/pub_04_01.jsp?category=2672) states that no less than 41,971 ROK soldiers were missing in action (MIA) after the Korean War. Of these 22,562 were later classified as killed in action (KIA), while the fate of the remaining 19,409 remains unclear.

Although Seoul has named 510 whom it believes to be still alive in the North, Pyongyang resolutely refuses to discuss the issue, insisting that it holds no one involuntarily. It likewise denies the status of the oddly similar number (506) of post war abductees whom the South has listed as being detained in the North – mostly fishermen seized at sea up to the 1970s; nowadays they are usually returned – by claiming that they have all embraced the socialist motherland on their own free will. Since 1994 a total of 79 ex-POWs, with 197 of their new Northern family members, and 8 abductees have managed to flee the North and make their way back to the South. (At least some of these returning POWs have not been officially reclassified, so that pensions can continue to be paid to their relatives.) After the latest four came back from the dead at the Mt. Kumgang reunions, the ROK Defense Ministry (MND) said it will make a new study on the number of POWs still held in the North, although it admitted that without Northern cooperation this would inevitably remain incomplete.

Yet there is an even larger can of worms. Dwarfing these figures are the thousands whom the DPRK marched North in 1950, when the KPA twice briefly captured Seoul and for a few months occupied most of the South. Estimates vary wildly, but the most recent study, by an association

of relatives of the missing, lists 96,013; others put the total at over 100,000. None ever came back, and some may have gone voluntarily. A great many – perhaps most – must now be dead of natural or other causes, though most were young when they were taken; 21,000 were 20 or younger, and another 51,000 under 30. It is thought that the North took them because of shortages of skilled and other labor, not to mention soldiers. (More details are in the KINU White Paper.)

Unlike POWs and post-war abductees, this earliest and largest group of victims had barely featured on the formal inter-Korean agenda in modern times. On Dec. 13 the ROK launched an official committee, chaired by the premier and also including the unification, foreign and defense ministers, to clarify names and numbers involved. At a meeting to inaugurate this, Unification Minister Hyun In-taek declared that, “The issue of abductions is no past issue. It is part of the reality of the inter-Korean relations.” Even absent Yeonpyeong, the chances of any cooperation with Pyongyang on this matter would be zero. While Seoul has every right to raise it, choosing to do so now – and at such a senior level – is but one sign among many that the Lee government no longer has any serious expectation of dialogue with the North.

Suffer the little children

A decade ago, the UN World Food Program (WFP) had its largest operation anywhere in the world in North Korea. The need remains, but others’ willingness to meet it has shrivelled. WFP head Josette Sheeran visited Seoul on Oct. 28 en route to Pyongyang and appealed for support for the agency’s work in North Korea. WFP is currently feeding 671,000 hungry children in 65 DPRK counties. Its plan to supply 75,000 tons of food to 2.5 million needy children, costing \$45 million, is only 20 percent funded.

This is hardly megabucks. Altruism apart, an ROK government concerned for the quality of human capital in a future united Korea might deem it a sound investment. Or there is a pair of billionaire brothers for whom this is loose change. But neither the carmaker Chung Mong-koo, nor his shipbuilder/politician sibling Chung Mong-joon, cares about the North like their late father (who was born there), the Hyundai group founder Chung Ju-yung – whose generosity Pyongyang milked to the full. So North Korea’s innocent children will remain hungry and cold this winter, and will not grow and thrive as they deserve to.

Wikileaks adds to Hyundai’s woes

Speaking of Hyundai, which once rivaled Samsung as the biggest *chaebol* (conglomerate), it is only a shadow of its old self since the best bits, like auto- and ship-making, were spun off amid rivalry among Chung Ju-yung’s many sons. The rump Hyundai includes Hyundai Asan – vehicle of Chung’s costly forays into North Korea, and bleeding red ink from Seoul’s ban on tourism to its Mt. Kumgang resort since July 2008. It is headed by Hyun Jeong-eun: widow of former chairman Chung Mong-hun, the founder’s favorite son, who killed himself in 2003 when under investigation in Seoul for illicit payments to Pyongyang.

Hyundai and Hyun now face embarrassment from *WikiLeaks*. On Jan. 4 the *Chosun Ilbo* reported a cable describing a breakfast meeting between US Ambassador Kathleen Stephens and

Hyundai's chairwoman on Aug. 25, 2009, soon after Hyun returned from an eight-day visit to North Korea where she met Kim Jong Il. Hyun allegedly complained (Hyundai now says that this report contains many errors; well, they would) that "she faced more obstacles in South Korea than in the North." Kim Jong Il, interestingly and astutely, remarked that MOU "had lost the driver's seat" in handling unification to the Foreign Ministry (MOFAT), which Kim said "did not understand" the North. A tad disingenuously, he also wondered why the Lee administration did not "better utilize" officials from previous administrations with ample experience in dealing with the DPRK and said that the main problem is a lack of trust.

Kim also asked why more *chaebol* do not invest in Kaesong. Hyun's reply, that this would get them into trouble with the US, is at best a half-truth. The real reason is that having seen how greedily the North exploited Chung Ju-yung's goodwill and deep pockets, no other big Korean firm – including Chung's surviving sons – wants to touch it with a bargepole. That was true even in the sunshine era, let alone with North-South relations at their current nadir.

Sea shells

But to the main event. After a quite quiet autumn, in late November the peninsula's weather changed with a vengeance as North Korea made headlines twice over on successive days. On Nov. 22, Siegfried Hecker, a leading US nuclear scientist and regular visitor to the DPRK, reported seeing facilities which suggest that Pyongyang has got much further in enriching uranium than had been thought.

As if that were not bombshell enough, next day KPA artillery suddenly shelled military and civilian targets on Yeonpyeong – one of five South Korean islands in the West (Yellow) Sea, close to North Korea. Two marines and two civilians were killed, 18 persons were injured, and fire damage to property and trees from suspected thermobaric shells was substantial. The targets included not only military bases but also a restaurant and a health centre elsewhere. (For two thoroughly detailed accounts of this episode, see the ICG report mentioned above, and also a study by Joe Bermudez in his *KPA Journal*, discussed below.)

