

CNN NEWSROOM

CLASH OF KOREAS

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BROOKE BALDWIN, CNN ANCHOR: All right, here's the story. North Korea opened fire on a South Korean island. Now two South Korean marines, they're killed -- 15 South Korean soldiers and civilians are wounded.

This all started -- and you can see the mess, the smoke, the flames here. This is when North Korea fired about 100 rounds of artillery at Yeonpyeong Island. South Korea responded with more than 80 rounds in return. They also deployed some fighter jets, trying to fight back here, and this whole back-and-forth firing lasted for about an hour there along the Yellow Sea.

Now, there is speculation that this action coupled with reports that North Korea has this highly advanced new uranium enrichment facility is really sending a message to us, the U.S. That notion was also addressed by the State Department just this afternoon. International diplomats are urging both sides to show restraint, despite very aggressive language from both directions about who is to blame, how to retaliate.

So, joining me now, John Park. He's an expert on all of this.

And, John, let's get right to the fact that, look, a lot of people are saying North Korea did this to provoke, not South Korea, but the U.S., and that this is a message to the U.S. What is your take?

JOHN PARK, CENTER FOR CONFLICT ANALYSIS AND PREVENTION: Well, that is one interpretation, but I think we have to look very carefully at the chronology of events in this area.

This is where we find the Northern Limit Line, which is the maritime boundary that is disputed between the two Koreas. And there have been a number of naval clashes in this area as well. In the lead-up to this exchange of fire, we saw the South Koreans launch what they call the Hoguk military exercises.

These were supposed to be nine days of South Korean military exercises, starting with a live fire exercise. The North Koreans warned the South Koreans not to do this exercise. The South Koreans went ahead. North Korea retaliated with this -- what the U.S. is now calling an artillery attack.

BALDWIN: Now, John, we have American soldiers in South Korea. I want to say 20,000. Correct me if I'm wrong. But, so, we have even just a physical stake there in that country. So, how should -- if we should, how should the U.S. respond militarily?

PARK: That's correct. We have 28,500 to be exact U.S. personnel there --

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BALDWIN: Yes.

PARK: -- but also their dependents and also a large number of U.S. citizens working and living in South Korea. So there is a significant U.S. presence in South Korea.

In terms of the U.S. response, that is a priority right now. I think the United States is working very closely with the South Korean allies to figure out the next steps. But, frankly, if we remember the Cheonan sinking that occurred in March, we were in a similar type of situation where we were trying to evaluate the different responses, be it a Security Council measure, a resolution.

BALDWIN: Right.

PARK: What eventually came out was a presidential statement there, more sanctions, and also looking at things like more joint U.S.-South Korean naval exercises in that area. Those are all being evaluated right now. BALDWIN: What about -- John, what about China, huge ally for the North? How important is it to work with China as everyone moves forward?

PARK: That's a very important question.

And I would add in addition to that what part of China, which group within China? There are different groups dealing with the North Korean issue. And if you look at the North Korean-Chinese relationship, since October of last year, when Premier Wen Jiabao went over, led a big delegation that included the Chinese commerce minister, they signed and are now implementing economic deals, we see a dynamic between the two countries where something like an artillery attack by North Korea on a South Korean island is very difficult within this capacity, institution-building occurring between the two countries.

BALDWIN: Also, John, the bit of news, it was a Stanford professor who was over there, saw this highly-advanced uranium enrichment facility. How worried does the U.S. need to be about this and the world, for that matter?

PARK: Well this had been something that had been on the U.S. books in terms of monitoring and long suspecting this uranium program. So, this isn't really a surprise to the United States, but it does raise concerns in the sense that we know that the North Koreans have the plutonium route to develop nuclear weapons and now with this early stage facility on the uranium front, while the North Koreans claim it is for civilian use and generation, the U.S. concern is that here is another part to more proliferation.

BALDWIN: John Park for us from Washington. John, thanks.

PARK: My pleasure.

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