

The Two Koreas - Is War Inevitable?

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For the

International Korean Studies Conference
University of British Columbia
August 2011

Introduction

The possibility of a second Korean War persists sixty years after the first Korean War erupted in June 1950. The Korean War Armistice, signed in July 1953, only stopped the fighting and established the De-militarized zone (DMZ), a truce line that still divides Korea. The year 2010 brought the peninsula to the brink of war. On March 26, 2010 the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) Korean People's Army (KPA) sank, according to an international investigation, the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) naval vessel the *Cheonan* in the West Sea not far from Incheon International Airport. Forty six ROK sailors died. The incident surprised many and excited international concern. Then on November 23, 2010 the KPA bombarded ROK occupied Yeonpyeong Island in the West Sea not far from Incheon International Airport. Two ROK Marines and two civilians were killed and numerous civilian homes and businesses destroyed.

The DPRK has rejected allegations that it was responsible for the *Cheonan's* sinking, but compelling evidence suggests otherwise. The Yeonpyeong incident was unprecedented since the Korean War because the KPA bombarded a civilian area. International diplomacy after the *Cheonan* incident condemned the DPRK, but China and Russia blocked passage of an UN Security Council resolution. Indeed, the possibility of a second Korean War persists.¹

Today the nations of Northeast Asia – China, Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States – face a choice. They can either pursue diplomacy to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula, or persist in their current confrontational stances. Diplomacy would greatly improve prospects for sustaining peace and prosperity in the region while confrontation would only increase the risk of another war.

Usually flare ups of tension on the Korean Peninsula are a consequence of more deeply rooted causes than the apparent causes. Here we look behind the headlines to decipher the more fundamental political and economic factors that may have contributed to making 2010 one of the more dangerous years in recent memory.

History's Long Tail

Events on the Korean Peninsula have a long historical tail. The *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong Island incidents are connected to North-South disputes over the so-called "Northern Limit Line" (NLL) that dates from at least 1973, if not earlier. The NLL is the invention of the United Nations Command (UNC), the umbrella military organization established at the beginning of the Korean War and headed by United States military officers.²

¹ Thomas J. Eccles, RADM, USN, *On the Attack Against the ROK Ship Cheonan*. Seoul: Ministry of National Defense, 2010.

² U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, directorate of Intelligence, "The West Coast Korean Islands." Washington, D.C., January 1974. This declassified CIA assessment provides valuable insight into the NLL's history and the US government's view regarding the NLL's legitimacy.

On January 14, 1965, the commander of the UNC's naval component, which also at that time had operational control over the ROK navy, issued a directive that established the NLL. The NLL was defined as a line extending from the DMZ's end on the Korean Peninsula's west coast westward into the Yellow Sea. The line was drawn between the DPRK's southern coast line and five ROK occupied islands that included Yeonpyeong Island. A similar line had been drawn by the same authority in 1961 but under a different name. According to the US Central Intelligence Agency study entitled, "The West Coast Korean Islands," "The sole purpose of the NLL was to avoid incidents by forbidding UNC naval units to sail north of it without special permission; ..." According to the same study, "The NLL, ..., has no legal basis in international law, nor does it conform along some of its length to even minimal provisions regarding the division of territorial waters. It is binding only those military forces under the command or operational control of COMNAVFORKOREA." (UN Commander Naval Forces Korea).

The NLL created three problems. First, the ROK government has "regarded the NLL as a seaward extension of the DMZ," a *de facto* boundary between South and North Korea." The DPRK, however, has consistently rejected this view. The second problem is that the NLL ignores the DPRK's internationally recognized claim of its territorial waters extending to 12 miles (about 19 kilometers) from its coast line (*ibid.* p. 4). All five ROK occupied islands, including Yeonpyeong, lie within the DPRK's territorial waters. Actually Yeonpyeong Island is less than 3 miles from the DPRK coast. This makes access to Haeju, a major DRPK port and naval base just north of Yeonpyeong Island, difficult particularly during bad weather.

