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## Tense standoff after North Korean-South Korean artillery exchange

By Peter Symonds

1 April 2014

Tensions flared on the Korean Peninsula yesterday as the South Korean military responded to a North Korean live fire exercise with an artillery barrage of its own. Hundreds of shells fell into waters near the disputed maritime boundary, known as the Northern Limit Line, to the west of the peninsula.

Yesterday, North Korea notified the South Korean 2nd Navy Fleet Command by fax that it intended to carry out live fire drills in seven areas close to the five front-line islands in the Yellow Sea. Some 100 North Korean shells out of 500 landed in waters claimed by South Korea, which responded with its own artillery, unleashing more than 300 rounds into North Korean waters.

The artillery exchange between North and South Korea highlights the fragile state of relations on the Korean Peninsula, one of a string of dangerous flashpoints in Asia. The Korean War, which was waged by the US to subjugate North Korea and claimed millions of lives between 1950 and 1953, did not conclude with a formal peace agreement, but only a truce.

The Northern Limit Line (NLL), which was drawn in the Yellow Sea by US and its allies, was never accepted by North Korea and has been a constant source of tension. Last week, a North Korean fishing boat with engine trouble was seized by the South Korean navy after the boat strayed south of the NLL. Pyongyang accused South Korea of capturing the vessel, which was later released. An unnamed South Korean official told Reuters: "If North Korea tries provocation... we'll be sure to come back with punishment pretty decisively."

In November 2010, North Korean shelling of South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island, just to the south of the NLL, killed four people and prompted a heavy South Korean artillery barrage in return. The artillery exchange occurred seven months after the sinking of the South Korean warship, Cheonan, for which the US and South Korea blame North Korea. Yesterday, the residents of five South Korean islands evacuated to bunkers.

Yesterday, the White House immediately denounced North Korea's actions as "dangerous and provocative." National Security Council spokesman Jonathan Lalley warned that the incident would only lead to Pyongyang's further isolation. He reaffirmed the US commitment to defend South Korea and Japan.

US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel, who is travelling to Asia, insisted that "the North Koreans have to stop these provocative actions." He made clear that he would use the incident to put pressure on the Chinese leadership to pull Pyongyang into line with Washington's demands. "Obviously when I'm in China that will be a subject that I will discuss with my counterpart," he said.

However, the chief responsibility for the tense situation on the Korean Peninsula lies with Washington. While the White House routinely condemns North Korea's drills as provocative, the US is currently holding major annual military exercises with South Korea, known as "Key Resolve" and "Foal Eagle," which began in February and continue until April 18.

In response to the US-South Korean drills, North Korea has test fired some 86 rockets since late February, including two medium range ballistic missiles last week. On Sunday, Pyongyang warned that it "would not rule out a new form of nuclear test for bolstering up its nuclear deterrence." North Korea has previously tested three crude nuclear weapons in a rather reckless attempt to gain greater leverage in any talks with the US and South Korea.

Yesterday's artillery exchange in the Yellow Sea took place on the same day that US and South Korean forces conducted a huge amphibious exercise on the coast near the southern port city of Pohang. The US-led Combined Forces Command in South Korea said the drill was "greater than any other in the past," involving "the full spectrum of a combined arms, amphibious landing operation in cooperation with our international partners."

The exercise involved 7,500 US Marines and 2,000 US navy personnel, along with 3,000 South Korean Marines and some 130 Australian soldiers. The operation was supported by more than 20 US Navy and South Korean ships, as well as about 60 aircraft, including 22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft. Overall, about 12,700 US troops and 200,000 South Korean personnel are participating in the extended Foal Eagle and Key Resolve drills.

While officially targeting an unnamed enemy, a military source told *Chosun Ilbo* that the exercise “demonstrates the will of the US government and our military to deter North Korean provocations.” In fact, the expanded US-South Korean exercise is part of a far broader “rebalance” of American forces throughout Asia—a military build-up that is primarily directed against China.

The same joint exercises last year provoked extreme tensions on the Korean Peninsula after the US responded to bellicose, but empty, threats from Pyongyang by provocatively flying nuclear capable B-52 and B-2 bombers to South Korea. The US exploited the situation to announce the expansion of its anti-ballistic missile systems in North East Asia, as part of its war preparations against China.

Yesterday’s artillery exchange in the Yellow Sea took place amid heightened tensions throughout the region and internationally produced by the US-led confrontation with Russia over Ukraine. Having engineered a fascist-led coup in Kiev, the Obama administration has seized on Moscow’s annexation of the Crimea peninsula to build up NATO forces in the Baltic states on Russia’s borders.

The Russian regime clearly feels under siege by the US, not only on its western borders, but in East Asia. A Russian Foreign Ministry statement urged “maximum restraint” from North and South Korea following yesterday’s incident, but blamed Washington for the tensions. “It is not impossible to see that the periodic aggravation of the situation in the region coincides with the annual large-scale military exercises of the US and South Korea,” it declared, adding that Moscow had “repeatedly drawn attention to the inadmissibility of excess military activity in North East Asia.”

The Obama administration, however, has no intention of pulling back. Amid the tensions generated by last year’s joint exercises, the *New York Times* revealed that the Pentagon drew up a “counter-provocation” plan, involving an “immediate but proportional ‘response in kind’” to any North Korean action. Its “counter-provocation” response last year was to fly nuclear-capable strategic bombers to South Korea to demonstrate its capacity to obliterate North Korea’s industrial and military infrastructure. While it is currently preoccupied with Ukraine, Washington is quite prepared to recklessly escalate tensions in North East Asia if it furthers its strategic ambition to bring the Eurasian landmass under its sway.