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## Prospects for North Korea-South Korea Relations after the Cheonan Incident (ARI)

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**Theme:** This ARI explores the situation in the Korean peninsula after the sinking of the Cheonan on 26 March 2010 and stresses the need for a new South Korean policy towards the North.

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**Keywords:** North Korea, South Korea, Cheonan incident (26 March 2010), China, US.

### Analysis:

#### *The Cheonan Incident and the Korean Government's Position<sup>1</sup>*

Fifty-five days after the Cheonan incident, which occurred on 26 March 2010, the Joint Civilian-Military Investigation Group (JIG) has reached the conclusion, through its scientific and objective findings, that the sinking was caused by a torpedo attack from North Korea. Considering that a number of other countries besides Korea, including the US, the UK, Australia and Sweden (a neutral nation), agreed to this conclusion as they took part in the investigation, there cannot be any doubt or controversy as to its validity. Various pieces of evidence presented by the JIG made it undeniable that the Cheonan was attacked by a torpedo fired from a North Korean submarine. Since the result of the investigation has been released, 21 countries have signed the statement condemning North Korea, and the number is growing.

The Cheonan incident is currently at the 'action stage' as it has moved on from the initial 'investigation stage'. In his statement to the nation on 24 April 2010, President Lee Myung-bak expressed the South Korean government's position and, following his statement, the Ministers of Unification, Foreign Affairs and Defence gave details on Seoul's specific countermeasures at a joint press conference. They included: prohibiting North Korean vessels from making passage through the shipping lanes within South Korea's waters, suspending all inter-Korean trade and exchanges except through the Gaesong Industrial Complex, suspending aid programmes for the impoverished and children, resuming psychological warfare with the North, conducting an anti-submarine

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions expressed in this paper are the author's and do not represent the position of the organisation to which he is affiliated.

operation exercise in the immediate future, participating and conducting PSI (Proliferation Security Initiative) maritime interdiction exercises both within the region and beyond, and taking the matter to the United Nations Security Council. On the other hand, while claiming that the Cheonan incident had been fabricated and suggesting the despatch of an inspection team to the South, North Korea also appears to be moving towards increasing the tension by announcing the adoption of eight measures, including the complete suspension of North-South relations. The security situation of the Korean Peninsula is facing a new challenge and the area is now receiving more attention from the international community than it has had for a long time.

As President Lee Myung-bak clearly expressed in his statement to the nation, South Korea is holding North Korea accountable for the incident but is approaching the problem from the position of trying to avoid military conflict or any form of confrontation or tension. The fact that President Lee did not make a direct reference to the North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in his statement and that both Koreas have to play their part in order to achieve peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula as well as in North-East Asia can be interpreted as a declaration to the world of South Korea's two-track approach of dialogue and sanctions. Also, the decision to remove the Gaesong Industrial Project from the list of halted trade links and programmes with the North can be seen in a similar context. The problem is how to induce the North to respond positively to the South Korean government's stance. As seen in previous cases, such as the 1996 submarine incident in the coastal waters of Kangrung and the 1998 submarine infiltration incident, it will be difficult to draw a positive response from the North within a short period of time. Also, the South-Korean government's dual task of preventing the security situation from deteriorating while attempting to resolve the issues at hand will remain a difficult challenge and might lead to the emergence of further risks.

#### *The North Korean Government's Intentions and its Prospective Future Response*

The North has displayed a very active and aggressive regarding the Cheonan incident, showing that the regime is well aware of the fact that the current situation does not work in its favour. This has been made evident by the action taken by the North since the announcement of the investigation's results and the adoption of countermeasures. First, North Korea chose to play the card of 'complete suspension of North-South relations' and appeared to be contemplating the use of force. Such an aggressive stance by the North Korean regime was in stark contrast to the South and will likely lead to a strengthening of the international solidarity between South Korea, the US and Japan, deepen North Korea's isolation and perhaps eventually lead to a change in China's policy towards the Korean peninsula. In recognition of these possible risks, North Korea might refrain from taking further action that might aggravate or rapidly lead the situation to spiral out of control.

It seems natural to be curious as to why the North has chosen to be provocative when the possibility for dialogue between the US and North Korea had been growing significantly, and this question must be taken into account when considering future countermeasures. The simplest answer to the question is that the Cheonan incident is a means for the regime to recover from its previous defeat in the Daechung naval battle (2009) and to improve the morale of the North Korean military. Such an explanation could be drawn from looking at the relationship between the first and second battles of Yeonpyeung. Then, the North had been seeking an opportunity to avenge its defeat in the Yeonpyeung incident back in 1999, and it finally carried out a retaliatory action in 2002. If seen in the same context, the recent Cheonan incident could be seen as retaliation for the defeat in

