

The Pattern and Impact of North Korea's Recent Military Provocation

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1. News Highlights

On October 18, North Korea fired hundreds of artillery shells at the maritime buffer zone near the Northern Limit Line (NLL) on the western front (Jangsan Point of Ryongyeon County, South Hwanghae Province) and the eastern front (Jangjeon-eup of Goseong County, Gangwon Province). The North Korean General Staff claimed that the South Korean army was holding a military exercise called “National Defense 22” in Cheorwon County of Gangwon Province and fired artillery shells near the front line where the 5th North Korean Army Corps

was stationed, which was “clearly an invasion exercise toward the North.” In response, North Korea fired two batches of warning shots in the morning¹ and afternoon² of that day; on the afternoon of the 19th, *North Korean Central Television* released a video of the South Korean army conducting artillery training near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).³ On October 24, the North Korean cargo ship “Mu-Pho” crossed the “Northern Limit Line” in the waters off Jangsan Point of Ryongyeon County, South Hwanghae Province. It was suspected of trying to sail toward South Korea’s Baengnyeong Island and therefore given warning shots and dispersed by

1. “조선인민군 총참모부 대변인발표,” 조선중앙통신, October 19, 2022, <http://www.kcna.kp/kp/article/q/d0c66ca4ecab2c540dff5b3381d3ba7.kcmsf>.
2. “조선인민군 참모부 대변인발표,” 조선중앙통신, October 19, 2022, <http://www.kcna.kp/kp/article/q/d0c66ca4ecab2c540dff5b3381d3ba7.kcmsf>.
3. “조선인민군 참모부 대변인발표,” 조선중앙통신, October 19, 2022, <http://www.kcna.kp/kp/article/q/d0c66ca4ecab2c540dff5b3381d3ba7.kcmsf>.

the South Korean Navy frigates.⁴ After the cargo ship returned to North Korean waters, the “Western Front Coastal Defense Force” stationed in Ryongyeon County fired ten artillery shells at the maritime buffer area, citing South Korean military provocations.⁵

2. Security Implications

2-1. North Korea tries to escalate the military crisis in the Peninsula

North Korea's military provocation during the 20th CCP National Congress was a rare choice; during the 19th CCP National Congress, North Korea ceased military activities for nearly two months. However, North Korea had completed its sixth nuclear test and achieved its “becoming a military superpower” political goal at that time; it was also on the eve of the Pyeongchang Winter

Olympics that it needed to change its diplomatic strategy to focus on economic development for a better international image.

But since the return of the USS Ronald Regan to South Korea this year, North Korea has conducted numerous missile tests and military provocations. According to Radio Free Asia, when North Korea issued a “combat mobilization situation” order that called for the entire military force to enter the combat mobilization status when it launched the shelling on October 18.⁶ The last time Kim Jong-un gave an emergency order publicly was in August 2015. It was when an incident called “the wooden-box landmine explosion” occurred in the northern Gyeonggi Province DMZ in South Korea, causing serious injuries to two South Korean soldiers. Soon afterward, Kim Jong-un declared a “state

4. The origin of the North Korean cargo ship remains a matter of debate, as it may have been one of many retired cargo ships purchased in 2020-2022. “NLL 침범 ‘무포호’, 과거 제3국서 등록 취소 ... 최근까지 중국 입항,” 미국의소리, October 25, 2022, <https://www.voakorea.com/a/6803491.html>.

5. “조선인민군 총참모부대변인발표,” 조선중앙통신, October 24, 2022, <http://www.kcna.kp/kp/article/q/caaaa-bb21bc8a74bc97a8d070bf79454.kcmsf>.

6. “북, 전군에 전투동원태세 발령,” 자유아시아방송, October 22, 2022, https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/nk_nuclear_talks-10202022113635.html.

7. “북한, 전방지역 ‘준전시상태’ 선포 ... 과거 사례는,” 연합뉴스, August 21, 2015, <https://www.yna.co.kr/>

of quasi-war” in North Korea⁷ and ordered the coast artillery units and the navy to enter the highest alert status.⁸ Moreover, the direct border crossing by the North Korean cargo ship on October 24 without prior notification should have been a test of the response of the South Korean military as a pretext to counterattack or create a small-scale armed conflict.

2-2. China's Korean Peninsula policy is still unclear

While North Korean media have wide coverage of its relationship with China and Xi Jinping's re-election as general secretary recently, Xing Haiming, the Chinese Ambassador to South Korea, spoke on the current situation in the Peninsula at a discussion session organized by Korean media groups on October 26. He said, “China supports the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula

and is working to promote four-party and six-party talks.” He also stressed that “China has never acquiesced to North Korea's military provocations,” and China hopes to resolve the dispute through dialogues.⁹ He also believes that “some South Korean media's continued overly negative coverage of China will hurt the feelings of the Korean and Chinese people. I hope there will be mutual respect”.

