



North Korea's Arena of Asymmetric Advantage: Why We Should Prepare for a Crisis in the Yellow Sea

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This paper examines the potential for North Korea to initiate a limited military conflict in the Yellow Sea. It begins with a hypothetical vignette, based on past incidents and recent trends, to illustrate how such aggression could unfold in a way that would deal a strategic defeat to US interests while benefiting Pyongyang and Beijing. The paper then explores the risk of North Korean escalation in the Yellow Sea by applying two established theoretical frameworks that explain why, how, and where weaker powers choose to escalate. The paper concludes with recommendations on preparing for such aggression.

Battle of Paengyong-do

The crisis, like so many others, began with threats and claims of grievances from North Korea, amid rumors about contentious palace politics in Pyongyang. The sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un publicly warned of dire consequences for South Korean “violations” of a 2018 inter-Korean agreement on activities in the disputed waters of the West (Yellow) Sea, claiming that North Korea was preparing to take “defensive” military action in response.¹ Seoul and Washington quickly agreed on increases in alert levels and other carefully calibrated measures to meet the threat but hesitated to authorize a major repositioning of forces just to respond to what seemed to be yet another North Korean bluff—particularly after Beijing warned “all sides” not to escalate the crisis. South Korea’s president, confident in his military advantage and backing from his US counterpart, chose not to retreat in the face of North Korean threats and unreasonable demands. Pyongyang, well aware of its weaknesses, still pushed forward with escalation to violence, gambling that it had chosen the right time and place to turn the tables on its more powerful adversaries with a surprise strike using new advanced weapons.

The skirmishes at sea began the next day. The North Korean navy, clearly outmatched, could not win a series of small surface engagements near the westernmost island of South Korea—Paengyong-do—less than 10 miles off North Korea’s coast. Seoul and Washington were relieved as the North Korean vessels that were not sunk quickly retreated, but these skirmishes were only the prelude and pretext for the real attack. Within hours, North Korea retaliated against Paengyong-do’s garrison with volleys of guided artillery rockets along with carefully targeted salvos of the new ballistic and cruise missiles it had repeatedly test launched in recent years—all fired from mobile launchers based on North Korea’s massive Hwanghae Peninsula adjacent to the island. Meanwhile, threats from North Korean anti-ship missiles and submarines hampered the Republic of Korea (ROK) navy’s support of the island’s defense.

¹ Panmunjom Declaration, also known as the Comprehensive Military Agreement, signed by the minister of National Defense of the Republic of Korea and the minister of the People’s Armed Forces of North Korea; Song Young Moo and No Kwang-chol, *Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain*, Sept. 19, 2018.

The ROK forces on all five of its Northwest Islands returned fire, but their defenses were quickly overwhelmed by numerous accurate projectiles. South Korea did its best to hit back, unleashing its own land- and sea-based missiles. They counterattacked North Korean artillery and missile units while also striking some key military targets in North Korea to disrupt the attack and punish Pyongyang's aggression without initiating all-out war—or triggering nuclear retaliation.²

Despite South Korea's far superior intelligence capabilities and more advanced missiles, the challenge was immense. South Korea was trying to find, track, and quickly strike North Korean mobile launchers in more than 8,000 square kilometers of the well-defended Hwanghae Peninsula, including mountain ranges riddled with underground facilities. Meanwhile, the defenders of Paengyong-do were confined to a limited number of points on an exposed island a mere 45 square kilometers in size (the other four Northwest Islands are even smaller). In this carefully chosen moment of space and time, geography aided North Korea in achieving a temporary military advantage—North Korea had managed to turn the tables on the far better equipped ROK military for a brief period.

However, North Korea's "window" of advantage began to slam shut. More ROK navy and air force assets quickly moved to the scene to begin neutralizing North Korea's air and coastal defenses in the area, to prevent North Korea from invading Paengyong-do, and to clear the way to reinforce the island. Meanwhile, US and ROK military leaders consulted to coordinate a "decisive" yet measured response by US and South Korean forces that would deal Pyongyang a further stinging defeat without pushing the peninsula to nuclear war.

