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In My View

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IN MY VIEW . . .

The Naval Battle of Yeon Pyung, the West Sea

Sir:

As a 1985 graduate of the Naval War College, I was pleased to read in the Winter 1999 issue of the *Naval War College Review* an excellent analysis of the naval situation in Northeast Asia by Lt. Cdr. (also Dr.) Kim Duk-ki, Republic of Korea Navy [“Cooperative Maritime Security in Northeast Asia,” pp. 53–77]. Since Commander Kim completed his study, events have increased the danger of conflict in that region, specifically on the Korean Peninsula—one of the most volatile areas in the world. As the only divided nation on the face of the earth where a Cold War atmosphere still exists, the Koreas have not joined the global trend toward reconciliation and cooperation. The South and the North, with their competing political ideologies and structures, still confront each other militarily.

The Republic of Korea (ROK) government has committed itself to bringing peace and stability to the peninsula by improving South-North relations. The North, however, adheres fiercely to its strategy of “red unification by force.” The North Korean leadership has raised the level of tension on the peninsula by constant provocative actions and by violations of the armistice agreement with the South.

Those provocations resulted last year in the naval battle of the West Sea (known in the West as the Yellow Sea), the first large naval engagement between regular naval forces of the two Koreas since the armistice agreement of 1953. On 15 June 1999, North Korean patrol boats illegally invaded the Northern Limit Line (NLL) under the guise of protecting crab-fishing boats in the vicinity of Yeon-Pyung Island (about fifty miles northwest of Inch'on, and well south of the demarcation line). The battle began when a North Korean patrol boat opened fire as our ships were approaching. The battle—which certain Western periodicals incorrectly described as a “skirmish”—was a

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complete ROK victory; our navy sank a North Korean torpedo boat and significantly damaged numerous patrol boats.

The victory can be explained in part by our superior weapon systems, but the main credit should be given to our sailors' high morale. The victory was a result of our combat-oriented training and education, which can best be summed up in the phrase, "When we fight, we win." Our crews were thoroughly imbued with that mentality.

The engagement in the West Sea taught new lessons to both sides concerning security aspects of the South-North relationship. First of all, it was an opportunity for the North to recognize the severe limitations of its ability to deal with problems through military provocation. Fundamentally, the battle was caused by an attempt by the North Korean military to revitalize its declining position in national affairs in comparison to the political and economic sectors. Our assessment is that hard-liners and the military commanders deliberately violated the West Sea NLL in order to interfere with the South's "Sunshine Policy"—a comprehensive effort to bring the North to the path of openness, reform, and inter-Korean reconciliation. They have resisted this approach, and the well-known disagreements in international law over the NLL may have seemed to offer them an opportunity.

However, the results of the naval battle shattered the North Korean military's strategic intentions. It appears that the battle was a major turning point for North Korea's leaders, in that it altered their perception of the South. They were forced to recognize the operational effectiveness of our navy's autonomous command structure, its advanced weapon systems, the strong security mindset of our citizens, the comprehensiveness and resolution of our government's policy, and the importance of the ROK-U.S. alliance.

In the past, we were overly concerned that any given crisis might escalate into full-scale war; accordingly, we responded somewhat passively to North Korea's various local provocations. This time, things were different. Our navy's immediate response fully and effectively displayed its freedom of action in regard to North Korea and neighboring states.

In military and security terms, the incident turned out to be a valuable confirmation of our armed forces' superiority in firepower, maneuverability, and overall operational capability. This confirmation of superiority has had a major influence on our sailors' attitudes; it has given them new confidence. It has also deepened our citizens'

trust in the armed forces and strengthened their focus on security. Finally, the battle displayed and reemphasized the importance of the close ROK-U.S. alliance.

However, one important issue requires our attention. The potential still exists that North Korea will continue its campaign of selective and localized provocations despite the increasing civilian exchanges and humanitarian support to the North, which are having the effect of sustaining the Kim Jeong-Il regime. That is a critical fact, of which we must remain aware.

With this threat in mind, our armed forces today are maintaining their seamless readiness, pursuing military cooperation with neighboring nations, and continuing to strengthen the combined ROK-U.S. defense structure based on our nations' close alliance. These efforts are necessary to deter future provocations by the North. We are committed to supporting our government's comprehensive policy through maintaining force superiority.

