

By Tom French

The recent shelling by the North Korean People's Army of Yeonpyeong Island and the resultant civilian and military casualties have raised many questions about the possible causes behind, and responses to, this clear act of aggression.

## Causes

Much like the original outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 the exact cause or 'who fired first' in this incident may never be known. However, it seems that the North Korean shelling began ostensibly in response to an artillery exercise by the South Korean military. Nevertheless, the bombardment is believed by most observers, and crucially, the South Korean leadership, to have been a premeditated act of aggression.

Much like the sinking of the Cheonan on 26 March the incident has provoked a flurry of speculation about the North's motivation behind these highly risky acts of aggression. Some have speculated that the attack could be a response to the recent hosting of the G20 by the South, with the North unwilling to be upstaged by its southern neighbour. Others have argued that the attack could be a result of the recent statements by a US diplomat that Americans would not reward Northern provocations by returning to the six party talks. The often advanced theory of blaming of the incident on 'rogue elements' within the Northern military is also a common theme. No doubt these and the clichés of the North as a 'mad', 'bad' or even 'sad' regime will fill much of the commentary on the incident.

These rather flimsy arguments seem to unravel when confronted by the question: why would the North risk so much over such minor incidents as it would almost certainly be defeated if it came to war? A more credible explanation lies in attempting to assume the perspective of the Kim regime and the choices available to it.

Caught in the midst of a succession crisis, the ailing Kim Jong-il seems to want to ensure the smooth transition of power to his heir apparent Kim Jong-un. A useful tool in this seems to be winning the support of both the military and people through 'victories' over the United States and its South Korean 'puppet'. As noted in B.R. Myers's recent book *The Cleanest Race* this form of anti American / South Korean propaganda is very common in the North and a the sinking of a southern warship and the bombardment of a military base offer the chance to renew and strengthen this narrative and with it the interconnected Kim dynasty personality cult and central, highly respected position of the military.

## Responses

The cessation of the bombardment and the apparent absence of any further acts of aggression seem to prove that the North doesn't seek a wider conflict, however the full response of the

South is yet to be revealed. As noted in a previous Defence Viewpoints article, three possibilities lay open to the Southern government, sanctions, a blockade of some kind and finally, military action. It seems that the South too does not yet seek an escalation of the incident however the remarks by Southern President Lee Myung-bak that the attack would be met "through action", not just words may hint at a tougher line over the coming days. It seem Southern patience is wearing thin and this coupled with the inevitable public outcry and the clear opportunity the attack provides for a strike against the North's nuclear facilities, (including the recently discovered centrifuges at the Yongbyon nuclear complex) might yet result in a hardening of the South's attitude towards its northern neighbour.

### **About the author**

Tom French is a graduate of Durham University and is currently completing his PhD in Northeast Asian Security from Southampton University.