

EAI
Commentary
No. 10

EAI Security Net

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The Aftermath of the *Cheonan* Diplomacy at the UN: from a “Post-*Cheonan*” toward a “Post-Kim Jong-il” Strategy

July 23, 2010

On July 9, 2010, the UN Security Council Presidential Statement on the *Cheonan* incident was adopted. As expected, a carefully-worded statement was drafted that allowed for different interpretations of the text. Subsequently, there was a second round of disputes over the interpretation of the statement with the ROK-U.S. alliance on the one hand and Beijing and Pyongyang on the other, as well as among different domestic political powers within South Korea.

Although there could be a political significance in evaluating the success of the *Cheonan* diplomacy, it is completely wasteful in terms of addressing South Korea's national interests. At this point, an accurate reading of international politics surrounding the *Cheonan* incident and devising an effective future strategy is much more important than the endless debate over the interpretation of the UN Presidential Statement.

The diplomacy over the *Cheonan* incident has taken place continuously as a multifaceted complex game. From the great power game between China and the United States at the global level to the triangle game among ROK-DPRK-PRC at the Northeast Asia level and the domestic political game, the levels have intertwined to display great complexity. Thus, the significance of China's diplomacy at the East Asian and global level was again confirmed, and the United States' position to resolve current issues through cooperation with China became clear. Furthermore, the strategic partnership between South Korea and Chi-

na is still fairly weak. Without a discussion or a consensus on the future of North Korea between Seoul and Beijing, issues concerning inter-Korean relations will not be easily solved. There is an unquestionable need for a national strategy that can sensibly deal with current diplomatic issues entangled with domestic politics.

U.S.-China disputes that unfolded at the beginning of 2010 reoccurred again during the *Cheonan* incident. The outcome was not the victory of one side, but a bilateral compromise. In this regard, conflicts over the ROK-U.S. joint exercise in the West Sea inevitably concluded with the modification of the location to the East Sea away from China.

It is expected that both the United States and China that barely managed to reach a compromise on the *Cheonan* incident will not afford any more time and effort to this issue. The main stage will swiftly move back toward the denuclearization of North Korea. China has already made its position clear that the Presidential Statement signals an end to the *Cheonan* incident and therefore the Six-Party Talks need to be resumed. The United States will also be keen to push ahead with the denuclearization of North Korea in order to fulfill President Barack Obama's vision of a “World without Nuclear Weapons.” If North Korea shows sincerity in this effort, the United States would not feel obliged to oppose the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. Washington has already secured strengthened alliances with South Korea and Japan as well as the

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relative effect of curbing China. As they move on from the *Cheonan* incident, the United States and China will discuss and map out the specific conditions and methods for resuming the Six-Party Talks.

However, the South Korean government has still maintained that it will not return to the Six-Party Talks without first resolving the *Cheonan* sinking, a position that served as both a security measure and a strong warning toward North Korea against future attacks. Meanwhile, Pyongyang has been trying to escape from the situation it had created by improving its relations with Beijing through Kim Jong-il’s visit to China, and offering to resume the Six-Party Talks following the release of the UN Security Council Presidential Statement on the *Cheonan* incident.

Now that the Security Council Presidential Statement has been adopted, it is in Seoul’s best interest not to pursue a fundamentalist approach by trying to link the *Cheonan* incident to every other security issue. Its blind focus on the sinking of the *Cheonan*, regardless of China and the United States’ push towards the Six-Party Talks, is reminiscent of the Koizumi administration’s narrow focus on the abduction issues. South Korea therefore, should at least take up a two-track strategy of resolving the *Cheonan* sinking while also preparing for the Six-Party Talks at the same time. That is, while it continues its efforts to resolve the incident, Seoul should also demand North Korea’s unconditional return to the Six-Party Talks and its resumption of the denuclearization process as it had agreed. Given that North Korea carried out its second nuclear test in 2009 and then attacked the *Cheonan* in 2010, Pyongyang’s request to lift the sanctions first should not be accommodated.

Inter-Korean relations are much more

complicated. Although normalization is the ultimate goal for improved inter-Korea relations, it should be preceded by the resolution of the *Cheonan* sinking with North Korea’s formal apology, punishment of the persons responsible, and implementation of preventive measures that President Lee Myung-bak laid out in his statement on May 24. Such resolution however, is unlikely to happen soon. From an objective perspective, it is likely to follow the patterns from past contentious historical events in inter-Korea relations such as the Korean War, the KAL 858 bombing in 1987, and the Rangoon bombing in 1983. The complete and fundamental resolution of the *Cheonan* incident would only be possible with a change in North Korea’s military-first regime. In this respect, it is necessary to take the incident as an opportunity to push efforts to reshape Kim Jong-il’s military-first policy and inter-Korean relations. South Korea’s approach to inter-Korean relations and policies toward North Korea in the post-*Cheonan* setting are not completely unprecedented given the Bush administration’s security policy in the post-9/11 period.

Yet, just as important to resolving the *Cheonan* incident is also preparing for the post-Kim Jong-il era. The formation of the post-Kim Jong-il regime will have a decisive political impact on the Korean Peninsula by determining the fate of North and South Korea. Pyongyang is expected to formalize its political succession issue around 2012, the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung as well and declaration of its elevated status as a *kangseong taeguk* or “strong and prosperous nation.” The upcoming meeting of Party Representatives scheduled for September 2010 will bear more significance than usual. Whether North Korea continues with Kim

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Jong-il’s military-first policy after his demise or turns to an economy-first policy of reform and openness will determine the future course of inter-Korean relations and the North Korean nuclear issue.

South Korea’s strategy towards North Korea should focus on attracting a post-Kim Jong-il regime toward a desirable direction. Several things need to be considered in order to achieve this result. Firstly, the way hard power is exerted needs special consideration. Seoul should build up a strong defense capability to deal with any contingencies while maintaining sanctions against North Korea. At the same time, South Korea must show prudence on measures that might lead to unnecessary armed conflict, such as installing loudspeakers as part of the Psychological Warfare Operations against North Korea. The unnecessary build-up of military tensions on the Korean Peninsula will only erode South Korean public support for the government’s policies in domestic politics.

Secondly, the importance of soft power is certainly worth the consideration. A new order for North and South relations needs to be presented in order to lead a post-Kim Jong-il regime down the path of denuclearization and economy-first policy in its domestic politics. Under the current situation, where all previous inter-Korean agreements have been abolished, more sophisticated measures will be required to manage North-South relations. It is especially important to lead a ‘denuclearized, economy-first’ post-Kim regime to co-evolve with South Korea’s complex support for the new regime’s prosperity and security.

Lastly, making full use of network power is required. Given the current tensions, open-

ing up all channels of official communication between North and South Korea is unlikely. However, private sector networks can be opened and other networks that affect the North Korean regime’s decision-making should also be developed. This includes North Korea’s diplomatic and alliance networks with China and Russia. In the current situation, the only way to fully resolve the situation is to show initiative in devising a new paradigm and then implementing a new strategy toward North Korea with the strategic support of neighboring countries. ■