South Korean forces on the island returned fire, but the South did not escalate its retaliation. Most of the island's population was evacuated over the next few days. The South Korean *won* fell and stock markets wobbled, locally and globally. Markets in Seoul remained volatile for the rest of the week, but did not plummet. The financial effects did not last; some brokerages even suggested that investors consider this brief dip as a buying opportunity. A lower *won*, especially against the *yen*, also helps South Korean exporters, who have had a record year.

Anger and disarray in Seoul

The political fallout, by contrast, went much deeper. There was fury – not least in President Lee Myung-bak's conservative ruling Grand National Party (GNP) – that the South yet again seemed impotent against Northern aggression. All this had an air of *déjà vu*, six months after Seoul accused Pyongyang of torpedoing its corvette *Cheonan* in nearby waters on March 28. Then as now the South threatened to strike back – next time. Always next time.

While some South Koreans query the official version regarding the *Cheonan*, this time there was near-unanimity. Even the left-wing daily *Hankyoreh Shinmun*, a noted skeptic as regard the ship sinking, wrote an editorial harshly critical of Northern aggression – and printed a map showing how most of the North’s shells had fallen on non-military targets. The longer-term political impact remains to be seen. Though Lee as president took the flak for now, incidents like this do not help the center-left opposition Democratic Party (DP), which wants to return to the former ‘sunshine’ policy of engaging the North. However no elections are due in South Korea until 2012, when voters will pick a new president and national assembly.

With reports that the radar and some howitzers on Yeonpyeong had not worked, Defense Minister Kim Tae-yong, who had offered his resignation in May over the *Cheonan*, suddenly found it accepted on Nov. 25. Even replacing him was a shambles. First reports were that President Lee had appointed his top security adviser, Lee Hee-won. As of Jan. 7, 2011 the semi-official Yonhap newsagency is still carrying that ‘news,’ complete with a photo of Lee: http://app.yonhapnews.co.kr/yna/basic/ArticleEnglish/ArticlePhoto/YIBW_showArticlePhotoPopup.aspx?contents_id=PYH20101126018300341

The *BBC* and other media duly announced this. But in fact the new defense minister is Kim Kwan-jin, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. If personnel and communications in Seoul are such a mess, one must hope the nation’s defenses are in better shape. (They may not be; on Nov. 28 an ROK howitzer was fired by mistake, sending a shell flying 10 miles northward toward – but fortunately not across – the DMZ. The South swiftly sent a phone message to the North that this was an accident; so at least the hotlines are still in use.)

US sends gunboats

In a show of force and solidarity in response to the Yeonpyeong shelling, the aircraft carrier *USS George Washington* and other vessels sailed from US bases in Japan to hold four days of joint exercises with ROK forces in the Yellow Sea, starting Nov. 28. Some feared this would ratchet up tensions rather than ease them; yet to do nothing would suggest weakness. Prudently, these war games were held well south of the disputed sea border.

Pyongyang’s predictable rhetorical riposte to these moves could be summarized as “Bring it on!” Belying its name, the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK) on Nov. 26 warned that “Gone are the days when verbal warnings are served only.” A day earlier, the North’s military had declared that “the Korean People’s Army will deal without hesitation the second and third strong physical retaliatory blow if the south Korean puppet warmongers commit another reckless military provocation out of all reason.” There were reports that the North had readied surface-to-surface missile batteries on its west coast.

China waves a dead rabbit

By contrast, China’s response this time was more muted than after the *Cheonan*. Then, its fierce opposition to US-ROK naval maneuvers in the Yellow Sea, supposedly too close to its own coast for comfort, caused the allies rather ignominiously to retreat to waters on the other side of the peninsula. No such deference was in the cards a second time, as Beijing grasped. Its own response showed elements of disarray. China’s Foreign Minister Yang Jiechie abruptly cancelled

an already planned trip to Seoul. As over the *Cheonan*, Chinese media did not blame the North but reproduced its feeble excuses, on which more below.

By the weekend this low-key approach seemed inadequate. On Nov. 27, as the *USS George Washington* sailed toward the Asian mainland, State Councilor Dai Bingguo, who outranks Yang Jiechie, flew to Seoul and met Lee Myung-bak for two hours. In a chilly if restrained tone, the Blue House reported that Lee “asked China to play a role to match its new status in dealing with inter-Korean relations to pursue coexistence and peace in the 21st century after the end of the Cold War,” and urged Beijing to “act in a fairer and more responsible way in dealing with South-North Korea relations and contribute to peace on the Korean Peninsula.”

Next day China’s Foreign Ministry called a press conference in Beijing. Hopes were dashed when they produced a dead rabbit from the hat by merely proposing an emergency session of the Six-Party Talks (6PT), stalled since 2008. South Korea and its allies were underwhelmed. They want and need more; though what exactly – in the realms of the feasible – is unclear.

Escalation, with no provocation

Much ink has been spilled over exactly why North Korea shelled Yeonpyeong. Unlike with the *Cheonan*, Pyongyang did not plead innocent, but its pretext did not convince. It claimed to be reacting to the South’s having first fired live artillery shells into ‘Northern’ waters, and said it had warned Seoul to desist before shooting back. But this is entirely specious.

The background here – as rehearsed often in these pages before, after previous incidents – is that the North has never accepted the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the *de facto* marine border set by the United Nations Command (UNC) after the Korean War. Instead it claims a line of its own, extending the land-based Military Demarcation Line (MDL) westward. This would put Yeonpyeong and other islands – including Baengnyeong, off which the *Cheonan* sank – in Northern waters. Naturally that is unacceptable to the South. (Ironically, as its name hints, the NLL was originally drawn to stop provocations from the South. The then ROK President Syngman Rhee refused to sign the 1953 Armistice; the NLL was set to hold him in check.)