This should have been China's first specific expression on the situation on the Korean Peninsula since the 20th CCP National Congress, but no specific details have been provided. To avoid a military crisis on the Korean Peninsula due to US-China competition, China should engage in appropriate communication with North Korea in the future. In addition, North Korea's military provocations during this period have drawn the attention of

view/AKR20150821061700014.

8. The “emergency period” as currently defined by North Korea can be divided into five stages in the following order of intensity: Stage 1: wartime status, Stage 2: quasi-wartime status, Stage 3: combat mobilization status, Stage 4: combat mobilization readiness status, and Stage 5: combat alert status. When the supreme commander gives orders for Stage 3 or above, all ruling party, political, and military organizations will shift to the “emergency support system” with the supreme commander as the center; all military personnel will be prohibited from outgoing leaves to man battle stations. Reference: 고재홍, “북한군의 비상시 . 평시 군사 지휘체계 연구,” 통일정책연구, 14 권 2 호, 2005, p.137, <https://reurl.cc/MX1qyW>.

9. 대화 통해 해결해야,” *KBS NEWS*, October 26, 2022, <https://news.kbs.co.kr/news/view.do?ncd=5587313>.

10. “전문가들 시진핑 3기 중국, 북한 더 밀착 ... 핵실험 눈 감고 대북제재 협조 안할 것,” 미국의 소리,

South Korea and the US to the military crisis in the Korean peninsula and diverted the attention of neighboring countries from China's 20th CCP National Congress, allowing China to complete the conferences and internal power consolidation smoothly. In other words, North Korea's provocation could have been a "potential benefit" to China, which might be one reason China has remained tacit and passive during this period.¹⁰

3. Trend observation

3-1. North Korea's long-range artillery capabilities may need re-evaluation

North Korea fired more than 500 artillery rounds between October 14 and 24, demonstrating an impressive ammunition reserve and long-range artillery combat capabilities. North Korea's enormous supply of shells could have been related to the "Economy and Defense in Parallel" policy promoted by

Kim Il-sung in the 1970s. At that time, Kim hoped that domestic civilian and defense industrial facilities could support each other to increase the arms production scale to achieve the "national self-defense" and ammunition self-sufficiency goals, and the arms could also be exported to support friendly foreign countries. Some of the recent rumors regarding North Korea's sales of artillery shells to Russia were based on the theory that North Korea might hold a large stockpile of artillery shells and that its military industry still maintains a certain level of self-sufficiency.¹¹

North Korea began expanding its long-range artillery establishment in the 1980s when it realized the limits of conventional weapons development and shifted its focus to asymmetric weapons, such as ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. Its "revolutionary strategy against the South (Korea)" was mainly based on "special warfare behind enemy lines." Still, it was later replaced by "joint

October 25, 2022, <https://www.voakorea.com/a/6804054.html>.

11. "탄약 대량 보유한 북한, 이미 러에 무기 공급 -NK 뉴스," 뉴시스, September 7, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/QWnzk0>.

12. "Joint warfare" (배합전) is a military strategy developed by North Korea in response to the military

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warfare”¹² conducted with long-range artillery and political propaganda.¹³ The powerful long-range artillery with wide coverage poses a military threat that would “plunge Seoul into a sea of fire” and has affected public opinion in South Korea.¹⁴

According to the North Korean doctrine, its “surprise attack, coordination, and end the battle quickly” strategy would be able to launch a regional war by concentrating artillery fire in the shortest period possible. The surprise attacks would paralyze or panic the opponent before they could react before

the artillery units were moved to other firing positions.¹⁵ However, judging from North Korea's deployment at the time of the Yeonpyeong Island bombardment and the subsequent changes in its military provocations over the years, the “Korean People's Strategic Force,” expanded and established in 2013, has gradually replaced the long-range artillery force as the protagonist of military intimidation against South Korea. However, the coastal and long-range artillery units deployed near the DMZ still pose serious military threats to South Korea's border areas and even the City of Seoul.¹⁶

confrontation with the South. In the 1960s, Kim Il-sung proposed the tactical concept referencing the Soviet regular army and Mao Zedong's unorthodox guerrilla strategy. The term means the integration of “regular warfare and guerrilla warfare” and “front-line operations and behind-enemy-line operations” instead of relying solely on the regular army. The concept was later developed into an important part of North Korea's asymmetric warfare, which includes political and cyber warfare. Reference: “[긴급진단] 최신 북한군 戰力 : 核 - 미사일 - 기동軍 - 사이버戰으로 美軍 증원 전에 결판,” 월간조선, May 2005 Issue, <http://monthly.chosun.com/client/news/viw.asp?nNewsNumb=200905100026>.

