

Yeonpyeong Island

Background:

A crisis involving North Korea and South Korea surrounding incidents on the disputed Yeonpyeong Island occurred between 23 November 2010 and 19 June 2011. The crisis occurred amidst the backdrop of a long-running maritime border dispute between North and South Korea. The US was also significantly involved in the crisis, mainly due to its holding of military exercises with South Korea both before and during the crisis.

Yeonpyeong Island lies on the South Korean side of the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the maritime boundary between the North and South Korea that was drawn up by the United Nations after the end of the Korean War in 1953. North Korea accepted this demarcation for almost two decades before it began disputing it in the 1970s. Tensions surrounding the boundary decreased in the wake of a 1991 non-aggression pact between the two Koreas, but re-escalated when North Korea began disputing the boundary again in the mid-1990s.

Minor military incidents occurred between the two sides near Yeonpyeong Island in 1999 and 2002. On 10 November 2009, another skirmish between the South and North Korea navies occurred near the NLL. Tensions further intensified after the sinking of the Cheonan, a South Korean warship, in March 2010 (see case #461).

PRE-CRISIS:

Tensions increased further between South Korea and North Korea in the month prior to the crisis. On 14 October 2010, South Korea hosted Exercise Eastern Endeavor, a naval drill also involving the United States, Japan, and Australia. This drill was part of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a multinational effort aimed at stopping the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. North Korea denounced the drill as an open declaration of war, as it did in 2009 when South Korea joined the PSI in the wake of a North Korean nuclear test.

Then, on 16 November 2010, South Korea announced that it would launch a large-scale annual military exercise, the Hoguk Exercise, with the US the following week. North Korea viewed the exercise as preparation for war. Hours before the exercise began on 23 November, North Korea wired a complaint, said that it would not “just sit back while the South is carrying out the live-fire exercise,” and warned of military action if South Korea and the U.S. fired in its territorial waters.

Summary:

On 23 November 2010, South Korea and the US held the Hoguk Exercise on Yeonpyeong Island as previously announced, which triggered a crisis for North Korea. North Korea’s major response consisted of firing artillery shells onto Yeonpyeong Island that same day, which triggered a crisis for South Korea. Following an emergency meeting of top aides and security ministers called by South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, South Korea implemented its major response by firing back at the North Korean military that same day. The exchange of fire intensified for a short while before ending in the afternoon that day. Shortly afterwards that same day, South Korea and the US announced that they planned another round of similar military

exercises for some time between 17 and 21 December. North Korea responded it would consider such exercises a grave provocation and would respond appropriately.

In the aftermath of the attack, South Korean President Lee received much domestic public criticism for not responding more forcefully. On 25 November, the South Korean defense minister resigned; South Korea announced a dramatic troop and heavy weapon increase on Yeonpyeong Island; and President Lee announced changes to the rules of engagement permitting a more forceful military response, particularly if civilians are threatened. North Korea threatened further military action if South Korea continued what, according to North Korea, was a course of military provocation.

On 28 November, China proposed emergency consultations by representatives of the six-party talks to try and help resolve the crisis. China's proposal was rejected by the US, South Korea, and Japan.

On 18 December, Russia's ambassador to the UN appealed for an emergency UNSC meeting. The meeting was held the following day. Russia presented a draft statement with the hopes of adoption by the UNSC, but it could not secure sufficient support. China opposed including language in the statement that would criticize North Korea.

Around this time, New Mexico Governor and former US diplomat Bill Richardson accepted an invitation from North Korea to try and reduce tensions. Richardson conducted a four-day mission in Pyongyang as a private citizen beginning on 16 December. On 20 December, Richardson reported that North Korea was willing to discuss the formation of a military commission consisting of representatives from North Korea, South Korea and the US that would monitor and prevent conflicts in the disputed areas in the Yellow Sea. Richardson also reported that North Korea agreed to allow monitors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to its uranium-enrichment facility. The White House rejected the idea of new multinational talks with North Korea, and said it needed to change its belligerent behavior first.

From 20 to 25 December, South Korea carried out naval drills on Yeonpyeong Island and the Sea of Japan. On 23 December, North Korea called South Korea's exercises a preparation for war and threatened a nuclear deterrent response.

In January 2011, North Korea proposed working-level military talks with South Korea. These talks began on 8 February but ended abruptly with both sides blaming the other for the failed talks. North Korea claimed that the South made unreasonable demands and was uninterested in improving ties. South Korea wanted the talks to focus on the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents and claimed that the North maintained its refusal to apologize and accept responsibility for these incidents.

For the next several months, tensions began to slowly ease but nevertheless continued to simmer and remain unresolved, with little headway made toward abatement. Then, on 19 June, facing the threat of another possible nuclear test from North Korea, South Korea announced that while it still wanted an apology from North Korea over the 2010 incidents, it would no longer make such

an apology a prerequisite for restarting the six-party talks. After this statement, the crisis faded for both North Korea and South Korea.

References:

BBC; Bruce 2012 (Council on Foreign Relations); China Post; CNN; Dong-A Ilbo; Fackler and McDonald 25/10/2010 (New York Times); Guardian; Hankyoreh; International Crisis Group; Korea Herald; Korea JoongAng Daily; New York Times; Reuters; United Press International; Wall Street Journal; Washington Post; Xinhua.