In practice the North has mostly respected the NLL, with intermittent challenges. The waters near Yeonpyeong saw two brief but fatal firefights between patrol boats, in 1999 and 2002. The last such clash occurred in November 2009 near Daecheong, another island in this area. Then in Jan. and Feb. this year on several occasions KPA artillery shot volleys of shells into the sea north of the NLL. The South at first riposted, firing (again within their own waters) before deciding these were routine Northern winter maneuvers. Not so. The veteran military analyst Joseph S Bermudez Jr, in a detailed two-part study of the Yeonpyeong incident in his online journal <http://www.kpajournal.com/> (issues 11 and 12), has suggested that this month-long exercise was in fact used successfully to test new tactics, including synchronized “time on target” firing from various locations and using different weapons systems (rockets and artillery). This tactic would later be used to rain down coordinated fire on Yeonpyeong.

The North claims it was provoked, but in fact both Koreas hold regular military drills. In this case, the South and the US were engaged in their regular *Hoguk* joint exercise, held every year.

The North complained as it does about all such war games, claiming they are a prelude to invasion. Separately, but again as normal, ROK marines on Yeonpyeong carried out their monthly live-fire exercise, as always to the southwest of the island, on the opposite side from the DPRK coast. All this was routine. For the analyst, the key question is whether either side ups the ante and provokes the other by doing something that is out of the ordinary. There is no evidence that the ROK-US side did anything this time, nor did Pyongyang accuse them of doing so. The North did not even claim that any of its ships were a target or in the vicinity, merely that Yeonpyeong's coastal waters were somehow its own – “There is in the West Sea of Korea only the maritime military demarcation line set by the DPRK.”

Mixed motives

This attack – said to be the first shelling of South Korean civilians since the 1953 Armistice – was thus a dramatic and deliberate escalation by North Korea. As with the *Cheonan*, this prompted much speculation on Kim Jong Il's motives, and the likely mix between domestic and external goals. The former might include boosting the prestige of Kim's third son and successor Kim Jong Un among a military that may well remain skeptical of this untried youth, despite his implausible promotion in September to the rank of a four-star general. Significantly, as noted above, both Kims were in the vicinity on the day of the attack.

Yet in foreign policy terms it is hard to see what Pyongyang hoped to gain. It had already achieved far more, less aggressively and more subtly, with a quite different story that broke a day before the shelling. Siegfried Hecker, a leading US physicist, reported that earlier in November he had been shown a hitherto unsuspected ultra-modern plant for enriching uranium, with up to 2,000 centrifuges, which suggests the North is much further down a second route to potentially producing nuclear weapons – via highly enriched uranium (HEU), rather than plutonium – than was supposed. This already sufficed for President Obama to hastily dispatch his (part-time) special adviser on North Korea, Stephen Bosworth, for consultations in Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing; so he was in the region when Yeonpyeong was shelled. On its own, this revelation would surely have pressured all three allies to rethink their reluctance to return to the 6PT absent a change of heart by the DPRK. Robert Gates, the US secretary of defense, had famously said that US will not buy the same horse twice. In that sense Kim Jong Il was showing off a fresh thoroughbred, or at least a frisky colt.

By contrast, the attack on Yeonpyeong makes resumption of dialogue more difficult, at least in the short run. So why do both? There are at least two hypotheses, and both may be true. One is that the shelling enabled North Korea to swiftly change the agenda, from the nuclear issue in particular to tensions on the peninsula more generally. This has bought it more time – several months at least – to press on with enriching uranium rather than being summoned urgently to fresh talks and told to stop, as would otherwise likely have happened

Or one can come at all this from another angle. North Korea's philosophy of *juche* is often translated as self-reliance, but that is misleading. Right from the outset the DPRK has always needed, demanded, and taken other people's money. Rather, its abiding aim is to do this while at the same time remain un beholden to and unbidable by anyone. Squaring that circle gets no easier, but Pyongyang is adept at finding and exploiting whatever wiggle room it can.

Calculated, calibrated

Its provocations are thus carefully calculated and calibrated. Even as Kim Jong Il draws ever closer to China, he needs to signal that he is not about to go quietly; despite a still delicate and incomplete succession, nobody messes with the DPRK or takes it for granted. In that context, the fallout from the *Cheonan* – or rather the lack of any – may have been read in Pyongyang as a licence to provoke further. Now, as then, the gamble is that South Koreans have no stomach for a fight and Lee Myung-bak dare not upset financial markets, much less risk a robust retaliation that might rain down artillery fire and missiles on Seoul itself. In short, the KPA shelled Yeonpyeong because they knew they could get away with it – again. What fun to watch Lee flail and squirm. Give it a few months, and they may well try again.

Needless to add, this raises risk on the peninsula. Nor is Pyongyang the only Korean capital where the current game plan is hard to read. While by no means positing an equivalence of aggressor and victim, and granted that the North has placed President Lee in an unenviable position, even so it is hard to fathom his thinking at the moment. Perhaps Lee had no option but to mount a show of force, but the several successive exercises held in December in and around Yeonpyeong brought fierce verbal reaction from Pyongyang. All this had the world, and the markets, worried for several days. But this time the North's bark was worse than its bite, as usual. Talk is cheap, and in truth the KPA like lightning was hardly going to strike twice in the same place – especially at a time when its foes were on full alert for any move.

A democracy of course, unlike a dictatorship has to cope with public opinion, and the mood in the South has certainly hardened since the shelling (more so than over the *Cheonan*). The risk is that if the North is unwise enough to provoke for a third time, it would be politically all but impossible for Lee not to strike back militarily. Yet it is a huge challenge – no doubt one being furiously mulled in Seoul – to find a way to do this which is targeted and finite; a blow that is firm and effective, yet which does not risk further escalation and the nightmare of all-out war. Short of that, even a single hit on a Seoul skyscraper or apartment block by one of the KPA's thousands of heavy artillery or multiple rocket launchers along the DMZ would cause far greater casualties and take the peninsula into uncharted, perilous territory.

Talking peace, on and off

Perhaps both sides peered into the abyss, breathed deeply and thought twice. Or maybe such a hope is to clutch at straws. Either way the New Year brought mixed messages from each. The DPRK's customary New Year joint editorial called for peace – but it always does. The day before, Kim Jong Il inspected a crack tank division, named *Seoul* because it was the first KPA unit to roll into the Southern capital in June 1950. That hardly signals peaceful intent.

