

Engaging North Korea after the Cheonan sinking



With the 60th anniversary of the start of the Korean War this summer, we are once again reminded of unresolved Cold War tensions. The March 26 sinking of a Republic of Korea (ROK)¹ military ship, the Cheonan, with 46 of the crew found dead or still missing, has provided additional fuel for inter-Korean conflict while the current Lee Myun-bak administration has deliberately chosen a more conservative approach than its predecessors towards Pyongyang. While evidence strongly suggests, and global opinion largely concurs, that a North Korean torpedo caused the Cheonan sinking, little substantial evidence has arisen regarding whatever rationales may have been behind such a move.

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EXPERTS HAVE SUGGESTED that a struggle for who will be Kim Jong-il's successor may be the root cause of recent aggressive actions, with a growing consensus suggesting Kim's virtually unknown youngest son Kim Jong-Un is being groomed for the role. However, virtually no first-hand knowledge of North Korean decision making is available, with the last major defector, (Hwang Jang-yop) defecting 13 years ago. Insight to North Korean intentions has been gleaned from the constant barrage of propaganda, with conjecture trumping empirics. Despite the potential for regional instability caused by actions within North Korea, few innovations have been made to understand the political mindset of the Hermit Kingdom.

The aftermath of the Cheonan, both in increased North Korean rhetoric and actions, as well as US-ROK military exercises, highlights the precariousness of peace on the peninsula. The current shift has done little to encourage Pyongyang back to the negotiating table or reduce the North's own security fears. Instead of continuing a policy largely built upon sticks, I suggest a more nuanced approach which may benefit all powers within the region.

Cheonan Chronology

Shortly after 9pm on March 26th the South Korean ship Cheonan split in two and sunk off the Western coast of the Korean peninsula near Baengnyeong-do and the Northern Limit Line (NLL). Almost immediately the South Korean government claimed that the North was responsible. An investigation report released on May 20th by the Joint Civil-Military Investigation Group (JIG) indicated that a CHT-02D North Korean torpedo caused a non-contact explosion approximately three metres from the Cheonan's gas turbine room. The same day, North Korea's National Defense Committee denied involvement. Shortly thereafter, a critical minority both within South Korea (such as the NGO People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy/ PSPD) and abroad questioned the findings, claiming a lack of transparency in the investigation and that inconsistencies and scientific testing do not match Seoul's claims.² Similarly and consistent with traditionally diverging North Korean policies, liberal and conservative parties debated the cause of the sinking and China's potential role in restraining future actions.³ In July, the United Nations condemned the Cheonan sinking, however fell short of assigning blame. Meanwhile, the North Korean government never claimed any involvement.

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While the Cheonan has received much attention internationally, inter-Korean military skirmishes are not uncommon. In December 1998, the ROK intercepted a North Korean vessel attempting to land near Yeosu. In June 1999, six North Korean ships repeatedly crossed the maritime boundary near Yeonpyeong over six days, culminating in an exchange of fire leaving both sides with casualties. In June 2009, a South Korean fishing boat was captured after crossing the maritime boundary. A 20 minute naval battle occurred in June 2002, leaving a damaged DPRK vessel and a sunken ROK vessel. In November of the same year, a North Korean naval vessel crossed into ROK waters and was later fired on by ROK navy. Last year a navy skirmish off the coast of Daechong Island left a North Korean ship severely damaged and 10 crewmen dead while the South Korean vessel and crew remained unharmed. Furthermore, during the apex of recent inter-Korean conflict, a southern fishing boat was captured by North Korea this August.

Assuming that North Korea was at fault for the sinking—which is the Western consensus with approximately three quarters of South Koreans concurring—there are several possible rationales. First, the Cheonan sinking could be connected to the crisis of succession, with next generation leadership (e.g. Kim Jong Il's youngest son, Kim Yong-Un) or a faction within the government attempting to secure their position by being aggressive against the South. The combination of the strength of the military (believed to be the fifth largest in the world) and the ideological foundation of the party has prevented state collapse so far and most analysts expect the next generation of leadership to maintain a bellicose stance towards both South Korea and the US. The potential accession by a member of the National Defense Commission (NDC) may encourage small but highly publicised shows of strength. Similarly, the support of the military would be especially necessary if Kim Jong Il's son takes the helm, as he has no direct military experience nor a long period of tutelage for accession in the way that Kim Jong Il had from his father, Kim Il Sung. With the first Chosun Workers' Party (KWP) delegates' conference in 44 years scheduled for September, would-be successors have a further incentive to shore up support by maintaining an aggressive stance towards the ROK. The sinking could also be viewed as revenge for the Daechong naval encounter with the ROK in November 2009. In addition, a rogue military officer may have acted without higher orders, forcing North Korea to respond. Finally, the

