

Korea Update: 28 Dec 10

A couple of interesting items from JoongAng Ilbo on happenings in Korea. First, it appears as though units of the Korean People's Army (KPA) are now wearing uniforms designed to look like south Korean army uniforms. (<http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2930244>).

Some North Korean special forces stationed at the border with South Korea have dressed up in uniforms with the same camouflage pattern as South Korean uniforms, a South Korean military source said yesterday.

The North's tactic, confirmed by the South's military for the first time, is believed to be intended to confuse South Korean troops, as the special forces have held drills to practice their ability to infiltrate the South, the source said on condition of anonymity.

"It was confirmed, for the first time this year, that North Korean troops at the front-line land border are wearing uniforms with the same woodland camouflage pattern [as South Korean troops]," the source said. "Our judgment is that the North's special forces stationed there are staging drills for intrusion while wearing the uniforms."

The other item relates to the combat readiness of the North Korean Air Force. (<http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2930252>).

North Korea's Air Force has launched more training exercises this month compared to the same period last year, in response to large-scale South Korean military drills conducted following the Yeonpyeong Island attack.

The vigor with which the Korean People's Army Air Force, as it is officially known, has conducted the drills - which included simulated attacks on South Korea - has resulted in the crash of one MiG fighter jet, according to a source. There has been a 150 percent increase in the number of military drills from December 2009, and they have included soldiers from the Army and Navy.

"It shows that the North Korean military has been very tense after the attack on Yeonpyeong Island," said a South Korean military source.

It is exceptional for North Korea to hold extensive winter flight drills because of a shortage of fuel.

This article also includes information on continuing exercises by other parts of the KPA. Both articles should be read for additional important information.

Analysis. The units wearing the new uniforms are postulated to be the infiltration units that would lead any attack against the South. This probably has little significance in the grand scheme of things right now as making the new uniforms public pretty much destroys their tactical value. South Korean units will now institute procedures to make sure that they have a yet to be disclosed way to differentiate their folks from the KPA people.

Flying airplanes is a whole different matter because it involves consuming a lot of scarce jet fuel. It is significant that at least one crash has been reported out of the North. We have known for a long time that the pilots of the NKAF are not exactly getting enough flying time to be safe in the aircraft.

Considering the weather in the North this time of year, spacial disorientation from lack of instrument flying practice is a definite hazard. I know from experience that this is something you must do regularly and the simulator is only a partial substitute for actually aviating. Landing currency in the USAF was, and probably still is, 14 days or you fly with an Instructor pilot to regain your landing currency. Couple North Koreas pretty much outdated navigational aids with a lack of real instrument flying and you get lots of crashes.

Without knowing the type of exercises it is difficult to say if these were offensive exercises, defensive exercises or both. These exercises may also have involved flights to test the readiness of the South Korean air defense systems. North Korea would at the same time seek to test South Korea's improved anti-submarine capabilities developed since the sinking of the Cheonan.

I suspect that Kim will continue to probe the South's defenses at the same time the PRC will let it be known again that Kim is ready to come back to the Six Party Talks. The implication may well be that return to the Six Party Talks is the only way to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula. I don't believe that this gambit will work either. South Korea, Japan and the United States have made it pretty clear what Kim has to do to get them back to Beijing.

We will perhaps get a better idea of the possibility of real war by watch what the PRC says about the situation. If the People's Daily and other PRC publications start running semi-hysterical articles about the situation in Korea, we should all begin to prepare for a not so good ending to this mess.