

## Shots Fired Across the DMZ—What Does It Mean?

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**By Robert R. King**

Last Sunday morning (May 2), multiple gunshots were fired across the border from the North Korean side, striking a South Korean guard post inside the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Consistent with established procedures, South Korean soldiers fired two ten-round volleys in response. Military officials from the South sent a notice to the North by the inter-Korean communication link calling for an explanation while seeking to prevent the incident from escalating. The message, however, was sent two hours after the first shots were fired. South Korean soldiers identified four bullet marks on the exterior wall of the guard post. South Korean news agency reports and newspapers said it was unknown if there was any damage in the North, though South Korean shots were not aimed to cause damage or death, just respond.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in an interview with ABC News that same Sunday morning that the shots were “accidental,” although South Korean soldiers did return fire. “So far as we can tell, there was no loss of life on either side,” he said. South Korean officials expressed the view that the firing of shots by the North was “unlikely to have been a deliberate provocation.”

The day after the exchange, the United Nations Command said it would send a team to the DMZ to investigate whether the North Korean shots were a violation of the armistice agreement that ended the Korean War in 1953, although the armed exchange did not cause injury or damage. In a message to North Korea, South Korean officials protested the gunshots as a violation of the armistice.

The North has not responded to the South Korean concerns that were raised via the hot line, and North Korean media have ignored shots being fired in the DMZ. The story was quickly lost in the midst of headlines about the reappearance of Kim Jong-un, who had not attended any public events for three weeks, including his failure to attend the most important North Korean national celebration on the anniversary of the birth of his grandfather Kim Il-sung.

The North-South border extends 160 miles from coast to coast, and it has been described as one of the most heavily fortified and guarded borders in the world. In September 2018, in line with improvement in North-South relations following summits between the leaders of the two Koreas, both sides have made an effort to ease tensions along the border. They announced the goal of removing all guard posts within the DMZ.

Some 60 such guard posts stretch along the South Korean side and a similar number are on the North. The two leaders agreed to begin easing tensions by each removing 11 guard posts. In November 2018, both countries announced that they had withdrawn troops and military equipment from 22 “frontline” guard posts and the buildings were then dismantled. Military officials from both countries visited and verified that the guard posts that they had agreed to remove were gone. This first phase seemed to go as planned, but there has been little further information about continuing efforts to dismantle guard posts in the DMZ.

Such border incidents along the North-South land border have been infrequent in recent years. Two-and-a-half years ago there were two incidents, each one involving a single individual. In December 2017, a North Korean soldier defected across the border from the North in heavy fog. The South Korean military fired twenty warning shots, apparently to discourage soldiers on the North side from crossing the border to retrieve the fleeing soldier. Troops from the North responded by firing a few shots some forty minutes later. The previous month, in November 2017, a soldier from the North fled across the border, and he was shot multiple times and seriously injured by his fellow North Korean soldiers seeking to stop him from defecting. The South Koreans nursed him back to health. These were not cases of North and South engaging each other, but cases involving the North trying to prevent its own soldiers from defecting.

In August of 2015, North Korean soldiers were accused of slipping into the South side of the DMZ where they planted landmines near a South Korean guard post. Two soldiers were seriously injured when they inadvertently triggered the landmines. At that time planting landmines was a serious concern because it had been nearly five decades since North and South had used such devices, and they had been particularly devastating in the late 1960s.

Although such incidents at the border are infrequent, officers on both sides of the DMZ take seriously any shots fired across the demarcation line. In the late 1960s border incidents were much more frequent and far more dangerous. Lee Jin-sam, a current member of the National Assembly and a former South Korean army general, was involved in border activities in the 1960s and 1970s. In a series of interviews Lee provided information about some of the incidents in which he was involved.

North Korean commandos reportedly infiltrated into the South 57 times in 1966 and 118 times in 1967. The most dramatic of those incidents was the North Korean attack against the Blue House, the South Korean presidential residence, in January 1968 in an effort to assassinate President Park Chung-hee. That infiltration raid was foiled, but only at the last minute, and the effort cost the lives of 26 South Koreans, 4 Americans, as well as 29 North Korean troops who had infiltrated. The South Korean military apparently also was involved in retaliatory strikes against the North, with a number of cross border raids that resulted in a significant number of deaths, and Lee provided information about these.

As part of an effort to minimize the deadly consequences of misunderstanding and improve North-South communication, a “hot line” was established between North and South in the early 1970s. This has now become a series of some telephone lines for various levels of communication between North and South. These lines all run thorough the border at Panmunjom. This hotline network is checked twice daily, but it is also used for North-South communication on issues such as the border

firing incident that took place earlier this week. A “hot line” connection was set up between the offices of South Korean President Moon Jae-in and leader Kim Jong-un shortly before the two met in person at their summit on April 27, 2018. Lines were also opened between military and intelligence officials of the North and the South.

The incident this week is a reminder of the difficulties that have plagued North-South relations for the seven-and-a-half decades since the end of World War II. Despite the effort made by President Moon Jae-in to strengthen and improve ties with the North, forward progress has been slow and unsteady. Certainly things are far better than they were following the Korean War and the dark period of violent provocations in the late 1960s.

At the same time, as the firing of shots on the border this week emphasizes, a nervous finger still rests on the hair trigger. The considerable international media attention that was given to the firing of a few shots on the inter-Korean border at this time when world attention is focused on the devastating international Covid-19 pandemic is a reminder that North Korea still has the potential to disrupt, disorder and upset the international order.

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