While the allies were calibrating their military actions to forestall the risk of nuclear retaliation from North Korea, Beijing moved to intervene. Chinese officials repeated past warnings that the People's Republic of China (PRC) would not tolerate "chaos or war" in Korea while asserting that the United States must respect China's "vital security interests" in the Yellow Sea.³ Beijing demanded an immediate cease-fire, proposing a "no-fly, no-sail" zone to separate the combatants. Within hours, dozens of PRC fighter aircraft and warships based nearby, which had been trained for Korean contingencies under the Northern Theater Command, were patrolling just 20 miles west of Paengyong-do.⁴ They were supported by an umbrella of advanced air defense systems and sensors operating on the PRC's nearby Shandong Peninsula, a little more than 100 miles away from the conflict zone. Numerous PRC radars overtly tracked North Korean, ROK, and US vessels and aircraft alike, issuing stern warnings to cease combat operations and leave the area. Beijing made no further moves to use force, but Pyongyang, Seoul, and Washington took notice.

² For more on these capabilities and how they would be employed, see Ian Bowers and Henrik Stålhane Hiim, "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas: South Korea's Deterrence Strategy and Stability on the Korean Peninsula," *International Security* 45, no. 3 (2021), doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00399.

³ Jeong-Ho Lee, "China's New Flash Point with U.S. Allies Is a Hotspot for Spying," Bloomberg, May 4, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-05-04/china-s-new-flash-point-with-u-s-allies-like-south-korea-a-hotspot-for-spying>; Jeremy Page, Jay Solomon, and Julian E. Barnes, "China Warns U.S. as Korea Tensions Rise," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 26, 2010, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704008704575638420698918004>.

⁴ "Information on Northern Theater Command" from Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020, Annual Report to Congress*, US Department of Defense, Sept. 2020, pp. 107–198, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

At Beijing's insistence, an emergency North-South meeting at the truce village of Panmunjom led to marathon negotiations, much like the ones that ended the tense confrontation in August 2015. As in 2015, the resulting agreement temporarily defused the situation by allowing both sides to declare victory but settled nothing. The brief conflict came to an end before the vastly superior military power of South Korea and the United States could be decisively brought to bear but also before the situation escalated to open PRC-US conflict or even a nuclear exchange.

In purely military terms, the Battle of Paengyong-do was a resounding victory for the US-ROK alliance, but it did not seem that way in the eyes of most civilian observers around the world. Experienced military analysts were quickly able to determine that North Korea suffered far more casualties and destruction than South Korea in the brief conflict. However, this fact was less compelling to the people of South Korea and the United States than the photographs of wreckage and casualties suffered by South Korea, underscored by the portraits of dozens of dead ROK servicemembers, saturating official news and social media. For its part, Pyongyang's state media displayed the wreckage of an elementary school struck by a South Korean missile and commemorated the sacrifices of some valiant sailors while admitting few other losses.

Beyond the immeasurable human cost, the battle's outcome was a profound strategic setback for the alliance. Kim Jong-un, bolstered by claims of military victory using some of the new weapons expensively developed, ostentatiously displayed, and repeatedly tested during his rule, was able to achieve at least a symbolic military victory over South Korea. These new weapons, combined with the nuclear deterrent he had established, now enabled North Korea to threaten a strike by surprise at any time without effective retaliation by South Korea. This ability enabled him to position the Kim family for another generation of leading what has become a de facto nuclear armed power, despite his failure to deliver on economic promises. Beijing's initial ire at Kim quickly dissipated—along with its interruption of North Korea's petroleum supply to punish Kim for his recklessness—particularly as it became clear that this unwanted crisis had elevated China's position in the Pacific vis-à-vis the United States.

Ultimately, the Battle of Paengyong-do came to be marked by historians as a watershed moment in the decline of the ROK-US military alliance and in the PRC's rise to regional dominance. It also became yet another case study for theorists of asymmetric conflict, a literal "textbook example" of the conditions under which a weaker power could choose to initiate a conflict or escalate a crisis despite being well aware of its overall military, economic, and political weakness in comparison to its adversaries.

