

Coping with the North Korean Survival Game: The *Cheonan* Incident and Its Aftermath

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Seong-Ho Sheen

The *Cheonan* Incident and Succession in North Korea

While on a routine patrol along the Northern Limit Line (NLL), a South Korean Navy corvette, *Cheonan* was hit by an external explosion and rapidly sunk at 9:22pm on March 26, 2010. Of the one hundred and four South Korean crew members on board, forty six were found dead or remain missing (Cha 2010). After weeks of a scientific investigation supported by an international team of twenty four American, British, Australian, and Swedish experts, the South Korean government announced on May 20, that the ship was sunk by a torpedo launched from a North Korean midget submarine.¹

The South Korean government and the public are now weighing the various measures in how to respond to this major North Korean provocation. Experts, on the other hand, are trying to understand what might have been the cause of such a bold aggression by the North Korean regime. While some have suggested a combination of various reasons for the alleged attack, a prominent North Korean insider has argued that the *Cheonan* incident may have to do with the North Korean leadership succession issue. Cho Myung-chul, a former professor at Kim Il-sung University, has suggested that the *Cheonan* incident was the work of the emerging leadership surrounding the young and unknown Kim Jong-eun, the son of Kim Jong-il and possible future successor. The motivation then would

be for Kim Jong-eun and his supporters to prove themselves to Kim Jong-il and North Korean people.²

Leadership succession in a dictatorship tends to create a lot of uncertainty, anxiety, and confusion for its governance and the state apparatus. There will be competition and rivalry among different groups and factions for survival and to take a lead in the power transition. In that process, hard liners tend to command a stronger voice. Given the mounting pressures of a deteriorating economic situation and diplomatic isolation since the famine of 1995-98, sinking a South Korean warship could score an important political victory domestically, inducing the North Korean people to be proud of its regime and new leadership. At the same time, it could teach a lesson to the Lee Myung-bak government which has insisted on linking the nuclear issue with North-South exchanges. Indeed, North Korea issued a series of warnings to South Korea after criticizing the Lee administration for refusing to restart the Mount Kumkang Tours that had been canceled after a South Korean tourist had been shot by

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The East Asia Institute
909 Sampoong B/D, 310-68 Euljiro4-ga, Jung-gu,
Seoul 100-786, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr

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a North Korean guard on July 11, 2008. Pyongyang was further upset by alleged contingency planning for a sudden collapse of the regime and the hosting of military exercises with the United States.³ In particular, just a couple of weeks before the *Cheonan* incident, the Korean People's Army issued a statement that it would no longer remain bound by the Korean War Armistice or the 1992 North-South Non-Aggression Agreement, therefore it "will legitimately exercise their force for self defense, unhindered, just as they had determined to do."⁴

The worry now is that such provocations may eventually be aimed at the Obama administration which has hardened its position toward North Korea since the second nuclear test on May 25, 2009. While not completely excluding the possibility for bilateral dialogue, the United States has insisted that Pyongyang must return to the multilateral Six-Party Talks by implementing its obligations under previous agreements. North Korean demands for nuclear arms control and a peace treaty in exchange for denuclearization has only strengthened Washington's deep mistrust of Pyongyang's true intentions.⁵ Considering that the Obama administration has adopted a policy of wait and see, or what it calls "strategic patience,"⁶ the North Korean leadership might have concluded that there is not much to gain from making a deal with Washington for now. Furthermore, President Obama's designation of North Korea along with Iran as an outlier in his drive for a "World Without Nuclear Weapons" and a possible target of U.S. nuclear weapons in the recently published 2010 Nuclear Posture Review can only have made Pyongyang's conviction even more pessimistic.⁷

The problem is that the sinking of the *Cheonan* may not be an isolated incident. North Korea may become more desperate and brazen as they face increasingly harsher measures from South Korea and the international community, particularly the United States. The race for completing succession by 2012 may further strengthen the voice of hardliners who

wish to heighten tensions with South Korea and the United States.⁸ More importantly, the *Cheonan* incident could be a sign of increasing instability in North Korea. The regime there faces the critical question of Kim Jong-il's health and the issue of succession amidst a deepening economic crisis and international isolation. The *Cheonan* incident not only presents the immediate challenge of crisis management but also poses a medium to long-term question about the regime's future.