Since its establishment, the NLL has been the source of frequent clashes between the two Koreas. Annually both sides seize fishing vessels from the other side that stray across the NLL, which also cuts through an area with abundant fish. Tensions over the NLL were eased considerably when ROK President Kim Dae-jung met his DPRK counterpart Kim Jong Il in the first ever North-South Summit which produced the Joint Statement of June 15, 2000. This initiated a period of peaceful co-existence, economic cooperation and social exchange. Kim Dae-jung's successor President Roh Moo-hyun forged a second similar accord with DPRK leader Kim Jong Il in October 4, 2007 which extended the period of cooperation. The 2007 accord also placed the NLL on the agenda for resolution through South-North talks. It also called for the establishment of a special zone of peace and cooperation in the West Sea which included a joint fishing zone.³

Tensions Rekindled

But two key developments in 2008 rekindled North-South tensions along the NLL. The first was ROK President Lee Myug-bak election to succeed Roh Moo-hyun, and the second was DPRK leader Kim Jong Il's apparent suffering of a stroke in September 2008.

³ C. Kenneth Quinones, "South Korea's Approaches to North Korea: A glacial Process," in: Kyung-ae Park and Dalchoong Kim (editors), *Korean Security Dynamics in Transition*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

President Lee adopted a more assertive approach to the DPRK than had been the case during the previous decade. At the beginning of his term, Lee angered the DPRK's leadership by offering a "grand bargain," that is to give each inhabitant of the DPRK \$3,000 if the DPRK dismantled its nuclear weapons program. The offer suggested to the DPRK leadership that their allegiance was for sale. Soon afterward, a DPRK sentry shot dead a wandering ROK tourist at the Mt. Kumgang tourist resort located just north of the DMZ. Understandably the people of South Korea were shocked. Lee rejected the north's apology, demanded a joint investigation of the incident, and halted tours to the area which had earned the DPRK hard currency for its impoverished economy. The DPRK retaliated by closing road and rail links between the two Koreas and restricted access from the south to the Kaesong Industrial Park, a joint South-North commercial venture that enabled some 250 small and medium ROK industries to manufacture goods in the DPRK using North Korean workers. Eventually, the DPRK blocked ROK access to Pyongyang and elsewhere in the north. Lee scrapped his predecessor's October 2007 accord with the DPRK. Ever since, North-South tensions have intensified to the brink of war.

Then in September 2008, DPRK leader Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke. By then the DPRK had alienated the international community by disengaging from the Six Party Talks aimed at achieving a peaceful diplomatic end to its nuclear weapons program. The DPRK's military leadership declared United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions aimed at deterring Pyongyang's further development of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons to be "acts of war," disregarded them and continued efforts to build what it called a "nuclear deterrent capability."

Succession and the KPA's Belligerence

Kim Jong Il's stroke compelled the DPRK to adjust its priorities. Although Kim was eventually able to resume his official duties, his failing health appears to have convinced him to quicken preparations for his succession. As we learned on October 10, 2010, his third son Kim Jong-eun became the heir apparent and is expected to formally assume that role in 2012, the year that Kim Jong Il plans to celebrate the 100th anniversary of his father Kim Il Sung's birth.

But Kim Jong-eun's successful succession will require that he win the KPA's political support. Kim, like his father, is inheriting the DPRK monarchy without any significant accomplishments. Kim Il Sung, the DPRK's founder and Kim Jong-eun's grandfather, rose to power by commanding anti-Japanese patriots and then commanded the KPA during the Korean War. His military record in the face of "imperialist aggression" legitimized Kim Il Sung's power in the KPA's eyes. Kim Jong Il inherited power in 1994 as his father's only son and after having only managed domestic policy for a decade. Although lacking military experience he was designated the KPA's Supreme Commander in 1991. Once he had become the DPRK's leader, Kim Jong Il in 1998 sought to cement the KPA's allegiance by naming himself chairman of the National Defense Council, elevating it to the highest office in government, and declaring the era of "Military First Politics" (*Songunjeongchi*).

These political moves greatly enhanced Kim Jong Il's political authority, but in exchange of the KPA's allegiance, Kim Jong Il had to promise the KPA priority access to the nation's scarce resources. Thus in 2001, when President Bush listed the DPRK as a member of the "axis of evil" which he threatened to attack, the KPA apparently convinced Kim Jong Il to pull out of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and resume development of a "nuclear deterrent capability." Testing of nuclear devices followed in 2006 and 2009 as well as several ballistic missiles tests.

The KPA's Growing Influence on Policy

Kim Jong Il's political dependence on the KPA appears to have intensified after his September 2008 stroke. Ever since the KPA General Staff and other KPA commands have issued increasingly assertive and belligerent policy statements as suggested in the chart below. Foreign Ministry statements, traditionally the primary means for announcing Pyongyang's official policy, have also become more blunt and belligerent in tone.

