

North Korea's Likely Actions and Our Response Following the Announcement of the Cause of the Cheonan Sinking

Choi Jin Wook

(Director, Center for South-North Cooperation Studies)

The Joint Civilian Military Investigation Group's May 20th announcement of its conclusion that the Cheonan was sunk by a North Korean torpedo was followed on the 24th by President Lee Myung Bak's statement to the nation and a detailed strategy discussion. The government strongly condemned North Korea's behavior, while announcing a number of countermeasures including banning North Korean shipping through the Jeju straits, stopping all inter-Korean trade outside of the Kaesong Industrial Area, restarting propaganda campaigns directed at the North, and direct participation in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI).

The international community has taken a favorable view of the actions of the South Korean government following the Cheonan sinking. Immediately after the sinking, the government showed patience in following through with a thorough investigation, on the principle of not jumping to any conclusions until "scientific, objective evidence" is obtained. Rather than using the North's provocations for political ends, as was done in the Cold War era, they have tried to show a mature attitude, saying they will formulate a detailed response after producing evidence acceptable to the international community obtained via an investigation process that meets international standards. A part of this effort involved forming a Joint Civilian Military Investigation Group composed of specialists from the US, the UK, Australia, Sweden, and elsewhere. The foreign specialists' findings had a major influence on the South Korean leaders' strategic decisions, and thus their participation not only added authority to the findings but also helped to boost public confidence.

Nevertheless, North Korea has vigorously denied the evidence of its guilt in the incident, declaring the findings "a fabrication" and asking to send its own investigative team. Furthermore North Korea has closed off all aspects of inter-Korean relations, has scrapped all its non-aggression pacts with its neighbor to the South, is now warning of all-out war and putting itself on a war footing, and is trying

to shift blame onto the accuser while ratcheting up tensions on the peninsula.

North Korea appears to be pursuing a variety of different aims – internal aims, external aims, and aims towards the South. Internally, it seeks to promote solidarity through the Cheonan incident. This incident works to build up tension within the society, which has been agitated since the currency reform, and helps to raise loyalty among the military – absolutely essential in order to firmly establish the succession system. As its economic troubles and social unrest are unlikely to improve, and it will take some time to firmly establish the succession, the regime will need to maintain a state of tension for some time to come.

Externally, North Korea will deny its involvement in the Cheonan incident to the bitter end in order to provide China with a pretext to abstain from international criticism or sanctions. Since the findings were announced, China has entered a phase of “assessment” rather than accepting the results, implying that it is not certain of North Korea’s involvement and giving the appearance of defending the North Korean position.

Towards South Korea, North Korea seeks to evade responsibility for the breakdown in relations and attempt to instead pin the blame on the Lee Myung Bak government, thus promoting conflict within South Korean society. Hereafter North Korea will give up on hoping for aid and economic cooperation from the Lee Myung Bak government and will instead attempt to drive it into a corner. Through additional threats and provocations it will try to increase fears of war within South Korean society and incite a “war or peace” debate in order to put pressure on the current South Korean government.

We should see through this to understand North Korea’s true intentions and formulate a determined, principled response. First of all, in response to North Korea’s attempts to foment fears of war within South Korean society, we must stay resolved and show that our hard-line approach toward the North is not a temporary measure but an on-going strategy.

Second, we need to respond in a way which distinguishes between the Kim Jong Il regime and the people. The Kim regime seeks to strengthen its internal control and promote national solidarity by increasing inter-Korean tensions we need to help the North Korean people to see the harm caused by the attack on the Cheonan. It was appropriately decided that aid for infants and small children would continue despite the cessation of other forms of economic support from South Korea. Our psychological campaign towards North Koreans must include mention of how the Kim Jong Il regime stands as a major obstacle to aid and economic cooperation from South Korea and the international



community. Over the past two years the regime has heaped slander and threats on the South, including two nuclear tests and several long-range rocket launches, ultimately destroying inter-Korean relations and deepening its own isolation with a sneak torpedo attack on the Cheonan.

Third, we must focus our efforts on preventing further provocations and prepare for the next move from North Korea, with support from the stronger-than-ever ROK-US alliance. For the time being North Korea will compensate for its losses in inter-Korean trade through trade with China, so it is likely that we will see a rise in North Korean-Chinese trade. However, the loss of inter-Korean trade means reduced foreign exchange earnings for North Korea and in the long-term could sour its relations with China. In order to maintain the flow of Chinese aid, North Korea will have to allow China greater political influence in its affairs, which could pose a dilemma for the DPRK with its core doctrine of Juche (self-reliance). This situation can work to pressure North Korea to approach the US, and in anticipation South Korea should prepare a strategy aided by solid collaboration with the US.

In the short-term, increased inter-Korean tensions will be unavoidable. In the long-term, we must avoid complete severance of South-North relations at all costs, and we should be deeply concerned about the possible consequences of sanctions, obstruction of South-North relations, and tighter North Korean dependency on China. We should take this Cheonan incident as an opportunity to settle up accounts on our former South-North relationship and construct a new one, aided by a resolute policy stance and a solid ROK-US alliance.