13. 문광건, “북한의군수산업,” 국방과학기술, Issue 235, 1998, p. 38, <https://reurl.cc/58k39v>.

14. The phrase “plunge Seoul into a sea of fire” began at the 8th North-South Korea Practical Meeting held in Panmunjom on March 19, 1994. The then North Korean Deputy Chief Minister Park Young-soo said, “This place (Panmunjom) is not far from Seoul. If there is a war, Seoul will become a sea of fire,” which was later abbreviated to “Seoul in a sea of fire” (서울 불바다). The term was also used several times in North Korea's later critical and threatening remarks about South Korea. In the most recent incident, when the North-South Liaison Office in Kaesong was bombed in 2020, the North's Korean Central News Agency published a commentary on June 17, 2020, asking South Korea to speak carefully, or there will be “a threat more serious than Seoul in a sea of fire.” Reference: “파렴치의 극치 조선중앙통신사 룬평,” 조선중앙통신, June 17, 2020, <http://kcna.kp/kp/article/q/20605bf616fe278b225fb1ccea25155.kcmsf>.

15. 김장현, “평시 북한군 포병위협과 한국군 대응체계 분석,” 국민대학교 석사학위논문, 2013, pp. 22-23.

16. “남북 더 세진 火力 ... 서해 높아진 긴장 파고,” 동아일보, November 21, 2013, <https://reurl.cc/91oj8O>.

17. In the past, the Moon Jae-in administration agreed with the Chinese government on the “Three-Not Principles”

3-2. China may adjust its relationship with the two Koreas

If Xing's claim is valid, it is likely that China will gradually improve its relations with the two Koreas starting from Xi Jinping's third term. The biggest stumbling block in its relations with South Korea at present is the "Three-No Principle," while China's claim that "THAAD will affect China's mainland security" may not be convincing to South Korea. Moreover, South Korea may not make any further concessions to China's "one limit" proposition.¹⁷ The honeymoon period between China and South Korea has basically come to an end, and Korea can no longer remain aloof from the Taiwan Strait situation. In the economic sphere, as the US begins to restrict high-tech technology exports to China, China may require South Korea's continued assistance as an important partner in

the domestic development of advanced technologies.¹⁸

In terms of the Korea-US military alliance, large-scale exercises are expected to resume in Korea next year. In addition to this year's "Ulchi Freedom Shield" (UFS) and "Vigilant Storm," Korea is planning to conduct a series of joint Korea-US amphibious landing training, similar to the previous exercises such as "Double Dragon Landing," "Max Thunder," or "Vigilant Ace," starting next spring with new air and sea training elements. Judging from North Korea's recent violent response to the South Korean-US joint military exercises, the newly added exercises next year will certainly provoke yet another negative reaction from the North. Although the main purpose of the exercises is to deter the North from making any rash moves, it's still a potential risk to China.

regarding the THAAD issue: "will not add more THAAD anti-missile systems," "will not join the US missile defense system," and "will not join the military alliance among South Korea, the US, and Japan." But China later unilaterally claimed that there was an additional "one limit" that calls for "restricting the use of the existing THAAD anti-missile system." The South Korean government has yet to agree with the "one limit," which could become the "stumbling stone" in its relationship with China. Judging from the current public opinion in South Korea, the current Yoon government may not accept China's "one limit" proposal; this will be one of the key points in the future high-level dialogue between Korea and China.

18. "[시진핑 3기] 파고놓아지는미중경쟁 ... 한중관계에 복합도전," October 23, 2022, <https://www.mk.co.kr/news/politics/view/2022/10/937882/>.

19. "Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi Proposes 'Dual-track Approach' and 'Dual-moratorium' for Resolving Korean

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On October 25, North Korea and China both openly celebrated the 72nd anniversary of the “Resist US Aggression, Aid Korea” war. The relations between North Korea and China are likely to enter a new phase after the 20th CCP National Congress with joint efforts to counter the US containment strategy and promote the development of the surrounding regions. As China continues to adopt a tacit, passive attitude toward North Korea’s military provocations, this may lead to the accelerated development of the military security alliance among South Korea, the US, and Japan. To avoid the related issues being pushed to the edge and become stagnate, China may once again advocate the “dual-track approach” and “dual moratorium” that Wang Yi once proposed and use them to serve as the main axis of its policy toward North Korea and throw the responsibility of the North’s nuclear issue back to the US.¹⁹

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Peninsula Issue at Security Council,” *UN News*, April 28, 2017, http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/topnews/2022-10/27/content_4924410.htm.