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## BASIC Backgrounder

### Update on North Korea's nuclear program and security situation around the Peninsula

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*Tensions on the Korean Peninsula are again running high. BASIC Intern Taek Jin Han summarizes the most relevant developments on North Korea's nuclear program and the broader security situation – with a more detailed account than what is available in BASIC's [Getting to Zero Updates](#).*

- **New nuclear enrichment facility in North Korea revealed**
- **North Korea fires artillery at South Korean island, killing four people**
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#### **New nuclear enrichment facility in North Korea revealed**

On November 12, North Korea invited Dr. Siegfried S. Hecker, a nuclear scientist at Stanford University, to inspect a new enrichment facility at Yongbyon. On November 20, Dr. Hecker published [the report](#) on his visit to the Yongbyon Nuclear Complex. At a briefing at the Korea Economic Institute in Washington, DC, he recounted how he was shown a 25 to 30 megawatt-electronic (MWe) experimental light-water reactor in the early stages of construction and a modern industrial-scale uranium enrichment facility with 2,000 centrifuges. Dr. Hecker described it as “[astonishingly modern](#),” and added that it “would fit into any American processing facility.” Hecker warned that Pyongyang must have been involved in a procurement scheme in order to secure technology and equipment, although he was told that it was proceeding with indigenous supplies and talent. North Korean officials claimed the plant to be producing low enriched uranium in order to fuel the country's first light-water reactor. It was noted that the facilities can be readily converted to produce highly-enriched uranium (HEU) bomb fuel or be run in a mode to produce plutonium.

The introduction of the new nuclear facility shifted the security dynamics in the Korean Peninsula, as it confirmed long-held U.S. suspicions that North Korea had a uranium enrichment program. The enrichment of

uranium – if pursued to weapons grade – can provide North Korea with a second pathway toward building a bomb. North Korea is already believed to possess enough plutonium for six to eight weapons. The state-sponsored [Rodong Simun newspaper](#) reported that the facility was for peaceful purposes.

According to *the Korea Herald Tribune*, South Korean Defense Minister [Kim Tae-young](#) stated that South Korea could seek the redeployment of U.S. [tactical nuclear weapons](#) in the country in order to respond to the nuclear threats posed by North Korea. “We will review [the redeployment] when [Korea and the United States] meet to consult on the matter at a committee for nuclear deterrence,” Kim said during a parliamentary committee session on November 22. The United States [withdrew](#) tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991.

### **North Korea fires artillery at South Korean island, killing four people**

On November 23, North Korea fired a barrage of [artillery rounds](#) on Yeonpyeong island killing two civilians and two marines. At least eighteen soldiers and civilians were injured. The incident resulted in the first civilian deaths on South Korean soil by North Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953. “In the past, North Korea has provoked us on many occasions, but this is the first time they have made a direct attack on South Korean soil ... Launching a military attack on civilians is a crime against humanity, even during wartime,” South Korean President [Lee Myung-bak](#) said following the artillery bombardment. Pyongyang expressed regret over the civilian deaths but [blamed](#) Seoul for the incident. “If that is true, it is very regrettable, but the enemy should be held responsible for the incident as it took such inhuman action as creating ‘[a human shield](#)’ by deploying civilians around artillery positions and inside military facilities before the launch of the provocation,” the state-run Korean Central News Agency reported on November 28.

Yeonpyeong island is located in the disputed area below the [Northern Limit Line \(NLL\)](#), the *de facto* maritime border between the two Koreas in the Yellow Sea. The NLL was unilaterally drawn by the [United Nations Command](#) in 1953 in the closing days of the armistice negotiations. Although South Korea and the United States maintained uncontested dominance in the area, they withdrew the forces from the off-shore islands above the NLL. The NLL was never formally recognized by North Korea, but Pyongyang had tacitly acknowledged the NLL until 1973 since the naval superiority of the U.S.-South Korea Combined Forces made it impossible for North Korea to challenge it. However, North Korea recently began to challenge the NLL with [a series of military provocations](#). Several naval clashes have been reported in the area since 1999. Prior to the attack on Yeonpyeong island, in the most serious incident to date, a North Korean submarine allegedly [attacked a South Korean corvette](#), the Cheonan, killing 46 sailors on March 27, 2010. Some commentators have pointed out that the renewed North Korean military action coincides with the North Korean leader’s plans to groom his son, Kim Jong Un, to succeed him.