Kim Jong-il and Regime Survival

Since reports surfaced of Kim Jong-il suffering a stroke in the summer of 2008, there has been a flurry of interest and discussion on the possible collapse of North Korea. Indeed, the topic of North Korea's collapse is nothing new. As the former communist regimes in Eastern Europe fell with the collapse of the Soviet Empire in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, many speculated the same fate for the more impoverished North Korea. The possibility became even more plausible with the sudden death of its supreme leader, Kim Il-sung in 1994, amidst confrontation with the United States over the North's nuclear program. Yet, North Korea under the "dear leader" Kim Jong-il and his regime showed remarkable tenacity and persistency to survive large-scale famine, economic sanctions, and diplomatic isolation for the next sixteen years. In fact, North Korea under Kim Jong-il has not only managed to survive but has also become a de facto nuclear state despite intense international pressure led by the United States.

Meanwhile, there have been a lot of questions about Kim Jong-il's personal health since he suffered a serious stroke in the summer of 2008. Now that North Korea is reportedly preparing for regime succession to his young and unknown son, Kim Jong-eun, the question of regime survival is revisited by some observers again (Stares and Wit 2009).⁹ Having seen the re-



markable resilience of Pyongyang's leadership and its people, this time few dare to predict imminent collapse of a post-Kim Jong-il regime. Instead, many expect North Korea to muddle through its uncertain succession process and continue to survive at least several additional years if not decades.¹⁰

Predicting North Korea's future after Kim Jong-il is anyone's guess. Given its isolation and lack of transparency, no outsider dares to predict what will happen. For one thing, Kim Jong-eun has not been revealed to the North Korean public, having remained in complete secrecy. Yet, there are a couple of things that we know about North Korea that may provide a better judgment about the possibility of regime collapse. This comes from the often-misunderstood comparison between North Korea and East Germany. Despite a much more oppressive regime and a weaker economy than East Germany was at the end of the 1980s, North Korea's regime survival has been sustained by two factors; a solid basis of popular domestic support and unquestioned backing from its key ally in Beijing.

As we know, Germany was unified when the situation in East Germany came to a near collapse of the communist regime. Among the complicated factors and chain of events that led to the East German regime's implosion, one could point to two factors, one is domestic and the other is external. Both were critical in the final collapse of the regime. First, the East German government never enjoyed true loyal support from its own people. In other words, from the very beginning the East German regime was not the creation of its own people's choice. Instead, it was created as a result of the outcome of the allied forces' decision to divide Germany into two. One of which was put under the practical control of the Soviet Union. It was the fear of ruthless suppression and control of its population that kept the Eastern German communist government in power throughout the Cold War. Once the passage to the West was readily available after Hungary's decision to open its border to Austria, East German authorities could not keep its people from

simply deserting the regime and heading to its Western neighbor in massive numbers.

Second, due to the lack of legitimacy with its own people, the Eastern German regime was heavily dependent upon the Soviet Union for support. Moscow shored up its communist ally in Berlin with a heavy military presence and a will to intervene against any anti-communist movements as it had done in Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1956 and 1968 respectively. But by the late 1980s, Moscow was under its own severe strains and had no will or strength to shore up its neighbors. Instead the reforming Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev declared a new doctrine of non-intervention, which undermined the East German regime's power to control its own destiny (Zelikow and Rice, 1997, Ch.1,2, and 3).