More striking was the North's offer on Jan. 5 to “meet anyone anytime and anywhere” for “wide-ranging dialogue and negotiations.” Seoul was sniffy, yet two days earlier President Lee had similarly assured the North that “the door for dialogue is still open.” But as ever he set conditions: “nuclear weapons and military adventurism must be discarded.” Lee even compared the Yeonpyeong shelling to the 9/11 attacks on the US, which if intended as a serious comparison suggests a serious lack of judgment or of any sense of proportion.

Other remarks could only set alarm bells ringing in Pyongyang. To call for “endeavors to engage our North Korean brethren in the long journey toward freedom and prosperity,” like other statements during the last month – for further examples, see the Chronology – tends to suggest that Seoul has given up on Kim Jong Il. Early December found Lee in messianic mode: “I feel that reunification is drawing near.” Regime change is the clear subtext here.

And it will happen – but probably sooner in the South, thanks to the electoral cycle. Lee cannot run again, but his successor will be elected less than two years from now in December 2012. Despite the present mood which may pass, not everyone in the ruling GNP supports Lee’s hard line. Polls suggest that the front-runner is his rival and nemesis Park Geun-hye, daughter of the late dictator Park Chung-hee. No less conservative than Lee overall, in 2002 Ms Park visited Pyongyang and dined *à deux* with Kim Jong Il. The weather vane could yet turn again on the peninsula, and any direction is better than risking war.

Chronology of North Korea-South Korea Relations October – December 2010

Sept. 30, 2010: The Koreas hold their first direct military talks (at colonel level) in two years, at Panmunjom. They founder on the wreck of the *Cheonan*. The South insists on an apology, while the North still demands to send its own inspectors to examine the wreckage. [Ed. Note: Our apologies for incorrectly reporting them as occurring on Oct. 1 in our last issue.]

Oct. 1, 2010: At a meeting of their Red Crosses, the two Koreas agree to hold family reunions at the North’s Mt. Kumgang resort Oct. 30-Nov. 5.

Oct. 1, 2010: ROK National Assembly confirms Kim Hwang-sik as premier two months after an earlier nominee withdrew.

Oct. 2, 2010: North Korea proposes working-level talks on Oct. 15 to discuss ways to restart regular tourism to Mt. Kumgang.

Oct. 3, 2010: An unnamed ROK official tells the daily *JoongAng Ilbo* that in 2007 a senior DPRK diplomat, Ri Gun, inadvertently admitted North Korea’s responsibility for the 1987 bombing of KAL 858, with 115 deaths.

Oct. 4, 2010: In Germany for the 20th anniversary of reunification, ROK Unification Minister Hyun In-taek says North Korea must change its stance on the *Cheonan* if it wants the South to consider resuming cross-border tourism.

Oct. 4, 2010: A parliamentary report by the ROK Ministry of Knowledge Economy (MKE) shows the Kaesong Industrial Zone almost unaffected by the *Cheonan* incident. Output at the zone in July was worth \$26.4 million, only slightly down from \$26.5 million in June and \$28.1 million in April.

Oct. 4, 2010: A survey by MOU shows that North Korean defectors in the South earn on average barely half as much as South Korean workers.

Oct. 4, 2010: Ratings agency Standard & Poor's (S&P) says that: "Significant uncertainties remain from a possible succession in the near future in North Korea ... We continue to view [such] instability as an important constraint on the creditworthiness of South Korea."

Oct. 4, 2010: An editorial in *Rodong Sinmun*, daily paper of the North's ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), urges implementation of the agreements reached at the second inter-Korean summit held in Pyongyang three years to the day earlier, on Oct. 4, 2007.

Oct. 5, 2010: The two Koreas exchange lists of names of 200 separated families each, who will be briefly reunited at the upcoming family reunions.

Oct. 5, 2010: Unification Minister Hyun tells lawmakers that about 100,000 North Koreans are hiding in China. Most estimates are lower than this. DPRK defector numbers reaching the ROK are on the increase: 2,018 in 2006, 2,544 in 2007, 2,809 in 2008 and 2,927 in 2009. The cumulative total will surpass 20,000 this year.

Oct. 5, 2010: Kim Tae-hyo, ROK presidential secretary for national strategy, tells a forum in Seoul that the North's "nuclear program is evolving even now at a very fast pace."

Oct. 5, 2010: ROK Defense Minister Kim Tae-young tells a National Assembly audit that the North's ability to jam GPS signals is a new threat, and that Pyongyang has imported mobile equipment from Russia to do this.

Oct. 5, 2010: In his first reported outing since Sep. 28's WPK conference, the North's heir-apparent Kim Jong Un watches a live-fire drill with his father, DPRK leader Kim Jong Il.

Oct. 8, 2010: Yang Hyong Sop, vice president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA, the DPRK's rubber-stamp parliament), confirms Kim Jong Un's status as successor in an interview with *Associated Press Television News*.

Oct. 8, 2010: Kim Sung-hwan – a career diplomat, previously senior presidential secretary for foreign affairs and national security – takes as office as ROK foreign minister.

Oct. 8, 2010: After the annual Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) with US Secretary of Defense Secretary Robert Gates, ROK Defense Minister Kim Tae-young says that both allies are fully ready for "all situations that could occur ... If Kim Jong Il's health worsens further or economic difficulties deteriorate, we can't rule out ... instability in North Korea."

Oct. 10, 2010: In his second major public appearance, and the first sighting of him by about 80 invited foreign journalists, Kim Jong Un joins his father (and a senior Chinese delegation) on the saluting stand for a large-scale military parade marking the WPK's 65th anniversary.

Oct. 10, 2010: ROK Defense Ministry (MND) report says the North's Korean People's Army (KPA) is now thought to have 200,000 special warfare troops; 11 percent more than in 2008, and up from 120,000 in 2006. Other KPA assets include some 1,000 ballistic missiles, about 2,500-5,000 tons of chemical weapons agents, and around 600-700 computer hacking specialists.

Oct. 10, 2010: Hwang Jang-yop, the most senior DPRK defector of modern times – a former WPK secretary, he fled in 1997 and in exile became a fierce critic of Kim Jong Il – is found dead at home in Seoul of a suspected heart attack at age 87.

Oct. 12, 2010: South Korea's Unification Ministry (MOU) reports that the military has plans to set up camps for refugees in case of instability in the North.