### **South Korea and the United States respond with live fire naval exercise**

On November 24, Washington immediately released a statement condemning the attack on Yeonpyeong. The United States and South Korea began [a joint naval exercise](#) with live fire and bombing drills in the Yellow Sea on November 28. The exercise had been planned in advance, yet “the intensity for the drill will be higher than planned” a South Korean military official confirmed. The USS George Washington super carrier participated in the exercise over the objections of China and North Korea. Beijing has not issued a condemnation of the attack on Yeonpyeong and [expressed its concerns](#) over the joint naval exercise. The Foreign Ministry in Beijing stated: “We oppose any military act by any party conducted in China’s exclusive economic zone without approval,” referring to a 200 nautical miles zone in the Yellow Sea. According to the *Korea Times*, Pyongyang released [a stern warning](#), “If the United States brings its carrier to the West Sea (Yellow Sea) of Korea at last, no one can

predict the ensuing consequences." North Korea deployed SA-2 surface-to air missiles to the coastline of the Yellow Sea and fired additional artillery shells.

### **China calls for resumption of Six-Party Talks, U.N. Security Council takes up the issue**

China called for an "[emergency consultation](#)" of the members of the Six-Party Talks – the two Koreas, the United States, Russia, China and Japan - on North Korea's nuclear program after the attack. "A series of complicated factors recently emerged on the Korean peninsula ... China is opposed to all actions that undermine peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula," a high-ranking envoy, [Wu Dawei](#) said at a news conference on Sunday November 27. Chinese Foreign Minister [Yang Jiechi](#) stated, "One reason for the current situation is that Six-Party Talks have not been held for a long time." However the United States, South Korea and Japan rebuffed the appeal. On December 5, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, South Korean Minister Kim Sung Hwan, and Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara [jointly condemned](#) the attack by North Korea and announced that the "resumption of the Six-Party Talks will require the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to make sincere efforts to improve relations with the Republic of Korea as well as taking concrete steps to demonstrate a genuine commitment to complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization."

The Security Council held closed-door consultations on the issue of North Korea. [France and Great Britain](#) pushed for a resolution to condemn North Korea's nuclear program and the attack on Yeonpyeong island. However, there was strong opposition from China which demanded the removal of words such as "condemn" and "violation." "This afternoon talks on the enrichment issue [essentially collapsed](#) and it's not clear that they can be revived," a western diplomat told Reuters. "Talks on the shelling incident also appear to be stalled ...There's a slim chance that something could be agreed on there, but it's not looking good either, " he added. China has refrained from criticizing North Korea for the attack on the island and the sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan last March, which may have been in retaliation for a South Korean attack in November 2009 in which 11 North Korean sailors died. Meanwhile, [the International Criminal Court \(ICC\)](#) launched a preliminary investigation to determine whether North Korean forces committed war crimes in the two recent attacks - its attack on Yeonpyeong island and the sinking of the Cheonan.

