

Digest of Inter-Korean Tensions at the Turn of 2024

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[The author barely completed one digest](#), when events on the peninsula rapidly developed. The New Year vacations were not much different from work in terms of preparing materials for the New Eastern Outlook.

On December 17, mere thirty minutes after launching a short-range missile towards the Sea of Japan, the [Korean Central News Agency \(KCNA\) released a statement from the military department](#). The statement claimed that the results of the second meeting of the South Korea-US Nuclear Security Consultative Group constituted an open declaration of nuclear confrontation. "Any attempt of the hostile forces to use armed forces against the DPRK will face a preemptive and deadly response."

On December 18 at 8:24 a.m., [North Korea launched](#) an intercontinental ballistic missile towards the Sea of Japan. The missile flew approximately 1,000 kilometers along a steep trajectory before falling into the East Sea, about 250 kilometers from the border of Japan's exclusive economic zone. North Korea thus launched its fifth intercontinental ballistic missile in 2023.

On December 18, the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff announced that [US Special Forces \(Green Berets and SEALs\) and South Korean Special Forces were conducting joint special operations exercises](#) on the Korean Peninsula. Due to the nature and specifics of Special Forces' activities, it is assumed that measures were taken to eliminate the military-political leadership and decapitate North Korea. The ROK military department did not confirm or deny this.

During a meeting with members of the Second Red Flag Company of the General Missile Bureau [on December 20](#), **Kim Jong-un** stated that the launch of the Hwasong-18 solid-fuel

intercontinental ballistic missile demonstrated the DPRK's readiness to launch a nuclear strike without hesitation in the event of nuclear provocations by the enemy.

"It is the genuine defense capability... to have the real capability for preemptively attacking the enemy anywhere , making any enemy feel fear," Kim Jong-un emphasized.

On December 20, in response to Pyongyang's launch of the Hwasong-18 intercontinental ballistic missile, the air forces of South Korea, the United States, and Japan [conducted a joint exercise](#). US B-1B strategic bombers, F-16 fighters, South Korean F-15K fighter jets, and Japanese F-2 fighters participated in the exercise. The exercise occurred above the sea to the east of Jeju Island, where the air defense identification zones of the Republic of Korea and Japan intersect. This was the second time the Air Force has conducted a trilateral exercise since the beginning of the year. The Joint Chiefs of Staff of the ROK Armed Forces aim to enhance their joint response capabilities to North Korea's nuclear and missile threats.

As the new year approached, [South Korea's National Intelligence Service increased their duty hours](#) due to potential provocations from North Korea. These provocations could include military actions, psychological operations such as spreading fake news to divide society, attempts to infiltrate South Korean territory, cyberattacks, drone incursions, and more. The [intelligence agency stated on December 28](#) that there is a high likelihood of North Korea engaging in military provocations early next year, prior to major elections in South Korea and the United States. The return to power of three key North Korean officials, who are believed to be responsible for Pyongyang's major provocations against the South, may indicate a concerning development.

On the same day, December 28, during a visit to the Fifth Army Infantry Division in the border county of Yeoncheon, 60 kilometers north of Seoul, **Yoon Suk-yeol** [ordered the military to shoot first and report later in case of provocation](#).

"We should smash the enemy's desire for provocations immediately on the ground."

Yoon added that North Korea is the only country in the world that explicitly includes invasion and preventive use of nuclear weapons in its constitution. It is possible that North Korea could undertake provocations at any time.

At the same time, during the plenum of the WPK Central Committee, which the author covered in a separate text, Kim Jong-un suggested a fundamental departure from the current policy towards South Korea and described the current inter-Korean relations as 'relations between two hostile countries.' Kim stated that the DPRK Armed Forces should be prepared to restore order throughout the entire territory of the Republic of Korea in the event of an emergency, including the use of nuclear weapons.

On January 1, 2024, President [Yoon Suk-yeol said](#) in his New Year's address that in the first half of 2024, South Korea and the United States will complete a strengthened "extended deterrence" regime to block North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, underscoring their commitment to building a "genuine and lasting peace" through strength. [Shin Won-sik, Minister of National Defense, stated in his New Year's message](#) that North Korea must understand that provocative actions that threaten South Korea will only lead to its own destruction.

The rhetoric in the North was very similar. On December 31, 2023, [Kim Jong-un met](#) with top commanders of the Korean People's Army, including commanders of major formations. The leader of the DPRK analyzed the security situation on the Korean Peninsula in detail. The possibility of an armed clash is becoming a reality by the hour. He said that "if the enemies opt for military confrontation and provocation against the DPRK, our army should deal a deadly blow to thoroughly annihilate them by mobilizing all the toughest means and potentialities without moment's hesitation."

On January 1, about 330 members of the artillery brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division of the South Korean Army fired about 150 artillery rounds during an exercise in the central part of the "presumed front line," simulating a scenario in which the enemy opens fire first.

