

Rising tensions on the Korean peninsula:

South Korea sinks North Korean torpedo boat

By Peter Symonds
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Tensions between the two Koreas rose on Tuesday after South Korean naval vessels sank a North Korean torpedo boat and badly damaged several other ships during a clash in disputed waters to the west of the peninsula.

Both sides allege that the other began the ten-minute exchange of fire. The South Korea Defence Ministry has, however, admitted that its patrol boats were, at the time, engaged in attempting to ram three of the North Korean craft in order to force them back over the so-called Northern Limit Line.

According to US officials, at least 30 North Korean sailors were killed and 70 others injured during the skirmish.

South Korean officials reported that seven of its sailors were wounded in the incident, and one of its frigates and a patrol boat were hit but no substantial damage was done.

The North Korean delegation to talks with the United Nations Command (UNC) in the truce village of Panmunjom on Tuesday strongly protested the incident and demanded an apology from South Korea. According to the official North Korean news agency: “The reckless military provocations by the South Korean rulers are deliberate and planned ones aimed at driving the situation of the Korean peninsula to the brink of war.”

The naval clash follows eight days of confrontation in the Yellow Sea when North Korean patrol boats and torpedo vessels began escorting fishing ships into rich crab-fishing grounds over the Northern Limit Line on June 8. The crabs are exported to Japan to obtain scarce foreign currency.

No recognised maritime border between North and South Korea was ever agreed after the armistice was signed to end the Korean War in 1953. The UNC unilaterally declared a buffer zone in the Yellow Sea, the

northern border of which is known as the Northern Limit Line (NLL). North Korea has never accepted the arbitrary line and has frequently dispatched fishing vessels and naval craft into the area—particularly during the height of the crab-fishing season. As one South Korean official noted, the fight over the fishing waters has become “an annual event”.

Yet last Friday marked a sharp escalation. The South Korean military massed dozens of destroyers, frigates, missile boats and even landing craft in the area and put its forces on a high state of alert. Shore guns, guided missiles and submarines were put on standby, together with special combat teams. The government officially requested the assistance of the US, which has 37,000 troops in South Korea, nominally under the UN flag. According to a South Korean official quoted by Agence France-Presse: “We have decided to take a more aggressive stance. North Korea's intrusions are aimed at incapacitating the NLL.”

When North Korean vessels sought to enter the area last Friday, the South Korean navy attempted to ram the boats in an effort to drive them back over the sea border. As an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted, the purpose of the exercise was to “intimidate the North Korean vessels into leaving the disputed area permanently”. “Opposing ships trained their machine-guns on each other as four southern vessels deliberately bumped the North Korean patrol boats to bully them back over the sea border.”

After sinking the North Korean, the South Korean military went on “Defcon three” readiness, signifying “a serious situation... that could lead to the deployment of North Korean military forces”. US officials admitted that there had been no extra activity by the North Korean military along the demilitarised zone separating the two

countries, nor any increased airforce movement.

Clearly the incidents are not simply about crab fishing and disputed waters. The two Koreas are due to meet in Beijing next Monday for their first official talks at the vice-ministerial level for 14 months. Both governments face economic problems at home and pressure from opposition groups not to give concessions to the other side.

The North Korea economy has slumped dramatically since the early 1990s, amid the collapse of the Soviet Union, on which Pyongyang relied for its trade and access to key imports, such as oil and spare parts. Since 1995 the country has been ravaged by a famine caused by floods, drought and a slump in fertiliser, pesticide and farm machinery production. This has been severely aggravated by the US economic and trade blockade of North Korea, continued since the end of the Korean War. If next week's talks go ahead, Pyongyang will undoubtedly be seeking further economic aid beyond the 200,000 tonnes of fertiliser previously offered by Seoul.

The South Korean government is grappling with its own economic crisis. Despite reports of a moderate upturn, unemployment is still at record levels; almost three times last year's figure. President Kim Dae Jung, routinely hailed in the international press as a democrat, faces falling popularity. His government has pressed ahead with the IMF's demands for further restructuring and used repressive police measures to end strikes against job losses. It lost parliamentary by-elections on June 3 to the conservative Grand National Party (GNP) and is now embroiled in a scandal over the alleged receipt of expensive clothes by ministers' wives in return for lobbying.

Moreover Kim Dae Jung is under pressure from the opposition GNP over his so-called Sunshine Policy towards North Korea—the attempt to engage Pyongyang in talks and to open up North Korea for South Korean investors and businessmen. Following the naval clash, GNP policy co-ordinator Lee Sang Duk branded the “Sunshine Policy” as “a failed policy,” adding, “It has succeeded only in prompting more armed provocations from the North.”

It is impossible to understand the heightened military standoff simply as the product of the politics of the two Koreas. The Korean peninsula remains a key strategic area in north-eastern Asia in close proximity to Japan, Russia and China and with a substantial US military presence in the south. The Clinton administration, in particular, has sought to exploit the economic collapse in

North Korea to compel Pyongyang to make military and political concessions.

US presidential envoy William Perry has just completed a visit to North Korea, during which he reportedly offered to ease the economic and diplomatic blockade if the Pyongyang regime agreed to dismantle its nuclear and long-range missile programs. The offer is more in the form of an ultimatum. Perry is believed to be preparing a list of more aggressive options should North Korea turn down the US “offer”. Already the Clinton administration has indicated its intention to deploy an extensive anti-missile system covering its regional allies including Japan and South Korea—a move that both China and North Korea have protested.

North Korea is also under pressure from China to come to an agreement with the US and open up the country to capitalist investment. Chinese President Jiang Zemin last week bluntly told a high level North Korean delegation to China, the first in nearly ten years, that its neighbour should put economic reforms ahead of defence. The Beijing bureaucracy has provided little economic aid to the famine-stricken country and has attempted to close its borders to North Korean refugees. Growing ties between Russia and South Korea have further isolated Pyongyang.

The international media, the US and South Korea have sought to paint the North Korean entry into the disputed waters as “a dire provocation of great proportions” and “an action... beyond the bounds of rational analysis,” to use the words of one editorial in the *Korea Herald*. However, the limited available evidence points in another direction—to an incident engineered by the South Korean military with the nod of approval from the US in order to ratchet up the pressure on the isolated North Korean regime. It is after all Washington, and not Pyongyang, whose record is one of reckless military interventions in the Middle East, the Balkans and elsewhere around the world.

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