### **WikiLeaks diplomatic cables reveal "Chinese strategic shift"**

The leaks of U.S. diplomatic cables revealed a change in China's political calculus regarding North Korea. A senior South Korean diplomat, [Chun Yung-woo](#), privately told the American ambassador, Kathleen Stephens, that a new generation of Chinese leaders "would be comfortable with a reunited Korea controlled by Seoul and anchored to the United States in a benign alliance." The comment was made public by [Wikileaks](#). The cable also revealed a comment from a Chinese official saying, "North Korea wanted to engage directly with the United States and was therefore '[acting like a spoiled child](#)' in order to draw attention of the "adult." Following the cable leaks, Choe Thae Bok, a chairman of North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly, arrived in Beijing on November 30. Chairman Choe was expected to seek the assurance of continued Chinese support for the North Korean regime. China is the largest supplier of food aid to North Korea despite the growing trade deficit. In 2008 alone, North Korea is estimated to have a \$1.2 billion trade gap with China.

A classified [intelligence report](#) from the U.S. diplomatic cables indicated that North Korea has supplied Iran with sophisticated long-range missiles weaponry such as BM-25 or the Musudan. However, experts are skeptical of the claim. "The U.S. side does not firmly say we have evidence that the BM-25 is in Iran," [Michael Ellman](#), a missile expert at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said in an interview with the *Washington Post*.

## U.S. policy options weighed as “strategic patience” is challenged by recent attacks

From the outset of the Obama Administration, officials have advocated [strategic patience](#) toward North Korea, with one senior official summarizing the policy thus: "What we're focused on is changing North Korean behavior ... We are not focused on getting back to the table." The United States is now juggling the policies of engagement and containment. The engagement camp stresses the need to deal with the North Korean regime in order to prevent further vertical and horizontal proliferation by Pyongyang. Former President [Jimmy Carter](#) wrote in the *Washington Post*, "Pyongyang has sent a consistent message that during direct talks with the United States, it is ready to conclude an agreement to end its nuclear programs, put them all under IAEA inspection and conclude a permanent peace treaty to replace the "temporary" cease-fire of 1953." Thus, he claimed that the United States should consider this offer in order to avoid further brinkmanship in the region. Nevertheless, Balbina Hwang at Georgetown University notes that future engagement would be different than in the past by [separating the goal](#) of peace between Pyongyang and Seoul from overall nuclear disarmament. "By not separating out those goals we are living under this delusion that here are the choices: either everything falls apart and we're in this major crisis ... or we are able to fix the problem diplomatically."

On the other hand, the advocates of containment emphasize the nature of the regime of North Korea: "its [aggression](#) is ideologically built in." Brian R. Myers from Dongseo University points out "Pyongyang is thus virtually predestined to push Seoul and Washington too far, thereby bringing about its own ruin." In this view, regime change is the only way to alter the behavior of North Korea. John R. Bolton, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, mentioned that unification would be the only way to resolve tension in the region, thus "serious efforts need to be made with China on [reunifying the Korean peninsula](#), a goal made ever more urgent by the clear transition of power now underway in Pyongyang as Kim Jong Il faces the actuarial tables." Senator [John McCain](#) (Republican-Arizona) also spoke of regime change, "I think it's time we talked about regime change in North Korea ... We can have a peaceful resolution to this issue, but the North Korean regime is not one that's going to abandon the nuclear power status."

As the crisis deepened, on December 8, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, traveled to Japan and South Korea and accused China of having "enabled" the "reckless" behavior of its ally. "I actually believe that because these provocations continue, and seemingly at a more frequent interval, that the danger is going up and that steps must be taken to ensure that they stop," Admiral Mullen told journalists in Tokyo.

Despite the divergent opinions between the engagement and containment policy camps, both sides agree that the role of China is critical. Peter Feaver describes in *Foreign Policy* that China has responded to North Korea "with successive rounds of [concessions and cover-ups](#)" rather than pressuring the regime. While China shares similar frustrations with the United States regarding the nuclear programs in North Korea, China is not ready to turn a blind eye to Pyongyang's behavior because of their traditional ties. A senior Chinese media commentator said in *The New York Times*, "No matter whether it be within the party, among the people, or even within the military, China has grown [increasingly sick and tired](#) of North Korea's rogue politics, but strategically, China's kidnapped by it."

### Further Reading

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