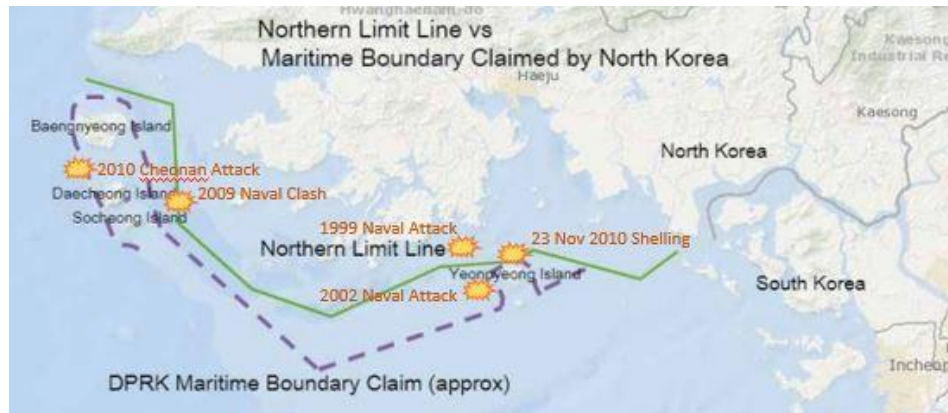
Potential for real escalation

Fortunately, this scenario remains in the realm of analytically informed speculative history. As this article explains, however, the waters west of the Korean Peninsula have been—and will increasingly be—an area in which Pyongyang finds it advantageous to escalate. Although the Yellow Sea may be relatively quiet at the moment, this seeming peace may prove to be just another interval between acts of aggression in the decades-long history of North Korean escalation there. When we apply the frameworks of established theories of asymmetric conflict dynamics to the case of North Korea, the result indicates that all of the key drivers that prompt escalation by a weaker party could soon lead Pyongyang to initiate aggression in this area. As a result, the ROK-US alliance must work to counter these conditions and to be fully prepared, militarily and politically, for a North Korea-initiated confrontation in the Yellow Sea in the months and years ahead.

The Northern Limit Line and the Northwest Islands

The maritime boundary between North and South Korea has been a site of not only ongoing political disputes between the two but also periodic violence since the 1990s (see map below).

The most severe incidents were in 2010. First, in April, the ROK warship *Cheonan* was sunk by a torpedo fired from a North Korean mini submarine, killing 46 South Korean sailors. North Korea did not overtly claim responsibility, and a multinational investigation took months to prove it was a North Korean attack. Seeking a different type of ambiguity, North Korea fired artillery guns and rockets at the ROK marine garrison of Yeonpyeong-do the following November, claiming this action was just a response to “threatening” ROK artillery training toward North Korean waters.



Source: Modified map. Original from Darcie Draudt, Maritime Awareness Project Analysis, Mar. 3, 2020, National Bureau of Asian Research, https://map.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/analysis_draudt_030320.pdf.

Notes: Northern Limit Line (green), maritime boundary claimed by North Korea (purple).

Paengyong-do can also be written as Baengnyeong Island. “-do” means island in the Korean language.

Besides being a site of contention between North and South Korea, the maritime boundary is also an area of convergence between Chinese and Korean spheres of influence. China’s Shandong Peninsula is about the same distance from the westernmost Northwest Island, Paengyong-do, as the island is from South Korea’s mainland. The Shandong Peninsula is home to major Chinese military forces, including the headquarters of the naval component of its Northern Theater Command—the command that trains and prepares for Korea contingencies. This geographical proximity gives China both the potential interest and clear ability to quickly send military forces into the area in the event of a crisis.



Source: Modified map. Original from Jinming Song and Liqin Duan, “Chapter 18 – The Yellow Sea,” *World Seas: an Environmental Evaluation (2nd Ed.)*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-100853-9.00025-7>.

