AIPS Symposium

Post- Cheonan Regional Security

WHERE ARE WE NOW?
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

AUGUST 2010
### AIPS Symposium on “Post-Cheonan Regional Security”

- **Date**: Friday, August 13, 2010  
- **Venue**: Lecture Hall (1F), AIPS, Seoul, Korea

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| 2:00 pm | Opening Remarks                                 | **Hahm Chaibong** (AIPS)  
**Scott Snyder** (Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, The Asia Foundation)                                                                 |
| 2:10 pm | **Session I**: “Post-Cheonan Regional Security: Where are we now?” | **Chair**: HAHM Chaibong (AIPS)  
**Speakers**  
"ROK Perspective": **Kim Taewoo** (The Korea Institute for Defense Analyses)  
"U.S. Perspective": **Ralph Cossa** (Pacific Forum CSIS)  
"DPRK Perspective": **Paik Haksoon** (The Sejong Institute)  
"PRC Perspective": **Drew Thompson** (The Nixon Center) |
| 4:00 pm | Coffee Break                                    |                                                                                                   |
| 4:30 pm | **Session II**: “Post-Cheonan Regional Security: Where do we go from here?” | **Chair**: Scott Snyder (Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, The Asia Foundation)  
**Speakers**  
"ROK Perspective": **Lee Chung Min** (Yonsei University)  
"U.S. Perspective": **Evans Revere** (Albright Stonebridge Group)  
"DPRK Perspective": **Kevin Shepard** (Pacific Forum CSIS)  
"PRC Perspective": **Kim Heungkyu** (Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, MOFAT) |
| 6:30 pm | Dinner at Korean Restaurant                     |                                                                                                   |
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Executive Summary

The sinking of the South Korean naval vessel, the *Cheonan*, on March 26 has ratcheted up tensions on the Korean peninsula, which had already been suffering from strained inter-Korean relations since North Korea’s second nuclear test in May, 2009. When a South Korean government-led international investigation concluded with an announcement on May 20 that a North Korean torpedo sank the *Cheonan*, North Korea vehemently denied any role. Instead, North Korea questioned the validity of the investigation, denouncing its conclusion as a fabrication. What started as an inter-Korean clash then seemed to escalate into a broader regional conflict as China came to North Korea’s defense when South Korea and the United States tried to obtain a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution naming North Korea as the culprit. With China opposing such a Resolution, South Korea and the U.S. had to settle for a UNSC Presidential Statement on July 9, which “condemn[ed] the attack” without naming North Korea as the culprit.

Afterwards, as the U.S. and South Korea held joint naval exercises off Korea’s coastal waters, China held its own naval drills in the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea. Although China’s military denied that its drills were in response to the US-ROK naval exercises, the drills were widely interpreted as such in Seoul and Washington. Tensions rose further when the Chinese media quoted senior Chinese officials criticizing the exercises as undermining China’s security interests. When the U.S. and South Korea announced that they would conduct monthly joint naval exercises until the end of 2010, the level of tension seemed to rise yet higher, with regional stakeholders bracing for the possibility of another “incident” in or near Korea’s coastal waters with repercussions for not only inter-Korean relations but also U.S.-China relations. The *Cheonan* sinking and its aftermath cannot but have far-reaching implications for the efforts to achieve regional peace and North Korea’s denuclearization, through the Six Party Talks whose future is currently in a limbo.

On August 13, AIPS convened a symposium addressing post-*Cheonan* regional security, where noted experts, both Korean and American, investigated the complex issues raised by the *Cheonan* sinking and delivered their policy prescriptions.

The first session began with a presentation by Kim Taewoo (Korea Institute for Defense Analyses), who outlined the South Korean perspective on the *Cheonan* crisis. Focusing his remarks on the controversies within South Korea regarding the ROK government’s handling of the crisis, Kim disputed the claims of the “progressive critics” of the government and advocated a policy of strong alliance with the United States and friendly relations with China. Ralph Cossa (Pacific Forum CSIS) then offered a U.S. perspective. After summarizing the positions of China, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas, Cossa argued that the current standoff over the crisis, along with other current irritants in U.S.-China relations, has led the U.S. to view China as part of the problem, not solution, in dealing with North Korea and also to regard resuming the Six Party Talks as largely meaningless.
Next, Paik Haksoon (Sejong Institute) analyzed the North Korean perspective on the crisis, starting with a chronology of the North Korean reactions in the aftermath of the Cheonan sinking and concluding with an observation that denuclearizing North Korea has become more difficult since the sinking in a context of rising Sino-U.S. hegemonic rivalry in East Asia. The session ended with a presentation by Drew Thompson (Nixon Center), who analyzed the complex factors underlying China’s response to the crisis, such as: Chinese domestic politics in the run-up to the 2010 leadership transition; a perceived gap between China’s civilian and military leaders; China’s strong aversion to North Korea’s sudden collapse; and China’s need to manage its delicate diplomacy towards the two Koreas. Observing that the current tension in Sino-American relations increases the risk of another “incident”, Thompson called on China’s leaders to reverse the current momentum towards brinksmanship within the Chinese military and to work with the U.S. in reducing tensions.

In the second session, four experts – Lee Chung Min (Yonsei University), Evans Revere (Albright Stonebridge Group), Kevin Shepard (Pacific Forum CSIS) and Kim Heungkyu (IFANS) – discussed the ROK, US, DPRK and PRC policies respectively in the wake of the Cheonan crisis. Noting South Korea’s growing international responsibilities as a G-20 power and a major Asian economic player, Lee emphasized that the Cheonan crisis highlighted the challenges of simultaneously managing the critically important ROK-US alliance and ROK’s overwhelmingly important ties with China. In particular, Lee called for South Korea’s defense reform, including strengthening its national security apparatus to improve crisis management. Echoing Lee, Revere also stressed a need to deal firmly with North Korean provocations by strengthening South Korea’s defense capabilities and voiced his support for continuing the joint US-ROK naval exercises as a means to meet this need. As for diplomacy, despite the apparent futility of negotiating with North Korea, Revere argued that forums such as the Six Party Talks are still a useful device to keep channels of dialogue open and that the U.S. and South Korea need to engage both China and North Korea so as to explore the latter’s “bottom lines” and devise a way to peace.

Next, Shepard posited that the North Korean sinking of the Cheonan was probably not a centrally orchestrated act authorized by Kim Jong-il but that North Korea nevertheless benefited from the crisis. Noting the current North Korean succession politics and the longstanding South Korean forbearance of North Korea’s provocations in order to avoid war, Shepard suggested that more North Korean provocations are possible – even as North Korea continues to pursue economic growth and the goal of a “Great and Prosperous Nation” by 2012 – in a current North Korean policy regime characterized by concurrent and uncoordinated strategies. The session ended with Kim’s extensive commentary on China’s policy directions. After elaborating on the current divisions within China’s foreign policy establishment, Kim elucidated possible causes for the current assertive tone in the country’s foreign policy, such as politics played by China’s military to stir Chinese nationalism in order to boost its own budget and influence. According to Kim, although China’s leaders will attempt to avoid fundamental clashes with the U.S. while maintaining a balanced diplomacy towards the two Koreas, uncertainties plague China’s future foreign policy, which presents a great challenge for South Korea, Japan, the United States and other regional stakeholders.
Session I
“Post-Cheonan Regional Security: Where are we now?”

**Post-Cheonan Regional Stability: A South Korean Perspective**

Kim Taewoo

“Liberal Critics” and the Merits of Their Claims

I will begin by discussing the controversies arising within South Korea on the Cheonan incident and its aftermath. There are some critics, the so-called “liberal critics,” within South Korea berating the Seoul government’s policies after the incident. Their criticisms can be boiled down to four main issues. First, absence of an exit strategy in inter-Korean relations; second, non-acceptance of the resumption of the Six-Party Talks now being initiated by China as well as North Korea; third, accusation against the recent ROK-US naval exercises; and fourth, ROK-China relations, which pertains to South Korea’s survival strategy. My conclusion is that the first criticism makes little sense in the short-term and none in the long-term, and the second, third, and fourth are the opposite: they make no sense immediately and may make sense in the long-term.

First, the non-existence of an exit policy. Critics say that South Korea has closed off inter-Korean dialogue channels, thereby denying itself an exit strategy to avoid war. They argue South Korea should accommodate North Korea by ceasing tension-heightening measures and that the U.S. should stop additional sanctions. This makes some sense immediately, because if South Korea and the U.S. do this, there will be immediate peace and an immediate switch to dialogue. But this might indulge North Korea in the long-term, so South Korea should not prematurely pursue this course of action.

What we need to think about is the worst-case scenarios in inter-Korean relations. In the past, when North Korea committed military provocations, South Korean voters usually supported political parties that stood for national security from North Korean threats. This no longer held in the recent local government elections in June. There were stories about some soldiers telephoning home saying, “Mom, if war breaks out, I will be killed,” etc., and their parents voting for the opposition party in order to avoid war. If this kind of appeasement takes root in South Korea, the future of inter-Korean relations will be hopeless. North Korea will intimidate South Korea at will and manipulate South Korea’s public opinion. South Korea will lose all leverage over North Korea. Therefore, in the long-term, we need to worry about this worst-case scenario, and these liberal accusations are incorrect.

Second, Six-Party Talks. We have to remember how North Korea utilized the Six-Party Talks in the past as a means to undermine international sanctions against their nuclear development. They simply utilized the Talks to gain more time. So, as long as North Korea is not sincere about denuclearization, the Six-Party Talks will have little meaning. This is why resumption of Six-Party Talks is not important.

Third, the naval exercises. What the critics are saying is that South Korea has been dragged into the U.S.-initiated anti-China containment policy. This is an absurd argument. They also argue that this kind of military drill will precipitate a new Cold War in this region and so South Korea should stay out of it.
This criticism may make some sense in the long-term but none in the short-term. The Cheonan incident vividly demonstrated the asymmetric threats posed by North Korea, and South Korea must urgently counter such threats and provocations. Strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance meets South Korea’s needs. The U.S. has the means and the will to deter North Korea’s provocations.

But, in the longer term, yes, we should be careful so that South Korea does not contribute to aggravating Sino-American relations or increasing regional tension.

Finally, the ROK-China relations. The critics are right about this relationship being very important. Historically, the Korean peninsula was often invaded by China, and the behavior of mainland China is integral to Korea’s survival. We understand the importance of China, but, for the time being, we must consider how China behaved after the Cheonan incident.

China showed the characteristics of a hegemonic power after this incident. China’s repeated military drills in the Yellow Sea and, at the same time, opposition to the South Korean military drills, which took place because South Korea had been victimized by North Korean provocations, send the message that the Yellow Sea is China’s backyard closed off to everyone else. In political science parlance, this type of behavior represents hegemonic characteristics. We must acknowledge this, and this is why many South Koreans now rethink China. It is urgent for South Korea to realize this fact, while accepting the importance of ROK-China relations in the longer term.

Conclusion
There are four parts to this conclusion. First, there are two different perspectives in predicting China’s future behavior: one is the realist perspective, and the other is the institutional perspective.

In the realist perspective, China will become increasingly assertive and hegemonic in proportion to the growth of its power. Institutionalists argue that China will become more internationally responsible because it needs to sustain its economic growth, trade with other countries, and cooperate with the international community. I don’t know which view is correct, but, for the time being, seeing the aggressive behavior on the part of China, we cannot deny the persuasiveness of the realist perspective.

Second, the U.S.-China confrontation may have already begun before the ROK-U.S. naval drill, so the drill is not a cause precipitating this confrontation. It is merely an occasion exhibiting the growing confrontation between the U.S. and China.

Third, South Korea should do its best to play constructive roles if it can help prevent mounting confrontation in this region. For example, China possesses internal dynamics. It faces problems such as equitable economic development, environmental degradation and evolution of its political system. As China becomes more prosperous economically, the Chinese people will demand more democratization, human rights, and other changes. This kind of internal dynamics may play some positive role in China’s future behavior, and South Korea should encourage China to become a good friendly neighbor.

Finally, South Korea’s survival strategy should be alliance with the U.S. and friendly relations with China. The U.S. has always been important as our ally and supporter who helps South Korea remain secure from threats. South Korea should continue its alliance with the U.S., but, at the same time, South Korea has no reason to have purposefully hostile
relations with China. China is the largest export market for South Korea, and 5 million people come and go between the two countries. This economic interdependence is good, and South Korea needs to keep friendly relations with China.

The biggest task for South Korean diplomacy is managing its relations with these two giants – China and the U.S. – that South Korea needs: alliance with the U.S. and friendly relations with China.

Post-Cheonan Regional Security: Where Are We Now? - A US Perspective

Ralph A. Cossa

Let me begin by giving a simple, but hopefully not too simplistic answer to this session’s opening question: Where are we now is exactly where Pyongyang wants us to be. By this I mean, we have a deep and deepening division among the various Six-Party Talks members along the most familiar fault line – Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo on one side and Beijing and Moscow (along with Pyongyang) on the other – plus heated debate within the ROK over whether or not the Lee Myung-bak administration’s policies, and those of its US ally, are too hard or inflexible. This is happening while conspiracy theorists in the ROK, US, and elsewhere debate the implausible deniability of Pyongyang’s sneak attack against the Cheonan. Pyongyang secretly – and reportedly at times not too secretly – boasts of getting revenge for its embarrassing naval loss last November. Pyongyang also proclaims a "great diplomatic victory" when Chinese "neutrality" increases tensions with the US and ROK as China dishonors Premier Wen Jiabao’s pledge to scrutinize the results of the investigation in an "objective and fair manner" and "not protect anyone regarding the review."

My task is to focus on what US policy and attitudes are at present; what US policy should be will be taken up later today. But before my remarks on US views, I will briefly review where the other main players are, from a US perspective (or, more accurately, from the perspective of this particular American).

DPRK Position

In my opinion, Pyongyang was guilty, beyond any reasonable doubt, of a deliberate attack against the Cheonan. Revenge for the November 2009 naval encounter in which it was bloodied was no doubt a primary motive. It was also most likely associated with leadership transition in the North as almost everything Pyongyang does or will do in the coming months is with one eye on leadership transition, although how the two relate exactly is not clear. Perhaps, it was aimed at creating a crisis atmosphere to get the population, the elites, and the military to rally around the flag - a familiar North Korean tactic. Perhaps, it was aimed at building military support for the next leader, as a quid pro quo. All of the above is another choice. I dismiss the theory that it was a rogue navy captain acting alone, although the North may yet use this excuse if it wants to defuse the situation (although the prospects of this seem slim at present).

Most importantly, the attack, as noted above, contributed to Pyongyang’s time-honored (and all too often successful) salami-slicing strategy of playing all sides against one another, both internationally – especially among the Six-Party members – and domestically within South Korea. While Pyongyang now professes its willingness to come back to the Six-Party Talks – most likely the quid pro quo for
Beijing's protection at the UN — I have met no one who believes that the North is willing today, or is likely to be willing during the leadership transition period, to negotiate away its nuclear capability.

A key argument here is that, even if the Cheonan incident had not occurred (or even if it were proven to have been an accident rather than the result of a deliberate attack), the prospects for progress in the Six-Party Talks were very slim, since Kim Jong-il appears convinced that he must retain nuclear weapons, both for his own regime’s survival and to assure a smooth transition of power to his third son, Kim Jong-un. I make a distinction here between having talks for talks’ sake (or to receive new payments for repeating old actions) and making progress. It is the realization of this fact that I believe drives much of Washington’s thinking toward Pyongyang and the Six-Party process.