the Daechung naval battle. Secondly, the Cheonan incident can be seen as a measure to secure an advantageous position prior to dialogue with the US and also to stress the necessity for peace talks. In other words, by emphasising that continuous armed conflict will occur if dialogue between the US and North Korea, once initiated, ends without signing a peace treaty, the North might be employing the Cheonan incident to emphasise the absolute necessity for peace talks and also to place the regime in a relatively favourable position in its dialogue with the US. Third, others interpret the Cheonan incident as the North's strategy to create tension with the aim of strengthening solidarity within the regime. This suggestion is based on speculation that the North Korean leadership might feel threatened by its continuing policy failures –as with its currency reform–, which have heightened the discontent among the general public with the leadership. Recognising this growing dissatisfaction among the public, the leadership could have planned and carried out the Cheonan attack to induce the public to externalise their anger. In other words, by turning the attention of its citizens from domestic issues to external threats and by aggravating the tension, the regime might have been seeking to promote the stability of its system and to strengthen its people's solidarity. Finally, the Cheonan incident has been seen by some as an incident in the struggle for succession. It has been suggested that Kim Jong-eun, who is most likely to be designated as Kim Jong-il's successor, might have provoked the Cheonan incident or that the North Korean military might have engineered it to show their loyalty to Kim Jong-eun.

Although it is difficult to decide which of the four interpretations is the right one, the main thing is that the Cheonan incident has paradoxically shown that North Korea is, indeed, not in an advantageous situation and that the regime is now faced with a difficulty. A strained situation and the confrontational nature of the relations between North and South Korea will continue as the North is expected to remain firm. The North is also expected to maintain exchanges at the non-governmental level to a minimum. Since the North is expected to continue its strategy of breaking the deadlock through its dialogue with the US rather than through North-South talks, it has become difficult to expect an improvement in North-South relations. In this regard, it must be noted with caution that the persistent stance of the North Korean regime could lead to North-South relations becoming a substructure or a dependent variable of the relations between US and North Korea.

#### *The Positions of the Countries Concerned*

It appears that the neighbouring states, including the US, Japan and Russia, share a consensus at least on the importance of reaching a turning point for resolving the North-Korean nuclear problem. Also, these states appear to share a common view of not wanting the present tension and confrontation to continue. In more specific terms, an assessment of their positions reveals that the countries concerned have endorsed the position that no additional tension or confrontation must occur, but have not yet attached much significance or urgency to the necessity of progressing on the North Korean nuclear issue as well as on promoting North-South relations.

The US, by emphasising 'strategic patience', is expected not to actively engage in efforts towards resolving the North-Korean nuclear issue if the North does not translate its willingness to give up its nuclear programme into explicit and concrete actions. Therefore, the US is expected to continue to hold on to its two-track approach of dialogue and sanctions while closely watching how the North responds, and stressing that the possibility for dialogue is always open as it takes into consideration China's position. On the other hand, in consideration of its relations with Seoul, the US will fully support the

position of the South Korean government. Recognising that its future position will ultimately be influenced by the Korean government's stance, the US is therefore likely to refrain from expressing any specific plans or position on North-South relations. This should become increasingly so as the US gives primacy to the South Korean government and also puts indirect pressure on the North Korean regime.

China, in contrast to the US, is expected to be more active in resolving the North-Korean nuclear problem, being likely to work in favour of resuming the talks with the aim of easing the burden that would arise if the confrontation on the Korean peninsula should persist. However, China's capacity to suggest any specific solution seems limited. In other words, since the nuclear problem is now seen as a US-North Korea issue, China has little scope to suggest specific measures to bring the two positions closer and its role is likely to be merely to provide an opportunity for dialogue. While pointing out that South Korea needs to adopt a more flexible attitude in its relations with the North, China is expected to preserve and also strengthen its influence on the Korean peninsula by maintaining friendly and cooperative relations with the North, as suggested by Kim Jong-il's earlier visit to China. To summarise: China is currently seeking peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, but will give a greater weight to the concerns and considerations of North Korea.

The roles of Japan and Russia are expected to be extremely limited. Japan is expected to basically support the position of the South Korean government while being concerned with North Korea's military threats. Therefore, by taking a similar position to the US, Japan is expected to place an emphasis on building up cooperation between Japan, South Korea and the US. However, given that the political environment inside the country is not really suited to pursuing an active foreign policy, it would be difficult for Japan to find the impetus to improve its relations with the North, thereby leading Tokyo to adopt the policy of going along with the situation. Russia is also expected to refrain from becoming actively involved in the Korean peninsula, but still to consider intervention as an option. Considering that Russia is, basically, expected to emphasise a policy of engagement and intervention as well as resolving problems through dialogue and negotiation, it is expected to approach the issue with a similar attitude to China.

#### *The Aims and Direction of Future North-South Korea Relations*

(1) South Korea's aim should be to achieve stability and peaceful coexistence. South Korea should engage with the North with clear principles in mind and must refrain from re-adjusting its relations according to changing conditions or incidents that might arise at any time. Also, its efforts must be directed, first, at ensuring peaceful coexistence, and, ultimately, at achieving unification.