Oct. 13-14, 2010: South Korea hosts a Proliferation Security exercise near Busan named *Eastern Endeavor 10*.

Oct. 15, 2010: The head of the KPA's delegation to inter-Korean military-level talks warns that "if the South does not stop anti-Pyongyang psychological broadcasts and dissemination of leaflets, it will be met with our military's strikes on those sites." The South has not in fact engaged in such activities for some years, but keeps threatening to do so.

Oct. 15, 2010: *Minju Joson* attacks ROK Unification Minister Hyun In-taek for expressing the hope that Korea may achieve a reunification similar to that of Germany 20 years earlier.

Oct. 16, 2010: *Rodong Sinmun* attacks Seoul for taking part in *Eastern Endeavor 10*, a four-nation drill (including Japan and Australia) held on Oct. 13-14 in the ROK's southern seas under the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI).

Oct. 18, 2010: *Rodong Sinmun* criticizes Seoul for saying it needs more time to think about holding talks on resuming tourism to Mt. Kumgang, calling this an "absurd pretext" and "a sleight of hand revealing their shallow trick." Pyongyang had demanded talks on Oct. 15.

Oct. 18, 2010: MOU reports that the two Koreas have reopened their aviation hotline, which was cut off in May in reprisal for the South's sanctions against it over the sinking in March of the corvette *Cheonan*.

Oct. 18, 2010: Meeting briefly at a checkpoint in the DPRK border city of Kaesong, the two Koreas' Red Crosses exchange lists of family members to be reunited at the end of October.

Oct. 18, 2010: A report by the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) claims that the DPRK has violated the Northern Limit Line (NLL) 211 times since 2006. Such trespass has increased, with 88 violations so far this year compared to 50 in all of 2009.

Oct. 18, 2010: Gen. Han Min-koo, chairman of the ROK JCS, tells an annual international Chiefs of Defense Conference held in Seoul that the DPRK's "nuclear program, as well as its weapons of mass destruction, is the biggest threat" to the security of the Asia-Pacific region.

Oct. 20, 2010: North's Committee for the Implementation of the June 15 Declaration – the accord reached at the first inter-Korean summit in June 2000 – faxes its Southern counterpart suggesting they “make contact at an appropriate time” to consider how to honor the agreement.

Oct. 21, 2010: Unification Minister Hyun tells a forum in Seoul that “rather than lashing out at us, North Korea should show a way for the future of the peninsula ... The first step is to show a willingness to account for the attack on the *Cheonan*. Another is to make a political determination toward denuclearization. That will be the starting point for the normalization of inter-Korean relations.”

Oct. 22, 2010: ROK Unification Minister Hyun tells a parliamentary audit that the DPRK has an estimated 150,000-200,000 political prisoners.

Oct. 26, 2010: A ship carrying 5,000 tons leaves the ROK port of Gunsan on Oct. 26, bound for Dandong in China and then to the adjacent DPRK city of Sinuiju, hit by severe flooding in August. Another ship sails from Incheon to Dandong with 3 million packets of instant noodles. Southern Red Cross officials fly to Dandong to supervise delivery across the Yalu river to Sinuiju. The rice is in 5kg packs, each marked “Donation from the Republic of Korea.”

Oct. 26, 2010: North's official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* says that Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un recently visited KPA Unit 10215, the DPRK's top anti-espionage agency.

Oct. 27, 2010: The two Koreas fail to agree on further family reunions beyond the one due on Oct. 30. The North demands resumption of the former supply of half a million tons of rice and 300,000 tons of fertilizer aid yearly.

Oct. 28, 2010: In Seoul en route to Pyongyang, the head of the UN World Food Program (WFP), Josette Sheeran, appeals for support for the agency's work in North Korea.

Oct. 28, 2010: The Director of the National Intelligence Service (NIS), Won Sei-hoon, says the KPA has almost 1,000 computer hackers, adding: “North Korea's cyber ability is remarkable.”

Oct. 29, 2010: MND says it sent a message rejecting North Korea's proposal to resume military talks – last held on Sept. 30 – unless Pyongyang admits and apologizes for sinking the *Cheonan*. *KCNA* calls this refusal “an act of treachery.”

Oct. 29, 2010: The ROK Foreign Ministry (MOFAT) welcomes Canada's new sanctions on the DPRK over the *Cheonan*. Trade, financial transactions, fresh investment, and technology transfer are all now to be banned, as are most bilateral exchanges.

Oct. 30-Nov. 5, 2010: Reunions of separated families are held at Mt. Kumgang.

Oct. 31, 2010: After four elderly ex-soldiers, listed in Seoul as killed in action in the 1950-53 Korean War, appeared for family reunions with their Southern relatives, the ROK Defense Ministry (MND) says it will make a new study of such POWs still held by Pyongyang.

Nov. 2, 2010: The National Defense Commission (NDC), the highest DPRK executive body, issues a lengthy, detailed, and vitriolic rebuttal of the charge that it sank the *Cheonan*.

Nov. 2, 2010: Defense Minister Kim Tae-young tells ROK lawmakers: “We believe North Korea owns 40kg of plutonium and continues attempts to miniaturize atomic weapons.” He adds: “I think it’s quite possible for North Korea [also] to build nuclear weapons through its uranium enrichment program.”

Nov. 4, 2010: ROK Vice Unification Minister Um Jong-sik renews Seoul’s call for regular reunions of separated families, saying this would be “conducive to creating public sentiment for aid provision to the North.”

Nov. 5, 2010: *Rodong Sinmun* calls for a “revitalization” of North-South dialogue. It repeats this plea on Nov. 8, and again on Dec. 1 despite tensions over the Yeonpyeong shelling.

Nov. 6, 2010: Vice-Marshal Jo Myong Rok, who in 2000 took tea in the White House with President Clinton, dies aged 82 – of “an inveterate heart disease” according to *KCNA*. On Jo’s funeral committee Kim Jong Un is listed second, after his father Kim Jong-il.

Nov. 8, 2010: *Rodong Sinmun* attacks Seoul’s joining the Operational Experts Group (OEG) of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) on Nov. 1 as pushing regional tensions into “the extreme phase of confrontation.”