**PRC Position**

I would sum up Beijing’s policy toward North Korea today in one simple sentence: "wait for Kim Jong-il to die, and hope for the best under the next leadership," which China believes will be guided or heavily influenced by Kim Jong-il’s brother-in-law Jang Song-taek. Jang has recently been elevated to the position of Vice Chairman of the powerful National Defense Commission, which apparently makes him the second most powerful leader in North Korea after Kim Jong-il and the presumed transition guardian. Beijing sees Jang as a "reformer" who is likely to steer Kim Jong-un in the direction of the “Chinese model” of reform (if Jang doesn’t just take over himself, with the same intention in mind). In the meantime, Beijing will do little to upset stability or damage its influence with the North.

China’s influence and reputation in the South has taken a serious hit, of course, but skepticism regarding China’s contribution to Korean peninsula denuclearization and broader peace began well before the Cheonan incident. Economic promises made during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to Pyongyang in October 2009 were seen at a minimum to be undercutting ROK President Lee’s proposed "grand bargain" and, at worst, violating the spirit if not the letter of UN Security Council Resolution 1874, put in place after the North’s second nuclear test. But these concerns have been magnified in the wake of the Cheonan "incident" (as Beijing calls the attack), first by Beijing’s decision to honor Kim Jong-il’s request to visit China while the Cheonan investigation was underway — reportedly after being expressly and personally asked not to when President Lee met with President Hu in Shanghai several days before the visit — and then by Beijing’s "neutral" stance, which undercuts President Lee’s assertion that “no responsible country in the international community will be able to deny the fact that the Cheonan was sunk by North Korea.”

While siding with the North over the South seems short-sighted, as few doubt that the eventual outcome on the peninsula will be a united country under Seoul’s leadership, it appears that Beijing has already written off the Lee administration as too pro-American to be influenced and believes that more “progressive” ROK governments will be more...
understanding of China’s position. Regardless of who rules in the South, Beijing likely believes that, when unification finally comes, China will be too powerful for its interests to be ignored by Seoul.

Russian Position
There is a tendency to disregard the Russians, given their apparent lack of influence over Pyongyang and their willingness to side with the North or remain “neutral,” even when such a position clearly favors the North and frustrates the US and ROK. This is a mistake. Russians have unique insights and access into North Korea, are probably more trusted than the Chinese (to the extent Pyongyang trusts any country), and, as Moscow demonstrated at the G8, more willing to at least indirectly blame Pyongyang for the Cheonan.

While the G8 statement did not specifically blame Pyongyang for pulling the trigger – Russia was not prepared to go that far, even after its own independent investigation of the evidence –, it came close enough to be deemed acceptable by both Washington and Seoul as a model for the more important UN Security Council statement that was to follow. In the G8 statement, the leaders "deplore the attack on March 26 that caused the sinking of the Republic of Korea's naval vessel, the Cheonan," identifying it as "a challenge to peace and security in the region and beyond." They called for "appropriate measures to be taken against those responsible for the attack," noted that the South Korean-led international Joint Civilian-Military Investigation Group (JC-MIG, including US, UK, Australian, and Swedish experts) had concluded that the DPRK was responsible for the attack, and then stated: "We condemn, in this context, the attack which led to the sinking of the Cheonan" [emphasis added]. It then continued: "We demand that the Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Korea refrain from committing any attacks or threatening hostilities against the Republic of Korea. We support the Republic of Korea in its efforts to seek accountability for the Cheonan incident, and we remain committed to cooperating closely with all international parties in the pursuit of regional peace and security."

The G8 statement also expressed the leaders’ “gravest concern” about DPRK nuclear and missile activities and called on Pyongyang "to abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear and ballistic missile programs, as well as proliferation activities, in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner in accordance with UN Security Council Resolutions 1718 and 1874." Had the UNSC adopted the G8 statement, Seoul and Washington, rather than Pyongyang, could have declared a “great diplomatic victory.” It is also worth noting that, rumors and leaks aside, to date, the Russians have not officially disputed the ROK account of the attack. In private discussions, Russian specialists concede that the evidence does in fact point to a torpedo attack and that, while Pyongyang is the most likely, if not the only plausible, culprit, for political reasons the final dotted line will not be connected.

Japanese Position
One of the clearly unintended (by Pyongyang) consequences of the Cheonan attack has been a deepening of relations and general trust between Japan and the ROK. It has also helped to guide the new ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) toward a North Korea policy that is very much in sync with those of Washington and Seoul. It even provided some rationale (or at least a convenient excuse) for Prime Minister Hatoyama to hide behind when he decided to face reality and reverse his stand on the Okinawa base issue (although not before his
indecisiveness contributed to his inevitable downfall). The Kan government has been equally intent on moving closer to Seoul, as witnessed by the significant breakthrough (which seems to have gone unnoticed by most) that took place when Japanese observers participated in the US-ROK East Sea show of force against Pyongyang.

**ROK Position**

I would not be presumptuous enough to discuss this topic in this setting, given the number of ROK experts in the room, but suffice it to say that, thus far at least, Pyongyang’s tactics have failed when it comes to US-ROK solidarity, despite some reported tension between ROK (and Japanese) diplomats and their US counterparts in New York, where the need to achieve “consensus” among the veto-wielding UNSC members (read: China and Russia) caused ROK (and Japanese) diplomats to express some frustration with the US negotiating team. Nonetheless, it was clear who the real problem was, and the outcome, while privately disappointing, was still sufficiently strong for Seoul and Washington to proclaim that an important message had been delivered to Pyongyang. It was, of course, also weak enough to make additional actions, including military exercises off both North Korean coasts, necessary.

**US Position**

The US policy regarding North Korea in general and the Six-Party Talks in particular, both before and after the Cheonan attack, has been defined as one of “strategic patience.” As alluded to earlier, I believe this is based on the assumption that North Korea is not now, and is unlikely in the near future, to become serious about denuclearization. North Korea’s earlier preconditions about the US first ending its hostile policy and lifting UN sanctions prior to talks helped to reinforce this view. But, even with Pyongyang now professing a readiness to return to dialogue (most likely due to Chinese pressure and perhaps the realization that they went a bit too far with Cheonan — it turned out to be less plausibly deniable than assumed), the US appears skeptical, wisely so, in my opinion.

This skeptical viewpoint was clearly implied in recent remarks by Robert Einhorn, the State Department’s special adviser for nonproliferation and arms control, who noted that the North’s aggressive rhetoric suggests it is not willing to make a serious commitment toward denuclearization. “I don’t know that we are ready today to resume those talks,” Einhorn told reporters in Tokyo this past week, “North Korea’s actions raise legitimate questions about whether they are willing to live up to their commitments.” When faced with what surely appears to be a lose-lose situation – entering into futile talks with little or no hope for real progress in denuclearization, while at the same time being accused by critics of coddling Pyongyang or of failing due to their naive approach –, doing nothing seems like a wise choice and, hence, “strategic patience.” In short, Washington’s strategy appears similar to Beijing’s: “wait for Kim Jong-il to die, and hope for the best under the next leadership,” while also pursuing non-proliferation of any North Korean nuclear materials or know-how and stopping additional materials that would assist North Korea’s nuclear or missile programs from entering the country.

The original intent — to sufficiently squeeze Pyongyang to the point where it would have to seriously consider giving up its nuclear programs — seems to have gone by the wayside, due to lack of Chinese support, at least since the aforementioned October 2009 Wen visit to Pyongyang. It had been hoped (obviously in vain) that the Cheonan attack
would have gotten Beijing back on board, but this was not meant to be. Even those Chinese who admit that Pyongyang is the likely culprit (like Beijing University’s Zhu Feng at a recent seminar) argue that, from a Chinese perspective, “Beijing does not regard the Cheonan issue worse than DPRK’s reckless nuclear test.” Instead, it sees the attack “as part of the North-South military conflicts arising around the NLL [Northern Limit Line] area, which have never ended in the past decades... Beijing has no intent to be a ‘judge’ over these precarious military interactions.” Zhu argues that, Pyongyang’s apparent guilt notwithstanding, “China’s open condemnation of DPRK for the sinking of Cheonan would remarkably signal its abandonment of Pyongyang as a longtime ‘socialist’ ally. Its refusal to do this explicitly indicates that Beijing hasn’t been ready yet to give up the North.”

China’s performance on this issue, combined with its foot-dragging at the UN over Iran (another US “core interest”), its suspension of military-to-military ties and other actions, appears to be leading the US to a state of readiness to give up on Beijing at least when it comes to China ever becoming a real strategic partner. Washington’s frustration was clearly in evidence during President Obama’s press conference at the G8 when he noted, in response to China’s calls for continued “restraint” by all parties, “I think there’s a difference between restraint and willful blindness.” He also made a direct link between the Chinese response to the attack and the resumption of Beijing-led denuclearization negotiations through the currently moribund Six-Party Talks: “We are not going to be able to have serious negotiations with the North Koreans if China fails to deal resolutely with the incident.”

When it comes to dealing with North Korea, Washington (and I would argue Seoul even more so) increasingly sees China as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Washington and Seoul are both concerned about possible future hostile acts if Pyongyang reaches the conclusion that its own nuclear weapons capability now serves as a deterrent protecting it from harsh international reaction to acts of aggression. But Washington’s concerns go further and deeper. UNSCR 1874 was supposed to prevent nuclear or missile components from being delivered to Pyongyang but also to restrict North Korean export of all military-related goods. There is already good evidence Pyongyang has tried to circumvent this prohibition, as seen in the North Korean arms shipment bound for the Middle East that was intercepted in Bangkok. North Korea is one of the very few potential sources of the technical know-how and plutonium or other radioactive materials desired by international terrorist organizations seeking a rudimentary nuclear weapon or “dirty bomb” capability. Keeping such materials out of the hands of terrorists is a core national security interest of the United States. If Pyongyang reaches the conclusion that Beijing will protect it from censure or punishment regardless of how egregious its actions, the likelihood of proliferation goes up.

The Chinese have long argued that their first priority in Northeast Asia is regional stability. Preventing proliferation, Washington’s primary goal, finishes a distant second. But it is time for Beijing to ask itself whether regional stability is possible if North Korea believes that it has carte blanche from China to misbehave and that it has the US, ROK, and the rest of the world deterred. Certainly, attacking a South Korean warship is not conducive to regional stability. This does not mean that China should “abandon” North Korea. But there are a lot of things China can and should be doing to express its dissatisfaction with Pyongyang’s behavior. Blocking or watering down UNSC resolutions is not one of them. Such
actions not only undermine future regional stability; they threaten US core national security interests.

Senior White House spokesmen are quick to point out that the current series of military exercises off Korea’s east and west coasts are not aimed at or about China but at sending Pyongyang a message that future acts of aggression will not be tolerated. There is little doubt that Pyongyang is – and should be – the primary audience and intended target for the exercises. But it would be useful to remind China that its actions, especially at the UNSC, are what have made the added signals of resolve necessary, to prevent Pyongyang from believing its own propaganda about its “great diplomatic victory.”

And this, from a US perspective, is where we are today, with the US (along with the ROK and Japan) trying to send signals to Pyongyang that future acts of aggression will not be tolerated, even in the face of irresponsible behavior on the part of Beijing which undermines, if not counteracts, this message. Meanwhile, there seems to be little interest in Washington (or in Seoul) to rush back to Six-Party Talks, given the high probability that they will result in new DPRK demands to be rewarded for doing what they have already been rewarded once or twice before for doing, while allowing Beijing to pat itself on the back for facilitating Talks likely to go nowhere. As one DPRK diplomat told me, “It’s too early. Obama has not yet been in power 2 years. We will wait until the 3½ year mark, when he will become eager to cut a deal with us.” Hopefully, the Obama administration has learned this lesson from the past and will not act accordingly.

An Analysis of the North Korean Perspective on Post-Cheonan Regional Security

Paik Haksoon

On March 26, 2010, the South Korean naval vessel Cheonan was sunk by a North Korean torpedo in the West Sea, according to South Korea’s government-led investigations. North Korea denied its involvement in the incident and offered to dispatch “an inspection team,” meaning an investigation team, to South Korea. South Korea has not accepted this offer. The South Korean government referred the Cheonan case to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and the UNSC issued a Presidential Statement. The U.S. and South Korea conducted a joint naval exercise in the East Sea, which was the largest in decades, and North Korea immediately placed all its military and civilians on alert and conducted its own military exercise.

The immediate result of the Cheonan incident was an instantaneous sharp rise in inter-Korean tension, leading to a vulnerable situation where a military conflict is no longer a remote possibility. There have been other developments as well: manifestation of a systemic power transition taking place between the United States and China in East Asia, and a “preventive” use of a military-security card by the United States vis-à-vis China, aimed at curbing the rise of China and ensuring that South Korea and Japan remain close allies of the United States by driving a wedge between these two countries and China.

Key Points of North Korea’s Announcements since the Cheonan Incident

At first, North Korea remained silent about the Cheonan incident. Then, on April 17, a North Korean
military commentator denied North Korea’s involvement. He claimed that the South Korean government was spreading “the theory of North Korea’s involvement” in order to: (1) guard against or fend off criticisms of its failures in governance and North Korea policy; (2) win votes for ruling party candidates in South Korea’s local government elections taking place on June 2; (3) continue international sanctions on North Korea; and (4) destroy “the strong and prosperous state” North Koreans have been trying hard to establish in 2012. It is noteworthy that North Korea’s responses at this early stage were predominantly targeted at the South Korean government and did not mention the role or involvement of the U.S. in the case.

Second, once the South Korean government-led joint investigation team announced on May 20 that the Cheonan was sunk by a North Korean torpedo, the spokesman for North Korea’s National Defense Commission stated that North Korea would respond to South Korea’s reckless actions by launching a “righteous war” and that it would dispatch an inspection team to the South in order to check the authenticity of the material evidence produced by the South Korean government-led joint investigation.

At the same time, North Korea’s Foreign Ministry issued a statement alleging that South Korea’s investigation report was “approved, supported, and concocted by the United States” and claiming a U.S. use of South Korea as an instrument to realize its strategic design in Asia. North Korea now zeroed in on the United States as the mastermind behind the whole incident.

Third, just after President Lee Myung-bak released a statement that North Korea was responsible and had to be punished severely, North Korea denounced the statement, denying any responsibility on its part and alleging that the statement abrogates the joint declarations made by the two Koreas on June 15 and October 4. In this fashion, North Korea claimed that the report of the joint investigation and the actions by South Korea and the United States were responsible for nullifying the two joint
declarations, which were products of two inter-Korean summit talks.

Fourth, on May 25, North Korea warned that it would take military measures; on May 26, the North Korean military notified South Korea that it would destroy South Korean military propaganda speakers by precision firing once the South resumes propaganda broadcast along the DMZ and that it would bring to a halt the South Korean personnel and automobiles in the Kaesong and Mt. Kumgang areas; on May 27, North Korea notified that it would: (1) withdraw military guarantees for inter-Korean cooperative projects and review a complete halt to the Kaesong Industrial Park; (2) nullify inter-Korean bilateral agreements designed to prevent accidental conflicts in the West Sea; (3) cut off maritime communications and strike physically in response to any violation of the maritime demarcation line; and (4) suspend passage of South Korean airplanes, ships and automobiles over North Korean airspace, waters and land. North Korea also banned South Korean government officials’ entry into North Korea.