In accordance with the principle of reciprocity, the stabilisation of North-South relations can be interpreted as their development as well as their improvement. This implies that the two countries should cooperate and develop by maintaining mutually beneficial relations rather than by seeing themselves, unilaterally, as donor or recipient. Such an objective cannot be achieved overnight, but requires continued efforts over the long term, along with a certain degree of consistency. Therefore, the focus of the South Korean government's policy towards the North must be on real shifts rather than on symbolic events or changes. South Korea must clearly declare that the ultimate objective of its policy towards the North is to achieve peaceful coexistence and, eventually, unification. This issue must be brought to light, as it had previously been neglected in the discussions.

(2) South Korea should seek fundamental regime changes rather than short-term objectives, with the aim of prompting North Korea to become a normal state. In this regard, efforts must be directed at identifying what tasks are necessary. Also, decisions should be made as to which tasks are priorities and which can be tackled later.

Although in the past the South Korean government took the approach of tackling first the tasks which were relatively easy to agree upon as well as to implement, it has been significantly affected by the North's provocations and dramatic policy changes. This has led the South Korean government to anxiously seek a 'symbolic agreement' and has resulted in an 'optical illusion', imposing too much of a political meaning on the longer-term tasks. Also, it has had to face the burden of not being able to implement the measures agreed upon.

Based on its past experience, South Korea's future policy towards North Korea should focus on stipulating what exactly are the fundamental changes necessary in the North and on this basis to identify and then carry out the correct policies and tasks. In other words, South Korea's policy towards the North should not be geared towards gaining temporary and merely declaratory outcomes. In addition, South Korea should make it clear to its people that the process will, indeed, take a long time, thereby fostering their support and understanding. By doing so, it can prevent the disappointment which could arise from any lack of progress.

(3) In order to induce change in North Korea, South Korea should reject the regime's political and military objectives. North Korea has so far worked to achieve its political, economic and military objectives through various military means, and these policies have to a certain extent been effective. Therefore, it will be extremely difficult to expect real change in North Korea unless South Korea successfully induces the regime to recognise the fact that its strategies and policies will ultimately not be successful.

Therefore, the first priority of the South Korean government's strategy towards the regime must be to deter military adventures from the North and also to acquire the capacity to enable it to deny it any benefits from engaging in military action. It would be logical for the South Korean government to enhance the possibility for dialogue by rejecting the North's military adventurism, based on the principles of achieving changes and peace through security. To reach such a goal, the South Korean government needs to strengthen the US-South Korea alliance and cooperation, develop necessary strategies and build up its military power. South Korea also needs to emphasise that peace must be achieved through security, rather than treating peace from security as separate issues.

(4) South Korea should maximise its cooperation with the countries concerned, fostering their understanding of –and support for– its policies. In addition to the US, South Korea urgently needs to cooperate with Russia and China at this juncture. Especially, stronger efforts must be made to adjust the direction of their basic policies on the Korean peninsula with the aim of ultimately making them work to South Korea's advantage. During the process of resolving the Cheonan incident, the Korean government, once again felt the presence of Russia and China. The two countries have clearly shown that they could easily take a different stance from South Korea for their own interests while continuing to emphasise their cooperation with Seoul. In order to bring them closer it is necessary for South Korea to strengthen its strategic dialogue with the countries with the aim of modifying their perceptions, policy tendencies and objectives while seeking ways to bring them into its circle of influence. This requires that the Korean government acquire a

thorough understanding of their policies and strategies and also provide a favourable environment for them to consider taking action. This should be done not only from a positive perspective, but from a negative one as well, that is, identifying what they fear or wish to avoid the most and appropriately utilising this information.

(5) South Korea should strive to build up an understanding and a consensus on North-South relations and attract the interest of the public on this issue by making appropriate efforts to that end. Public interest on North-South relations has decreased over the years, while debate on the issue has also declined. Making progress on the North-South relationship in this situation could be hampered and consequently become a cause for dissension within South Korea itself.

**Conclusions:** Insecurity is likely to be present in the Korean Peninsula for some time. However, if South Korea surrenders to the North's threats it will never be able to escape from the vicious circle of insecurity. Therefore, despite the dangers posed by short-term challenges and insecurity, South Korea needs to face up to them while it works to mobilise public opinion, seeks the means to generate peace and stability and encourages the North to undergo fundamental changes. At this juncture, South Korea is also faced with the need to strengthen its joint defence system with the US, keep a firm hold on its principles, promote normal relations with the North and make comprehensive efforts to enhance the support and cooperation of the international community as well as its neighbouring countries, including China. By making it clear that what the South wants from North Korea is not conflict or confrontation but coexistence and co-prosperity, South Korea must make parallel efforts to transform the North into a normal state.

The most important question for South Korea is to strengthen its security. To achieve this it should first analyse the North Korean threat objectively and then, going beyond simply assessing its military power, it must try to predict how North Korea will use its military capability. Countermeasures will have to be devised for preparedness to be assured. Furthermore, South Korea needs to consider the proper direction in which it should go, develop its combined defence system with the US and examine what kind of division of labour and cooperation are suitable to face the situation. The Cheonan incident will certainly be regarded as an opportunity for South Korea to re-think the basics of both its diplomacy and security policies, and it should become the starting point for further consolidating peace and stability on the Korean peninsula.

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