DPRK Policy Statements 2005 – 2010⁴

Government Agency	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Total
NDC	0	2	0	2	2	9	15
KPA GS	1	2	5	2	11	6	26
KPA Panmunjom	2	1	2	2	2	3	12
N-S Military Talks	0	0	0	3	2	7	12
KPA-US Military Talks	0	0	0	0	1	8	9
KPA Other	0	0	0	0	1	3	4
Military sub-total	3	5	7	9	19	36	79
Foreign Ministry	23	18	18	21	26	20	126

NDC – National Defense Commission

KPA GS – Korean People's Army General Staff

KPA Panmunjom Mission – formerly the KPA delegation to the Military Armistice Commission (MAC) of the Armistice Agreement

N-S Military Talks – North-South Military General and Working Level Talks

KPA-US Military Talks – Talks between KPA and US Army representatives

KPA Other – KPA naval and field commanders, and "military commentators."

The chart above clearly indicates the KPA's increasingly audible role in Pyongyang's policy formulation, particularly after Kim Jong Il's stroke. In 2007, the KPA General Staff delivered four reports about the situation on the Korean Peninsula. This included the annual New Year's Editorial which is jointly composed and published annually by the Korean Workers' Party (KWP), KPA and Youth League. Of these four statements, the KPA navy issued one which warned the ROK not to venture north of the NLL.

⁴ The data for this chart was collected from all DPRK official statements published by the Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) Daily Reports, 2005-10, www.kcna.co.jp

But beginning in 2009 and continuing into 2010, the NDC and the KPA General Staff (KPA GS) issued far more policy statements than previously. While the NDC is the DPRK's highest policy organ, the KPA General Staff is the highest military command. Traditionally neither had issued formal policy statements except for the annual Joint Editorial, but beginning in early 2009 DPRK policy statements have become more assertive, even belligerent.

This is apparent even in the usually tempered Foreign Ministry statements. For example, on January 13, 2009 the Foreign Ministry statement asserted that the DPRK had "consented to the September 19 (2005) Joint Statement" of the Six Party Talks to achieve the:⁵

denuclearize not only the northern half of the Korean Peninsula but the whole of it, and to this end, the United States committed itself to terminate its hostile relations with the DPRK, assure it of non-use of nuclear weapons and clear south Korea of nukes, etc."

In other words, the price for Pyongyang's cooperation in the Six Party Talks had risen to the "simultaneous nuclear disarmament" of both halves of the Korean Peninsula.

Shortly afterward, on February 2 the KPA General Staff shattered its usual silence.⁶

It is the unshakable stand already clarified by the DPRK that it will never show its nuclear weapons unless the U.S. rolls back its hostile policy toward the DPRK and the latter is completely free from the former's (*sic*) nuclear threat.

The statement concluded that, "The DPRK will never 'dismantle its nuclear weapons' unless nukes in south Korea are dismantled to remove the nuclear threat from the U.S." These statements suggest that the KPA General Staff's views had a significant impact on redefining the price Pyongyang now demands for denuclearization.

The KPA and the NLL

Arguably the most amazing aspect about the *Cheonan's* sinking and the bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island is that the KPA, beginning on March 28, 2008, repeatedly warned the ROK that KPA military action along the NLL was a probability. Equally amazing is that the ROK government apparently dismissed these warnings' significance.

The KPA Navy Command on March 28, 2008 called the Northern Limit Line (NLL),⁷

... a bogus line as it was unilaterally drawn by the U.S. imperialists ... the NLL defends five islands in the West Sea and *Yonphyong Islet is like a dagger to be thrust into one's throat* while Paekryong Islet the one to be

⁵"DPRK Foreign Ministry's Spokesman Dismisses U.S. Wrong Assertion," January 13, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp.

⁶KPA General Staff, "DPRK's Principled Stand on Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula Reiterated." (February 2, 2009, www.kcna.co.jp).

⁷ KPA Navy Command, March 28, 2008, www.KCNA.co.jp.

thrust into one's side. ... A situation in which an armed conflict may break out any moment is prevailing in the frontline waters in the West Sea. ... Any attempt (by the ROK) to protect the NLL at any cost would only spark off a clash in the said waters.