In contrast, Kim Il-sung and his regime have enjoyed broad public support among North Koreans since the beginning (Oberdorfer 1997, Ch.1). Even though Kim was brought in by Joseph Stalin's Red Army after the Pacific War, he soon established himself as the one and only legitimate ruler of North Korea using his charm, charisma, and background as an independence fighter against Japanese colonial rule. Indeed, it was Kim who manipulated Stalin and Mao Zedong into his ambition to unify Korea by military force in 1950. The failure of the Korean War only strengthened Kim's domestic position as he mobilized his country for rebuilding the country and a perpetual struggle against American imperialism. After decades of indoctrination, North Koreans have come to revere Kim Il-sung as almost a deity. Kim's son and successor, Kim Jong-il knew that maintaining his father's legacy was the key to his political success. He showed his utmost respect for the so-called "great leader" by not inheriting his father's official title, the president of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Instead, he rules the country as the Chairman of National Defense Committee with his *songun* or military-first policy. North Koreans returned their appreciation of Kim Jong-il by calling him the "dear leader."



Despite decades of misrule and a deteriorating economy under Kim Jong-il, his regime enjoys broad support from their own people who see America and its South Korean puppet regime as the source of all trouble. From this perspective, North Koreans view Kim Jong-il's weakening health with great sympathy, as they consider it to be as a result of his relentless hard work to protect his people against Western imperialism. Viewed in this way, it is not taken as a cue for a revolt. There have been reports of unrest and public protest in North Korea recently. However, such incidents tend to be isolated and limited to marginal segments of North Korean society in remote areas. Large segments of the population, particularly in Pyongyang, are believed to be loyal to the regime under the tight control of military, police, and state apparatus.

Even when the public expresses their displeasure on specific matters like the recent currency reform and government efforts to control the burgeoning black market or more broadly on the deteriorating economy, it never reaches to the level of a large-scale public revolt against the regime itself. For their misery during the so-called "arduous march," the majority of North Koreans blame it on the hostile policy of the United States and its southern neighbor. North Korea demands normalization of diplomatic relations with the United States and replacing the Korean War Armistice with a permanent peace treaty as a precondition for their denuclearization.¹¹ Meanwhile, for Kim Jong-il and his successor, growing tension and crisis with Seoul and Washington serves important domestic political objectives of shoring up popular support especially in this critical time of domestic power transition.

China's Increasing Stake and Leverage

As Kim Jong-il faces the double challenge of managing regime succession under increasing economic and international political isolation, he needs outside help. And China figures prominently in this. For one thing,

China today is not like the former Soviet Union abrogating its leadership and commitment to communist allies in Eastern Europe under Gorbachev. Today, China's influence and clout is increasingly felt by its neighbors and the rest of the world with its fast growing economy. China has been an important supporter of the North Korean regime both politically and economically. Since the 1990s, China has provided North Korea with up to 90 percent of its fuel, 80 percent of its daily consumer goods, and 40 percent of its food supply (Eberstadt 1998). For all its diplomatic and economic isolation, North Korea has become increasingly dependent on China's life support. Beijing has shown a strong interest in maintaining stability of North Korea. From this, the North Korean regime may well calculate that they can survive as long as they manage to keep a positive relationship with China.

The China-DPRK relationship seemed to go through a tough period when Beijing joined the international sanctions effort against Pyongyang each time North Korea tested a nuclear device in 2006 and 2009. Relations were further strained each time North Korea in turn rejected to return back to the Six-Party Talks hosted by China. These difficulties, though, were offset in October last year when Premier Wen Zhaobao led a large delegation of Chinese officials to celebrate the 60th anniversary of China-DPRK diplomatic relations in Pyongyang. The Chinese delegation included all major communist party and government officials as well as local officials engaged in border trade and joint ventures with North Korea.¹² The visit exhibited a comprehensive and deepening engagement with the North. Despite tightening international economic sanctions with United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1718 and 1784, bilateral trade between China and North Korea reached \$ 2.8 billion in 2008, up 41.3 percent from 2007 (Bajoria 2009).