[ROK ground forces conducted live-fire drills](#) and mechanized unit maneuvers on January 2. The Capital Mechanized Infantry Division, the 2nd Quick Response Division, and other units, including those with K9 self-propelled howitzers and K2 tanks, held exercises in areas adjacent to the inter-Korean border. During the exercise, the soldiers practiced responding to enemy artillery provocations. Apache attack helicopters provided air support to ground troops.

[On January 3, the ROK Navy](#) conducted its first live-fire exercise of the year. The exercise involved 13 warships and three aircraft from the First, Second, and Third Fleets and took place in waters off the east, west, and south coasts of the country simultaneously.

[On January 4, South Korea and the United States conducted a joint live-fire exercise](#) near the border with North Korea to enhance their military readiness. The exercise simulated a precision strike by an A-10 combat aircraft against conditional targets, including firing by a K1A2 tank and integrated air defense tank firing.

[North Korea strongly criticized the New Year's exercises](#) due to the use of live firing and a wide range of military assets, including K1A2 and K2 tanks, K9 self-propelled howitzers, Stryker infantry carrier vehicles, AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, A-10 attack aircraft, and RC-135V Rivet Joint reconnaissance aircraft. According to a statement, made on January 4 by KCNA, Seoul began the new year with "self-destructive" actions. "There will be the highest risk of clashes this year, as invading forces, such as the United States and Japan, will crawl into the peninsula under the South Korean puppet group's plea and active cooperation, and they will likely stage unprecedented provocative war moves such as a nuclear strike," the KCNA said. South Korean "warmongers" will only face the "most painful moments they cannot even imagine" if they continue to stage confrontational moves against the North, the statement said.

On January 4, KCNA released a commentary that contained offensive language, stating that "[Confrontation maniacs will suffer most painful moments.](#)" "The bellicose behaviors of the puppet group conducted under the provocative remarks "promptly, forcefully and persistently" make the world know what aspect and color the situation of the Korean peninsula will assume in 2024."

The words were accompanied by deeds. [On January 4, between 9:00 and 11:00 in the morning, North Korean artillery fired approximately 200 shells into the waters off its western coast.](#) According to the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Republic of Korea, the artillery shelling came from Cape Changsan and Cape Seongsan, north of the South Korean border islands of Baengnyeongdo and Yeonpyeong. The administration of Yeonpyeong Island ordered civilians

to evacuate to underground shelters, but both South Korean military and civilians remained unharmed. All shells landed in the maritime buffer zone north of the Northern Limit Line in the Yellow Sea, which serves as the inter-Korean maritime border.

In the world media, these shootings somehow caused a sensation because over time, or due to a translation error, the news about evacuating the population from possible shootings became news about evacuating because of shootings: “The DPRK shelled the Yeonpyeong and Baengnyeong islands.”

Naturally, the [Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Republic of Korea stated that the DPRK is fully responsible](#) for the escalation of the crisis in the region and urged North Korea to cease what they consider provocative actions. It has been stated that the South Korean military, in close cooperation with the United States, is closely monitoring North Korea’s activities and is prepared to take retaliatory actions commensurate with Pyongyang’s “provocations”.

In the afternoon of January 4, the ROK military responded to the DPRK shelling with its own firing of K9 self-propelled artillery howitzers and tank guns, firing twice as many shells – [about 400 vs over 200](#). At around 3 p.m., the 6th Marine Brigade forces deployed on Baengnyeong island and military units on Yeonpyeong participated in the exercises.

[The General Staff of the Korean People’s Army, however, denied](#) the ROK’s claim that the KPA had fired coastal artillery at the islands in the northern waters. Yes, “units and sub-units in charge of the southwestern coastal defense under the 4th Corps of the KPA staged a naval live-shell firing drill into five districts with 192 shells by mobilizing 47 cannons of various calibers of 13 companies and 1 platoon force from 09:00 to 11:00 on January 5.” The direction of firing doesn’t give even an indirect effect on ROK, but “it is a sort of natural countermeasure taken by the KPA against the military actions of the ROK military gangsters.”

[On January 5, ROK media reported](#) that North Korea appeared to have rebuilt some of its destroyed guard posts inside the DMZ with concrete structures and mined a road connecting South Korea to the now-shuttered Joint Industrial Complex in the border town of Kaesong.

On January 5, North Korean media reported that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un [visited a military factory that produces mobile transport and launch units for intercontinental ballistic missiles](#). Accompanied by his daughter Kim Ju-ae and major party functionaries, Kim Jong-un inspected the factory. The leader of the DPRK commended the labor collective of the enterprise for exceeding the production plan. The leader also emphasized the importance of preparing for a potential “military conflict” due to the current difficult situation. According to Russian military expert Vladimir Khrustalev, [the total number of launchers can be determined by analyzing the footage in the report](#). There were eight Hwaseongpo-18 ICBMs and four Hwaseongpo-17 ICBMs.