Fifth, when South Korea and the United States decided to refer the Cheonan case to the UNSC, the North Korean Foreign Ministry’s spokesman commented on June 4 that the key to the resolution of the Cheonan incident was to have North Korea check the truthfulness of the report produced by the South Korean government-led investigation.

On June 21, the North Korean Central News Agency issued a bill of indictment entitled “You can’t cover up the truth” regarding the Cheonan incident. The indictment claimed that the Cheonan incident was a plot fabricated by the U.S. and South Korea and that such plots were always followed by U.S. invasion.

Sixth, on June 28, the North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman stated that declassified materials on the EC-121 Incident in 1969 showed that the United States had planned to use nuclear weapons against North Korea and that it had also planned to use them against North Korea and China in 1954, proving that the United States always planned to use nuclear weapons whenever there were opportunities to do so.

Earlier, on April 6, 2010, the U.S. Department of Defense had issued a Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) for 2010. The United States declared its long-held “negative security assurance” that it will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states that are party to the NPT and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations, which means that the United States will not exclude the possibility of using nuclear weapons against states that possess nuclear weapons but are not in compliance with non-proliferation obligations.

Against the NPR, the North Korean Foreign Ministry’s spokesman claimed that President Obama was no different from his predecessors and stated that, given continuing nuclear threat from the United States, North Korea would increase its stockpile of nuclear weapons as deemed necessary and proceed to modernize them. He claimed that North Korea had enough capacity to carry out such plans and that the United States had provided ample reason for North Korea to do so.

Seventh, North Korea criticized South Korea’s request to postpone the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) of the joint U.S.-ROK military command, saying this request was one of the aims of the United States in fabricating the Cheonan incident. North Korea listed the following as South Korea’s concessions to the U.S.: opening South Korean markets to the United States; greater burden-sharing of maintaining U.S. forces in Korea; dispatch of South Korean military forces overseas to
support U.S. operations; becoming a full member of the U.S.-led missile defense system; and so on.

Eighth, when the UNSC issued a presidential statement on July 9, the North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman underlined the following part of the presidential statement: “the Security Council encourages the settlement of outstanding issues on the Korean peninsula by peaceful means...” Arguing that the Cheonan incident highlighted the urgency of peace on the Korean peninsula, the spokesman claimed that North Korea will continue its effort to sign a peace treaty and denuclearize the Korean peninsula through the Six-Party Talks.

Ninth, on July 24, North Korea’s National Defense Commission issued a statement on the U.S.-ROK joint naval exercise in the East Sea, saying North Korea regards the exercise as a military provocation. It said that: (1) North Korea will confront the exercise with nuclear deterrent; (2) the hypocrisy of U.S. and South Korean policy compels North Korea to strengthen its nuclear deterrent; (3) the more the United States exercises its nuclear power and the more South Korea follows it, the more North Korea will strengthen its nuclear deterrent and the more remote denuclearization of the Korean peninsula will be; and (4) North Korea will launch its “sacred retaliatory war” whenever the U.S. and South Korea intentionally drive the situation to the brink of a war.

Tenth, from July 1 to August 10, there were four sessions of military talks at the colonel-level as preparation for general-level talks between the United States and North Korea for resolving the Cheonan incident. North Korea stressed that on-the-spot investigation by its own investigation team was a prerequisite for any solution. North Korea suggested sending a 20- to 30-member team to the South to conduct investigation for 3-5 days. At the third session, both sides agreed to “objective and scientific clarification of the Cheonan incident” as the agenda for general-level talks.

Eleventh, on July 31, the North Korean Central News Agency issued another indictment entitled “we convict the U.S.-ROK joint naval exercise of bringing about another Korean War.” It is noteworthy that North Korea compared the visits to Panmunjom by U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates with the visits to the 38th parallel by senior officials of the State and Defense Departments and the U.S. Presidential envoy John Foster Dulles just before the outbreak of the Korean War. North Korea argued that the behavior of the two U.S. Secretaries this time signified that the U.S. completed final review of its plan for invading North Korea and that the plan now entered implementation phase.

The indictment also argued that the U.S.-ROK naval exercise was for U.S. military hegemony in Northeast Asia and that the U.S. used the Cheonan incident to firmly capture South Korea as a major component in realizing its world hegemony.

Finally, North Korea fired about one hundred shells from its coastal battery in the West Sea on August 9, the last day of South Korea’s naval exercise in the West Sea.

This review of North Korea’s responses to the Cheonan incident helps us identify a few tendencies in North Korea’s thinking and actions: at first, North Korea touched on inter-Korean relations only, but then it accused the United States as the mastermind; North Korea found excuses for its strong anti-ROK and anti-U.S. stance and for strengthening its nuclear deterrence by claiming the nullification of the June 15 and October 4 joint declarations by the U.S.-ROK naval exercise in the East Sea; North Korea interprets the Cheonan incident in a larger context of U.S.-Chinese confrontations in East Asia.
and around the world; and finally, North Korea still keeps alive the agenda for “denuclearization of the Korean peninsula,” which it thinks should move forward with progress in establishing a permanent peace regime on the peninsula.

North Korea’s Rationale for Boycotting the Six-Party Talks
North Korea has repeatedly made clear that it would not return to the Six-Party Talks unless UN sanctions on North Korea were removed. North Korea’s rationale for not participating in the Six-Party Talks could be compared with its rationale for defending itself against U.S. financial sanctions as in the case of BDA in 2005-2007.

Stating that “the spirit of mutual respect and equality” expressed in the September 19th Joint Statement for the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is the foundation for the Six-Party Talks, North Korea claims that the parties to the Six-Party Talks denied this spirit in the name of the U.N. Security Council resolutions, thereby grossly violating the sovereign rights of North Korea and attempting to disarm it and change its regime. Under these circumstances, North Korea claimed it would not participate in the Six-Party Talks ever again and that it would not be obligated to carry out the terms of the September 19th Joint Statement. North Korea appears to have been deeply disappointed that the parties to the Six-Party Talks themselves had played major roles in passing the UNSC Resolution 1874. Therefore, North Korea appears to have decided that it will come back to the Six-Party Talks only when the United States and other parties to the Six-Party Talks clearly showed that they will not attempt a regime change in North Korea and demonstrated respect for North Korea’s sovereignty and equality.

As for the BDA sanctions, North Korea likewise argued that without first resolving the U.S. financial sanctions on North Korea, North Korea would not participate in the Six-Party Talks. North Korea’s strategy was that it would not begin denuclearization until it became clear that the United States had abandoned its hostile policy to topple the country’s regime and that the United States had reengaged North Korea with the intention to peacefully coexist with it. In addition, the North Korean leadership also made clear that even if the United States agreed on a non-aggression treaty, such treaty would be meaningless as long as the United States continued its anti-North Korea policy. North Korea demanded concrete evidence that the United States had shifted its North Korea policy from attempting regime change to peaceful coexistence.

Implications for the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula
What are the policy implications of the Cheonan incident? It appears that denuclearizing North Korea has become more difficult since the incident. Not only North Korea but also other East Asian countries are fully aware of the changing international order in East Asia, and North Korea appears to have almost lost its incentive to give up its nuclear weapons.

South Korea and the U.S. immediately tied the incident with resuming the Six-Party Talks, making clear that the cause and perpetrators of the incident must be determined unambiguously before any effort to resume the talks. Resuming the Six-Party Talks now appears to be on the back burner, and denuclearizing North Korea appears to be becoming more difficult as a new confrontation based on a “power transition” takes place between the United States and China.

The apparent use of the military-security card by the United States in the Cheonan case appears to
have been similar to a “preventive war” launched by a declining hegemonic power during periods of power transition in the past; it appears to have targeted at curbing the rise of China and simultaneously making South Korea and Japan dependent on U.S. cooperation. In the aftermath of the Cheonan, South Korean hopes for denuclearizing North Korea practically died, a disaster in South Korea’s effort to achieve a nuclear-free Korean peninsula and a failure to achieve the country’s goals in the Six-Party Talks.

China’s Perspective on Post-Cheonan Regional Security

Drew Thompson

The Cheonan incident has seriously tested China’s foreign policy and relations in the region, reinvigorating U.S. alliances with South Korea and Japan amid growing regional support for a robust and active U.S. presence in both Northeast and Southeast Asia. China’s failure to take a stronger stand against North Korea’s attack on the Cheonan reflects stagnation and uncertainty in Chinese decision-making at the highest levels. Regional concerns about China’s growing assertiveness, a more active and far-ranging PLA, and China’s growing economic hegemony are heightened by a lack of insight into opaque politicking in Beijing, raising questions about whether the succession process from Hu Jintao to the next generation of leaders is going smoothly, or whether there is a widening gap between civilian and military leaders. It is impossible to know how and to what degree elite politics in the run-up to 2012 are shaping China’s response to foreign policy challenges. However, it is clear that they will affect Chinese perceptions of their own interests and possibly result in postures that adversely affect China’s relations with the U.S. and the region.

The Cheonan incident is a potent reminder that China’s perspectives of its interests in the region have not changed over time. It continues to seek a balance in its relationships; preferring North Korea’s continued survival while maintaining a peaceful relationship with South Korea and the U.S. China has apparently reached the conclusion that security threats emerging on the peninsula cannot be contained or isolated and will inevitably become regional threats. China’s strong reaction to the joint U.S.-ROK naval exercises is an indication of that concern, though there is speculation that the PLA naval and air defense exercises bracketing the July U.S.-ROK anti-submarine drill are not only intended to send a message to the U.S. but are linked to succession politics as well.

China regards the Cheonan incident as a part of the continuum of inter-Korean conflict resulting from the limitations of the 1953 armistice that does not delineate the maritime boundary between the two Koreas. China sees the attack as consistent with traditional hostilities, a retaliation for the incident in 2009. The attack does not represent a paradigm shift. Therefore, China does not feel compelled to change their approach to North Korea. Condemnation of the DPRK by Beijing would be interpreted by Pyongyang as abandonment, and China remains unprepared to take that step.

China’s response to the Cheonan attack was seen as out of step with South Korea, drawing criticism from both Seoul and Washington, which surprised some in Beijing who felt that their reaction was consistent with China’s long-standing posture. Basically, China felt that nothing had changed, and
China’s subsequent response was not towards the alleged instigator, North Korea, but the highly visible and choreographed response by South Korea and the U.S. China suddenly appreciated that the Cheonan incident drew in other regional players, which they felt exacerbated tensions, particularly between the U.S. and China. Since Deng Xiaoping formulated China’s modern foreign policy, Beijing has sought to carefully manage “Great Power relations,” and the Cheonan incident – or as some in Beijing feel, the U.S. response – threatened to upset the carefully cultivated balance. The Cheonan attack and its aftermath remind Beijing that “security dilemmas” remain in Northeast Asia, particularly now that China-ROK relations are at their lowest level since 1992.

Chinese policy towards North Korea is unlikely to change as long as Kim Jong-il survives. There will be a wait-and-see approach to the new leadership that replaces him, regardless of whether it is a collective one coalesced around a figurehead or an unforeseen strongman. China is presumed to have told Kim Jong-il of Beijing’s preference for an orderly transition of power. Furthermore, Chinese analysts have concerns about Kim Jong-un’s suitability as a leader. First, because he is young, inexperienced and might be incapable of maintaining stability. Second, a hereditary transition is seen as anti-reform and anti-China. Kim Jong-il’s family is believed to be fearful of Chinese domination, and the continuation of the Kim family grip on power lessens the likelihood that Pyongyang will either reform or show greater respect for China’s interests in the future.

Despite the Chinese commitment to support North Korea, it is not unconditional. No country wants to provide North Korea an ironclad security guarantee, but at the same time, no one wants it to collapse either. Neither China nor South Korea wants to assume the burden of rebuilding North Korea’s political, economic and social structure. All the stakeholders believe the material and human costs of rebuilding North Korea are too great. Therefore, both China and South Korea have concluded that the status quo, even with the North’s provocative acts – nuclear tests, proliferation and unprovoked attacks like the Cheonan –, is more important than risking radical change in Northeast Asia.

China’s strategy towards North Korea is first and foremost to ensure that it is a friendly neighbor, rather than a client or buffer state. If China wanted, it could easily “buy out” North Korea: bail out its economy, arm the Korean People’s Army and flood the country with “advisors,” and even meddle in Pyongyang politics or install a puppet regime. However, China continues to provide food and energy aid, some financial and technical assistance and commercial investment, but only enough to keep the DPRK going -- never enough to enable the North to rebuild itself with Chinese assistance alone.

In its current state, North Korea continues to serve China’s strategic and economic interests. While China’s trade with North Korea is small, $2.79 billion last year, it is an important trading partner for two of China’s Northeast provinces, particularly the towns and prefectures along the border. North Korea, on the other hand, is completely dependent on China, making up almost 80% of its total foreign trade. However, despite this asymmetrical economic relationship, North Korea has effectively resisted Chinese influence.

The Cheonan incident was a vivid indicator of the limits of China’s influence over Pyongyang. North Korea’s provocations and brinksmanship have frustrated Beijing and harmed China’s interests. Lamenting North Korea’s “deaf ears” to China’s interests and advice, China has quietly distanced
itself from its former “lips and teeth” relationship to an increasingly “normal” one. The failure of North Korea to abandon military-first strategies and follow China’s economic model adds to Beijing’s frustration. Chinese leaders feel they have done what they can to show Kim Jong-il the benefits of reforming the economy, taking him on tours of Shanghai and Shenzhen. On his most recent trip, Chinese authorities made him dismount his armored train in Dalian and travel by car so his motorcade can drive him on new highways past prosperous towns all the way to Beijing.

China would very much like to put the Cheonan incident behind them, choosing instead to focus on the deep rift that has opened between Beijing and Seoul. China’s delicate diplomacy both prior to and since normalization of China-South Korea relations in 1992 represents a significant investment that Beijing does not want to squander.

Beijing’s calculation in balancing its relations with the two Koreas is complicated and obviously shaped by more than economics. Simply comparing China’s trade and investment figures with the two Koreas provides limited insight into Beijing’s calculations. From 2003 to 2008, Chinese companies invested $90 million in North Korea, compared to $963 million in South Korea. Likewise, China’s less than $3 billion in annual trade with the North pales in comparison to the $16 billion with the South. This level of economic interaction makes it difficult for some in South Korea to appreciate China’s decision to protect North Korea following the Cheonan attack, particularly considering that China is South Korea’s number one trading partner and cumulative FDI in China is a fifth of South Korea’s total, approaching $30 billion.

So long as North Korea’s lifeline of trade and aid remains, there is little worry in China about the possibility of North Korean collapse. U.S.-led sanctions have not destabilized the DPRK up to now, and arguably the DPRK has done more harm to itself with the recent currency revaluation and periodic crackdowns on free markets. Barring natural disasters or an unexpected domestic political development, China is certain that North Korea’s continued survival is assured. However, North Korea’s arduous existence does little to improve the regional security environment. China has thus far failed to influence Pyongyang. Beijing’s stark dilemma is that anything else that it might try to persuade Pyongyang could lead to the country’s collapse. Therefore, we can expect the China-North Korea relationship to continue with business as usual.