Yet, the most dramatic show of China's unwavering support occurred when President Hu Jintao welcomed Kim Jong-il to Beijing on May 5, 2010, in the wake of the *Cheonan* incident. The surprise meeting



came less than a week after South Korean President Lee Myung-bak paid a visit to President Hu at the Shanghai Expo for China to support South Korea's findings in its investigation of the *Cheonan* incident.¹³ During their dinner at a state house, President Hu said "China always handles, maintains and pushes forward the relations with the DPRK in a strategic and long-term perspective."¹⁴ He went on to further suggest five specific measures to strengthen bilateral relations. What is interesting and surprisingly candid from Hu was that he called for reinforcing strategic coordination through the exchange of views on major "domestic and diplomatic" issues in a regular and timely manner. The statement almost sounded interventionist, a direct violation of China's long standing principle of non-intervention in other countries' domestic and foreign affairs. As Hu added his willingness to share China's governance experience, the statement clearly indicated Beijing's strong interest in the political situation and more specifically the succession issue after Kim Jong-il. After the meeting, North Korea issued a statement saying "the DPRK-China friendship will steadily grow strong generation after generation as it...stood all sorts of tests and trials of history."¹⁵ The Kim-Hu meeting clearly showed Beijing's priority in North Korea's regime survival and stability over denuclearization. As much as Kim Jong-il needs China's help, Beijing enjoys increased leverage over Seoul and Washington as well as Pyongyang. What is more, Pyongyang may try to further up the ante of its hard line policy toward Seoul and Washington as long as it can rely upon China's support.

In April 2010, the North Korean regime terminated its partnership with Hyundai Asan after months of negotiations over reopening the Mount Kumgang Tourist Region since the shooting of the South Korean tourist. After it had terminated the contract, North Korea declared a new partnership with a Chinese company.¹⁶ As for the *Cheonan* incident, the Chinese government did not respond to South Korea's invitation for a fact finding mission of the joint investigation

results. Instead, Premier Wen emphasized peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, and reiterated China's pledge to take an "impartial" stand. He urged all parties to remain calm and show restraint during his meeting with President Lee Myung-bak.¹⁷

It has been well known that Beijing has a keen interest in keeping the North Korean regime stable (Glaser et al. 2008). China has tried to keep a delicate balance between exercising pressure against North Korea's nuclear defiance and providing a life support for Pyongyang's crumbling economy. Kim Jong-il may feel getting Chinese support for his successor is critical for the regime's ultimate survival after his own departure. At the same time, Beijing faces an increasing dilemma between shoring up the North Korean regime and alienating South Korea and the United States (Snyder 2009, Ch.6). If indeed, Kim Jong-il has made a strategic decision to up the ante against Seoul and Washington, Beijing will be in difficult position to protect an unruly Kim Jong-il at the risk of damaging important partnerships with the two countries. It would also drive Seoul into a closer alliance with Washington.

Policy Considerations

It is always difficult for a democratic country to deal with a totalitarian regime like Kim Jong-il's North Korea. It is even more dangerous and uncertain to deal with absolute leadership in domestic power transition. If indeed, North Korea is preparing for Kim Jong-il's demise, having Chinese cooperation in managing North Korea and its succession process will be even more critical for South Korea and the United States. This does not mean that their interests *vis-à-vis* North Korea will always remain the same. Seoul and Washington will have to work hard to define common ground and finding mutual interest in managing the North Korean situation with China (Glaser and Snyder 2010).

The first order of business is keeping close coop-



eration and a united front on both North Korea and China. Seoul and Washington should demonstrate their unity and resolve to both Pyongyang and Beijing. As a U.S. government official mentioned, U.S.-ROK relations have never been better before. This is the time for two allies to translate good relations into concrete action through close consultation. It was constructive to see the Obama administration fully support the South Korean position in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* incident.

Now that the almost two month's long investigation concluded that North Korea was the culprit, the two countries should show strong resolve to demand responsibility from the North Korean side. In June 2010, South Korea brought its evidence from the investigation and presented it to the UN Security Council.¹⁸ At the same time, the two allies are considering various bilateral measures such as joint naval exercises, strengthening anti-submarine warfare capabilities, and numerous unilateral measures such as Seoul reactivating psychological warfare operations against the Kim Jong-il regime and tightening existing sanctions and introducing new ones, in the broad context of the current UN Security Council resolutions against North Korea.

