

## What North Korea Overlooked about the Impact of the Yeonpyeong Attack

**Cho Han Bum**

*Senior Research Fellow,  
Center for South-North Korean Cooperation Studies*

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North Korea's bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island was a direct attack on South Korean soil which included a civilian residential area, and as such it should be considered a grave incident set apart from previous provocations. As this attack was planned elaborately in advance, it cannot be dismissed as an accidental military clash. North Korea has made a series of armed provocations in recent times, from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> West Sea battles to the Cheonan sinking and this most recent attack on Yeonpyeong Island. This signifies that North Korea is using a strategy of military provocations to move the negotiating process along in its favor, and the Yeonpyeong attack may be interpreted along the same lines.

With the economy failing, the nuclear negotiations dragging on, and the South Korean government refusing to reward bad behavior, it appears the North Korean regime is feeling a heightened sense of impatience. With the emergence of the "lackluster" Kim Jong Eun, who has significantly less experience and a weaker grip on power than either his father or grandfather had, it seems plausible that the regime needed a variety of sensational events to help normalize the power succession. In these circumstances, the North Korean authorities appear to have decided to use a series of new and more sensational provocations to try to turn the negotiations in their favor, while also increasing internal solidarity and strengthening the succession system. They may believe that the shock to South Korean society and the

internationalization of the issue as a result of the Yeonpyeong attack will correspond appropriately to their intended result. However the attack has had several other effects which may differ from what North Korea intended.

First, we have to consider the long-term impact this will have on China's North Korea policy. The Cheonan sinking occurred in the West Sea, the body of water directly adjacent to Shanghai, just as China was pouring all its efforts into preparing for the Shanghai Expo. Moreover, the Yeonpyeong attack occurred just as the city of Guangzhou was hosting the Asian Games, part of China's ambitious effort to transform its image. These attacks demonstrated that ultimately China has very limited influence over North Korea's behavior and, furthermore, North Korea is acting with absolutely no concern for China's situation. The artillery attack on Yeonpyeong not only embarrassed China both domestically and abroad but also may have prompted China to reassess the North Korean leadership. For China, North Korea represents a buffer against the ROK-US-Japan alliance, and thus from a strategic viewpoint it cannot be abandoned. That is why China continues to provide support despite its discomfort about North Korea's nuclear weapons. However if North Korea continues to exhibit unpredictable and uncontrollable behavior, it will become for China nothing but a "costly structure." This may cause China to become more keenly aware of the need to transform the North Korean leadership into a form that is more pro-China and easier to control.

Given the lack of a mature civil society or political resistance force within North Korea, only China has the power to influence a transition of the North Korean regime. It is difficult to imagine China doing anything rash while Kim Jong Il lives. But China is well aware that it may have to prepare for a sudden crisis or the emergence of new variables during the process of transition to the successor regime under Kim Jong Eun. This most recent attack on Yeonpyeong will serve to make these fears more concrete in the eyes of the Chinese leadership. It is quite likely that this event will cause China to give serious consideration to the thought of changing the current "costly" North Korean system.

Second, the Yeonpyeong attack may have significant impact not only in South Korea but within North Korea as well. The North Korean authorities may have declared it a victory, but the attack will do nothing to help the unraveling unity of North Korean society or the lack of faith in the system. There are reports of rumors circulating within North Korean society about casualties and damages sustained by the North during the Yeonpyeong battle as well as desertions and punishments within the military. In a situation where the regime has been stretched to its limits such external crises may easily break out, but they will not work to improve systemic unity. On

the contrary, at a time when the system is weakened and more people are dying of starvation, this incident may only serve to increase the public's cynicism and skepticism toward the regime. It is quite possible that the North Korean people will see the Yeonpyeong attack as a reckless provocation committed for the sake of securing Kim Jong Eun's succession. It is worthwhile to recall the precedent of the Falklands War, in which the Argentine military dictatorship, struggling to overcome an internal political crisis, entered a limited war with England, but ultimately lost its hold on power as a result.

Third, we need to re-assess the relationship between the Kim Jong Eun succession structure and the North Korean military. The prevailing view is that Kim Jong Eun is using the military and pursuing a hard-line policy toward the South in order to normalize the succession system. However this is not merely a matter of Kim Jong Eun strengthening his control over the military. It is possible that the North Korean military, which was unable to gain any special benefits during the previous friendlier phase of inter-Korean relations, presented various proposals to Kim Jong Eun including the Cheonan incident and this attack on Yeonbyeong. Thus conversely these incidents could be seen as evidence of the military exerting its influence over Kim Jong Eun. As evidenced by the *songun* system, the North Korean military is the final means of propping up the regime when it has reached the limits of its durability. The withdrawal of military support was a key factor in the collapse of the Ceausescu regime in Romania, indicating that the exclusive and closed-off military of North Korea may paradoxically have the greatest influence in bringing about change in the system. Thus the military may become both a helper and an uncontrollable element in the Kim Jong Eun succession system.

Fourth, the impact of the Yeonpyeong attack on South Korean society goes beyond what North Korea intended. Through this attack, the Pyongyang leadership intended to stimulate a change in South Korea's policy toward North Korea, but in reality such change is unlikely. This continuous series of armed provocations by the North - the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> West Sea battles, the Cheonan sinking, and the attack on Yeonpyeong - have increased the tolerance of South Korean society. But paradoxically, the South Korean people have also come to understand that giving in to North Korean demands will not produce a lasting peace on the peninsula. This has led to rising demands from South Koreans for a firm response that will put a stop to these North Korean provocations permanently, rather than the temporary solution of making concessions. Furthermore, the South Korean leadership, as a government based on representative democracy, finds itself in a position where it has no choice but to take a strong hard-line response. The most recent ROK-US joint exercises in the West Sea, which included an aircraft carrier strike force in spite of China's warnings, is a representative example of this new situation.

Faced with a serious systemic crisis, the North Korean regime shows no sign of changing its typical negotiating tactic of creating a nuclear crisis or conventional military provocation in order to increase pressure on the US and South Korea. Therefore it is easy to foresee additional military provocations by the regime in the future. These provocations are evidence that the North Korean system has reached its limits, and we must view them as signs of the need to make detailed preparations. Therefore we should consider the Yeonpyeong attack not as a temporary crisis but as a harbinger of similar provocations to come. The important thing is to recognize that these provocations are not signs of the strength of North Korea's system, but rather symptoms of its dying stages. The current situation calls for "patience" and "confidence" based on a strong faith in ultimate unification. What is required now is a wise response from the government and a calm assessment by the people.