While China has differentiated between its security and economic interests where convenient, it faces a dilemma over South Korea. In addition to fears of Korean irredentism, during times of heightened tensions, South Korea is seen as a U.S. ally rather than a neutral trading partner. China is particularly concerned about U.S. objectives for Asia in the post-Cheyon era. There are concerns that the U.S. is playing favorites, expressing preferences for one country over another, or practicing double standards. Suspensions abound that the U.S. opposes an East Asian community and is incrementally provoking China. The U.S. announcement that it would facilitate a multilateral process towards a code of conduct in the South China Sea, followed by the admission that the U.S. and Vietnam are negotiating a civil nuclear agreement, has raised questions amongst many strategists in Beijing about U.S. intent. Ambassador Ma Zhengang, Secretary of the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association, was quoted in China Daily as saying that the U.S.-Vietnam civil nuclear deal violates the “non-proliferation rule.”
Beijing sees these and other U.S. moves as a new “hard line” towards China being implemented by the Obama administration, ostensibly as part of a soft containment strategy. U.S. advances in multilateral forums raise significant concerns in this regard. China will likely respond to U.S. diplomatic initiatives, potentially upping the ante and turning multilateral regional groupings into a playing field for competition. Additionally, U.S.-ROK joint military exercises are seen in Beijing as provocative, and Beijing has reacted strongly to the expected presence of a U.S. aircraft carrier joining upcoming exercises in the Yellow Sea. While the U.S. and South Korea have stated that military drills are directed towards North Korea, China has chosen to interpret U.S. decisions to position an aircraft carrier off the west coast of North Korea, rather than the east coast, as a direct provocation and a threat to the Chinese capitol itself. Chinese military strategists have described recent U.S. exercises as “expansion” into waters near China, implying that China would seek to counter U.S. “intrusions.” U.S. and South Korean intentions to stage monthly exercises through the rest of the year are therefore likely to be met by regular Chinese military exercises in response.

Assuming that the U.S. and China can manage their bilateral relationship and shepherd it through the current tense period, significant potential pitfalls remain. The lack of sustained military-to-military contact between the US and China and a near constant state of dueling exercises increase the risk that an otherwise minor incident could quickly escalate. The inability to negotiate an incidents at sea-type agreement between the U.S. and China appears to be an increasingly dangerous predicament. It is impossible to know if North Korea foresaw their actions as precipitating a U.S.-China conflict, or if they would view that as a positive or negative development. Regardless, it is increasingly clear that North Korea’s attack on the Cheonan has exacerbated U.S.-China differences. The current state of tensions and mutual distrust certainly does not promote substantive U.S.-China dialogue on managing the North Korean issue, leaving us less prepared to deal with future challenges. Should rising U.S. and South Korean tensions with China continue, it is far from certain how North Korea would perceive incremental escalations and respond. How would China respond to a future provocation by the DPRK, such as a new nuclear test, particularly a uranium-fueled one? How would the U.S. and South Korea respond to an attack on an exercising vessel or aircraft, especially if there is no attributional ambiguity as in the Cheonan case?

Chinese experts are well aware of the increasingly high stakes and concerned about the trend towards brinksmanship. Some experts and officials feel that Beijing’s increasingly assertive tone, coupled with a more active and vocal PLA, is a departure from Deng Xiaoping’s strategy and a contributing factor to U.S. advances in Southeast Asia and increased hedging by neighboring states. Some have questioned the necessity of Beijing’s statement to visiting senior U.S. officials identifying the South China Sea as a core national interest, and other Chinese experts have questioned whether Hu Jintao or Wen Jiabao authorized it. If this sentiment prevails amongst elite policy makers, the leadership might begin to actively seek opportunities to reduce tensions and walk back from contentious statements by characterizing them as a misunderstanding. If China’s leaders reach the conclusion that their assertive posturing was a miscalculation, they will likely find the U.S. to be a willing partner in the effort to find a way out and cooperate to reduce tensions.
Q&A

Session I

Ralph Cossa:
I have a great deal of respect for Professor Paik, who tried to analyze what the North Koreans were saying, and appreciate his paper, which I found very useful until the last paragraph. In the last paragraph, you attempted to analyze what the U.S. is doing. I think this is fundamentally and a hundred percent wrong. I don’t believe that the U.S. is playing some sort of military security card in the hopes of curbing the rise of China. If we wanted to curb the rise of China, we wouldn’t be investing tens of billions of direct foreign investment into China. Our strategy has always been to guide the rise of China and integrate it into the world system. I think that the U.S. is playing the military security card because China negated the diplomatic card. The U.S. and South Korea have played the diplomatic card at the United Nations and that failed because of China’s actions. South Korea felt a strong need to send a strong signal to North Korea, and the U.S. as an ally has supported that. It is my understanding that South Korea is very much in the lead. The U.S. is not pushing South Korea into a show of force with the North. In fact, the South Korean military exercises last week didn’t even involve the U.S. So, my sense is that you have got it backwards. I don’t think either Seoul or Washington was looking for a fight with either Pyongyang or Beijing.

But, I think there is a concern now that if you don’t send a strong message to North Korea that this type of activity is unacceptable, we are going to see more of these types of actions. And in your paper, there was also an implication that North Korea was just dying to give up its nuclear weapons and here we’ve killed the idea of Six Party Talks. If you believe that North Korea was really prepared to give up its weapons, you’re the first person I’ve talked to in the last two years who believes that. If you believe that they are not going to give them up under any circumstances, the Six Party Talks denies us the opportunity to pretend there is progress, denies us the opportunity to reward North Korea for doing the same things they’ve done before, but it doesn’t give us denuclearization since I don’t think that’s going to happen.

Paik Haksoon:
I don’t think North Korea will be willing to give up its nuclear weapons under these circumstances. We had such opportunities before the George W. Bush administration; since then, it has become harder. This is a very critical time of power transition between China and the United States in East Asia. If you agree with the hegemonic transition theory in international relations, the decline of a hegemon usually leads to war against the rising competitor. This is not war, but I fear that we are approaching those critical points. In the absence of the possibility of using an economic card vis-à-vis China, the U.S. might be willing to use a military card. I am not sure whether it was used intentionally. As a scholar in Seoul, it makes me understand things that way.

Kim Taewoo:
I have two things to share. First, I would like to add to and support what Dr. Cossa said. The military drill was pushed by South Korean initiatives. It is very clear that the U.S. supported it. I am working for a special committee checking Defense Reform 2020. We are dealing with this issue very seriously within the committee on the so-called asymmetric threat. The North Korean submarines are just one of nine major asymmetric areas. Of course, this doesn’t mean that we should have an equal number of small submarines. We are looking for ways to avoid the
submarine threat. But we should immediately respond to North Korea with a strong message. This military drill was executed under South Korean initiative and not due to U.S. pressure. Second, I would like to pose a question to Dr. Paik. In your paper, you said that by refusing the resumption of Six-Party Talks, the U.S. and South Korea are losing the ability for denuclearization. You also said that it is “disastrous” that we are losing such opportunities for North Korea’s denuclearization. My question is whether there was any progress when we held the talks. Was there any progress to denuclearization when we were giving assistance and money to North Korea? If you say it is bad to deny or refuse nuclear talks, then I think you should prove that the continuation or resumption of such talks is beneficial for denuclearization. I agree that it is “disastrous” that North Korea should continue to produce nuclear weapons, but what is more disastrous is North Korea continuing to produce nuclear weapons financed by money and assistance given by gullible South Koreans, which ends up strengthening North Korea’s army and regime. I think denuclearization will only be possible when their regime undergoes drastic change. So, by strengthening their regime and political system, how can we expect them to do away with their only weapon?

Question:
We have spent so much effort and money on the issue of North Korea, but the results do not seem so successful. Why is this? Honestly, I think the question is wrong. Rather than asking why they have nuclear weapons, we need to ask why they cannot give them up. It is because North Korea cannot open its borders. They don’t want their people to be educated. I think opening their country is the key. How can we open the country? I don’t think external efforts from states such as China, South Korea, Japan, or the U.S. have been successful. So, I think the key is internal change. But, this internal change cannot be expected to come from the North Korean government because they do not want that. So, my personal view is that the people of North Korea must understand the situation and know the value of human rights, democracy, and free market. And how is that possible? Looking at what South Korea and the U.S. have been doing, we have only been concentrating on the military aspects.

Question:
I will direct my questions to Mr. Thompson. I must say I also found the Chinese reaction puzzling, to put it mildly, because their interests are still the same. They are still interested in denuclearization, non-proliferation, the Six-Party Talks, and the stability of the peninsula, but they are still supporting the actions of a regime that is actually leading to instability, which is not in China’s interest. So, I have difficulty understanding why they acted that way. Mr. Kim, I would like to know what you will do when there is another attack.

Drew Thompson:
Both of these questions are nicely related. People in Beijing ask the same question. I’ve got friends in the foreign policy establishment in Beijing saying... North Korea is trampling on our own interests by these behaviors. But then, you’ve got other voices within the larger community. And one of the voices is the PLA, and the PLA families, including the family members of the volunteers who died defending North Korea’s independence. And North Korea is a country represented at the UN. They paid for it with their blood. Not only serving members of the PLA but the ex-members and veterans don’t want to just give
it up: this is a powerful and influential political voice in China. But it’s also an emotional choice. That’s one aspect.

The other side is that China would rather not be in this position. They feel like victims of circumstance – they’re very good at feeling like they’re victims. I think they’re trying to offer North Korea an alternative domestic scenario. They took Kim Jong-il to Shenzhen, to Pudong, etc. On his most recent trip, they asked him to get off his train in Dalian and take a car. If you’ve been on a Chinese train, it goes through the countryside, but if you go on a highway, you tend to see the fruits of Chinese modernization in the countryside. You see tremendous amounts of concrete being poured. You see very good roads, which I’m sure he doesn’t see at home. This I think is what the Chinese are trying to put forward as their way out, which would lead to an eventual opening, and I think it is possible. I’m not going to pretend to understand what goes on in North Korea, but that may be the source of resistance to this reform and opening. There are currently two-hundred or so Chinese joint ventures and a handful of European companies. There’s not a whole lot of interaction between tourists and average North Koreans. But if you open the country up to more investments, you’re going to have a lot more people trespassing through. You’re going to have a lot more contact between workers and managers, foreign managers, and that may be something that they’re terribly concerned about.

Hahm Chaibong:
So Dr. Kim, what happens when there’s another provocation from North Korea?

Kim Taewoo:
Brief reaction to the question raised by the student: I have no disagreement with you. I fully agree with you. When I mentioned additional sanctions by the U.S., I meant financial sanctions and not military. And also you mentioned that we have to help them feel more acquainted with democracy and the free market. That’s exactly the method I advocated in my numerous writings. Without internal change of North Korean government, we cannot expect a resolution of North Korean problems, including nuclear weapons. That’s why sometimes we need carrots and sticks or some sort of combination.

To answer what South Korea will do when there is another provocation, frankly speaking, I do not know. But theoretically speaking, a proportionate reaction is very much necessary. In other words, we should make them pay some price whenever they perpetrate provocations. That is the commonsensical way to prevent the repetition of the same provocation.

But the problem is the North Korean influence on South Korean public opinion. For example, the South Koreans got scared after the Cheonan incident and supported political forces that argue for reconciliation with North Korea. If this sort of public opinion becomes mainstream, the South Korean government will not be able to do something significant.

Question:
Dr. Cossa said China is waiting: waiting until Kim Jong-il dies. Dr. Thompson said that the Chinese are reevaluating the situation and that cautious and moderate views are coming out. I worried about North Korean hard-liners and whether Chairman Kim can control these forces. During the Kim Il-sung era, he was able to control military leaders. Dr. Thompson, is China worried about North Korean hard-liners, especially militant leaders?
Ralph Cossa:
I would like to say that, first of all, when it comes to North Korean internal developments, we’re all guessing. I don’t really know whose guess is good. I have trouble believing that the North Korean military can do what it wants without Kim Jong-il’s support. I believe that most of the people in command today were put there by him and owe him a certain amount of allegiance. And while he may be a little bit weaker now and ill, I don’t believe that there’s a renegade military element that’s going in its own direction in North Korea. For one, if that were the case, I don’t think he would have ever felt secure enough to hop on a train and go to Beijing. So, that tells me he’s still feeling like he’s in control. That’s not to say that the military doesn’t have a powerful voice. I am frankly more concerned about the independent voice in China among the PLA. It is remarkable. In the United States, as we painfully saw a couple of months ago, even if you are a highly-decorated and respected General, you keep your political views to yourself. In China, every major General seems to be on CCTV every other hour, spouting off things on government policy, sometimes going off in the deep end. There seems to be a hundred-flowers-blooming campaign within the PLA, which is more interesting to watch, in my opinion, rather than worrying about the North Korean military going off in its own direction.

Drew Thompson:
I know so little about the workings of North Korea that I won’t touch them. But as I mentioned, there are some in China who think that the Kim family regime is anti-China, anti-reform, so hereditary succession is unfavorable to Chinese interests. So, I’ve been told that the Chinese have told the North Koreans that they don’t favor hereditary succession. But then, there are other people who believe that Kim Jong-un is younger and gentler, young and open. Then, there are others who say that because he is young and weak, he will be more brutal than others: we don’t know. I don’t think the Chinese have a clear sense yet, either.

But I’ll echo Dr. Cossa. It is puzzling to see what game these officers are playing. They are appearing on TV, writing op-eds, some of them even quipped that they don’t have to seek permission anymore to speak to the press. For a notoriously opaque and closed-off PLA, this is unusual and interesting to watch. Their motivation is unclear, but we can guess a couple of them: I think some of it has to do with political posturing prior to 2012. It’s also possible that they are looking at their next budget allocation process and at suddenly having a U.S. aircraft carrier approaching Beijing and the need for air defense exercises. So, what is the need for the next big PLA budget increase? Last year was below expectation, somewhere around 8%. Before, it had been somewhere in the double digits. So, maybe they’re angling for a double-digit increase this year. What bureaucratic institution doesn’t cry for need and budget? So, that might be it, but maybe they’re also posturing for more political power...

Question:
After China’s leadership transition in 2012 and a power consolidation, do you think China would change its policy towards North Korea?

Question:
I don’t think anybody mentioned the Chinese concern about the South China Sea and how that might relate to the Yellow Sea. It is interesting that the George Washington went from the East Sea to the South China Sea off Vietnam in the space of a few days. China seems concerned about the South
China Sea, claiming sovereignty. How does that relate to the Yellow Sea and China’s burgeoning military influence in the region? Maybe Mr. Cossa can answer this question.

Question:
This question is for Kim Taewoo. In your conclusion, you mentioned that South Korea will have to play a role in preventing possible US-China conflicts. Can you expound on the specific roles and how Korea could play these roles? Also, what could Korea achieve as a middle power? In other words, what are the limits?

