

23 December 2010

The Korean Peninsula in 2011 - Making Headlines, Unfortunately^(*)

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2010 was a bad year for the Korean Peninsula. Unless there are dramatic policy changes in North Korea related to the development of its missile and nuclear programs, 2011 could become an equally negative year as regards peace and stability on the peninsula.

What happened in 2010? On March 26, a North Korean submarine fired a torpedo sinking a South Korean warship killing 46 South Korean sailors.

On November 23 then, North Korean armed forces fired 170 shells onto Yeonpyeong, an island populated mainly by fishermen and farmers living near bases where South Korean marines were operating. The shelling killed two South Korean soldiers and two civilians.

North Korea's recent shelling of the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong is almost certain to make sure that relations with South Korea will remain tense and potentially prone to military conflict in 2011. While Seoul has decided not to respond to the November attack militarily (yet), it can be excluded that the South Korean leadership will exert the same restraint as regards its reactions to an unprovoked attack by North Korea should there be another North Korean attack in 2011.

Currently, too little is known on inner-North Korean political dynamics (not least because the country is in the midst of a political leadership succession process) to be able to assess whether Pyongyang is fully aware of the fact that attacking South Korea militarily could potentially lead to a joint South Korean-US-Japanese military response resulting in North Korea's almost certain defeat and destruction. To be sure, such a scenario remains very unlikely in 2011, but North Korea's recent shelling has nonetheless demonstrated 'impressively' that Pyongyang's leadership is reckless enough to risk military conflict with Seoul and its ally in Washington.

The so-called 6-Party Talks, a multilateral forum (US, Japan, Russia, China, South and North Korea) established in 2003 with the goal of denuclearizing North Korea, remain suspended and it remains yet to be seen whether they will be resumed anytime soon. Precondition for the talks to be resumed-at least as far as the US, Japan and South Korea are concerned-is North Korea's willingness to stop its uranium enrichment program, accept inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency and fulfil its obligations to abandon its nuclear weapons program and other existing nuclear plants under a joint statement agreed to at the six-party talks in 2005 and 2007.

So far there are no indications whatsoever that Pyongyang is willing to do any of that-in fact, the opposite seems to be the case.

The North Korean November 2010 shelling of South Korean territory attack followed revelations that Pyongyang has reportedly built a new sophisticated facility to enrich uranium in its Yongbyong nuclear complex. At the end of November an American scientist was shown a small-scale industrial uranium enrichment facility to which he referred to as «astonishingly modern fitting into any modern American

(*)The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

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processing facility». While Pyongyang refers to the facility and the 2.000 centrifuges as designed to manufacture uranium for civilian nuclear power, the American scientist concluded that «The centrifuges could be readily converted to produce highly enriched uranium bomb fuel».

South Korea's ability to consider engaging its northern neighbor politically and economically will remain very limited in 2011. In fact, the recent attack on its territory is interpreted by South Korea's conservative political and defense establishment as evidence that previous attempts to engage the North politically and economically did not lead to the stabilization of bilateral ties and in turn to overall peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea's current president Lee is without a doubt part of the country's conservative establishment, very reluctant to appear too 'soft' or 'engaging' towards the North.

Consequently, that there will no substantial South Korean efforts to provide North Korea with economic and humanitarian aid unless Pyongyang returns to the sustainable and accountable dismantlement of its nuclear program.

The approach that economic and humanitarian engagement can take place parallel to negotiations on nuclear disarmament-the basis of South Korean so-called 'sunshine policies' towards North Korea in the late 1990s and early 2000s-has realistically no place on Seoul's current North Korea's policy agenda.

North Korea's economic and political engagement will remain on the very bottom of Japan's North Korea policy agenda too, not least because Tokyo's political leadership is currently too weak and fragmented to initiate policies towards Pyongyang which would go beyond (occasional) requests to resume the dismantlement of North Korean missile and nuclear programs. Tokyo's policies towards North Korea will almost certain remain in "wait-and-see-mode" in the months ahead, not least because North Korea will continue not to respond to Tokyo's requests to receive reliable and accountable information on the fate of Japanese citizens who were kidnapped and brought to North Korea by the country's secret service in the 1970s and 1980s.

As regards the role of China, there is wide agreement amongst scholars and (non-Chinese) policymakers that unless Beijing interrupts or limits its financial, energy and economic support for North Korea, Pyongyang will continue to be able to ignore Japanese and South Korean aid and support in return for the resumption of denuclearization. In other words: As long as China continues to provide Pyongyang with funds and energy, Pyongyang will not obliged to change its hostile policies towards South Korea (and to a lesser extent Japan).

To be sure, there are no indications that Beijing is ready to change and readjust its policies towards North Korea, not least because of the recent re-emergence of Chinese-Japanese territorial disputes in the East China Sea and US assurances that defending Japanese territories in the East China would be part of US-Japan military cooperation as formulated in the 1960 US-Japan Security Treaty.

Washington for its part will continue to refer to the 6-Party Talks as the only forum to discuss North Korean nuclear disarmament. Bilateral US-North Korean negotiations-for years requested by North Korea-are very unlikely to take place in 2011, not least because Washington agreeing to negotiate bilaterally with Pyongyang would almost certainly be interpreted as the US giving in to North Korean pressure and military provocations.

In sum, for the security situation to improve on the Korean Peninsula in 2011, two actors would have to change course and policies significantly: North Korea and its only but still close ally China.

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