Applying Asymmetric Conflict Theories to North Korea

In June of 1950 when North Korea invaded South Korea, it was unquestionably the stronger power of the two, so it is not hard to understand why Kim Il Sung took the risk of launching an attack. Far better equipped and trained, North Korea's armed forces were in the process of winning total victory over the South when the timely intervention of the even more powerful US military eventually turned the tide. Since the armistice that ended the Korean War, North Korea has been the weaker party, facing the combined power of its southern rival and the United States. Yet it has still regularly taken the risk of engaging in limited acts of aggression against the ROK and US. Although these attacks have often been separated by years, they are nevertheless a consistently recurring phenomenon over decades, not the products of anomalies or mistakes.

Unfortunately, our insights into Pyongyang's calculus for these acts of aggression are limited by its highly centralized decision-making process and the extreme security measures that cause top US intelligence leaders to regularly refer to North Korea as a "hard target."⁵ To better understand why, how, and where North Korea might choose to escalate to initiating military force again, it is useful to go beyond the limited dataset provided by North Korea's own past and hazy glimpses of its opaque decision-making. The logic of such escalation despite relative weakness is not some unique quirk of North Korea's ruling Kim regime but rather a rational approach employed by other states in similar situations. Leveraging other cases—where we have more facts about the decision-making process for aggression by a weaker power—and a larger set of theories about why weak states escalate despite the risks could allow us to gain useful insights for understanding and anticipating North Korean aggression even with the limited information available.

For about as long as humans have engaged in organized armed conflict, they have documented how weaker challengers have attempted to defeat stronger adversaries. In perhaps the oldest example of the literature of such a conflict, the Old Testament relates that the Israelites defeated the Philistines when their champion David took down the massive Goliath with a well-aimed sling stone rather than facing him in close combat. Over the centuries, thinking on such uneven matchups largely rotated around the strategies and tactics commonly used by the weaker party in such conflicts, such as guerrilla warfare. In more recent times, this type of confrontation has been studied more holistically and has become known as an "asymmetric" conflict—a term first popularized in Andrew Mack's "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict" published in *World Politics* in 1975.⁶

Nearly 20 years later, the literature of asymmetric conflict reached a new level when T. V. Paul's *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers* provided a framework to explain why a weaker power would initiate such a fight in the first place, rather than just examining how such wars are fought.⁷ Based on a detailed examination of a series of case studies, Paul identified a number of factors prevalent in modern cases of a weaker power's decision to initiate conflict with a stronger one. These factors included the following: (1) a politico-military strategy of limited war for limited aims, (2) emergence of short-term offensive capability, (3) great power defensive support, and (4) a changing domestic power structure. Furthermore, Paul noted that these factors could be linked and combined by a sense of "time pressure" that prompted initiation of the conflict rather than tolerance of an existing or deteriorating status quo.

⁵ Mike Yeo, "US Intel Chief: North Korea Is the 'Hardest Intelligence Collection Target,'" *Defense News*, Mar. 8, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2018/03/08/us-intel-chief-north-korea-is-the-hardest-intelligence-collection-target/>.

⁶ Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (1975), doi: 10.2307/2009880.

⁷ T. V. Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

More recently, in a 2019 article in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Jan Angstrom and Magnus Petersson proposed four factors that would drive a weaker state to escalate in a crisis:

*First, to provoke a desired over-reaction from the stronger adversary. This over-reaction, in turn, can be beneficial for the weak party as it may trigger outside help. Second, weak parties escalate if they can compartmentalize conflict within a domain in which they can, despite their overall inferiority, maintain escalatory dominance. Third, weak parties escalate by creating a division of labour with a stronger ally. Fourth, weak parties escalate to forge a reputation of not yielding lightly. This final logic suggests that even if the immediate consequences of escalation are negative, the long-run benefits of maintaining a reputation of being steadfast can be more important.*⁸

Taking the Paul and the Angstrom-Petersson models together as a guide to anticipating the logic of a North Korean decision to escalate suggests that the Yellow Sea is a likely venue for North Korea to initiate such escalation in the next few years. The following sections provide a factor-by-factor examination supporting this conclusion.

