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Lessons from the *Cheonan* Incident and South Korea's Response

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Since the tragic sinking of the ROK Navy corvette, the *Cheonan*, on March 26 2010, there has been an unprecedented level of unconfirmed suspicion, speculation, and criticism over the incident. Not only has this focused on the cause of the sinking but also on the Lee Myung-bak administration's handling of the incident and its response in the immediate aftermath. The major challenge ahead is to build a domestic consensus on how to perceive and characterize the *Cheonan* incident and muster global support to punish North Korea. Pyongyang's sinking of the South Korean warship has raised fundamental questions in the five most critical areas of the state; the military, diplomacy, economy, politics, and intelligence. Rather than narrowly focusing on one single area within which to muster a response, the Lee administration needs to take a comprehensive approach across all five areas and prevent further provocations from threatening peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

1. Military

The North Korean torpedo attack on the *Cheonan* shows all too clearly the security environment in which Koreans have lived since the end of the Korean War. More seriously, it has also revealed the loopholes in South Korea's defense policy during a time of crisis. Immediately following the sinking of the *Cheonan*, concerns were raised criticizing the initial reporting system in the military and

the insufficient levels of cooperation between the civilian government and the military. This together with the lack of effective communication to the public led to unconfirmed speculation dominating subsequent discussions even among policymakers including the military. The shortcomings of the government's crisis-management capacity only served to aggravate South Koreans' anxiety and threat perceptions of North Korea.

For the South Korean government, what is urgently required is a comprehensive review of its defense strategy. Particularly, this relates to the development of feasible options to strengthen the ROK's defense capability against unexpected provocative actions. To prevent further attacks against South Korea, a careful analysis regarding the underlying causes of the threats to its security is needed. The *Cheonan* incident hit the Lee Myung-bak administration at a time when it had yet to devise an effective defense strategy and was also in the midst of reconsidering the defense reforms left over from the previous administrations. In light of the incident, voices are growing for the reclassification of the North Korean regime as the main enemy of South Korea, a delay in the transfer of wartime operational control, and an increase in defense spending. This all demands that the government urgently needs to conduct a long-term and comprehensive strategic review of its national security policy.

The primary focus of Seoul's reaction to this tragedy is centered on the prevention of

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further provocations against South Korea, particularly future clashes in the Yellow Sea. President Lee Myung-bak should send a clear message that the international community as well as his government will not tolerate any kind of attack that threatens peace and security on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea should enhance its defense capability and the ROK-U.S. alliance needs to be further strengthened in ways that make a future joint military response more effective. Any military response, however, should come together with diplomatic, economic, and political measures in a comprehensive manner. South Korea’s effective use of various diplomatic channels at the global level can further maximize the effects of a military response.

There are limits to South Korea initializing a military response in the future. Considering the Lee Myung-bak administration’s global initiative to emerge as a benign middle power, it will be difficult for him to blindly pursue military retaliation that can deepen tensions on the Korean Peninsula in the rapidly changing security environment in East Asia. If a military response is the only option available for Seoul, it will also fail to reflect the interests of regional powers, particularly China and the United States, that seek to establish themselves as stabilizers in the region. Given South Korea’s numerous foreign policy initiatives including the G20 summit meeting in November in Seoul, future military countermeasures to the North’s provocations should be carefully calculated in ways that do not escalate unnecessary tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

2. Diplomacy

On the diplomatic front, the *Cheonan* incident has already reached a new level. South Korea should make its diplomatic effort consistent to prevent future provocations on the Korean Peninsula. This effort should include sending a clear signal that any country or organization that leads or supports any violent provocations will suffer punitive political, economic, and diplomatic consequences.

The regional powers have shown a great deal of attention to how the *Cheonan* incident will develop and its possible implications for their national interests. In the midst of the rapidly changing international politics in East Asia, the United States has pursued both a strategic partnership with a rising China and a multilateral foreign policy in the region. Yet Washington’s traditional alliances with Japan and South Korea remain its priority. Given the recent friction between the Obama administration and the Hatoyama government in their bilateral ties, the ROK-U.S. alliance is gaining more strength in the region. The Obama administration has expressed continued support for South Korea’s handling of the *Cheonan* incident by indicating its willingness to suspend efforts to restart the Six-Party Talks until the warship sinking has been fully resolved. However, the Obama administration’s initiative for a nuclear-free world remains its overall objective which would suggest a consistent strategic interest in denuclearizing the North. Taking this into account, the Lee administration should send a clear and strong signal about its own North Korea policy. Considering the complexities involved in the *Cheonan* incident, Seoul must outline clearly how it will attempt to respond in order to successfully maximize the cooperation between South Ko-

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rea and the United States.

China is also in a difficult position regarding the *Cheonan* sinking. Beijing continues to support the North Korean regime out of a fear for instability on its border. At the same time, China is now seeking to secure its status as a responsible global power at the international level. The Chinese government has recently showed its commitment toward resolving the *Cheonan* incident by initiating talks with both the South Korean President Lee Myung-bak and the North Korean leader Kim Jong-il respectively and acknowledging that the South Korean-led multinational investigation is scientific and objective. During Kim Jong-il's recent visit to China, the North was strongly pressed to increase strategic dialogue on both Pyongyang's domestic and external affairs with Beijing in exchange for the continued Chinese political and economic support. The *Cheonan* incident presents a serious test for China as both a global power and a North Korean ally. Whether China will be fully cooperative on sanctions against Pyongyang will largely depend on the two strategic goals of China. These two goals are the promotion of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and the peaceful rise of China as a global power. As Chinese support is crucial for South Korea, the Lee Myung-bak government should devise a long-term and well-calculated strategy to gain adequate support from Beijing to punish Pyongyang.