Two days later, the ROK Armed Forces Joint Chief of Staff, at his confirmation hearing before the ROK National Assembly, declared that the ROK might launch a "preemptive strike" against the DPRK's nuclear facilities. A KPA "commentator" countered in the DPRK media that all North-South dialogue should be suspended pending ROK clarification of the "preemptive strike" comment. Then came the July 11, 2008 KPA sentry's shooting of a South Korea tourist at Mt. Kumgang. Subsequently on December 1, the KPA representative to the North-South General Level Military Talks informed his ROK counterpart that all overland passages through the DMZ would be closed.

The KPA's belligerency intensified in 2009. On January 17, 2009, the KPA General Staff repeated the KPA Navy's earlier warning regarding the NLL and reiterated that the NLL is "illegal." Responding to ROK President Lee's decision for the ROK to become a full participant in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), the KPA General Staff declared on April 18 that the decision is a "declaration of war against the DPRK" The statement concluded that the KPA "... has never pinned any hope on the six-party talks from their outset ..."⁸ The KPA also reacted very negatively to the UN Security Council's April 14 presidential statement that urged the DPRK to stop launching range ballistic missiles.

The DPRK's second nuclear test followed on May 25, 2009. Again largely unnoticed in the test's wake was another KPA policy statement, this time issued by its Panmunjom Mission on May 27.⁹ It repeated the General Staff's allegation that the ROK's participation in PSI was a "declaration of war," and declared that the KPA "*will not be bound to the Armistice Agreement any longer ...*" Also ignored was the warning that, "*For the present, we will not guarantee the legal status of the five islands under the south's (ROK) control "Paekryong, Taechong, Sohong, **Yonpyong**, and U islands in our side's territorial waters northwest of the extension of the Military Demarcation Line in the West Sea of Korea ...*"

A May 29 Foreign Ministry Statement confirmed the KPA's earlier declarations about the armistice, stating that, "Any hostile act by the UN Security Council immediately means the abrogation of the Armistice Agreement." On June 13, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1874 that imposed additional economic sanctions on the DPRK for having performed its second nuclear test. The Foreign Ministry responded, "It has become an absolutely impossible option for the DPRK to even think about giving up its nuclear weapons."

Later in 2009 the KPA repeated its challenge to the NLL's legitimacy and warned on November 10 and 13, and December 21 about possible military action along the NLL.

⁸ KPA General Staff, April 18, 2009. www.kcna.co.jp.

⁹ KPA Panmunjom Mission, May 27, 2009. www.kcna.co.jp.

The December 21 warning was specific. The KPA Navy Command declared its intention to conduct artillery practice in the vicinity of the NLL, warned civilian and military ships to take appropriate precautions and reiterated that the NLL is “illegal.” The KPA converted its bellicose rhetoric into deadly military action in 2010 by sinking the ROK navy’s ship *Cheonan* and bombarding Yeonpyeong Island.

The DPRK’s Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) on February 23, 2011 published a lengthy statement that drew extensively on the report of the DPRK National Defense Commission’s (NDC) review of events prior to the *Cheonan*’s sinking and Yeonpyeong Island bombardment. Predictably, the rambling statement repeatedly faults the ROK for having created an atmosphere of mutual hostility and suspicion that set the stage for both incidents. It labels President Lee Myung-bak’s administration the “south Korean group of traitors” and “puppet forces.” The United States is deemed the head of the “imperialist forces.” Yet the statement sets forth a detailed proposal for pursuing a diplomatic resolution as quoted below:¹⁰

The historic (Joint DPRK-ROK) October 4 (2007) declaration on which the north and the south agreed reflected this will. This declaration stipulated the principled matters for putting an end to the relations of military hostility, defusing tension and ensuring peace on the Korean Peninsula. In particular, it provided the best way for setting up the special zone for peace and cooperation in the West Sea and fixing a joint fishing zone and peace waters. Both sides held the second defence (sic) ministerial talks and general level military talks for the implementation of the October 4 (2007) declaration, at which they agreed to take practical measures to prevent conflicts and security peace in the West Sea.

The army and people of the DPRK put forward the realistic and principled proposals to implement this agreement. They included landmark proposals calling on both sides to give up all their assertions from broad mind, handle the West Sea conflict on the basis of the already existing north-south agreements, (Korean War) Armistice Agreement and demand of internationally accepted laws, until a new military demarcation line is set in the West Sea of Korea, and fix the peace waters and joint fishing zone.

However, the south Korea group of traitors scrapped valuable agreements of the Korean nation. As a result, the seed of conflicts and disputes still remains in the waters, becoming a potential flash point of an all-out war.