Limited aims/Fait accompli in a confined venue

In each case Paul examined, the initiator of the aggression pursued an “offensive-defensive” approach to achieve limited aims. The weaker aggressor struck first, by surprise, and seized a small amount of terrain or won a victory over limited elements of the stronger power’s military. By carefully choosing the timing, location, and form of the attack, the aggressor achieved a temporary localized advantage despite its overall inferiority. The aggressor then quickly transitioned to a defensive posture, operationally and tactically enabling it to blunt the counterattack of the more powerful foe as well as to politically position itself as having established a new status quo through a fait accompli. By adopting this defensive posture, the aggressor intended that the stronger power would not choose to continue a counteroffensive because the political, economic, or military costs of continuing the conflict would be greater than accepting the new status quo. This sort of approach seems well suited for North Korea to employ in the vicinity of the ROK’s Northwest Islands, where North Korea is well positioned to threaten the exposed islands and surrounding waters with little warning from military bases in the well-defended and mountainous Hwanghae Peninsula.

Paul’s analysis of this factor also reveals that the weaker power’s belief that it can confine the conflict to a limited area is a potentially important variable favoring escalation. Similarly, the second factor of the Angstrom-Petersson model notes that weak parties escalate in a domain where they can maintain escalatory dominance. The Yellow Sea and the Northwest Islands provide an ideal venue for a contained conflict without direct contact between ground forces or major population centers in the midst of the battlefield. The history of military exchanges in this area since the 1990s without significant “spillover” escalation into other venues, as noted above, probably suggests to North Korea that a conflict could be contained to this area.⁹

In contrast, escalation could be much harder to control in the land area along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea, given the tremendous concentration of military forces of both sides along the DMZ, the proximity of the DMZ to major population centers, and the absence of the ambiguity that

⁸ Jan Angstrom and Magnus Petersson, “Weak Party Escalation: An Underestimated Strategy for Small States?” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 2 (2019), doi: 10.1080/01402390.2018.1559154.

⁹ For a detailed examination of these events, see Ken E. Gause, *North Korea’s Provocation and Escalation Calculus: Dealing with the Kim Jong-un Regime*, CNA, COP-2015-U-011060, Aug. 2015, pp. 9–14.

surrounds the disputed waters in the Yellow Sea. North Korea most recently escalated on the DMZ in August 2015 by maiming two South Koreans with land mines secretly planted at a gate on the southern side of the DMZ.¹⁰ Despite temporarily obscuring its responsibility, North Korea no longer had a political veneer of ambiguity once an investigation showed that the mines were planted by North Koreans in an area that was clearly recognized by all parties to be South Korean territory.¹¹ The incident rapidly mushroomed into a larger confrontation, as both sides elevated their military postures and South Korea reactivated its propaganda loudspeakers to punish North Korea.¹² South Korea made clear its willingness and ability to escalate in response to North Korean aggression on the DMZ when it fired a volley of 155 mm artillery into the northern half of the DMZ in response to a report North Korea had fired at one of the loudspeakers. Military postures on both sides heightened after this incident, with media reports noting North Korean vessels suddenly leaving various homeports, for example.¹³ Only the aforementioned “marathon negotiations” enabled the de-escalation of the situation.

Short-term offensive capability

Paul noted that the weaker adversary’s acquisition of new offensive weapons was also a factor in most of the cases of war initiation by a weaker power. These weapons gave the weaker power’s leadership greater confidence in its ability to achieve an advantage by striking first. Such new weapons also provided the weaker power with the incentive to strike rather than delay in order to take advantage of the new weapons before the stronger adversary had developed countermeasures.

North Korea’s testing of new more accurate solid-propellant short-range ballistic missiles and new cruise missiles¹⁴ could provide such an incentive for limited North Korean aggression. Once perfected and fielded in sufficient numbers, these types of missiles could give North Korea greater confidence in its ability to effectively strike first in a limited attack. These weapons would be particularly useful in a limited conflict around the Northwest Islands. Their enhanced precision would allow North Korea to overcome the shortcomings of its attack on Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010, where the attack’s military effectiveness appeared to have been hampered by inaccurate firing and its political effectiveness was compromised by civilian casualties resulting from apparently errant rounds striking a fishing village.¹⁵

¹⁰ Choe Sang-Hun, “South Korea Accuses the North After Land Mines Maim Two Soldiers in DMZ,” *New York Times*, Aug. 10, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/11/world/asia/north-korea-placed-mines-that-maimed-2-south-korean-soldiers-at-dmz-seoul-says.html>.

