

## Online Series

2024. 01. 08. | CO 24-02

# Assessment of the Possibility of North Korea's Military Provocations against South Korea

**Jang, Cheol-wun** (Research Fellow, North Korean Research Division)

On January 5, 2024, North Korea fired more than 200 rounds of artillery shells into the waters north of the Northern Limit Line (NLL) near Yeonpyeong Island and Baengnyeong Island in the West Sea. On the same day, North Korea, through a statement from the General Staff of the Korea People's Army(KPA), asserted that the artillery shell firing could be considered a "natural response" to various exercises conducted by the South Korean military. However, it seems the backdrop to the provocation is the shift in the direction of inter-Korean relations and unification policy as declared by Kim, Jong-un during the expanded meeting of the 9<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of the 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee at the end of December 2023. North Korea continued its artillery shell firing into the northern region of the West Sea near the NLL on January 6-7, 2024, firing approximately 150 rounds.

Kim, Jong-un, during the expanded meeting of the 9<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of the 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee, instructed a fundamental shift in the direction of North Korea's policies toward South Korea and unification. He emphasized that if South Korea and the US opt for military confrontation against North Korea, the country's army should "deal a deadly blow by mobilizing all the toughest means and potentialities without moment's hesitation." Kim, Jong-un, instructed the performance of important tasks related to the preparation for 'making it a fait accompli that a war could break out

at any moment,’ ‘and strong military actions by the North Korean military aimed at subjugating the entire territories of South Korea.’ Taking these factors into consideration, this article examines the potential for future military provocations by North Korea against South Korea.

### **Criteria for the Assessment and Evaluation of North Korea’s Military Provocations against South Korea**

In 2022 Defense White Paper published by the Ministry of National Defense of Republic of Korea in 2022, North Korea engaged in a total of 1,119 ‘local provocations against South Korea’ from the 1950s to the end of 2022. The Ministry of National Defense categorizes North Korea’s local provocations against South Korea into land provocation (503 instances), sea provocations (559 instances), air provocations (52 instances), and GPS jamming (5 instances)<sup>1)</sup>. The Ministry of National Defense not only uses the term ‘local provocations against South Korea’ but also “full-scale war provoked” by North Korea, and “nuclear and missile provocations.”

Taking this into consideration, this article aims to examine North Korea’s military provocations against South Korea broadly, distinguishing local provocations from non-local provocations. North Korea’s military local provocations against South Korea include cyber-attacks<sup>2)</sup>, in addition to the four cases of ‘local provocations against South Korea’ mentioned in the 2022 Defense White Paper. Non-local provocations encompass activities such as North Korea’s additional nuclear tests and the launch of missiles and long-range artillery (multiple launch rocket system) shells of various firing ranges<sup>3)</sup>. This article does not examine the possibility of North Korea’s ‘provocations that could lead to a full-scale war.’ This is because until today, the

---

1) Ministry of National Defense, 2022 Defense White Paper (Seoul: Ministry of National Defense, 2022), p. 352.

2) Considering the focus of this article is North Korea’s military provocations against ‘South Korea’, cryptocurrency and virtual currency hacking activities carried out by North Korea against not only South Korea but the world are excluded from consideration.

3) Activities such as artillery firing related to North Korea’s winter and summer military drills are excluded.

combined forces of the ROK and the US have effectively deterred the possibility of North Korea's provocations that could lead to a full-scale war.

## **Assessment of the Possibility of North Korea's Local Provocations against South Korea**

First, there is the possibility of sea provocations. Among the provocations conducted by North Korea against the South until the end of 2022 (1,119 instances), sea provocations (559 instances) account for the highest proportion (approximately 50%). In particular, the proportion (87.4%) of North Korea's sea provocations (209 instances) among North Korea's total local provocations (239 instances) against South Korea is overwhelming from 2010 to 2022. Representative cases include North Korean naval vessels violating the NLL in the East and West Seas, leading to armed conflicts. A notable point of concern is Kim, Jong-un's instructions during the expanded meeting of the 9<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting of the 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party to "enhance the underwater and surface capabilities of the navy," which reflects the possibility of sea provocations. The possibility of North Korea's 'Haeil-1 and 2' penetrating into the South Korean waters, the possibility of incidents similar to Chonan Sinking occurring, the possibility of North Korea's semi-submarines and submarines penetrating into the South Korean waters, which was frequently observed in the 1990s, and the resulting military conflicts cannot be ruled out.