Briefly summarized, the above proposal urges a resumption of South-North dialogue with the Joint South-North Declaration of October 4, 2007 as its starting point. Also of note are the DPRK references to respecting the Korean War Armistice and “internationally accepted laws,” i.e. the International Law of the Sea which governs territorial waters.

¹⁰ National Defence (sic) Commission, “NDC Inspection Group reveals Truth behind Yonpyong Shelling, February 23, 2011. www.kcna.co.jp.

The KPA's "Nuclear Deterrence Capability"

Possibly intensifying the DPRK's confidence to match President Lee Myung-bak with its own assertive posture toward South Korea is Pyongyang's growing confidence in its "nuclear deterrent capability. Two successful tests of nuclear explosive devices in 2006 and 2009 plus a series of ballistic missile tests suggest persistent determination and success, despite international criticism, to enhance its ability to deter the United States and/or South Korea to attack it."¹¹

DPRK official policy statements over the past decade support this assumption. On July 7, 2006, DPRK Foreign Ministry (MFA) explained Pyongyang's launching of several ballistic missiles as "... part of the routine military exercises staged by the KPA to increase the nation's military capacity for self-defence." In the same statement, the MFA continued that the same missile tests "... serve as a key to keeping the balance of force and preserving peace and stability in Northeast Asia." The statement concluded, "The KPA will go on with missile launch exercises as part of its efforts to bolster deterrent for self-defence in the future, too (sic)."¹²

On October 4, 2006, the DPRK MFA declared that, "... the DPRK will in the future conduct a nuclear test ..." which it then did. The statement explained that the DPRK "will never use nuclear weapons first The DPRK's nuclear weapons will serve as a reliable war deterrent ..."

By 2008, the KPA had become more assertive in issuing its own statements. On March 2, 2008, the KPA's Panmunjom Mission, in a lengthy statement, warned,¹³

If the U.S. and south Korean bellicose forces persistently work to realize their scenario to stifle the DPRK by force of arms at any cost, the KPA will not stand passively on the defensive but counter it with positive retaliatory strikes by mobilizing all means long built up by the DPRK at a high price.

After conducting a second successful test of a nuclear device, the KPA General Staff's spokesman declared on March 26, 2010, the day that the ROK vessel *Cheonan* was sunk, that the DPRK "is like an impregnable fortress firmly guarded by the invincible army of *Songun* (Military First policy)." He then warned that the "DPRK will bolster up its nuclear deterrent for self-defence capable of frustrating any plot and provocation at a single strike and keep all the power striking means fully read to go into action at all times."¹⁴

¹¹ Mary Beth Nikitin, *et.al. North Korea's Second Nuclear Test: Implications of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1874*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, July 1, 2009.

¹² "DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman on Its Missile Launches," July 7, 2006, www.kcna.co.jp.

¹³ KPA Panmunjom Mission, "KPA to Counter with Its Positive Retaliatory Blows Any attempt to Stifle DPRK by Force of Arms," March 2, 2008. www.kcna.co.jp.

¹⁴ KPA General Staff, "US-S. Korean Moves to Bring Down system in DPRK Warned," March 26, 2010. www.kcna.co.jp.

Obviously by March 2010 the KPA had become both more influential in the formulation of DPRK policy and more confident in its “nuclear deterrent capability.”

China’s Altered Approach to the Korean Peninsula

Another significant factor contributing to the DPRK’s confidence and assertive posture is the improvement of its relations with the People’s Republic of China, China. Until June 2009, just after Pyongyang’s second test of a nuclear device on May 25, China supported UN resolutions 1718 and 1874 that criticized the DPRK for its two nuclear tests. But then Beijing’s posture toward Pyongyang shifted from a willingness to rely on coercive diplomacy to a more conciliatory approach. In October 2009, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Pyongyang, the first such visit in eighteen years by a Chinese premier. Unconfirmed reports claim that Wen offer the DPRK a \$50 million economic assistance package plus an agreement was signed in which China would fund the \$150 million cost of building a new bridge across the Yalu River from China to the DPRK side. A month later, China announced plans to development the Tonghua-Dandong Economic Zone on the two nations’ northwest border.¹⁵

A month later China’s Minister of National Defense Col. General Liang Guanglie visited the DPRK, the first visit since 2006. Shortly afterward, DPRK first vice director of the General Political Bureau General Kim Jong-gak visited Beijing. These visits confirmed that bilateral civilian and military relations had recovered fully from earlier tensions when China supported UN resolutions critical of the DPRK’s nuclear and ballistic missile tests.