¹¹ United States Forces Korea, “United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission Investigates Land Mine Detonation in Demilitarized Zone,” Aug. 13, 2015, <https://www.usfk.mil/Media/Press-Releases/Article/613531/united-nations-command-military-armistice-commission-investigates-land-mine-det/>.

¹² Jethro Mullen and Kathy Novak, “South Korea: Propaganda Broadcasts at North to Resume after Landmines,” CNN, Aug. 10, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/08/09/asia/koreas-tensions/index.html>.

¹³ Soon Jeong-woo, “50 North Korean submarines lost by military...Failed anti-submarine ops,” (軍이 농친 북한 잠수함 50척..대 잠수함 작전 실패), *NewDaily*, Aug. 24, 2015, accessed Sept. 26, 2021, <http://www.newdaily.co.kr/site/data/html/2015/08/24/2015082400000.html>.

¹⁴ Michael Elleman, “North Korea’s Recent KN-25 Launches,” *38 North*, Mar. 6, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/03/melleman030620/>; Michael Elleman, “North Korea’s New Short-Range Missiles: A Technical Evaluation,” *38 North*, Oct. 9, 2019, <https://www.38north.org/2019/10/melleman100919/>; Ankit Panda, “Why North Korea’s New Cruise Missile Matters,” *Quick Take – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Sept. 13, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/09/13/why-north-korea-s-new-cruise-missile-matters-pub-85331>.

¹⁵ Scott Neuman, “Korean Peninsula Tense After Shelling by North,” *NPR*, Nov. 23, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/2010/11/23/131530509/2-dead-after-north-korea-shells-south-korean-island>.

Great power defensive support

Paul's third factor is the weaker aggressor's expectation that another great power would provide political or military support to blunt the response to its aggression. Similarly, the first and third factors of the Angstrom-Petersson model both focus on how the weaker party intends to leverage another great power to counter its adversary. These considerations clearly could come into play in future North Korean aggression in the Yellow Sea, given this area's proximity to China and the powerful Chinese military forces in the vicinity, which are likely to grow given the US-PRC strategic rivalry. The proximity of these waters and the Northwest Islands themselves to China are another major factor why this area is a potentially advantageous site for North Korea to initiate aggression. The westernmost South Korean island of Paengyong-do, for example, is actually about the same distance from the tip of China's Shandong Peninsula as it is from South Korea's mainland.

More than a decade ago, when China's military was far weaker and its relations with the United States not nearly as contentious, China still seemed to have successfully opposed a US military deployment in the Yellow Sea in response to the sinking of the *Cheonan*.

According to Jeffrey Bader, then-National Security Council senior director for the Asia-Pacific:

In July, the South Korean press reported that the US intended to deploy the carrier U.S.S. George Washington to the Yellow Sea, between Korea and China. The report was based on a leak of contingency planning within the US Pacific Command, not on any decision to deploy forces there, for in fact no such decision had been made.

The report infuriated the Chinese...China's Foreign Ministry representative warned that such a deployment in sensitive waters near China could threaten Chinese national security.¹⁶

After this opposition, the United States decided to deploy the *George Washington* Carrier Strike Group (CSG) off the eastern coast of Korea instead. Although Reuters reported that a Pentagon spokesperson claimed that the cancellation of the Yellow Sea exercise was a scheduling difficulty, this statement did not dispel the impression that the United States had hesitated because of Chinese pressure.¹⁷ Some media reports at the time claimed that the US had backed down even though Bader and others cast the decision in a more positive light, noting that the *George Washington* CSG deployed into the Yellow Sea later that year.¹⁸ In 2012, the *George Washington* CSG again operated in the Yellow Sea.¹⁹

Besides this area's proximity to China, the ambiguous political situation of overlapping maritime claims and long-standing disputes increases the prospects for de facto Chinese support to North Korea in a Yellow Sea

¹⁶ Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), p. 87.

