

CNN NEWSROOM

CLASH OF KOREAS

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BRIANNA KEILAR, CNN ANCHOR: North Korea and South Korea are closer to the brink of war -- that is the warning from North Korea in this region that's been on edge since Tuesday. That's when the North rained down an artillery attack on a South Korean island, an attack that killed four and wounded 15.

And now we are just two days away from the joint U.S./South Korea military exercises. And those upcoming drills have already provoked a reaction from North Korea. It seems as if they have started their own artillery tests, artillery tests near the island that was shelled just a few days ago.

So, joining me now is Jason. He's an expert on this region.

And, John, this seems to be a chronic danger for the Korean Peninsula, a low-level skirmish quickly escalating to a larger conflict.

JOHN PARK, CENTER FOR CONFLICT ANALYSIS AND PREVENTION: That's correct.

Brianna, this area is place that's seen a lot of conflict between the two Koreas, the disputed maritime boundary on the Western side. Well, the problem is, there are two different interpretations of the line. You have the northern limit line drawn that was by the U.N. after the Korean War in 1953. That's recognized by South Korea and the international community.

North Korea has a line that is below that to the southern part and they call it the military demarcation line. The two countries have been clashing over this area ever since.

KEILAR: And we can't just look at this as sort of an isolated area that has to deal with this. So tell me why Americans should be concerned about North Korea and what is happening right now.

PARK: Sure.

This is all tied in to a North Korea that frankly is acting very differently. I think a lot of the security analysts here in Washington are concerned that North Korea views itself as a nuclear weapons state. And as such having conducted two nuclear tests, the first in October of 2006 and the second May of 2009, North Korea feels that it can carry out provocations without massive retaliation by the South Koreans and the United States.

So right now we're in a situation right now we're watching very, very carefully and see how these U.S. -- the South Korean naval exercises take place this upcoming weekend.

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KEILAR: One of the things that the U.S. does in a situation like this and that we're seeing them do here is talking to China, trying to get China involved, one of North Korea's allies. How important is it to work with China on this? And can China really kind of run interference very well here?

PARK: Sure. Working with China is absolutely crucial in this area, but I think we have to manage our expectations, unfortunately.

Within China, there are different groups that are dealing with North Korea. And I would say the military within China is very concerned, not necessarily about North Korea and the threat posed by North Korea, but more the danger that they perceive from U.S./South Korean exercises that are close to Chinese coastal areas.

So we see a third-party entanglement in U.S./China relations over the North Korea issue. And, again, the Chinese military very, very sensitive about these U.S./South Korean exercises. KEILAR: John, let's talk about Kim Jong Il's youngest son. What do we know about North Korea's potential new leader. How does he factor into this situation?

PARK: He's a 27-year-old young man who has been put in the limelight.

September 28, we saw the Korea Workers' Party hold their party conference, and he was unveiled as a vice chairman of the party's central military commission. And he was also promoted as a four-star general.

So these promotions are important, but we have to keep in mind that he's in a grooming process. His father, Kim Jong Il, is still calling the shots. But right now in a situation where there is all this leadership change, North Korea, that has always been a difficult place to analyze and read, has become even more so.

So things like the artillery attack, and in March, the sinking of the South Korea warship, all of these are taking place in the parallel fashion with this leadership succession process.

KEILAR: And the shelling of this island by North Korea, is it seen that this attack has anything to do with trying to get the U.S. back to talks with North Korea?

PARK: That is a very popular interpretation right now, and there may be shades of that. But I would say that there is more to do with the recent revelation by the North Koreans that they have a uranium enrichment program.

That was something that was announced to Stanford University Professor Sig Hecker, who went over and was actually shown the facility. So, that, I think, fits in more neatly with the North Korea narrative of using nuclear programs and so forth for negotiating purposes. As I mentioned before, with this disputed boundary area, this is a separate set of issues, but again it's happening in a parallel fashion with a lot of other changes going on inside North Korea.

KEILAR: And one of the things that we're hearing coming out of North Korea, this idea that really this could be on the brink of war, how real is that?

PARK: I think we have to treat this very seriously. This is the first direct attack on South Korean territory since the Korean War in 1953. So we're in a situation right now where the South Koreans now are going to bolster their presence on these islands near North Korean territory.

The North Koreans, as we saw yesterday, when General Sharp, the commander of U.S. forces Korea, when he was touring the island, the North Koreans actually carried out another artillery drill. So, this is something where both sides definitely are not backing down.

And with the introduction of these U.S.-South Korean naval exercises, we will see how close they come to North Korean territory. And they need to send this message to North Korea, but now we have this complicating factor of the Chinese military reaction to something that is going to happen close to their coastal waters.

So, already a difficult problem, we're adding many more layers to it.

KEILAR: John Park, great information. Thanks for being with us.

PARK: My pleasure.

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