Second, there is the possibility of land provocations. Among North Korea's provocations against South Korea, land provocations (503 instances) account for approximately 45% of the total local provocations. Particularly noteworthy is North Korea's rearming of forces in Panmunjom within the Joint Security Area (JSA) immediately after declaring the de facto nullification of the "September 19 Military Agreement." North Korea also restored guard posts (GP) within the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and deployed armed forces. Kim, Jong-un's mention of "physical clashes can occur in the military demarcation line (MDL) area due to any trivial, accidental spark, and they can certainly escalate" during the 9<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting of the 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party draws attention to the possibility of North Korea conducting ground provocations in areas near the MDL. Historically, North Korea has engaged in ground provocations in the vicinity of the MDL, including gunfire

incidents, burial and explosion of wooden-box mines in the DMZ (2015), artillery firing while blaming the sending of anti-Pyongyang propaganda leaflets (2014), and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island (2010).

Third, there is the possibility of air provocations. Air provocations (12 incidents) are at a minimal level, accounting for approximately 5% of the total provocations conducted by North Korea against South Korea from 2010 to 2022. However, on December 26, 2022, five North Korean unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) trespassed into South Korea's airspace, with some UAVs even reaching Seoul. Prior to this, in March-April and September of 2014, as well as in June 2017, North Korean UAVs that infiltrated into South Korea's airspace crashed and were discovered. Notably, during the expanded meeting of the 9<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of the 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee, Kim, Jong-un directed the "development and production of various unmanned armed vehicles in the field of unmanned aerial vehicle that align with the characteristics of modern warfare" as one of the specific tasks to be pursued in 2024. Therefore, it is imperative to pay attention to the possibility that North Korea may actively utilize unmanned aerial vehicles for future air provocations.

Fourth, there is the possibility of GPS jamming. According to the data compiled by the Ministry of National Defense, GPS jamming (5 instances) accounted for a mere 2.1% of North Korea's provocations against South Korea from 2010 to 2022. However, the fact that Kim, Jong-un instructed the "development and production of various powerful means of detection and electronic warfare that align with the characteristics of modern warfare" during the expanded meeting of the 9<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of the 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee, is a point of substantial concern. Since most of the means of transportation in Korea including military and civilian vehicles, aircraft, and ships as well as various military weapon systems rely on GPS systems, North Korea's GPS jamming can cause significant disruption and difficulty, not only to the military but also to the entire South Korean society.

Fifth, there is the possibility of cyber attacks. Until now, North Korea has consistently carried out cyber attacks targeting not only South Korea but also the international community. It is highly likely that North Korea's cyber attack groups are constantly carrying out cyber attacks today, such as ransomware distribution and Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks. The likelihood of North Korea launching attacks in the cyber realm definitely exists.

## Assessment of the Possibility of North Korea's Non-local Provocations against South Korea

First, there is the possibility of North Korea conducting additional nuclear tests. Initially, the likelihood of North Korea's tactical nuclear tests can be anticipated from Kim, Jong-un's field guidance of the 'Mounting Nuclear Warheads on Ballistic Missiles on March 27, 2023. Through reports related to Kim, Jong-un's inspection of 'Nuclear Weapon Deployment Project,' North Korea not only unveiled 'Hwasan-31' but also implied that it could be mounted onto a total of eight launch systems, including super-large MLRS, short-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and torpedoes. However, it is not practically feasible to mount a single standardized nuclear warhead onto various launch systems with a single standardized type of nuclear warhead. This is because the acceleration, temperature, humidity, and other factors that a nuclear warhead would face during transportation vary significantly depending on the launch system. Therefore, North Korea would need to categorize the launch systems into several groups and develop a tactically suitable nuclear warhead for each launch system separately. Thus, the possibility of North Korea conducting tactical nuclear tests to accomplish this cannot be ruled out.

Next, the possibility of North Korea conducting strategic nuclear tests can also be anticipated based on Kim, Jong-un's statements. Kim, Jong-un has instructed the continued production of 'super-large nuclear warheads' during the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, and 'super-large nuclear warheads' can be interpreted as referring to 'strategic nuclear weapons.' North Korea claimed that the 4<sup>th</sup> nuclear test (January 6, 2016) and the 6<sup>th</sup> nuclear test (September 3, 2017) were tests of hydrogen bombs, but both are evaluated to be less powerful than a genuine hydrogen bomb (measured in Mt). Therefore, it is likely that North Korea may pursue the possession of strategic nuclear weapons in order to symmetrically counteract the strategic nuclear forces of the US. This may involve the possibility of North Korea conducting strategic nuclear tests.

Second, there is the possibility of North Korea launching missiles and long-range artillery shells (MLRS). Since the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress until 2023, North Korea has conducted a total of 104 missile launches, with short and medium-range ballistic missile launches accounting for 65.5% with 66 launches. Since 2022, North Korea has also started using terms including 'launch drill,' 'evaluation test-fire,' 'power

demonstration firing,’ and ‘firing drill for checking and judging’ instead of ‘test launch,’ and so forth that it used when it conducted missile launches in the past. Considering this, it is highly likely that North Korea will frequently launch missiles of various ranges in the future. ©KINU 2024

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).