Ralph Cossa:
These are good questions. Regarding the South China Sea, I think the key event in the South China Sea is Secretary Clinton’s comments at the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting about the U.S. supporting ASEAN, prodding China to move forward on the code of conduct. I think there is a perceived need, Cheonan aside, in the U.S. to remind China about the freedom of navigation. Obviously, there is a message being sent in both seas about this when you send the George Washington to the East Sea, the West Sea, the South China Sea, or anywhere else. It is reminding the Chinese that the U.S. is still committed to the freedom of navigation as these are international waters and that is going to continue. I think it’s also sending a message to China that it is not just about the U.S. and China. It is about a lot of countries in Southeast Asia, who are now becoming concerned about China’s muscle-flexing and some of China’s behavior in the South China Sea vis-à-vis the Yellow Sea and elsewhere. This is sort of a balancing act that is going to continue, and it is a necessary message because I think there has been concern in Washington that China misinterpreted earlier politeness on the part of the Obama Administration as weakness. The U.S. needs to send a message that while China is recognized as the 800-pound gorilla in Asia, the U.S. is still the 1,600-pound gorilla. I think it is a necessary message.

We have been debating for the last couple of days as to why the Chinese are acting the way they are acting – perhaps to build up the PLA budget. We have also seen PLA in the past trying to drum up anti-U.S. nationalism not just for budget purposes, but I think there is a concern among many in China. We saw this in the wake of the Belgrade bombing when we had a U.S. President who was perhaps more popular in China than he was in the U.S., and we may have the case again now with President Obama’s popularity and the PLA desires to bring the U.S. image down a bit in the minds of the young people in China. As I mentioned earlier, I don’t disagree with Dr. Thompson that China does worry about its world image, but I think in the Cheonan case, China understands that it is having some short-term damage to its image in South Korea but has dismissed it as a problem that it is willing to deal with because of growing Chinese arrogance and dismissiveness towards South Korea. I think that is a problem and requires some strong statements by the South, backed by the United States, to remind China that South Korea still matters.

As far as North Korea proposing the resumption of the Six-Party Talks, my guess is that this is the quid pro quo for China backing it at the UN Security Council, and North Korea would, in return, talk about its willingness to come back to the Six-Party Talks. It is also to their benefit to now be seen as wanting to come back to the Talks, but we have to keep reminding ourselves and everyone else that the objective is not Six-Party Talks. The objective is denuclearization. If the North Koreans say they...
would like to come back to the Talks but also say they have no intention of denuclearizing, then what you are doing is bringing them back for the appearance of progress and letting them play a propaganda game. I think that is the real problem. What I haven’t heard North Korea say is that it is committed to denuclearization...

Kim Taewoo:
What can South Korea do to prevent confrontation between the U.S. and China? The South Korean role will be largely based on economic power and interdependence. It will also depend on the cultural similarities, geographic proximity, and good relations. In the previous administration, there was a concept of South Korea being a balancer in Northeast Asia. As a sea power, South Korea can play an important role to mediate any confrontation between the U.S. and China. And what are the limits? If China shows muscle-flexing, South Korea will face difficulties. Also, South Korea being a sea power will be another limitation.

Paik Haksoon:
Dr. Cossa mentioned that we are all guessing when it comes to North Korea. That is true, but there are people who have studied North Korea for years. There is a tendency among policymakers, not only here but also in Washington, D.C., that they are not paying attention to the opinions of people who have studied North Korea.

What we hear most frequently these days about North Korea is that Kim Jong-un, the apparent heir to Kim Jong-il, is behind the scenes manipulating North Korean politics. I do agree with that. But think about the power transition in North Korea. It is a very abnormal thing especially for us living in the free world. It is true that Kim Jong-un is behind the scenes, but when he comes to power, he will inherit the same problems that his father has faced. As a young man, he has to feed his people, do politics, and juggle all sorts of coalitions within North Korea as well as across the borders in order to solidify his power.

Drew Thompson:
The question about the next generation of leadership in China and whether they would achieve something constructive [on the North Korean question] and create a legacy for themselves – I don’t think so. I think Taiwan would be a higher priority. I think that’s a much higher priority for China. It is also one that China has not made much progress on despite very favorable conditions.

Just to wrap up, China has made a political calculation and the decision to protect North Korea at all cost. That explains partly why they defended North Korea in the UN Security Council. It is not consistent with the global image they want to project, but China is much more concerned about contributing to stabilization. Should China have said something much stern to North Korea or permitted it to happen, that might have instigated a certain amount more instability in North Korea, which is the last thing China wants.
Session II
“Post-Cheonan Regional Security: Where do we go from here?”

Initial Strategic Lessons from the Cheonan Incident: A View from South Korea

Lee Chung Min

Introduction
Over the past five decades, the ROK has become accustomed in certain respects to North Korea’s calibrated military provocations. From attempted assassinations of Korean presidents (1968, 1974, and 1983), bombing of a civilian airplane (1983), numerous coastal and border intrusions, espionage operations, and naval skirmishes, Pyongyang’s use of force as an instrument of state policy is undisputed. Beyond direct terrorist attacks and limited military operations, North Korea has also expanded the threat envelope through two nuclear tests (2006 and 2009) and a series of missile tests including the longer range Taepodong-1/2. Fortunately, none of these attacks or demonstrations of force erupted into a major military conflict or crisis owing to the ROK’s and the United States’ concern that strategic counterattacks could trigger an all-out war or conflict on the Korean peninsula.

Compared to Israel’s more active and direct responses to a range of similar military provocations and intrusions, the premium placed on ensuring strategic stability on the Korean peninsula has come to largely define the ROK’s strategic template. Such a paradigm continues to persist even in the aftermath of North Korea’s brazen and totally unprovoked sinking of the Cheonan on March 26, 2010, although this tragedy is also likely to introduce new forces and constraints in the conduct of South Korea’s foreign and defense policies. For its part, the Lee Myung-bak administration has implemented a series of diplomatic, economic and military measures designed to enhance South Korea’s deterrent capabilities vis-à-vis North Korea. While it remains unclear how the Cheonan factor is likely to influence security dynamics between the two Koreas, three key factors are likely to assume greater importance in the mid-to long-term: (1) China’s more assertive responses to strategic developments on the Korean peninsula including reactions to joint ROK-U.S. initiatives; (2) the need for the ROK to revamp and improve its broader national security apparatus with an emphasis on enhancing its early warning capabilities vis-à-vis North Korea and attendant policy responses; and (3) taking into due consideration an expansion of the ROK’s security and economic responsibilities that may conflict with key strategic and economic interests as the ROK accentuates its “Global Korea” strategy and associated initiatives.

Reconsidering the China Factor
The Cheonan incident encapsulates an emerging strategic quandary for the ROK, i.e., coping with a much more assertive China over key security agendas. This doesn’t mean that China was not assertive prior to the outbreak of the Cheonan crisis, only that the incident accentuated China’s seeming willingness to demonstrate more fully its strategic capabilities in and around the Korean peninsula and, by extension, the broader Asia-Pacific region. Throughout the post-reform era, Beijing has opted for finely calibrated
but highly nuanced uses of force. The Sino-Vietnamese border conflict in 1979, live-fire exercises in the Taiwan Strait in 1995-96, and tensions with the United States in the aftermath of the Ep-3 incident in April 2001 are some of the more notable examples of China’s use of force, although, in the EP-3 incident, China did not take any direct military action against U.S. forces. All of these and other cases involving China’s use of force were highly situation-specific so that generic lessons are difficult to ascertain. That said, China’s reactions to joint ROK-U.S. exercises in the post-Cheonan period including the undertaking of its own robust military exercises marked the first time that the PLA conducted large-scale military maneuvers specifically in response to the ROK and the United States. How much impact the Cheonan incident is going to have in the shaping of Chinese strategies towards the Korean peninsula remains unknown, but Chinese authorities are likely to become much more attentive to and responsive to critical security developments on the peninsula.

The China factor has always loomed large in the context of inter-Korean relations and overarching security dynamics in Northeast Asia, but the Cheonan incident demonstrates China’s willingness to prong, if not “virtually contest,” U.S. security resolve towards the ROK and U.S. deterrence/defense postures vis-à-vis North Korea. Over time and particularly if events in the North deteriorate significantly and Pyongyang opts to escalate tensions with a third nuclear test or additional missile launches or conducts other military provocations, China’s strategic reactions are no longer going to be limited primarily to the diplomatic domain. This is perhaps one of the most important potential lessons from the sinking of the Cheonan. In other words, if China continues to display its displeasure through a combination of harsh rhetoric with corollary military moves aimed at more active U.S. and ROK responses to North Korean provocations, Beijing’s reactions before and after the Cheonan incident could be seen as a key tipping point.

For South Korea, China’s much more robust reactions to what it considers as entirely legitimate defensive actions in the face of North Korean intrusions and deliberate provocations introduce another strategic constraint in shaping its future strategies and policies towards the North. As South Korea’s economic interactions with China continue to grow with increasing South Korean FDI into China, Seoul’s sensitivity and vulnerability to potential Chinese moves cannot but increase. The key quandary for Seoul (and, to a lesser extent, for Tokyo as well) is the fact that as its economic linkages with China increase, so too will China’s ability to exert influence over a range of domains. Since the Lee Myung-bak administration came into office in February 2008, revitalizing and strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance has served as a central pillar of its foreign policy in the context of its “Global Korea” strategy. Beginning at the tail end of the Bush administration and continuing well into the Obama administration, the ROK-U.S. alliance is arguably the strongest it has ever been as evinced by the July 21, 2010, “Two Plus Two” foreign and defense ministers’ meeting that took place in Seoul for the first time. Seoul and Washington agreed to hold “Two Plus Two” meetings annually at the deputy or assistant ministers’ level and also at the ministerial level on a case-by-case basis.

There is every reason to believe that so long as the Grand National Party remains in power in the ROK, a robust alliance will continue. If the Democratic Party (DP) regains power in the 2012 election, there will be policy shifts and changes towards North Korea with a greater emphasis on sustained engage-
ment. Assuming that the North Korean nuclear issue remains unresolved through the next DP administration, Seoul is likely to continue to stress direct engagement with Pyongyang. Nevertheless, China’s propensity and preference for greater engagement between Seoul and Pyongyang is unlikely to translate into greater acceptance or accommodation of prevailing ROK-U.S. security linkages including on-going and expected joint military exercises between the ROK and the United States.

In other words, regardless of Beijing’s preference for a South Korean government that is much more conducive to engagement with the North, such a preference should be seen separately from China’s growing assertiveness vis-à-vis the United States and its central allies in the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, Seoul’s longer term security policy directions and options are likely to be complicated by the rise of the China factor irrespective of which party holds power in Seoul. It could also be argued that even if the DP were to win the next presidential election in December 2012, this likely will not result in any significant or substantial shifts in China’s reactions to robust ROK-U.S. and U.S.-Japan alliances.

Recalibrating the ROK’s National Security Framework

The Cheonan incident also brought to the fore the need for a significant overhaul in South Korea’s existing national security and defense planning framework and attendant policy processes. For nearly six decades, the ROK has been accustomed to a security template that emphasized avoidance of conflict and war given the destructiveness of a major conflict between the two Koreas. This basic approach remains unchanged even in the aftermath of the attack on the Cheonan. Yet, at the same time, the attack also illustrated some key drawbacks and deficiencies in the ROK’s operational capabilities. A blue ribbon commission is in the midst of finalizing a comprehensive review of the ROK’s national security posture together with on-going defense reform measures although it remains unclear how effectively and to what extent the reforms will be institutionalized. Since the late 1980s, every successive administration has tried to tackle defense reforms. However, while marginal improvements have been made, the ROK’s armed forces have suffered from the following: an over-dependence on static operational guidelines, an increasing reliance on RMA-esque technologies and associated strategies, a heavily bureaucratized military structure, a greater sensitivity to prevailing political norms, and an over-dependence and over-reliance on the ROK-U.S. alliance.

Although it goes without saying that the ROK-U.S. alliance has and continues to serve as the bedrock of the ROK’s overall defense posture, the ROK military’s ability to conduct the full spectrum of military operations has been stymied, in part, by the armed forces’ almost instinctive reliance on joint operations and interoperability with the USFK
and other U.S. military assets. Like all peacetime armies with little if any direct combat experience, the ROK military is becoming increasingly “book smart.” The generation of military officers who participated in the Vietnam War from the mid-1960s until the early 1970s have long been retired. Since then, limited PKO missions (such as in East Timor and ongoing missions in Lebanon), non-combat operations (such as in Iraq and Afghanistan), and MOOTW missions (such as humanitarian aid operations in Haiti) have come to define the ROK military’s field experience. This is not to suggest that the ROK military has to gain credible warfighting experiences in order to maintain a critical edge vis-à-vis the forces of North Korea. But it does mean that operational inertia, business-as-usual training, and ineffective C4ISR, among other factors, have resulted in a relative decline in its operational capabilities.

But the military is just one part of a broader problem. The ROK’s national security system has undergone numerous changes over the years, even as the Cheonan incident brought to the fore the lack of a much more “realistic” crisis management and response mechanism at the highest echelons of the government. The absence of a coordinated intelligence and early warning signals, an effective and operationally trained policy team that can ensure a high degree of integration and joint operational capacities, and a more savvy national security management structure all contributed to the military’s shortcomings in the immediate aftermath of the Cheonan attack. More worrisome, however, is the fact that the ROK is likely to face an expanded menu of threats and provocations from the North including a series of MOOTW probes and incursions throughout the ROK’s entire national defense grid. If North Korea chooses to escalate military tensions in combination with more assertive Chinese (or, for that matter, even Russian) responses to the ROK’s countermeasures, the ROK military will have to operationalize doctrines that are much more flexible. If previous attempts at defense reforms can serve as a guide and if the current administration wants to undertake critical reforms, the ROK should institutionalize a more formalized NSC structure while beefing up key weaknesses such as a lack of real-time intelligence sharing, realistic contingency scenarios with matching policy frameworks, and improved coordination within and between the respective services.

“Global Korea’s” Opportunities and Responsibilities

Last but not least, the Cheonan attack also highlighted what is perhaps the most important long-term lesson for the ROK government. In a nutshell, as the ROK’s international networks have expanded over the past three to four decades commensurate with its rapid economic growth, democratization, and more diverse international footprints (driven by both governmental and non-governmental organizations and institutions), the ROK’s responsibilities over a range of issues and vis-à-vis key partners and allies have also increased significantly. Even though the ROK continues to benefit from key economic linkages with the PRC and substantially improved political ties, China’s growing influence within North Korea (such as a greater control of key natural resources and sustaining the North with critical energy and food aid) suggests that China will increasingly emphasize the importance of “strategic accommodation” on the part of the ROK.

Beyond China’s expanding envelope in and around the Korean peninsula, the ROK also faces the
task of enhancing its international obligations commensurate with its status as a G-20 power and a major Asian economic player. As pressure mounts on the ROK government to honor multilateral obligations such as climate change (which it has chosen to do expeditiously), the ROK is also being called upon to step up to the plate in meeting international security challenges including U.N.-sponsored and U.S.-led sanctions against Iran and other sanctioned states such as Burma. As a result, while Seoul gains key dividends from its global forays and is rightfully stressing globalization, it is also true that pressures on South Korea are bound to increase commensurate with its growing regional and international stature.