counterintuitive intent may be to persuade the ROK to restart aid and investment programmes largely reduced under the Lee Myung-bak administration.

Changing directions?

Some may view the Cheonan as a watershed event, limiting the possibilities of rapprochement. Even liberal parties within South Korea have toned down calls for a return to the engagement under the 'Sunshine Policy'. The Cheonan incident has also encouraged military reform within South Korea to better combat low intensity asymmetric challenges. However, none of this resolves the underlying problems of North Korean insecurity nor persuading North Korea's traditional backers—mainly China but to a lesser extent Russia—from altering their stances.

The United States has consistently clung to employing economic sanctions towards North Korea to coerce more desirable behaviour. Not only has this largely failed in other situations (e.g. Cuba and Iran) but in the North Korean case it may potentially increase North Korea's reliance on China. Chinese officials have been reluctant to support North Korean belligerence, yet at the same time have encouraged economic reforms and cooperation that could prevent regime collapse. By the 1990s, China provided North Korea most of its rule and consumer goods and nearly half of its food supply.⁴ With growing joint development agreements and meetings with military officials between Beijing and Pyongyang, American sanctions may have actually strengthened North Korea's position by moving China from a reluctant supporter towards more than superficial relations. Chinese goals appear fairly straightforward: maintaining some sense of stability within the North Korean regime.⁵ The potential not only for military conflict but a collapsed North Korean state leading to a massive influx of refugees into China, as well as the potential of a US-backed ROK approaching the Chinese border is of great concern to China and thus actions which prop up the government remain in their national interest. One should not be surprised, then, that China has refused to assign blame to the Cheonan sinking to North Korea for fear up disrupting a government already on edge.

Whereas the US has consistently linked denuclearisation to the elimination of sanctions and the establishment of diplomatic relations, this fails to address that each party within the Six Party talks, other than a vague desire of regional security, have very differing goals. Instead, the US should encourage joint Korean economic programmes which potentially restrict North Korean actions while limiting growing Chinese influence. While one should never reward bad behaviour, the political costs of establishing formal liaisons, and thus encouraging future talks for formal recognition, outweighs the potential costs of increased conflict. Furthermore, instead of continuing the traditional path of sanctions, the US should continue the so far more successful policy spearheaded by the Treasury Department of targeting North Korean shell companies abroad by tying host country assistance to future economic cooperation. So far such leverage has encouraged several governments, including Vietnam, to voluntarily target suspect companies so as to not damage growing relations with American firms. By encouraging economic stability in North Korea while also restricting their illicit activities abroad, the US can reaffirm their commitment to South Korea and potentially encourage progress on stalled talks.

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Notes

1. For this paper, the terms South Korea, Republic of Korea, and Seoul will be used interchangeably as will North Korea, DPRK, and Pyongyang for North Korea.
2. Such sceptics constitute roughly a quarter of Koreans at most, according to estimates by several specialists contacted by the author. 'US Professors Raise Doubts About Report on S. Korean Ship Sinking'. Chosun Ilbo (English version). July 11, 2010. http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/07/10/2010071000245.html.
3. Min, Namgung. 2010. 'South Korean Politics Split on Kim Visit.' Daily NK website. May 4. www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catId=nk00600&num=6328.
4. Eberstadt, Nicholas. 1998. 'Statistical Blackouts in North Korea: Trade Figures Uncovered'. Beyond Transition 9(2). World Bank Group. www.worldbank.org/html/prdr/trans/marapr98/pgs21-23.htm.
5. Glaser, Bonnie, Scott Snyder, and John Park. 2008. Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor: Chinese Views on Economic Reform and Stability in North Korea. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies.