

Korea - Yeonpyeong-do: TheTragic Result of Aggressive Military Exercises and Escalating Antagonism North and South

Friday 3 December 2010, by [PSSP](#) (Date first published: 24 November 2010).

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The peace movement must gather its strength to oppose all further actions that threaten the peaceful existence of the Korean people.

24 November 2010

Policy Committee

People's Solidarity for Social Progress (PSSP)

On November 23 at 2:34pm North Korea fired more than a hundred artillery shells in the vicinity of Yeongpyeong-do, an Island of the west coast of the Korean peninsula that is home to roughly 1,300 South Korean citizens. Many of the artillery rounds landed on Yeongpyeong-do in an area populated by civilians. The South Korean military responded, firing roughly 80 of their own shells. The back-and-forth, which lasted over an hour, left two South Korean marines and two civilians dead, and fires burning across the island.

The South Korean government, while stating it will do its utmost to stop the situation from escalating, has, at the same time, promised a resolute response in the event of further provocation. North Korea, broadcasting its official position on the incident through the Korean Central News Agency on the evening of the 23rd, claimed that the South had persisted with artillery exercises in North Korean territorial waters despite repeated warnings, and that the North had, therefore, "responded with an immediate and forceful attack." It also promised to "respond without hesitation with a continuous merciless military attack" if South Korea intrudes "even 0.001 mm" into North Korean territorial waters.

This incident reveals clearly the tragic nature of South and North Korea's on-going military standoff and spiraling antagonistic actions, a conflict that affects, not only the Korean peninsula, but the entire region, stimulating militarization by neighboring countries and thus escalating tensions in the entire East Asian region. North Korea's shelling of a civilian area cannot, in the end, be justified. At the same time, we must recognize this incident as a demonstration of the extreme extent to which the conflict between North and South Korea has escalated, egged on by a policy of antagonism and supposedly defensive military training staged by the South. The South's antagonistic policies and military exercises must be halted immediately.

The Tragic Result of Aggressive Military Exercises

Based on reports by the Korean Central News Agency, it appears that the North's artillery attack was a response to South Korean maritime artillery drills carried out as part of "national defense"

military training. The South Korean military began these exercises on November 22, and they were scheduled to go on until November 30.

According to news reports, immediately after the plan for national defense exercises was announced, the North Korean Committee for Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland issued a statement referring to the exercises as a “military provocation” and again on the 22nd, referred to them as an “intolerable criminal action against the Korean people.” After the exercises began, the North again sent a memo of protest to the South suggesting that the drills were being carried out with an attack on the North in mind and demanding that they be stopped.

South Korean military authorities responded to reports of these warnings sent by the North by claiming that the shelling was not a response to national defense exercises, but rather a planned provocation. They added that the drills carried out in the waters around Yeonpyeong-do on the 23rd were regular periodic exercises, not national defense training, and that the North had simply used them as a pretext to attack.

Even if we are to believe this explanation, it is clear that the military authorities on both sides acknowledge that the South’s military exercises are a strong stimulant to the North. In addition, even if the drills were not national defense drills, this does not change the fact that they included artillery practice in the waters right next to North Korea. The farthest distance from North Korean territory to Yeonpyeong-do is less than 12 km. Joint army-navy artillery exercises were carried out on the 23rd in an area directly south of Yeonpyeong-do. Carrying out “periodic” shelling right in North Korea’s front door is unjustifiable, and is clearly a threat.

The South has consistently carried out aggressive military training since the Cheonan incident. Military authorities have clearly stated that these exercises are a “show of force” against North Korea, which have included joint training with the U.S. involving an American nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, and PSI maritime interception drills carried out with the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. Our peace movement has continuously warned that these military exercises not only cannot prevent a war but, in fact, provoke the deepening of military competition among neighboring countries and an escalation of tensions. The current South Korean national defense exercises, in which the United States participates, were begun as the replacement for the Team Spirit War Games, which North Korea protested strongly in the past. Currently on-going exercises are scheduled to include amphibious landing drills. Such landing drills are carried out in an area that approximates the North Korean coastline and, as such, have been criticized as actually being practice for an invasion against the North and been the target of intense opposition by the North. Nonetheless, joint military exercises involving the United States’ nuclear-powered aircraft carrier began on November 28. This move represents a denial of the central role similar military exercises have had in escalating tensions on the peninsula and threatens to further deteriorate the situation to a state of crisis.

The Vicious Cycle of Militarize Response

South Korean President Lee Myung-bak has responded by announcing that the rules of engagement for the South Korean armed forces have been changed to allow for a more forceful response to North Korea, while the conservative South Korean media is calling for armed revenge. These are highly troubling developments.