While the Cheonan incident is not directly tied to the specific point mentioned above, it does shed light on what the ROK should come to expect with increasing frequency in its foreign and security policies. As the on-going Iranian case has shown, Seoul’s key economic interests vis-à-vis Iran have to be balanced much more adroitly with key international obligations and, equally important, in the context of managing its alliance with the United States. The Cheonan incident also illustrates the growing complexities of simultaneously managing overwhelmingly important economic and trade relations with China while maintaining the closest of security ties through the critical ROK-U.S. alliance. This is going to require a thorough reevaluation of Seoul’s foreign policy priorities and options, as the weight of the “G-2” factor is likely to grow, rather than wane, in the years and decades to follow.

After the Cheonan: Where Do We Go From Here?

Evans J.R. Revere

The North Korean sinking of the Republic of Korea (ROK) warship Cheonan on March 26, 2010, was a tragic and disturbing new development on a divided peninsula that has seen more than its share of confrontation. While military incidents along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) dividing North and South and near the Northern Limit Line (NLL), which has long served as a de facto maritime demarcation line between the two Koreas, have occurred with some frequency, the attack on the Cheonan was quite different, taking place in South Korean territorial waters some distance from the disputed NLL.

The attack was also carried out without warning. Past naval incidents between the two Koreas have usually involved face-to-face encounters between warships in which warnings were issued and shots fired as the DPRK’s naval forces tested the ROK and challenged the status of the NLL as a boundary. But, as a ROK-led international investigation concluded, the March 26th attack was carried out by a North Korean submarine which stalked the ROK warship and fired a torpedo that exploded under the hull of the vessel, causing it to break in two.

The bold and unprecedented nature of the North Korean action sent a predictable shock wave through South Korea. The attack stoked popular anger at the loss of life (46 ROK sailors perished), prompted concerns about ROK military preparedness, and raised questions about the appropriateness of moving ahead with plans for the transfer of wartime opera-
tional control (OPCON) of ROK forces from the U.S.-led Combined Forces Commander to a ROK general. It also roiled Korean domestic politics in the run-up to local elections in June.

The attack also ended efforts that had been underway to restart the Six-Party Talks. In the weeks before the attack, there was reason to believe that the PRC was making progress brokering a resumption of the talks. During this period, senior Chinese officials expressed optimism about prospects for renewed talks. In March, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi conveyed his "great hope" that the talks would resume, while the senior PRC representative to the Six Party Talks, Ambassador Wu Dawei, even predicted that the talks might begin in the first half of 2010. However, any hope that the talks would be re-launched soon was quickly dashed by the North Korean attack, which destroyed in an instant the fragile atmosphere in which behind-the-scenes efforts by China and the United States to jump-start the Six Party Talks were taking place.

Some have speculated that Pyongyang, under considerable pressure from Beijing to return to the negotiating table, might have carried out the attack to sabotage the talks by creating a crisis. This seems unlikely. Such an approach would have carried with it the great risk of angering China, the host and convener of the Six-Party Talks and the North's major economic benefactor, just at the moment when the North was using a visit by its leader to solicit additional Chinese economic support. If China was upset by the impact of the attack on the Six-Party Talks, it masked its anger well, allowing North Korean leader Kim Jong-il to visit China in early May. However, during that visit, Beijing’s leadership made a point of eliciting from Kim his renewed commitment to denuclearization.

After the attack on the Cheonan, both the ROK and the United States evinced concern about China’s deference to North Korean sensitivities over the incident. Beijing has seemed accepting of North Korea’s denials of responsibility for the attack, and the PRC has effectively provided diplomatic “cover” for North Korea, even as the United States and the ROK have tried to mobilize international public opinion and diplomatic action to respond to the sinking. Perhaps reflecting this protective posture, it took China almost one month to convey its initial condolences to the ROK over the sinking. An expression of condolences from China’s leadership came more than two months after the attack, during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s May 29, 2010, visit to Seoul.

Any positive impact these belated statements of sympathy might have had on ROK public opinion was negated by Beijing’s hosting of the North Korean leader only days after a meeting between the ROK and PRC presidents in Shanghai, and as the ROK was in the midst of its investigation of the sinking. Beijing’s invitation to Kim was widely interpreted as a cynical step, although Chinese officials have argued that canceling or postponing the visit would have been inappropriate, since the ROK-led investigation had not yet reached any conclusions, and the ROK government had carefully avoided pointing the finger of blame at Pyongyang pending the end of the investigation and conclusive evidence of a North Korean role in the sinking.

Beijing’s efforts to run interference for its North Korean ally were worrisome to Seoul and Washington, particularly because China seemed oblivious to the mounting body of evidence pointing to North Korea’s role in the sinking. China’s opposition to a tough response to the incident by the UN Security Council was also puzzling, and stood in sharp
contrast to Beijing’s past willingness to support a firm UN resolution and new sanctions after the DPRK’s nuclear test in 2009. The fact that Beijing eventually endorsed a UN Security Council President’s Statement in response to the sinking of the Cheonan (the statement left little doubt that the UN believed North Korea carried out the attack) did little to ease concerns in the U.S. and the ROK about Beijing’s support for Pyongyang.

No less problematic has been the PRC’s opposition to the just-completed U.S.-ROK “Invincible Spirit” joint naval exercise off Korea’s east coast. In recent weeks, we have seen Beijing take a strident position against the exercise, despite repeated U.S. and ROK efforts to assure China of the defensive nature of the exercise and to point out that it was aimed at sending a deterrent message to North Korea and enhancing U.S.-ROK ability to deal with future DPRK provocations. For a time, Beijing’s vocal and determined opposition to the exercise seemed to risk turning this incident into a crisis in U.S.-China relations.

Beijing’s protective posture towards the DPRK seemed to exceed even the PRC’s past aversion to alienating its traditional ally or its traditional call for “moderation” and “dialogue” in resolving issues involving its problematic neighbor. By pursuing this recent approach, the PRC risked damaging its relations with the ROK and adding yet another burdensome problem to the basket of contentious issues in the U.S.-China relationship. It also raised questions about whether China is indeed prepared to play the role of “responsible stakeholder” when it comes to the Korean peninsula.

The aftermath of the Cheonan incident raises issues for the United States and the ROK as we look to the future. The first concern is that the incident highlighted significant shortcomings in the ROK’s anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities. Importantly, the ROK and the United States are addressing this problem through a series of military exercises and training. China’s objections to the recent “Invincible Spirit” exercise notwithstanding, it will be necessary to carry out additional ASW exercises, especially in the Yellow Sea off the ROK’s west coast, since the characteristics of those waters are quite different from those on the eastern side of the peninsula.

Second, while opinions may be divided in both Seoul and Washington over the wisdom of delaying the OPCON transfer, the postponement should be used as an opportunity for the ROK, with U.S. assistance, to improve procedures and systems that were found to be deficient in preventing the attack on the Cheonan. On a priority basis, the ROK should acquire those ASW capabilities that it lacks so that when OPCON transfer is implemented, the ROK navy will be able to take the lead in its own defense against submarine incursions.

Third, the bold attack on the Cheonan raises questions about whether North Korea might be willing to launch new and unprecedented types of attacks against the South in the future, perhaps in the belief that the ROK and its U.S. ally are unwilling
or unable to respond. In that light, the “Invincible Spirit” exercise and the impressive array of forces that were deployed in the exercise helped send a strong message of U.S.-ROK determination to deal with future aggression. This is a message worth repeating. The United States and the ROK should use appropriate opportunities to conduct similar high-profile exercises, particularly exercises that require the participation of visible, highly-lethal assets (aircraft carrier battle groups, F-22 aircraft, etc.). The allies should also consider extending the length of selected exercises during the year – a step that will place an additional burden on the North Korean military, forcing it to expend scarce resources to deal with our expanded and lengthier training.

Finally, the Cheonan incident raised important questions about China’s willingness to cooperate with us in pressing the North, and about the prospects for the Six-Party Talks themselves.

As for China’s future role in dealing with the challenges on the Korean peninsula, there is clearly a need for a dialogue with Beijing to better understand what is driving China’s shift on North Korea and to clarify the PRC’s intentions. The United States and the ROK should try to engage the PRC, trilaterally if possible and bilaterally if necessary, to explore current Chinese thinking about North Korea. Should the PRC prove reluctant to conduct such a dialogue officially, we should support efforts to carry it out through Track 1.5 or Track 2 channels.

As for the Six-Party Talks, prospects are far from clear. The sinking of the Cheonan mandated a “pause” in efforts to resume the talks while the cause of the sinking was being investigated. Having uncovered the North’s role in the attack, it was understandable that the ROK, with the support of the United States and other members of the international community, would demand an explanation, an apology, and perhaps even seek compensation from the DPRK. The heinous nature of the attack also made it difficult, if not impossible, to return to the negotiating table with the North until some passage of time and only after some mechanism or process that would allow “closure” after the sinking.

It is not clear today how such “closure” can be obtained, as a North Korean apology or acceptance of responsibility for the sinking is unlikely. Since the attack, Pyongyang has adamantly and repeatedly denied responsibility. The North’s leadership will not want to take a step that would cause it to lose face or to embarrass its Chinese patron, which has thus far accepted the North’s denial.

One mechanism that may prove useful in getting past the Cheonan tragedy is the recent UN Command-Korean Peoples’ Army (KPA) dialogue at Panmunjom. Three rounds of colonel-level talks have taken place, with a fourth session scheduled for early August. Surprisingly, the North has continued these discussions despite the recent U.S.-ROK joint military exercise, an event which would normally have provided a convenient pretext for the North to refuse to return to the table. It may be too much to think that the North might use this dialogue to somehow signal its acknowledgment of responsibility for the attack on the Cheonan. Nevertheless, it is possible that these talks could provide a face-saving mechanism that would allow the parties to move past the Cheonan tragedy and resume tackling the thorny issue of the North’s nuclear weapons program.

For the United States and the ROK, addressing the nuclear issue remains a central priority and one that must be pursued vigorously as a matter of self-defense. The last round of Six-Party discussions took place more than 18 months ago. Since then, the DPRK has almost certainly made additional
strides in its efforts to develop more sophisticated plutonium-based weapons and perhaps even in its now-acknowledged program to create a uranium path to nuclear weapons development. Meanwhile, the passage of time has not diminished the threat of proliferation of nuclear material and/or technology by the North — a critical concern for the United States and a direct challenge to the viability of the international non-proliferation regime.

The absence of a current dialogue channel with Pyongyang on nuclear matters has left us without a mechanism for exploring North Korea’s willingness to discuss restraints on its nuclear weapons program. Today, we have no channel through which we can test whether North Korea might be willing to resume its past commitment to freeze and eventually dismantle that program. At the current juncture, U.S. policy seems to rely primarily on financial sanctions and a plan to intensify such sanctions as a way of applying pressure on the North’s leadership by attacking their economic underpinnings.

Experience has shown that sanctions are a valuable component of an overall policy approach towards North Korea. There is considerable value in applying pressure on the North through such measures, particularly if they focus on the income streams that support and sustain the DPRK’s leaders and its military-industrial complex. However, unless the United States and its partners are prepared to engage in a broad assault on North Korea’s assets, on financial flows into and out of the country, and to take extraordinary measures against those financial institutions that do business in or with North Korea, sanctions alone are not likely to convince the DPRK to change its current course.

The Six-Party Talks, as unsatisfactory as they have been in achieving the denuclearization of North Korea, still remain a useful device for engaging North Korea on the nuclear issue, leveraging the influence of the other parties against Pyongyang, exploring the DPRK’s bottom line, and devising credible packages of rewards and incentives that may eventually appeal to the North. An eventual resumption of the talks would at least offer some prospect that a freeze on the North’s weapons program might yet be negotiated, which in turn might allow the parties to resume implementation of the far-reaching denuclearization commitments made in the September 19, 2005, and subsequent Six-Party agreements.

But lest I end on a note of excessive optimism, it must also be pointed out that since late 2008, North Korea has made it emphatically clear that the previous agreements concluded and commitments made in the Six-Party Talks are null and void; that it is and will remain a nuclear weapons state; and that it will never give up its nuclear weapons “even in a dream.”

While the other participants in the Six-Party Talks may still retain their commitment to the denuclearization process, by its own words and actions, the DPRK seems to have declared this process dead. If the Six-Party Talks are to have any hope, Pyongyang will need to demonstrate that it is prepared to take major steps to resuscitate them, particularly by clearly reaffirming its denuclearization commitments and by taking concrete steps to realize them. Regrettably, North Korea’s shocking attack on the Cheonan gives us little reason to hope that cooperation on this front will be forthcoming from Pyongyang anytime soon.
Northeast Asian Regional Security after the Cheonan Incident: A North Korean Perspective

Kevin Shepard

The sinking of the *Cheonan* rattled intra-regional relations, raising questions of DPRK motives, ROK policies, US commitment, and Chinese intentions. From a DPRK perspective, regional security has been shaken in the short-term, but the incident has provided some strategic opportunities and will have no long-term implications. While tensions are currently heightened, there has been no paradigm shift in the North’s policy toward the South. Nor has US or ROK policy toward the North seen significant change. The additional targets of sanctions only highlight the lack of earlier enforcement.

Understanding the impact of the *Cheonan* incident on regional stability requires understanding how North Korean actors view the incident and the subsequent reactions of others. DPRK decision-makers have been shown to be, for the most part, rational. That does not make them safe or right. It does, however, make them somewhat predictable. Predictions are only possible, however, if we understand the lens through which Pyongyang views this incident.

Pre-Cheonan Perspective

DPRK Economics

Pyongyang has been reeling from failed currency reforms but continues pushing hard to acquire foreign currency; the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) continues to stumble along; and deals with China and Russia are providing infrastructure. These and other projects indicate that the North has been actively, and successfully, pursuing foreign investment. Optimism regarding the ability to coax investment also allows for more hard-line policies toward Seoul.

Inter-Korean Relations

Despite tensions over Seoul’s perceived hard-line policies, significant inter-Korean exchanges had taken place recently, such as the North sending a delegation to former-President Kim Dae-jung’s funeral and to meet with President Lee. In a show of optimism, North Korea had also recently made several concessions to Seoul and Washington, returning the crew of the Yeonan 800, apologizing after opening floodgates on October 14 of last year, releasing US reporters held for illegally entering the North, and entertaining the possibility of an inter-Korean summit.

Domestic Politics

Significant changes have been underway. More than a dozen high-ranking positions have been reshuffled this year, as Kim Jong-il lays the groundwork for succession (most notably, with the appointment of brother-in-law Chang Song-taek to the National Defense Council). The expansion of the NDC and a constitutional revision in the spring, two Supreme People’s Assembly sessions only months apart, and a scheduled September meeting of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) representatives all indicate that significant shifts in regime leadership structure are underway.

What Caused the Incident & What Does It Mean?

In the midst of leadership transformation, economic recovery efforts, and improving relations with Washington and Seoul, the *Cheonan* sank on March 26,
2010. The subsequent investigation helped to pinpoint the how, but there is no solid evidence as to the why.

There are several plausible theories, but it is unlikely that an order was issued by Kim Jong-il. Chains of command and lines of communication are too constricted to allow for the timely approval for an opportunistic strike. In addition, command and control is too valued to believe that there has been a standing “fire when ready” command in retaliation for last November’s West Sea firefight.