Nov. 11, 2010: *Yonhap* notes that the CIA’s latest World Factbook 2010 puts North Korean average life expectancy at 61.5 for men and 66.9 for women – seven years less than in its 2008 edition. The decline, or revision, goes unexplained. The respective figures for South Korea are 75.6 for men and 82.3 for women.

Nov. 11, 2010: In reponse to Pyongyang’s proposal to hold talks on Nov. 19 about resuming Southern tourism to Mt. Kumgang, Seoul demands that the North first rescind its freeze and seizure in April of ROK-owned assets at the resort.

Nov. 12, 2010: The North’s General Guidance Bureau for the Development of Scenic Spots telephones MOU to urge Seoul to agree to talks on resuming tourism to Mt. Kumgang.

Nov. 13, 2010: Citing two recent US visitors, Siegfried Hecker and Jack Pritchard, press reports suggest that North Korea is constructing a new experimental light-water nuclear reactor (LWR) at its main Yongbyon nuclear complex, north of Pyongyang.

Nov. 15, 2010: Seoul announces that the cumulative total of Northern defectors reaching the South passed 20,000 on Nov. 11, when a Mrs Kim (aged 41) arrived with her two sons.

Nov. 18, 2010: South Korea again co-sponsors the annual UN General Assembly resolution criticizing North Korea’s human rights record. As usual Pyongyang fiercely rejects this.

Nov. 18, 2010: In what seems a hopeful sign, MOU says that the North has “proposed that government officials join the Nov. 25 Red Cross talks to discuss resuming Mt. Kumgang tours and that the matter of real estate and seizure also be discussed and resolved.”

Nov. 18, 2010: The North’s office of the Pan-national Alliance for Korea’s Reunification (Pomminryon), a DPRK front, holds an event to mark the 20th anniversary of its formation.

Nov. 20, 2010: The *New York Times* reports that earlier this month Siegfried Hecker, the former head of Los Alamos National Laboratory, was shown a hitherto unsuspected ultra-modern uranium enrichment (UE) facility containing some 2,000 centrifuges at Yongbyon. On Nov. 22 Hecker publishes a full report of his visit. He adds on Nov. 23 that Pyongyang may well also have other such facilities elsewhere.

Nov. 22, 2010: Amb. Stephen Bosworth, US special representative for North Korea policy, hastily dispatched to Asia in the wake of Hecker’s UE revelations, says in Seoul that this news is disappointing and provocative, but “not a crisis. We’re not surprised by this.”

Nov. 22, 2010: The North’s Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK) accuses the South of “desperately preventing” its NGOs from making cross-border contacts.

Nov. 22, 2010: The ROK begins its annual large-scale *Hoguk* military exercise.

Nov. 22, 2010: Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Un, and senior KPA figures visit the DPRK’s southwest coast, ostensibly to inspect fish farms.

Nov. 23, 2010: The KPA fires some 170 artillery shells at the ROK’s Yeonpyeong Island, close to the DPRK west coast. ROK forces fire about 80 rounds back. The KPA claims Seoul started this, by firing shells into its territorial waters despite being warned not to. President Lee calls the North’s act “an invasion of South Korean territory.”

Nov. 23, 2010: Hours after the Yeonpyeong shelling, KCNA reports Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un as touring a soy sauce factory and a medical school in Pyongyang. Similar reports of such guidance visits continue almost daily, despite rising tensions.

Nov. 24, 2010: In retaliation for the shelling, Seoul raises its non-wartime security alert to its highest level, bans its nationals from going North, postpones indefinitely Red Cross talks set for Nov. 25, and suspends flood aid to the North (cement and medicines) as yet undelivered.

Nov. 24, 2010: DPRK Red Cross attacks Seoul for “ruining humanitarian programs, including family reunions” by cancelling the meeting planned for Nov. 25.

Nov. 24, 2010: The DPRK Foreign Ministry (MFA) again blames the South for the shelling: “The enemies, despite our repeated warnings, eventually committed extremely reckless military provocations of firing artillery shells into our maritime territory near Yeonpyeong Island beginning 1 p.m. Tuesday ...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.”

Nov. 25, 2010 ff: DPRK media keep up a barrage of verbal artillery; saying the KPA “will deal without hesitation the second and third strong physical retaliatory blow” if provoked. On Nov. 26 DPRK, belying its name, threatens “a shower of dreadful fire”; the Korean version of the DPRK statement adds that the North is “ready to annihilate the enemies’ stronghold”, and boasts that on Nov. 23 its forces “precisely targeted and struck” ROK military units. On Nov. 28 the National Peace Committee says that US-ROK war games are creating an “ultra-emergency.” On Nov. 30 *Minju Joson* warns of “all-out war” if Northern land or waters are violated. Despite such rhetoric, this and subsequent ROK maneuvers pass without incident.

Nov. 25, 2010: The US-led UN Command (UNC) in Korea reports that Pyongyang has rejected its proposal, made a day earlier, to hold general-level military talks on the shelling.

Nov. 25, 2010: Lee Myung-bak in effect sacks Defense Minister Kim Tae-young, abruptly accepting the resignation Kim had offered in May over the *Cheonan*. In a media shambles, his successor is at first reported to be presidential security advisor Lee Hee-won, but turns out in fact to be Kim Kwan-Jin, current chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS).

Nov. 26, 2010: MOU says all applications by NGOs to send humanitarian aid to the North – currently suspended since Nov. 23’s shelling – will be strictly scrutinized henceforth.

Nov. 27, 2010: *KCNA* declares that “the US was the arch criminal who deliberately planned the [shelling] incident and wire-pulled it behind the scene.”

Nov. 28, 2010: An ROK howitzer is fired by mistake, sending a shell 14km north toward – but fortunately not across – the DMZ. The South swiftly tells the North this was an accident.

Nov. 28-Dec. 1, 2010: The US and ROK hold large-scale joint naval drills off the west coast of the peninsula, including the 97,000-ton aircraft carrier *USS George Washington*, in what *Yonhap* calls “an overt show of strength against North Korea.”