Second, the two allies need to work with, not against, China in dealing with North Korea. Rather than waging a mini-Cold War against the Beijing-Pyongyang axis, they need to identify common interests with China and work on it as a platform for a united front against any future North Korean provocations. Indeed, the U.S.-ROK alliance shares common interests with China including peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, economic reform and opening, and denuclearization. As much as China wants to increase its influence and leverage over North Korea, it has a strong interest in maintaining stability and peace in the region. Pyongyang's unruly behavior and provocations against South Korea and the United States can only make things more unstable. It is not in Beijing's best interests to have a situation where things get out

of control due to Pyongyang's provocations. In that respect, China shares a common interest in checking North Korea's dangerous behavior. Ultimately, China wants to see a more moderate North Korean regime embracing economic reforms and opening up. Indeed, during Kim Jong-il's Beijing visit, Premier Wen Jiabao publicly pushed for economic reform and opening-up, a sensitive topic for Kim, while reiterating China's support for developing the North Korean economy and improving its people's livelihood.¹⁹

In the long run, China still wants to see denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Otherwise, China would not have agreed to UN sanctions against North Korea not once, but twice. While resumption of the Six-Party Talks for Beijing remains the mechanism for solving the nuclear crisis, the Chinese leadership should understand that a resolution of *Cheonan* incident one way or another must precede resumption of the talks. The resolution should first come from Pyongyang. China should persuade Kim Jong-il to find a way to come clean about the incident so that it can not only ease the mounting sanctions against North Korea, but also broker dialogue with Seoul and Washington.

Third, they have to get to the bottom of the problem; North Korea. Yes, the two allies need to stand firm against North Korean provocation, and yes, they need to be prepared for any sudden contingency in North Korea. Yet, Seoul and Washington have to find a way to reengage Pyongyang in a creative way. In other words, the two allies should strike a balance between not rewarding or punishing North Korea's bad behavior and inducing dialogue and engagement. They also need to strike a balance between close alliance management and a division of labor in dealing with North Korea. This double task need not be a zero-sum game if managed in a comprehensive manner. Under the past administrations in South Korea and the United States, achieving either objective led to friction between the two countries. President Bush's harsh rhetoric collided with the rational of the Sunshine Policy by both the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun admin-



istrations. South Korea's continuing engagement efforts in spite of North Korea's provocations led to tension between Seoul and Washington. During this time, Pyongyang continued to drive a wedge between the two allies with its charm offensive to either side at the expense of the other. After President Roh, the Lee administration's principled approach to North Korea's nuclear program coupled with its drive for an upgraded strategic alliance with the United States contributed to a new close alliance partnership between Seoul and Washington. But, it came at the price of stalled, if not confrontational, inter-Korean relations.

Pyongyang's second nuclear test in May 2009, following the long-range rocket launch in April, challenged President Obama's early initiative for active diplomacy and froze the Six-Party Talks as the United States led tougher new international sanctions against North Korea. The result was yet more provocations from the North. And as a desperate Pyongyang seeks shelter from its ally in Beijing, China enjoys increasing leverage over South Korea and the United States as well as over North Korea. To break the cycle of non engagement and worsening behavior, Seoul and Washington need to adopt a flexible combination of pressure and dialogue. On the one hand, they need to stand firm together on North Korea's provocations. At the same time, they have to be flexible enough to reengage with North Korea to prevent further provocations and establish their own leverage.