It is more likely that the incident occurred much as previous naval skirmishes have: the simplest explanation is that an adventuresome DPRK vessel was boxed in by chance, caught off-guard by the Cheonan’s altered patrol route. Feeling threatened, the boat fires and flees. This would not have been a pre-planned action, but might have been precipitated by the knowledge of previous similar engagements and the contentious relations between the two Koreas.

Another, more disconcerting, possibility is that a DPRK boat commander saw an opportunity to strike and did so offensively without highest approval. This is not to say that there were no prior plans to strike a South Korean ship, but it is not likely that a specific attack on the Cheonan had been ordered by Kim Jong-il. This is more disconcerting because it would indicate a lack, to some degree, of central control. The reshuffling of decision-makers, along with the reorganization of and competition between strategic and security bureaus, may have encouraged competition for attention through displays of loyalty. This is supported by the fact that, following the incident, Kim Jong-il paid visits to military and security sites, and General Kim Myong Guk regained his fourth star, which was apparently stripped after the inter-Korean naval skirmish last November. Kim Jong-il, especially as he is in the process of building support for the succession of his youngest son, would be hard pressed not to reward a strike against the South. Similar attempts to improve standing with higher authorities will likely only increase as succession unfolds.

Either of these possibilities is even more plausible given the then-upcoming South Korean local elections. The South Korean left becomes very vocal whenever inter-Korean tensions heighten, pressuring Seoul to appease Pyongyang, and DPRK intelligence agents encourage this through involvement in leftist ROK organizations. This lends credence to the possibility of a general order to bump up inter-Korean tensions.

Post-Cheonan Perspective
While sinking the Cheonan was not likely part of the North’s central strategy, North Korea has benefited from the incident. Examining how Pyongyang has been impacted sheds light on what we might expect in the future.

DPRK-PRC Relations
Pyongyang is not concerned by recent G8 and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) statements; only if the UN had issued a resolution, would North Korea have taken notice. That did not happen, however, as China reaffirmed support for Kim Jong-il by blocking UNSC attempts to censure Pyongyang and ensuring that the Presidential Statement acknowledged North Korea’s denial of responsibility.

Hu Jintao also hosted a summit with Kim Jong-il in May and Assistant Foreign Minister Hu Zhengyue visited Pyongyang in late July. An agreement on furthering economic and technical cooperation was signed on July 29, and China has recently leased rights to yet another DPRK port, in Chongjin.
The message to Pyongyang is that the Cheonan incident has not hurt ties with China, that expanding economic cooperation will ease the burden of sanctions by others, and that China will use its leverage to protect the North.

Peninsula Environment
As Pyongyang pursues economic recovery, it is unhelpful that Seoul scaled back inter-Korean trade, but it did so by only one-third and is now providing additional hard currency to Pyongyang through raises to the workers in the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Besides, the campaigns for foreign investment this year were not aimed at ROK financiers, as South Korean involvement provides dangerous exposure to ROK success.

Pyongyang must also be very pleased with Seoul’s refusal to release the Cheonan incident report, giving credence to DPRK denial and allowing for alternative theories questioning the integrity of the South’s investigation. These theories are circulated throughout North Korea, and the Korean Central News Agency has been careful to quote from US, Japanese, Chinese, Russian and even ROK sources to add credence to the criticisms.

It was also encouraging to the North to witness the limitations of the ROK’s ASW, recovery, and deep-sea diving equipment. However, with the delay in OPCON transfer, the additional US-ROK naval exercises and the wake-up call this has sent to ROK military strategists, Pyongyang is aware that increased investment in these capabilities will now further weaken its relative naval capacity.

Regional Security
Tensions were immediately raised, with ROK and US forces on alert for additional provocations and the North heightening readiness and even repositioning some SA-5 anti-aircraft missiles on its western coast. This was followed by US-ROK exercises in the East Sea, ROK naval exercises in the West Sea, and DPRK threats of “physical response” and bolstered nuclear deterrent.

The North threatened to strike any vessel that crosses the NLL, and fired 130 artillery rounds in the West Sea. This is largely posturing, but the North’s threats could easily force it into a corner if a US or ROK ship or plane were to stray north. Pyongyang’s warnings against fishing craft approaching the NLL was a prudent move designed to prevent accidental escalation, yet a ROK fishing boat has already been seized by the North, days after Pyongyang’s warning, foreshadowing the potential for inadvertent escalation.

Pyongyang is not looking for a fight; the US and ROK have been quite persuasive in convincing it that there will not be any military retaliation for adventurism. Lee Myung-bak even stated, “[South Koreans] have always tolerated North Korea’s brutality, time and time again.” While he threatened that Pyongyang “will pay a price” this time, Seoul’s sanctions were hollow. Inter-Korean trade was cut by only one-third; the KIC continues to grow; psychological warfare operations were halted before they began; economic losses will be made up by trade with China; and while US-ROK military exercises are unwelcome, they are seen as just an inevitable result of Seoul’s hard-line policies. As long as Pyongyang avoids inadvertent escalation, Seoul’s concerns of all-out war will prevent it from retaliating, the US will respect the wishes of Seoul, and this incident will fade away as just another inter-Korean clash.
What To Expect
That this was not part of a centrally-organized campaign makes its re-occurrence more likely, not less. Most North Koreans believe that Pyongyang may have been complicit, but no one has been punished; South Korea’s claims of DPRK responsibility have been undermined; and Chinese support has not waned. If succession politics continue to stoke competitions over loyalty, we could see more provocations in the near future.

Perceived lack of support for the ROK position has helped legitimate a more hard-line militarist posture by North Korea, something that may play a role as the WPK is likely to regain some influence in the upcoming Party representatives meeting. The “inner circle” is aware of the dangers of additional provocations, but will not order military commanders to avoid conflict. Rather, Pyongyang is anticipating that South Korea wants to avoid similar incidents and so will heed warnings from the North.

While this may have been related to succession, the Cheonan incident was not a signal that the North wishes to suspend international relations while it deals with domestic issues. Pyongyang will continue vigorously pursuing economic growth and the establishment of a “Great and Prosperous Nation” by 2012.

This will likely lead to a mix of signals indicative of concurrent yet uncoordinated strategies. The central government is focused on economic growth and stable transition of power. Attempts to engage South Korea are for propaganda value; the North hopes Seoul will be the detractor. There is the threat of unintended escalation, and while Pyongyang recognizes this, it is limited in its ability to restrain ambitions while maintaining loyal facades. In order to maintain the current level of regional security, the Lee Myung-bak administration will need to continue to be reserved and pragmatic, but the price for this is that the North will continue to know that provocations go largely unanswered.

Post-Cheonan Regional Security: Where Do We Go From Here? (PRC Perspective)
Kim Heungkyu
China’s Initial Position
The Cheonan incident has presented China with a serious dilemma regarding its foreign relations, specifically its relations in Northeast Asia. Despite its disapproval of DPRK’s second nuclear test on May 2009, China has maintained its aim of promoting stability on the Korean peninsula and even adopted, in July, 2009, a policy of engaging North Korea by differentiating North Korean nuclear issues from North Korean issues in general. China’s reaction reflects the importance of stability on the Korean peninsula, the priority of its own economic development, and the necessity of good relations with the United States. Unlike the “normal” North Korean nuclear issues, which can be managed through China-U.S. cooperation, the Cheonan incident has the potential to destabilize the Korean peninsula. It could also undermine China’s goal of becoming a Great Power and its strategic interests within Northeast Asia.

As a result, divisions within the Chinese government and among foreign policy experts have grown more acute. In dealing with the Cheonan incident, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while urging caution on the part of China, highlights the importance of the global perception of China, of China’s relations with the U.S. and Korea, and China’s responsibilities as a rising Great Power. On the other hand, the liaison department of the Chinese Commu-
nist Party (CCP) and the Chinese military, which maintain the traditional thinking on the Korean peninsula and value China's special relations with North Korea, contend that China must secure its core interests within Northeast Asia and must not isolate North Korea any further.

At the initial stage of the Cheonan crisis, China most likely considered the following imperatives. First, China must place its priority on maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula. Second, China must deal with the Cheonan crisis in a manner not causing conflicts with the U.S. Third, China's stance must not threaten the survival of the North Korean regime. Fourth, China must not jeopardize its relations with South Korea. Fifth, China must check North Korea from undermining the security situation on the Korean peninsula. Last, China must also consider its international reputation.

Given these imperatives, the best scenario for China would be to resolve the crisis through inter-Korean dialogue and to manage the North Korean nuclear issue by resuming the Six-Party Talks via China-U.S. cooperation. What seems clear is that it would have been difficult for China to remain silent and reluctant to join international sanctions against North Korea if irrefutable proof emerged of North Korea's guilt in the Cheonan sinking.

**China's Responses**

China's approach to dealing with the incident came in three steps: first, verification of the facts; second, formulation of a resolution through internal consensus-building; and third, implementation of the resolution via international diplomacy. However, in China's perspective, South Korea couldn't get through even the first step.

China's handling of the crisis can be divided into two stages. The first was the period between the sinking of the ship and the announcement of the joint U.S.-ROK naval exercises in the Yellow Sea. The second encompasses events subsequent to the announcement.

During the initial stage of the crisis, China responded passively. Lack of information, distrust of South Korean intent, significance of the strategic implications, underestimation of the capabilities of the North Korean navy by the Chinese navy, and the conservative nature of China's policy-making process all contributed to China's passive response during this initial stage.

China sought to remain neutral in response to the crisis. Key members of the diplomatic service, Ning Fukui and Hu Zhengyue among others, helped maintain positive relations with South Korea, and when Wen Jiabao visited South Korea on May 28, China confirmed its intent to help realize justice as well as objectivity. China emphasized objectivity in investigation and its responsibilities as a rising Great Power. Examples of such Chinese attitude can be seen in the May 24 China-U.S. strategic economic dialogue, the May 26 editorial in *Global Times*, and the May 28 Wen Jiabao statement.

China's seriousness was also seen in Hu Jintao's direct questioning of Kim Jong-il on May 3 during Kim's three-day visit to China regarding North Korea's involvement in the Cheonan sinking. It is reported that Kim Jong-il vehemently denied North Korea's involvement. Instead, he requested China's J-10 fighter plane and T-94 battle tank, along with economic aid. China has since rejected this request and attained its objective of "exchanging strategic communication on internal affairs," revealing China's intention to intervene in North Korean affairs. At the same time, China urged North Korea to react responsibly in an editorial in *Global Times*.

In regards to the Cheonan situation, China has
misgivings towards North Korea but has yet to corroborate them with hard evidence, and thus has been unable to make a more positive stance with South Korea on the issue. The results of the Russian investigation have further consolidated China’s position.

With the Cheonan situation in a deadlock, however, the international community has come to see China as North Korea’s patron. Not wanting to jeopardize its relations with South Korea and considering the latter as the victim of the Cheonan situation, China agreed with the Presidential Statement of the UN Security Council in order to expedite the closure of the whole situation. And China has since revealed its desire to reinstate the Six-Party Talks.

Attention mounted on China’s post-Cheonan reactions only after the announcement of military exercise plans by the ROK-US Combined Forces. This indicates that the Cheonan situation has evolved beyond an issue for the two Koreas into a playing field for China and the United States. How China and the United States handle the situation will have significant consequences for the post-Cheonan Northeast Asian security architecture.

After the announcement on May 24 of impending military exercises by the ROK-US Combined Forces in the Yellow Sea, the influence of China’s military has been growing in the country’s foreign policymaking as the military has taken a hard-line position against South Korea and the US by triggering Chinese patriotism and nationalism.

During the past twenty years, the Chinese military has continuously enjoyed double-digit increases in budget allocation. But in 2010, the military was allocated only about an eight-percent budget increase, which affected the welfare of most of the military officers. Relations across the Taiwan Straits, which had previously taken up the largest proportion of military expenditure, had stabilized, and the China-US relationship also had improved, leading to a seeming diminution of the Chinese military both in resource allocation and political clout. The post-Cheonan ROK-US military exercise has given the Chinese military the pretext to reinforce its footing, and the military is clearly making good use of the situation.

When analyzing China’s hard-line attitude towards South Korea and the US, one needs to bear in mind the following: as President Hu Jintao faces an imminent transfer of power in 2012, it is not easy for him to control the influence of the military, which uses nationalism as a mechanism to promote its organizational interests; politicians connected with the transfer of power to the next generation of Chinese leadership are collaborating with the military; and China is testing the US’s will in an opportunistic way.

On July 1st, Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of Staff of the People’s Liberation Army, expressed “vehement opposition” to the ROK-US military exercises for the first time. On July 5th, Major General Luo Yuan of the Military Science Association revealed his aggressive intent by referring to the ROK-US combined fleet as a “live target.” On the other hand, on July 6th, Qin Gang, spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, referred to the exercises as a matter of “close interest” rather than opting for the expression “vehement opposition.” But on July 8th, the Foreign Ministry officially embraced Ma Xiaotian’s statement of “vehement opposition” and, during a press conference on the 13th, stated that the exercises were a provocation against “China’s core interests.”

At the same time, China’s mass media has been invoking the public’s patriotism and nationalism by
highlighting the remarks by the various military leaders who interpret the exercises as a U.S. attempt to keep in check and intentionally humiliate the Chinese people. The media are also arousing anti-South Korean sentiments as it propagates the notion that South Korea has formed an alliance with the U.S. to serve the latter’s interest. Global Times, which has close ties to People’s Daily, conducted a poll on what position China should take in dealing with South Korea, which resulted in 95 percent of respondents replying in the positive that South Korea should be forced to submit to China. It seems that this state of affairs will continue for some time, leaving behind repercussions within China and in China-Korea relations.

Tentative Conclusion

The Cheonan situation has a significant meaning for South Korea because it could become one of the most important cases for analyzing North Korea-related issues including sudden changes that could affect the country. In handling the Cheonan situation, South Korea and China had to remain satisfied with merely averting a total demolition of all relations. Considering the recent developments in China-South Korea relations initiated by the Lee Myung-bak government – such as establishing a “strategic cooperative partnership” with China and working towards agreeing on a free trade agreement –, this outcome fell far short of expectations. South Korea and China have not been able to reach any mutual understanding or significant agreement in dealing with the Cheonan issue and went about separately in trying to resolve the problem.

There are a few points to be examined regarding the incident. First, an inter-Korean issue changed into a tug of war between the U.S. and China. Second, China applied its core interests outside China for the first time. Previously, in July, 2009, the Chinese government demanded its U.S. counterpart to respect “China’s core interests” as the following: (1) security of its Communist regime and system, (2) national sovereignty and preservation of its territories, and (3) sustainability of its economic development. This reflects the fact that the two countries set up a strategic partnership based on respect of each other’s core interests. The Cheonan incident has now become a barometer of the two countries’ relationship in the future, burdening the U.S. government that needs support from China in its foreign policy.

Apparantly, much debate is going on inside Beijing at present. Traditionalist hawks argue that U.S alliances with Japan and South Korea are hard to break and that China needs to counter the U.S. and its allies by forging closer ties with India and Russia. In so doing, China will consider North Korea as one of its important allies to prevent U.S. hegemony; hence, China will take measures to strengthen its “special ties” with the reclusive regime.

Second, doves ("Developing Country Foreign Policy School" in author’s terms) hold that, despite some differences between China and the U.S, the two countries have more space for cooperation and negotiation. Supposing that China is and remains a regional power in Northeast Asia, they claim that China’s major competitor would be Japan rather than the U.S. If this is the case, China will pursue a foreign policy which aims to weaken the ROK-Japan relationship.