¹⁷ Phil Stewart and Jeremy Laurence, "U.S.-South Korea Aircraft Carrier Drill Delayed," Reuters, Oct. 24, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-korea-usa-drill/u-s-south-korea-aircraft-carrier-drill-delayed-idUSTRE69004T20101025>.

¹⁸ "S. Korea, US Shelve Plan to Stage Major Joint Drill: Report," AFP, Oct. 24, 2010, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/11476-s.korea-us-shelve-plan-to-stage-major-joint-drill-report>; Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, p. 89.

¹⁹ U.S. 7th Fleet Public Affairs, "George Washington CSG Operates in Yellow Sea," Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet website, June 24, 2012, <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/News/Article/2754312/george-washington-csg-operates-in-yellow-sea/>.

crisis, even one that Pyongyang initiated without consulting Beijing. The various agreements that North Korea could claim South Korea had violated all provide pretexts to escalate a confrontation while obscuring Pyongyang's responsibility. North Korea could play the role of the aggrieved party and claim that it was provoked, fostering sympathy and understanding in many quarters in Beijing and Moscow and even some in Seoul and Washington. Obscuring North Korea's responsibility for initiating the aggression with malice aforethought increases the prospects that Seoul and Washington may hesitate and that Moscow will show at least some sympathy and support at the United Nations. Most important, such political ambiguity that allows North Korea to obscure its responsibility for initiating aggression and engenders hesitation in Seoul and Washington could also increase the prospects that Beijing will see a political advantage to interceding, which would work to Pyongyang's advantage as it transitions to a defensive footing after initiating the aggression.

Changing domestic power structure

Paul noted that a changing domestic power structure in the weaker state was also a factor. In the majority of the cases, domestic politics appeared to have played a role in the decision for aggression, with key leaders seeking to consolidate their positions by initiating a limited conflict. North Korea's own history provides possible similar cases. A range of international experts theorize that the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the attack on Yeonpyeong-do in 2010 were motivated, at least in part, by the desire to burnish the credentials of Kim Jong-un as the successor to Kim Jong Il, because in the aftermath these "victories" were credited to Kim Jong-un as the "young general."²⁰

Whether or not Pyongyang is undergoing or approaching a major transition in its domestic power structure remains to be seen; however the structure is clearly changing and could change further. The opening of a new position, deputy to Kim Jong-un in his new title as General Secretary, may be a sign of a further restructuring of the regime.²¹ Even without a change in structure, there have been significant changes in the occupants of key positions around Kim Jong-un. Ri Pyong-chol, once a member of the ruling Presidium and the Vice Chair of the Central Military Commission, was demoted in recent months and his role apparently filled by Pak Jong-chon.²² Most important, the question of succession to Kim Jong-un also seems unresolved, with speculation of Kim's sister's role as a potential successor becoming muted in the aftermath of her "demotion" in status during the January 2021 Party Congress.²³ Regardless of the details, based on Paul's framework, such potential turmoil in the regime power structure could serve as a key driver of North Korean escalation in the months and years ahead in the Yellow Sea or elsewhere.

²⁰ Chung Min Lee, *The Real Lessons from North Korea's Ongoing Threats*, PacNet – Center for Strategic and International Studies, Number 24, Apr. 11, 2013, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/Pac1324_0.pdf; David W Shin, *Kim Jong-un's Strategy for Survival: A Method to Madness*, (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2021), p. 64-65.

²¹ Kyodo News, "North Korea's Ruling Party Stipulates New No. 2 Post as Kim's 'Deputy,'" June 3, 2021, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/06/a94202ebc3cf-n-koreas-ruling-party-stipulates-new-no-2-post-as-kims-deputy.html>.

²² Kim Myong-song, "N. Korea Promotes Ex-Army Chief to Top Body," Chosunilbo, Sept. 8, 2021, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2021/09/08/2021090801245.html.