[On January 6, the South Korean government claimed that the North Korean military had fired approximately 60 artillery shells](#) towards Yeonpyeong island. However, all of the shells fell in the buffer zone north of the Northern Limit Line in the Yellow Sea. This time, South Korea did not respond with the artillery firing, as, according to the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Republic of Korea, [North Korea fired all the shots toward its own territory](#).

On January 7, the DPRK [fired about 90 artillery shells](#) towards South Korea’s Yeonpyeong Island. However, Kim Yo-jong of the DPRK stated that there was no firing on January 6. In her

statement titled "[Misjudgment, conjecture, obstinacy, and arrogance will invite irretrievable misfortune](#)," the First Sister highlighted that despite the media hype and the ROK military's statements, "we conducted a deceptive operation in order to assess the real detecting ability of the ROK military gangsters engrossed in bravo and blind bravery while crying for "precision tracking and monitoring" and "striking origin" whenever an opportunity presents itself and give a burning shame to them, who will certainly make far-fetched assertions." There were simulated bombings that the Southerners "misjudged ... as the sound of gunfire and conjectured it as a provocation. And they even made a false and impudent statement that the shells dropped in the sea buffer zone north of the "northern limit line." At the same time, Kim Yo-jong made herself clear once again that "the safety catch of the trigger of the KPA had already been slipped" and "the KPA will launch an immediate military strike if the enemy makes even a slight provocation."

In addition to these statements, [North Korean Central Television displayed sequential explosions of gunpowder charges in a field surrounded by hills](#). The Joint Chiefs of Staff rejected the statement, labeling it as 'low-grade propaganda' intended to erode the confidence of ROK residents in the armed forces. The spokesperson for ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff said that the South Korean armed forces' detection system quickly identified the locations of artillery fire.

The media outlet reported that some shells [fell just above the Northern Limit Line](#).

In conclusion, this is how experts and the population of the Republic of Korea view the upcoming year. [According to data](#) released by Opinion Research Justice in October 2023, 48.3 percent of respondents said they believe a surprise attack from the North is somewhat or very likely, while 47.4 percent said such a scenario is unlikely or impossible. The percentage of individuals concerned about war has increased from 37% in 2017 to 42.7% in 2020, according to the previous two surveys.

According to [Cho Han-Bum](#), a senior research fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification, Kim's recent statements indicate the North's decision to leave any peaceful talks with South Korea. Instead, the regime will achieve "its ultimate goal of unification through the use of force, not through peaceful means. It seeks the collapse of South Korea," Cho explained, adding that South Korea should prepare for heightened military provocations.

Yang Moo-jin, president of the University of North Korean Studies, predicts that the conflict between North and South Korea will escalate in 2024, surpassing the levels seen in recent years. This is due to the increased tensions between South Korea, the US, and Japan on one side, and North Korea, Russia, and China on the other.

Oh Gyeong-Seob, the director at the state-funded Korea Institute for National Unification, said in his report that "[The Kim regime is presumed to be using the strategy of heightening military tensions on the peninsula to be recognized as a nuclear state by the US government](#)."

Other analysts said North Korea will focus on improving its nuclear and missile programs to increase its leverage ahead of the US presidential election in November, hoping that former US President Donald Trump will be re-elected.

The security dilemma and the actions of the ROK and the US are not related. "North Korea's

leader Kim Jong-un appears to have taken a more offensive policy stance toward South Korea to divert internal attention from economic difficulties and discontent over the hereditary power succession,” [Seoul’s top point man on inter-Korean relations said on January 6](#).

[According to guest experts invited by The Korea Times](#) — Cha Du-hyeogn, a senior analyst at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, a think tank, and Kim Jin-ha, a researcher at the Korea Institute for National Unification, North Korea may be preparing for a nuclear weapons test. This could include an underground nuclear explosion, an explosion underwater, or an explosion in the atmosphere.

North Korea is expected to avoid outright provocations due to fear of retaliation from the combined forces of Seoul and Washington, but well-calculated provocations may still occur. But it could be planning “something similar to the 2015 attack in which two South Korean soldiers were seriously wounded by a landmine in the Demilitarized Zone.” The details of this incident indicated otherwise, it should be added.

The JoongAng, a conservative newspaper, succinctly captured the overall sentiment of the comments with the phrase, “[A strict but cautious response is needed](#)”: “North Korea will surely escalate the level of provocation against South Korea. Our military must dampen its will to provoke South Korea through stern security posture and retaliation. At the same time, our military must demonstrate crisis management skills to prevent an unwanted armed clash. The government must be careful not to be exploited by North Korea to prompt our internal conflict ahead of the April 10 parliamentary elections.”

More importantly for the author, the risk of accidental clashes between the two Koreas has increased as the buffer zones established under the 2018 inter-Korean military agreement have become invalid.

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