Further confirming this has been the very significant increase in bilateral trade and Chinese investment in the DPRK. In 2008, DPRK imports from China rose 46% in a single year. Of Chinese exports to the DPRK, about 30% consisted of processed oil products, but the DPRK did have to pay for these imports unlike two decades earlier when it received Chinese oil on a “concessionary” basis. Chinese direct investment, especially from China’s provinces which border the DPRK, has grown to significant sums. For example, a Chinese firm has invested about \$874 in the DPRK’s Musan Iron Mine, the largest open pit iron ore mine in Asia. Chinese firms in Jilin Province have invested in modernizing the DPRK’s copper, zinc, lead and gold mines.

On the other hand, China’s export of small arms (weapons) to the DPRK remains very small – about 1% of the value of such exports in 1996.

During my an extensive tour of the DPRK in September 2010, China’s investment in the DPRK was particularly evident in Pyongyang. Colleagues who visited industrial cities on the DPRK’s northeast coast confirm the same is evident elsewhere.

¹⁵ For excellent discussions of China’s policy toward the DPRK, see: Dick K. Nanto, *et.al. China-North Korea Relations*. Washington, D.C., January 22, 2010; and, International Crisis Group, *China and Inter-Korean Clashes in the Yellow Sea*. Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2011.

It appears that Beijing reordered its bilateral priorities with the DPRK in 2009. Topping the list now is stability on the Korean Peninsula. De-nuclearization of the entire peninsula remains a priority but has slipped from its previous top ranking. Stability is also Pyongyang's top priority. For it, stability requires a successful father-to-son succession, a resolute deterrence capability and economic recovery. China seems willing to assist Pyongyang with priorities one and three in the hope that it can better restrain the DPRK's development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Consequently, Beijing has avoided agreeing with international allegations that the DPRK was responsible for the sinking of the *Cheonan* and believes that it had justifiable cause for bombarding Yeongpyeong Island.

Conclusion

Given the secretive nature of policy formulation in the DPRK and its relationship with China, the best that we can do is conjecture about what factors convinced the DPRK to adopt a much more belligerent attitude toward the ROK since 2008, and to go so far as to launch military attacks against it. With relative confidence we can say that Kim Jong Il's "Military First Policy" has assured the KPA over the past 12 years that he would fully support efforts to modernize the KPA and to develop a "nuclear deterrent capability." Supreme Commander Kim's eagerness to have the KPA support his designated successor and son Kim Jong-eun may have reinforced Kim Jong Il's reluctance to restrain the KPA.

Also clear, particularly since early 2009, the KPA's role in policy formulation is becoming increasingly influential. The KPA exploited former US President Bush's tough talk to justify the DPRK's pursuit of an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. It now appears that the KPA is similarly exploiting Lee Myung-bak's rhetoric.

The KPA may have convinced itself that neither the United States nor China would punish the DPRK for armed action against the ROK. This conviction might rest on the belief that the KPA's "nuclear deterrent capability" and the United States' preoccupation in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Middle East will prevent the U.S. from taking military action. China's shift to inducements to influence the DPRK's conduct could further strengthen the KPA conviction that attacking the ROK would not cause harm to the DPRK.

Nevertheless, prospects for a second Korean War remain fairly slight. The nations of Northeast Asia, at least China, Japan, South Korea, Russia and the United States, prefer peace to sustain prosperity. The resolute armed deterrence of the US, ROK and Japan as recently demonstrated in joint military exercises will certainly temper the KPA's belligerence. China's diplomatic intervention with the DPRK and Pyongyang's dependence on Beijing's economic inducements could further restrain the DPRK. After all, Kim Jong Il's foremost priority is regime survival and his heir's successful succession. But war can never be ruled out entirely so long as the two Koreas remain hostile rivals and the KPA remains assertively confident of both its military and political prowess.

But if it were to erupt again, the fighting and devastation would not be limited to the Korean Peninsula. War in the midst of the world's economically most dynamic region, Northeast Asia, would thoroughly disrupt the world economy. Tragically, not only would Koreans, both north and south, along with Americans and possibly Chinese would die in the fighting. The DPRK's possession of ballistic missiles means that Japanese could also become victims of the war. Ultimately, a second Korean War might even escalate to the brink of a nuclear war.