Nov. 29, 2010: In a televised address, ROK President Lee calls the shelling an “inhumane crime” and pledges strong retaliation to any future provocations. He says Seoul has given up hope that dialogue will make Pyongyang abandon brinkmanship and nuclear weapons. Lee also apologizes for “not having been able to protect the lives and property of the people” on Yeonpyeong.

Nov. 30, 2010: *Rodong Sinmun* reports that “the construction of a light-water reactor is actively underway ... To guarantee fuel for it, a uranium enrichment factory is operating, equipped with thousands of centrifuges.” The paper says all this is for peaceful purposes, to generate electricity.

Dec. 3, 2010: MND confirms it is considering reinstating a definition of North Korea as the South’s “main enemy” in its forthcoming *2010 Defense White Paper*. The same day, new Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin says at his confirmation hearing: “It is clear that the North Korean military and its leader are our main enemies.”

Dec. 3, 2010: Supporting a *WikiLeak* claim that recent defectors include relatively high-ranking figures, a Seoul official confirms that a senior youth official came South last year. *Chosun Ilbo* names him as Sol Jong Sik, aged 40, who was head of the Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League for Ryanggang Province when he fled in June 2009.

Dec. 5, 2010: Citing an unspecified “commissioned report,” KCNA warns against further planned US-ROK drills saying that “The political situation on the Korean Peninsula is reaching an uncontrollable level due to provocative, frantic moves by the puppet group.”

Dec. 5, 2010: New ROK Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin calls the KPA’s asymmetrical forces – WMD, submarines, Special Forces, etc. – a “serious threat.” Nuclear weapons apart, the North has 200,000 Special Forces to the South’s 20,000.

Dec. 6, 2010: North Korea Intellectuals Solidarity (NKIS), a defector body in the South, claims that the DPRK has jailed over 1,200 people for illicitly watching ROK films and TV.

Dec. 6, 2010: Meeting in Washington, the US, ROK, and Japanese foreign ministers renew a pledge to not engage in dialogue with North Korea unless Pyongyang changes its behavior by ending provocations and showing a sincere commitment to denuclearization.

Dec. 6, 2010: The International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague says that after receiving “communications alleging that North Korean forces committed war crimes in the territory of the Republic of Korea,” it has begun a preliminary examination as to whether its jurisdiction applies. This may take quite a while. The ROK has laid no official complaint with the ICC about the Cheonan or Yeonpyeong incidents, but South Korean citizens apparently did so.

Dec. 6, 2010: The ROK’s official National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) votes 6-2 to recommend that the government resume anti-North Korea propaganda. The troubled body, split between right and left, had failed to agree on a similar motion in June.

Dec. 7, 2010: At a seminar in Seoul on unification, Unification Minister Hyun In-taek calls the Yeonpyeong shelling an “indelible atrocity” and the “worst choice” Pyongyang has ever made. He adds: “This year, our society has started looking squarely at the issue of North Korea beyond inter-Korean relations and seriously thinking about the future of the Korean Peninsula. This year will be a grand turning point in the Korean Peninsula issue.”

Dec. 9, 2010: *Yonhap* notes that *KCNA* now offers news in Korean, seemingly aimed at South Koreans. Like all DPRK websites this is banned and blocked in the ROK, but can easily be accessed via an overseas proxy server.

Dec. 9, 2010: President Lee Myung-bak tells South Koreans living in Malaysia: “I feel that reunification is drawing near ... We should prepare for reunification on the basis of bigger economic power.” He adds that Seoul has a responsibility to achieve reunification as early as possible, so that 23 million North Korean people may live with the right to happiness.

Dec. 9, 2010: The North's DPRK again blames the US and ROK for provoking it into the Nov. 23 shelling, calling Washington the "wire-puller and chieftain" and Seoul its "puppet."

Dec. 11, 2010: The DPRK's National Peace Committee (NPC) calls the recent meeting between the US and ROK joint chiefs of staffs "a declaration of war."

Dec. 13, 2010: MOU launches an official committee to probe the abduction of up to 100,000 South Koreans in 1950 during the Korean War. Unification Minister Hyun says that this "is no past issue. It is part of the reality of the inter-Korean relations."

Dec. 14, 2010: ROK Army Chief of Staff Hwang Eui-don resigns over alleged real estate speculation. He is swiftly replaced by Gen. Kim Sang-ki, head of the Third Army Command.

Dec. 14, 2010: ROK Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan calls Siegfried Hecker's assumption (Nov. 20) that the North has several UE facilities "a fair point." He adds that Seoul has ideas on conditions for Six-Party Talks to resume, including UE disclosure; he does not elaborate.

Dec. 14, 2010: Beijing says Pyongyang has agreed to an emergency meeting of chief envoys to the Six-Party Talks. Seoul and its allies are less than keen, to put it mildly.

Dec. 16, 2010: The DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) declares: "We support all proposals for dialogue ... but we will never beg for dialogue."

Dec. 16, 2010: *KCNA* reports Kim Jong Il's first public visit to a military unit since before the Yeonpyeong shelling. His last was on Nov. 12. Kim Jong Un is also in attendance.

Dec. 17, 2010: *KCNA* warns that the KPA will strike back with "deadlier" firepower than on Nov. 23 if Seoul goes ahead with a planned live firing drill near Yeonpyeong on Dec. 18-21. The same day, *Uriminzokkiri* threatens that "if war breaks out, it will lead to nuclear warfare and will not be limited to the Korean Peninsula."

Dec. 18, 2010: Fighters for Free North Korea (FFNK), a defector group, launches balloons carrying 200,000 leaflets, 500 CDs, and a thousand \$1 bills from Yeonpyeong. Messages include: "Let's bring down the third-generation hereditary succession" and "Rise up, North Korean compatriots!"

Dec. 18, 2010: DPRK MFA calls US military observers and foreign journalists who will cover an upcoming ROK military drill on Yeonpyeong a "human shield," adding: "There is a need to clarify beforehand who is responsible for the imminent second Yeonpyeong crisis."

Dec. 20, 2010: *Rodong Sinmun* calls on all North Koreans to unite "to oppose war and uphold peace"; saying this is "crucial to keeping alive the fate of the Korean nation and rooting out the deepening danger of war."