South Korea's diplomatic response could serve as a good example in the international community if similar provocations arise. With the rising status of South Korea at the global level in hosting the G20 summit meeting and high-level meetings on a variety of transnational issues, the South Korean government needs to meet global standards and norms

when responding to the *Cheonan* sinking. South Korea has to show its effective use of all possible diplomatic means that engage multilateral bodies including the United Nations.

3. Economy

South Korea's open market-based economy has been highly influenced by the security perceptions of other countries during times of escalating crises on the Korean Peninsula. The South Korean government should deal with the security concerns effectively and secure an international support base by strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance if the country is to continue to prosper. Given the fact that the guarantee of national security leads to sustained economic development in South Korea, it is important to maintain a stable security environment by securing sufficient military funds that are relatively free from economic constraints. However, the sinking of the *Cheonan* increasingly raised the public's awareness of the fundamental problems in the navy as well as the military as a whole, particularly poor working conditions and outdated facilities and weapons systems. The global economic crisis has resulted in a decrease in defense spending and investment for defense reform that was pushed through by the previous Roh Moo-hyun administration. This recent incident has awakened South Korea to realize the important lesson that a defense policy has to take into account not only economic conditions but the threat perception as well.

With North Korea held responsible for this tragic incident, South Korea's economic leverage against Pyongyang will serve as a useful tool. Economic sanctions will certainly prove to be useful, albeit with some limita-

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tions, while other economic leverages seem equally important to promote stability on the Korean Peninsula and improve inter-Korean relations. North Korea is becoming highly dependent on China’s economic assistance as inter-Korean relations have deteriorated. As the most important ally of the Kim Jong-il regime, China seeks to maintain its dominant influence over Pyongyang while adjusting the level of economic cooperation to within the boundaries of the United Nations Security Council Resolutions instituted after North Korea’s nuclear tests. South Korea has to decide on whether to actively engage the North which would also secure economic leverage in inter-Korean issues or to isolate Pyongyang with economic sanctions when necessary. It is important that Seoul both maintain economic leverage against the North Korean regime in order to achieve the strategic upper hand in inter-Korean relations and intensify the impact of sanctions against its deadly provocations.

4. Politics

The *Cheonan* incident has clearly revealed the government’s failing crisis-management capacity and exposed the limitations of political leaders in dealing with national security threats. The government’s crisis management fell short of a prompt and accurate analysis and an array of governmental bodies also failed to provide a coherent picture of the tragic incident. The lack of a cohesive and coordinated response from the government has generated public distrust of official reports on the incident, which ultimately leads to public disapproval of subsequent measures from the government. Considering the persis-

tent threats arising from the rapidly changing security environment in Northeast Asia and the North Korean regime, the South Korean government needs to take the *Cheonan* incident as a warning to reinforce its crisis management system for the future.

In times of crisis, political leaders should transcend their partisan interests to pursue a shared public goal in national security. As responsible leaders in society, politicians need to place a priority on ensuring national security even though this might entail political losses. It is an important time now for political leaders to reach a bipartisan consensus on the *Cheonan* incident with the enduring question of what makes a good leader in difficult times.

Other actors in society, such as the press and non-governmental organizations, should participate responsibly with shared security concerns. In the aftermath of the sinking of the warship, unconfirmed information and biased opinions were reported competitively as well as irresponsibly by the mass media and other various organizations with eye-catching headlines. A mature democracy should demonstrate responsible participation of citizens in the production and distribution of information.

5. Intelligence

The *Cheonan* incident is a clear example of an intelligence failure. The South Korean government appears to have failed to obtain any relevant information prior to the North Korean torpedo attack against the navy corvette that regularly patrols the Yellow Sea, revealing the limitations of South Korea’s intelligence capability. This also confirms the difficulty of acquiring intelligence on asymmetrical securi-

ty threats on the Korean Peninsula. Accordingly, the South Korean government should prove how it can improve its intelligence capabilities.

The government is not the only one to blame for this intelligence failure. Other institutions at the national level have also exposed their limitations when investigating the possible cause of the sinking. Many experts and scholars failed to reach a consensus even after rounds of discussions. The sinking of the warship reiterates the importance of building an intelligence network at the national level to cope with the flood of information during a crisis.

South Korea's response to the North Korean torpedo attack should be long-term and multifaceted addressing the five critical areas discussed above. In this way, the *Cheonan* incident will be remembered as a painful yet valuable lesson for strengthening South Korea's security. This tragic event in the Yellow Sea is inevitably linked with rapidly changing inter-Korean relations as well as Pyongyang's nuclear program and its future. Therefore, South Korea should take all these factors into consideration when dealing with the *Cheonan* incident as its answers will determine the course of the strategic and diplomatic response against North Korea's deadly attack that killed forty-six South Korean sailors.■