Vice Admiral Suh Young-Kil
Republic of Korea Navy

*Vice Admiral Suh is Commander in Chief, Republic of Korea Fleet. He would like to inform the readers of the **Naval War College Review** that, under his direction, a more extensive article on the same topic is being prepared.*

Ethnic Conflict

Sir:

I was delighted to see the article on ethnic conflict [NWCR, Autumn 1999] by Dr. Pauletta Otis. Many of us, including myself, who joined the Navy after the collapse of the Soviet Union have been engaged in what has been called "low-intensity conflict" around the globe. There is nothing "low intensity" about such conflicts; Dr. Otis has pointed out the complexities and haziness our forces face in trying to make sense of these tribal, ethnic, or religious wars.

Dr. Otis says that a country involved in ethnic conflict has never tried democracy or has tried it but failed. I do not disagree that a lack of representation in government is what sparks tribal and

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nationalistic hatred, but I wonder what kind of democracy we should promote in areas of ethnic conflict. Should it be a bicameral government, created in our image? That is too simplistic a view. Maybe this issue should be studied further, taking the best features of each tribe's government, highlighting their similarities, and bringing forth a representative democracy that is in the image of those engaged in the fighting, and recognizable to them.

I have observed democracy in its primitive form among the tribes of Arabia, and it involves free access to their *sheikhs* (tribal leaders), the right to petition and complain, and a government in which a *majlis* (literally, gathering) is formed and decisions are made with input from the whole tribe. I have also encountered tribesmen in Egypt and Arabia who are content with their patriarchal society and are inclined culturally to serve the interests of the tribe before their own. Simply instituting methods that we have had over two centuries to develop is not feasible, from either a historical or cultural viewpoint. I would be glad to read an elaboration by Dr. Otis of her views, what she means by democratization in a nation riddled by ethnic conflict or in a culture where individualism is not the rule but the exception.

Youssef H. Aboul-Enein
Lieutenant, Medical Service Corps, U.S. Navy

"Ready or Not"

Sir:

James Levy's article "Ready or Not" about the Royal Navy's preparations and capabilities in September 1939 is useful and offers a long-overdue tribute to Admiral Sir Charles Forbes.

A supplementary point of value can, however, also be made. In the spring and summer of 1939 staff talks were held with the French Navy—at the time one of the finest navies that France had ever put to sea. Containment and destruction of the big German warships *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst* (both thirty knots) and the three pocket battleships (all three twenty-six knots) was to have been the mission of joint Anglo-French task forces comprising two of the Royal Navy's battlecruisers (thirty-one or thirty knots, faster than Levy allows) and the two fast, modern French battleships *Dunkerque* and

Strasbourg (thirty knots). From the British strategic perspective the French Navy was very important—in the Atlantic as well as the Mediterranean. In November 1939, for example, a task force under a French admiral aboard *Dunkerque* had the pride of the Royal Navy, *Hood*, under command. Naval operations in western European and Atlantic waters at this time have to be seen from an Anglo-French perspective.

It is, I think, also worth pointing out that the Royal Navy's belief that, for the most part, the German Navy could be contained in the North Sea by means of antisubmarine booms and nets in the Channel, Coastal Command aircraft, and heavy units in northern waters was not unsound. The strategy unraveled with the seizure of Norwegian and French Atlantic coast ports, and the loss of the French Navy as an ally—events not foreseen, or foreseeable, in 1939. A Battle of the Atlantic on a scale that it eventually assumed was not envisaged; the Admiralty staff requirement for the vessel needed for Atlantic warfare, the frigate, was only set out in July 1940.

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Call for Papers
“World War II: A Sixty-Year Perspective”
Siena College, 31 May–1 June 2001

Siena College is sponsoring its sixteenth annual international, multidisciplinary World War II conference. The focus for 2001 will be 1941. Topics welcomed include, but are not limited to, fascism and nazism, the war in Asia, Spain, literature, art, film, diplomacy, political and military history, popular culture, women's studies, and Jewish studies dealing with the era. Obviously Pearl Harbor, Japanese expansion and occupation, Greece, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, North Africa, and collaboration and collaborationist regimes will be of particular relevance. Inquiries from persons wishing to chair, or comment, are also welcomed.

Replies and inquiries to Prof. Thomas O. Kelly II, Department of History, Siena College, 515 Loudon Road, Loudonville, N.Y., 12211-1462, tel. (518) 783-2512, fax (518) 786-5052, e-mail legendziewic@siena.edu. Deadline for submissions is 15 November 2000. Final papers are due 15 March 2001.