Dec. 20, 2010: An emergency session of the UN Security Council (UNSC) fails to agree on a statement on defusing tensions on the Korean Peninsula. China reportedly threatens to veto any phrase condemning the DPRK for its Nov. 23 artillery attack on Yeonpyeong.

Dec. 20, 2010: South Korea conducts a 90-minute live-fire drill on Yeonpyeong, firing about 1,500 rounds. North does not respond. Later that day, the KPA Supreme Command explains they “did not feel any need to retaliate against every despicable military provocation like one taking revenge after facing a blow,” nor fall into the trap of “a cunning scenario to deliberately lead the military counteraction of the DPRK to driving the situation on the Korean Peninsula to the brink of a war and thus save the US Asia policy and strategy toward the DPRK from bankruptcy.”

Dec. 21, 2010: An unnamed Seoul official calls Pyongyang’s offer to accept International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors “an old trick.” He insists that the DPRK must first return to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), which it quit in 2003.

Dec. 23, 2010: The ROK Korea Customs Service (KCS) reports that despite tensions, North-South trade through the KIZ this year (Jan. – Nov.) rose 62 percent to \$1.3 billion. Southern firms invested in the zone increased by 30 percent from 93 to 121. By contrast Seoul’s post-*Cheonan* ban meant that non-KIZ inter-Korean trade fell 30 percent to \$464 million.

Dec. 23, 2010: Marking the 19th anniversary of Kim Jong Il becoming supreme commander of the KPA, Minister of People’s Armed Forces Kim Yong Chun threatens a “sacred war of justice of Korean style based on the nuclear deterrent at any time necessary to cope with the enemies’ actions deliberately pushing the situation to the brink of a war.”

Dec. 24, 2010: The National Defense Commission (NDC) and the WPK Central Military Commission (CMC) hold a banquet for the 19th anniversary of Kim Jong Il’s inauguration as supreme commander of the KPA. Unlike in past years, Kim and his son Kim Jong Un attend.

Dec. 24, 2010: Pyongyang’s National Reconciliation Council (NRC) denounces Seoul’s plan to investigate abductions of its citizens by the North, while it occupied the South during the 1950-53 Korean War, as “another vicious political provocation and unpardonable racket for confrontation.” It warns that “such poor farce” may hamper future family reunions, adding: “There is nothing for the puppet gangsters to gain from the cowardly scheme.”

Dec. 25, 2010: *Rodong Sinmun* attacks recent comments by Lee Myung-bak as “the worst provocation” against the North. Next day the paper calls the South’s military exercise near Yeonpyeong Island a “grave infringement” on DPRK sovereignty, aimed at defending the “illegal” northern limit line.

Dec. 27, 2010: Referring to recent US-ROK war games, *Rodong Sinmun* says the fact that “armed clashes have not occurred in the West Sea of Korea despite the dangerous collusion between the US and South Korean war-like forces [is] entirely thanks to the pluck, the self-restraint and steadfast will of the DPRK to preserve peace. But there is a limit to its patience, too.” It jeers that “the puppet regime of South Korea is so despicable and coward [sic] that it cannot maintain its power even a moment without the protection of its American master.”

Dec. 27, 2010: In his last biweekly radio address of 2010, ROK President Lee Myung-bak calls for unity at home and says that though he is eager to keep the peace, South Koreans should not fear war with North Korea: “If (we) are afraid of war, we can never prevent war.”

Dec. 29, 2010: ROK Unification Minister Hyun In-taek says that in 2011 Seoul will “press North Korea to move toward denuclearization and peace ... open up rather than be isolated, and prioritize the living of its people over the songun (military-first) line.” He adds: “I am not saying North Korea should open up by all means possible. I believe it would be right if the North could develop by opening up through at least a Chinese-style model.” Further, the South “will continue to try to heighten the quality of life for North Koreans and allow them to enjoy basic rights.”

Dec. 30, 2010: ROK *2010 Defense White Paper* labels the DPRK an “enemy.” While harsher than the phrase “direct military threat” in the last *White Paper*, this is not as strong as “main enemy” which was used from 1995-2004, which some now wished to restore. *Uriminzokkiri* calls the new moniker a “declaration of war.”

Dec. 31, 2010: In a rare literary reference, *Minju Joson* lays into the South’s Unification Minister: “Insane Hyun In-taek will definitely receive dreadful punishment one day. Just watch ... To be frank, Hyun has committed numerous unforgivable sins against the (Korean) nation for his Don Quixote-like behavior that defies norms.”

Dec. 31, 2010: Kim Jong Il watches the elite *Seoul Ryukyongsu 105 Guards* Tank Division in training, so named because it was the first KPA unit to enter Seoul after North Korea invaded the South in June 1950.

Jan. 1, 2011: North Korea’s customary New Year’s editorial of three leading daily papers – those of the party (*Rodong Sinmun*), military (*Joson Inmingun*) and youth organization (*Chongnyon Jonwi*) – calls, among much else, for “relieving the state of confrontation” and the threat of war between North and South Korea.

Jan. 3, 2011: In his New Year’s address, broadcast live, ROK President Lee Myung-bak says: “I remind the North that the path toward peace is yet open. The door for dialogue is still open.” He adds that “nuclear weapons and military adventurism must be discarded,” and compares the Yeonpyeong shelling to the 9/11 attacks on the US: “From now on, we need ... peace and reunification policies based on solid national security ... [and to] make endeavors to engage our North Korean brethren in the long journey toward freedom and prosperity.”

Jan. 4, 2011: *Choson Ilbo* reports a *WikiLeak* of an Aug. 2009 breakfast meeting between US Ambassador Kathleen Stephens and Hyundai’s chairwoman Hyun Jeong-eun, soon after the latter had met Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang.

Jan. 5, 2011: A joint meeting of the DPRK government, political parties and organizations in Pyongyang calls for “wide-ranging dialogue and negotiations ... [and] an unconditional and early opening of talks between the authorities having real power and responsibility, in particular ... We are ready to meet anyone anytime and anywhere ... We propose discontinuing to heap slanders and calumnies on each other and refraining from any act of provoking each other.” Seoul’s initial reaction is wary.