Third, new hawks ("Rising Great Power Foreign Policy School" in author’s terms) see China as a rising Great Power, second only to the U.S., and that China will collide head-on with the U.S. inevitably. If China aspires to be a hegemonic power in Asia, it will pursue a more active foreign policy to alienate Korea.
Post-Cheonan International Relations in Northeast Asia in Chinese Perspective

It is likely that the U.S. and China will undergo a long process of considerable tension, confrontation, and negotiations in coming years. The U.S., with its leading role in the world as well as in Northeast Asia, will try not to be overwhelmed by China. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s recent warning about China’s expansionist motives at an ASEAN conference was not merely diplomatic reassurance for smaller countries afraid of China; it was clearly a warning to China for its aggressive pursuit of influence.

Top leaders and mainstream strategists in Beijing will attempt to avoid fundamental clashes with the U.S. They will do so because they clearly are aware of the consequences of continuing tension with the U.S. The current Communist regime does not possess the social stability and political durability necessary to endure protracted years of stand-off against the superpower. The regime will rather seek to utilize the excessive patriotism of the Chinese.

China will likely maintain a balanced diplomacy, not siding with either of the two Koreas. Despite its deep distrust of the Lee administration and clashes with South Korea over the incident, China will consider rapprochement with South Korea at official levels and restrain harsh criticisms of South Korea.

With respect to North Korea, the Chinese government will continue to build up stronger ties with the country with its principle of separating North Korea from its nuclear program. In addition, China will continue increasing its influence in the Six-Party Talks and matters pertaining to North Korea.

Implications for Korea’s Foreign Policy

Given the history, strategic interests, and power configuration of the evolving strategic schools in China’s foreign policy after the Cheonan incident, China is not likely to take any serious initiative on North Korean issues or on security issues in Northeast Asia in the near future. However, China will certainly become more opportunistic to cultivate its rise to power in the international arena.

China will cautiously pay attention to changing regional security situations, in particular, to US policies. There might be unpleasant exchanges between China and the US in defining their “core interests” in the region. However, China’s policy can still be regarded as a dependant variable to US policy in the near future.

After all, South Korea’s foreign policy will be influenced by regional configurations of international relations, most importantly US-China relations. There are five security templates forming in the region: US-Japan cooperation to check China; US-Japan & US-China cooperation and China-Japan conflict; multi/bilateral cooperation & soft-balancing; multi-security cooperation; and unstable power balance. No matter which security template dominates the region, it will tremendously influence foreign policies of each country in the region. Given the current situation, the basic trend is moving from US-Japan cooperation to check China, through US-Japan & US-China cooperation and China-Japan conflict, to multi/bilateral cooperation and soft-balancing.

Considering the current state of US-China strategic cooperation, Japan needs to adjust its foreign policy direction. Under the new US-China entente cordiale, the strategic value of Japan to the US is likely to wane. Japan may seek Sino-Japanese cooperation more earnestly, instead of pursuing the
“US-Japan & US-China Cooperation/ China-Japan Conflict” option. In that case, the security environment in Northeast Asia may provide a window of opportunity for the multi/bilateral cooperation scenario and eventually the multi-security cooperation scenario away from the current US-Japan cooperation to check China.

Under these circumstances, South Korea would be left with no alternative but to work closely with both the US and China, because both countries have their respective role, capacity, and will to influence world affairs and Korean issues including the North Korean nuclear crisis. Under the current North Korean nuclear threat, the ROK-US alliance must be the pillar of South Korea’s security architecture. However, South Korean support for China is also relevant to transforming the Six-Party framework into a regional security forum and establishing a peace regime on the Korean peninsula.

As China’s strategic thinking evolves, there are still uncertainties in the country’s future foreign policy direction. This is a great challenge for South Korea. South Korea must constantly prepare for future transformation of regional politics, in particular, China’s policy towards the Korean peninsula.

In sum, when the security template in the region is moving toward multi/bilateral cooperation, Seoul will have more opportunity to realize its foreign policy objectives. However, the future relationship between South Korea and China is still open to question. No matter how favorable the variables are for positive relations between the two countries, construction of stable relations will be impossible without prudent policies and incessant efforts on the part of both countries.
Session II

Question:
Dr. Shepard, I noted that you were very clear that we are not deterring North Korea from conducting further provocations. So that seems to be an implicit criticism of the idea that anything we can do or anything we have done in our exercises would have a deterring effect on further provocations. So, first of all, if you could address that.

Second, is there something we can do to change North Korea’s calculus in terms of whether or not it can go to provocations? Or even the calculus of an individual if it is a decision made below the top of the regime?

Kevin Shepard:
So, why are the exercises not deterring North Korea? To a certain extent, obviously the alliance does deter North Korea. I do not think it deters North Korea from these acts of adventurism that we, on the one hand, say are isolated, and on the other hand, say show a pattern over time. So, we have a pattern of isolated incidents. We call them isolated because we think they are not a part of their larger planned escalation. And I think North Korea understands that is all they can get away with. I do think the exercises are important, and they do send a message to Pyongyang. They also send a message to China. I think one of the important messages they send to Pyongyang is that there is a cost to this type of action because there is a military cost for Pyongyang. The fuel they are spending, the shells they are spending... It is not a huge cost they are paying, but it is uncomfortable for them.

Another important deterring factor of these exercises is that they are removing any ideas that North Korea might have gleaned when they learned of the lack of South Korea’s ASW capacity, the weak search & rescue capacity, and the blunders that have been made public throughout the investigation. I think the exercises show North Korea that the U.S. forces will supplement ROK forces to the extent that North Korea should not think they can take advantage of those and start planning other provocations. I think they do have some deterrent value there. But I do not think it means that North Korea will not try something like this again.

The message the exercises send to China is also important, so the second question is: what should we do? We also need to make China understand that there is a cost to pay for supporting North Korea. I do not think North Korea could act this way if they did not feel safe under the umbrella of China’s influence on the UN and China’s continuing economic rise. I think we need to make China uncomfortable enough so that it realizes that every time it allows North Korea to do something like this, it also pays a price. And we have seen from China’s reactions to operations in the West Sea that it is feeling the price because of supporting North Korea. We made it very clear that the operations in the West Sea are in response to the North Korean action. The message to China is, if you allow North Korea to act provocatively, then you also need to feel uncomfortable about it. I think sanctions are also going to work against China. It has been mentioned that these new sanctions are not necessarily targeting North Korean entities but might also target entities that deal with North Korea. I hope that means the Chinese accounts.

Evans Revere:
I wanted to address this issue of deterrence and then two other points that will find me in disagreement with a couple of my colleagues here. I think the fact that the North Koreans, from the outset in
respect to the Cheonan attack, went out of their way to deny their responsibility is suggestive that the North Koreans are concerned about something. And I think that something is the possibility of retaliation or retaliatory steps by the ROK and/or the United States. This operation was carefully planned and carefully carried out in a way that suggests to me that the North Koreans thought their connection with it would not be detected. To me, that suggests the North Koreans are nervous. And that is unlike the across the NLL confrontations that we have seen in the past, in which, not only did they acknowledge what they had done, but they beat their breasts in pride to note that they had taken out a ROK warship, or had fired shots back in defense of their sovereignty and their position on the NLL. We have heard none of that here. What we do find is a North Korea, as well as the Chinese, who are denying any connection to this, even now. To me, that says something about deterrence, or at least about their nervousness about deterrence. I would be very nervous if the North Koreans came out tomorrow and said, “You are darn right we did, and we will do it again if we have to.” That would be a very different North Korea from the one we are dealing with here.

I do not agree with the notion that the North Korean command and control system is such that it would provide for a lower-level general reconnaissance bureau officer in command of the submarine to fire a torpedo because he was in a bad mood that day. This submarine was lying in wait in ROK territorial waters – a tremendously bold and carefully planned effort to intercept an ROK vessel that, the North Koreans were well aware, sailed through those waters on a fairly regular basis. My own sense of this is that this was, at its core, a retaliatory step by the North Koreans in response to the events last year in which the North Koreans were humiliated. And as you might expect, a military establishment that has been humiliated would, at some point, put together a game-plan for senior-level approval, saying to their bosses, “We have a way of not only retaliating for the humiliation we have been through, but we think we can retaliate and get away with it and not have our fingerprints discovered.” And my own sense is that – here, I am making connections to the North Korean succession – a new aspiring leader of North Korea seeing a game plan like this probably jumped all over it and said, “I like this,” and took it to his Dad to seek his approval. There is a very interesting circumstantial case suggesting that the highest levels of the DPRK not only approved it but rewarded those who were responsible for carrying it out - a visit by their leader to the general reconnaissance bureau base, the promotion of one of the officers who would have been in the general reconnaissance bureau chain of command. To me, this is suggestive of something that was very carefully thought through and recognized by the DPRK leadership as a job “well done.”

One final point is that the management of the Cheonan by the Chinese is somehow an indicator for much broader shifted policies by China regarding the Korean peninsula. We do not know, quite frankly, enough about internal Chinese thinking on this issue. However, let me just throw out two other things that I picked up that suggest to me that what is riling the Chinese position is something else. Many of the Chinese that I have talked to, including a military person, were deeply angered by the Cheonan attack. They made no effort, whatsoever, to defend the North Koreans. And when I pushed them on this, what I discovered was they figured that the sort of tough, clear response that the United States, the ROK, Japan, and others were seeking was such that it might push a weakened and potentially unstable
North Korean regime over the edge. And that is something that China could not support. China sought, in its own way, to let North Korea know about its displeasure and unhappiness, but that level of displeasure was not sufficient enough to convince the Chinese to sign onto a powerful set of economic and other sanctions that could run the risks of tipping the North Korean regime over into the abyss. They may not like the North Koreans, they may not like the occasional outrages the North Koreans commit, but the Chinese, at the end of the day, are not yet prepared to pull the plug on the regime.

Kevin Shepard:
I agree that the North Koreans showed a concern for retaliation by not coming out and admitting that they did it. But they did it. And so, to some degree, they were not deterred. I can buy into the argument that there was some planning behind this, but two things about the promotion bother me. One is that promoting someone after the fact of doing a good job does convince me 100% that he had prior approval. And if he had, he was the man who had just lost the star for last year’s incident, and that would lead me to believe that the government had lost confidence in him. So, I do not know why they would put him in charge of such an operation.

Lee Chung Min:
Let me just add, I think it is very difficult to imagine from our perspective how a person in North Korea gets demoted or promoted. So, whether you are promoted or not, really, it makes no rational sense. You could be in Kim Jong-il’s great favor one day and the next, you are actually out in the coal mines. And yet, for some other reason, he is brought back as if nothing happened, and he is back in the job. And there are several people who have had such illustrious career changes because of the whims of Kim Jong-il.

Question:
From now on, until the G20 summit in Seoul in November, will there be any more nuclear tests, missile launches and/or military clashes near the NLL? This question goes to Dr. Shepard. From a North Korean perspective, do you think there is a chance North Korea will engage in either of these provocative acts, perhaps all three? Another question goes to Mr. Revere. In such case, what can the United States do? Or what will the United States do? From the South Korean point of view, the U.S. appeared to have done little in terms of retaliation in the aftermath of the Cheonan incident.

Evans Revere:
Regarding the possibility of another nuclear test, another missile launch or another NLL incident, the playful person in me is inclined to say yes, yes and yes. But the bottom line answer is that we don’t know. We do know that the North is continuing its efforts to improve and refine its missile and nuclear capabilities. How do you do that? You test. They have made it very clear in the past that they are prepared to do this. I have no reason to doubt that at some point they might see it as an appropriate step to take, particularly if they are trying to ramp up attention. However, should they do so, I think it will really put at risk the Chinese patience with them that we’ve seen lately. The Chinese, in the past, have responded very strongly when it came to nuclear and missile issues. I think actions like this by North Korea would put at risk the current tolerance that we’re seeing from Beijing.

About the question of “what the U.S. will do,” I will throw the question back at our Korean friends.
What is the ROK prepared to do? And do with the U.S.? It was very clear from day one of the Cheonan incident that the ROK was not prepared to go to war. Even after discovering the smoking torpedo, I have been extremely impressed by the degree to which the ROK has been in the driver’s seat on this issue from day one. Washington has pretty much followed the ROK’s lead on this, as I think we should have. The ROK has demonstrated a very sober, mature, sensible approach to this. It allowed the investigation to go forward. It was very careful not to make abrupt conclusions, even when, as my colleagues say, we were getting very interesting signals not only that North Korea did it but they were damn proud of it. A response specifically to nuclear and missile tests, I think, will be efforts to ramp up sanctions; those are happening anyway. I think we would probably want to go back to the UN again. And on this occasion, it would be very interesting to see the Chinese squirm as they would, because they have endorsed such tough sanctions in the past.

Kevin Shepard:
Do I think missile tests, nuke tests, another NLL skirmish are likely? I don’t know better than anyone else. But I can say, “Eventually, yes.” I can’t see North Korea stopping any of these. They haven’t in the past. However, I don’t think they’re likely, in the short term, to commit another act. Right now, the situation might be just a little bit too hot. They want to maintain this continuing pattern of isolated incidents. They don’t want to continue “tit-for-tat” while we’re already publicly preparing more exercises. So, I think we might see them back off for right now. But their nuclear program is continuing. And there are other factors that drive the decision to have another nuclear or missile test. So, I would imagine that at some point in the future we’ll see something again.

Evans Revere:
I want to remind you that public statements coming out of Beijing in the aftermath of Kim Jong-il’s visit were really interesting. I can’t remember the exact phrasing, but the lines referred to an agreement having been achieved between the DPRK and the PRC in which the North Koreans had committed to the Chinese to discuss security concerns with them. I remember people looked at that language and came away with the view that this was the Chinese way of yanking the chain of Pyongyang and reminding them that this sort of adventurism that they had just committed is not appreciated and that Pyongyang needs to do a better job of coordinating with Beijing.

The other thing I would note came from chatting with a number of Chinese colleagues over recent months and finding a fair number of them who are willing to acknowledge who did it on March 26. That is the realization in certain quarters in Beijing that the North Korean leader visited Beijing, met with the senior leaders of PRC and lied to them about the March 26th incident. There are more than a few people in Beijing who are probably not pleased with that. They’re not going to talk about that in the newspapers; they’re certainly not going to talk about it with us. But if you begin to put the pieces together — the various comments that the Chinese are making privately about that incident and their de facto acknowledgement of who did it —, they have come to the conclusion that the person they hosted, the head of North Korea, had grossly misrepresented what he had done. Think about the implications of that.

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The Asan Institute for Policy Studies (AIPS) was founded as an independent think tank to provide innovative policy solutions and spearhead public discourse on the core issues that Korea, East Asia and the global community face. In particular, the AIPS’ mandate is to contribute to the peace, prosperity, and unification of the Korean peninsula by engaging issues pertaining to national security, foreign affairs, and governance, both domestic and global. “Human security” matters such as human rights, humanitarian crises, energy and environment are also a major focus. The goal of the Institute is not only to offer policy solutions but also to train experts in public diplomacy and related fields in order to strengthen Korea’s capacity to better tackle some of the most pressing problems affecting the country, the region and the world today.