²³ Hyung-jin Kim, "Demoted? Pushed Aside? Fate of Kim Jong Un's Sister Unclear," AP, Jan. 13, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/kim-yo-jong-north-korea-39b37a67d2fad24f6be3cbaa42fb051f>; Jieun Kim, "A Demoted Kim Yo-jong Reaffirms Hardline Stance Against S. Korea," (당직 낮아진 김여정, 강경 대남 담화로 건재 과시), Hankyoreh, Jan. 14, 2021, <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/defense/978665.html#csidxd58d1f2947d368b8a86cdef0742b9dc>.

What Should Be Done?

In the aftermath of the incidents of 2010, the South Korean military and the ROK-US alliance in general improved their preparedness to deter and defeat North Korean escalation in the Yellow Sea, undertaking measures such as establishing the Northwest Islands Defense Command. This new South Korean military command was established to place a single joint headquarters over the defense of the islands and the surrounding area, with the commandant of the ROK Marine Corps “dual-hatting” as its commander.²⁴

However, these preparations may be insufficient to deter Pyongyang in the months and years ahead, considering the evolving strategic situation since 2010. North Korea’s rapid nuclear and missile development, combined with the PRC’s strengthening military posture, could embolden Pyongyang. Given North Korea’s history and the logic described above that could motivate Pyongyang to choose to initiate a limited conflict, the waters west of the Korean Peninsula are a likely venue for renewed North Korean aggression. The ROK-US alliance should remain particularly wary of the potential for China’s rising power and assertiveness to lead Pyongyang to believe that escalating in this area would draw in China to blunt the ROK-US response.

As a result, Seoul and Washington should recognize that new acts of North Korean aggression in the waters west of Korea, unless successfully deterred by new measures from the ROK-US alliance, are probably just a matter of time—meaning that they should heighten their preparations accordingly. Given North Korea’s past willingness to violate inter-Korean agreements and to dramatically escalate without clear advance warning, the relative calm of recent years and the provisions of the Comprehensive Military Agreement should not lull the alliance into a false sense of security.

For both operational and political reasons, ROK forces will be at the forefront of any response to North Korean aggression in this area. However, the United States will still have a military role in deterring and responding to such escalation. Although Seoul and Washington should avoid unnecessarily antagonizing China when preparing for or reacting to North Korean aggression in the waters west of the Korean Peninsula, the United States should never again hesitate to deploy forces in the Yellow Sea because of concerns about China’s reaction, as it did in the summer of 2010. A US overreaction that widens the confrontation into one with China would serve North Korean interests, but so would excessive caution that allows North Korea to keep US support for the ROK at bay. Such a response will not be an easy line to walk, but the United States cannot afford to hesitate. As in the opening hypothetical scenario, caution and hesitation could end up accepting as much risk as moving forward. Given time and space, China may still move to intervene even if the US treads lightly.

Clear advance coordination between the ROK and US would be vital to moving quickly in such circumstances. Reinforcing, practicing, and demonstrating the capability of US forces to support the ROK defense of the islands from a distance, such as with advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms and long-range precision munitions, would aid in deterring and responding to North Korean aggression while still minimizing US forces’ proximity to China.

In previous crises in this area, Beijing largely confined itself to making excuses for North Korea, covering for Pyongyang at the United Nations Security Council, and issuing some vaguely threatening rhetoric. In the next crisis triggered by North Korean action in the waters west of Korea, the PRC may intervene more actively, even to the point of deploying military forces into the international waters and airspace. If Beijing overreacts to ROK-US alliance moves or intentionally chooses to use alliance military responses to North

²⁴ Yonhap News, “S. Korea Sets Up Defense Command for Yellow Sea Islands near N. Korea,” June 14, 2011, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20110614004500315>.

Korean aggression as a pretext for flexing its military muscles in the waters west of Korea, the alliance must be prepared to stand firm in the face of PRC bullying lest it invite further adventurism by Beijing or Pyongyang. The alliance must be fully prepared, militarily and politically, to counter coercion from not only North Korea but also the PRC in the waters west of Korea.

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