The governments of both South Korea and the United States have demonstrated their plans to escalate militarized pressure on North Korea several times well before the Yeonpyeong-do incident. The joint communiqué from the recent U.S.-ROK Security Consultative Meeting (SCM), for instance, made the first reference to a “state of instability” in North Korea, clearly suggesting the two governments’ intentions to intervene in the event of an emergency situation. Such a measure would

mean the actualization of the scenario called for in OPLAN 5029, in which the U.S. and South Korea use joint military force to destroy facilities housing weapons of mass destruction in 30 places in North Korea and land marines on North Korean territory in the event of instability arising during a transfer of power. What is more, on November 22, South Korean Minister of Defense Kim Tae-yeong told the National Assembly that the new Proliferation Policy Committee, established at the recent SCM, would consider the possibility of redeploying American tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea. These statements show clearly that the U.S. and South Korea seek to respond to rising tension on the peninsula through military means only.

U.S. and South Korean military operation plans that aim at attacking or occupying North Korea, the aggressive military exercises that aim to make these plans realizable and ceaseless military build-up all only serve to make peace on the Korean peninsula more distant and plant the seeds for the explosion of an even more dangerous incident. An aggressive response on one side of the border only becomes the basis for an even more aggressive response on the other, with the situation escalating in a disastrous chicken fight. We must wake up to the simple fact that in a chicken fight there are only two possible conclusions: One side gives up first or both are destroyed.

The Need for a Mechanism to Stop North-South Military Clashes

The West Sea is becoming a powder keg capable of driving the whole Korean peninsula into a state of crisis. There have been numerous military clashes in the area, including three in June 1999, June 2002 and June 2009 that led to dozens of casualties. These clashes continue to occur because of conflict over the military demarcation line in the West Sea, which North and South Korea have never agreed upon. The Armistice Agreement concluded in 1953 set the terrestrial border between the two sides, but did not designate a corresponding border in the nearby waters. No agreement on this line was reached in the aftermath of the armistice. The South sees the Northern Limit Line (NLL) it set unilaterally as the legitimate boundary, while the North has set a different border it refers to as the West Sea Military Demarcation Line. South Korea's response to any movement by the North across the NLL as if they were a provocation only deepens the conflict, as do statements by the North that it will respond to an intrusion of even 0.001 mm across the South Sea Military Demarcation Line with a "continuous merciless military attack."

Repetitive clashes between North and South Korea make it impossible for the two sides to develop even a basic level of trust and only induce increasingly aggressive responses.

The creation of an institutionalized mechanism for de-escalation is urgently necessary. Efforts must be made to supplement the Armistice Agreement and set a military demarcation line to which both sides can agree. Concrete and diverse actions must be taken by both sides to develop basic mutual trust before the ultimate conclusion of a peace treaty is possible. It is time that we put our collective wisdom towards developing means to protect the peaceful existence of the people of the Korean Peninsula.

North Korean Attack's is not Justifiable

The Yonpyeong-do incident demonstrates that the chicken fight occurring on the Korean Peninsula has taken on an even more brutal form. This is the first time since the end of the Korean War that either side has made a direct attack on the other's territory.

No matter the circumstances, it is not possible to condone a military action that threatens common people's peaceful existence and steals away lives. As such, we cannot justify North Korea's shelling of an area populated by civilians. We must state clearly that such military actions cannot be repeated in the future. This is the stance that all people who wish for peace on the Korean Peninsula

must take.

The Need for a United Peace Movement

Conflict on the Korean Peninsula has implications for the security of not only North and South Korea, but all of East Asia. We are gravely concerned about the state of tension in the East Asian region due to disputes among neighboring countries over the resources, territory and hegemony of China, Japan and Russia. We are concerned that further conflicts on the Korean Peninsula will only exacerbate this situation. As such, we will resolutely oppose any action that stimulates military tensions on and around the peninsula by even 1%. We cannot allow the Korean people's lives to be held hostage to a deadly chicken fight. We must choose a future for ourselves that is free of military conflict.

The Yeonpyeong-do incident has showed us the following things: 1) The Korean Peninsula is engulfed in a state of instability in which military clashes can occur at any time. 2) These military clashes are taking more and more severe forms 3) 'National defense' exercises and mutual policies of antagonism cannot lead to peace. 4) This situation has and will continue to lead to the loss of life.

We must use this incident as a chance to stop North and South Korea's antagonistic policies towards one another and move towards the establishment of a peace regime. Let us be clear about just how destructive and terrible antagonistic and threatening military actions are. In order to prevent a war of mutual destruction we must begin by building a movement in South Korea against all the stimulants to military tensions. In other words, we must build a movement calling for arms reductions, an end to aggressive military exercises and dissolution of the U.S.-ROK defense alliance.

Will our future be that of a peaceful Korean Peninsula or a peninsula engulfed by the smoke of artillery fire? The answer to this question lies in whether we mobilize under the banner of peace, or allow the South Korean government to continue to respond with antagonistic policies and shows of force. We must resolutely denounce the logic of aggressive militarize response and unite in a powerful peace movement that can build a peace regime and protect the peaceful existence of the Korean people.

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* <http://www.pssp.org/eng/?p=169>