After its failed currency reform last fall, the North Korean economy is facing an even greater difficulty with a growing food crisis. This might be the reason why the North Korean leadership has become more desperate and aggressive. Yet, it also presents an opportunity for Seoul and Washington to negotiate a settlement over the *Cheonan* incident and other broader issues with Pyongyang. While demanding acknowledgement and a certain resolution of the *Cheonan* incident, they should deliver a clear message that they are ready to address Pyongyang's pressing concerns of its economic situation. They may also suggest finding a

way to prevent further conflicts at sea, particularly over the NLL issue. The purpose of this engagement should be preventing further escalation of the current crisis as well as isolating the hardliners within the North Korean leadership. This could lead to the resumption of dialogue for denuclearization and a peace mechanism on the Korean Peninsula. According to the latest poll, 50.6 percent of South Koreans oppose the complete shutdown of inter-Korean exchanges as a measure to punish North Korea over its possible involvement in the *Cheonan* incident.²⁰ As Winston Churchill said, "it is better to jaw-jaw than to war-war." ■

——— *Seong-Ho Sheen* is an assistant professor at Graduate School of International Studies at Seoul National University. He is also a member of Policy Advisory Board of Ministry of Defense, Republic of Korea.

Notes

¹ *Munhwa Ilbo*, May 20, 2010, <http://www.munhwa.com/news/view.html?no=2010052001070227102002> (accessed May 8, 2010).

² *JoongAng Ilbo*, April 25, 2010.

³ *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)*, January 15; January 24; February 8; February 25; March 8, 2010.

⁴ *KCNA*, March 7, 2010.

⁵ *KCNA*, January 11, 2010. Against the call from the United States to change its behavior for meaningful dialogue, the North Korean authorities demanded a peace treaty with the United States as a precondition for a step toward denuclearization.

⁶ See remarks at the Woodrow Wilson Center by Deputy Secretary of State, James Steinberg (2010).

⁷ *Rodong Shinmun* in *KCNA*, April 14, 2010. North Korean state newspaper claims that the 2010 NPR is a living proof of the unchanging US hostile policy



toward North Korea.

⁸ The North Korean regime plans to complete the mission of building a strong and prosperous nation by 2012, the year of centennial celebration of Kim Il-sung's birth. 2012 is also year when both South Korea and the U.S. have presidential elections.

⁹ See Nicholas Eberstadt (2010).

¹⁰ *Chosun Ilbo*, April 2, 2010. Hwang Jang-yup, North Korea's highest ranking defector, said in his recent talk at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C. that he did not expect a sudden collapse of the Kim Jong-il regime.

¹¹ KCNA, January 11, 2010.

¹² KCNA, October 3; October 4; October 5, 2010.

¹³ *Blue House News*, April 30, 2010. In their meeting, President Hu expressed his condolence to the fallen South Korean sailors and their family members. ROK Office of President. Available at http://www.president.go.kr/kr/president/news/news_view.php?uno=1019&article_no=143&board_no=P01&search_key=&search_value=&search_cate_code=&order_key1=1&order_key2=1&cur_page_no=1&cur_year=2010&cur_month (accessed May 8, 2010). Meanwhile, Chinese government news coverage did not mention President Hu's statement on the *Cheonan* incident. See Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China (2010).

¹⁴ Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, "Top Leaders of China, DPRK hold talks in Beijing," May 6, 2010, http://english.gov.cn/201005/07/content_1601138.htm (accessed May 8, 2010).

¹⁵ KCNA, "Unbreakable DPRK-China Friendship to Last Forever," May 14, 2010.

¹⁶ KCNA, April 23, 2010. "DPRK to Freeze S. Korean Assets in Mt. Kumgang."

¹⁷ Xinhuanet, May 29, 2010. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-05/29/c_13322203.htm (accessed May 30, 2010).

¹⁸ In a letter to UNSC, the South Korean government

argued that the North Korean torpedo attack on the *Cheonan* is a threat to world peace and security. *KBS World*, June 5, 2010. http://world.kbs.co.kr/english/news/news_Po_detail.htm?No=73088 (accessed June 6, 2010).

¹⁹ See Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China (2010).

²⁰ See East Asia Institute (2010). The most favorable response was taking it to the UN Security Council with 75 percent.

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