

The Cheonan Sinking and China's Diplomacy

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On May 28th, during a visit to South Korea to attend the ROK-China-Japan summit, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao held a bilateral meeting with President Lee Myung Bak. This meeting produced significant results, including: agreement on bilateral trade passing \$200 billion by 2012 and \$300 billion by 2015 establishment of consular offices on Cheju Island and in Dalian cooperation at the G20 Summit and the Nuclear Security Summit; expanded high-level exchanges increased understanding and friendship between the peoples of both nations; cooperation towards a successful Year of Mutual Visits, Shanghai Expo (2010), and Yeosu Expo (2012) approval of the South Korea-China FTA and more substantive cooperation on issues such as an employment permit system, nuclear power, intellectual property, the environment, and green development.

However, the main focus of this meeting was a discussion of the Cheonan situation. Particularly, attention has been focused whether China will change its adherence to its cautious and vague position, and the possibility of South Korean-Chinese cooperation. This is consolidated in Prime Minister Wen's remarks at this summit. The main points of his remarks are as follows.

1. As a responsible nation, China values the international investigation and each country's response, and will determine its course upon making a fair and objective assessment of the issue based on the principles of right and wrong.
2. China has consistently emphasized peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and is opposed to any act which disrupts that peace and stability; thus it appeals to the various countries to maintain calm and self-restraint, and to work together to prevent any shock or further deterioration of the situation and to protect peace and stability on the peninsula.
3. China appeals to the countries involved to take a long-term view in advancing the 6-Party Talks in order to resolve the nuclear issue and establish a lasting peace on the Korean peninsula.
4. China hopes that the South Korean government will deal with the situation appropriately and wishes to maintain close communication with them.

Looking at the above points, China's position on the Cheonan incident shows no significant change, as it appears to be maintaining its cautious approach. Only the remarks about "assessment based on right and wrong" and its desire for close communication with the South Korean government can be construed as signs of slight progress. The announcement of the results of the investigation was followed in rapid succession by the China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue (5.24-25), the ROK-China Summit (5.28), the ROK-China-Japan Summit (5.29-30), and the China-Japan Summit (5.30-6.1), indicating that China has earnestly launched into a flurry of "Cheonan Diplomacy."

China is concerned that the international criticism of North Korea which has erupted since the May 20th announcement of the investigation results could lead to additional UN sanctions against North Korea. The dominant opinion within China is that up to now the UN sanctions have not contributed to resolving the nuclear issue or affecting change within North Korea. On the contrary they warn that additional sanctions could prompt North Korea to take more extreme measures or could lead to the collapse of the regime, greatly complicating the situation on the peninsula (by increasing uncertainty and instability). This point springs from the desire to hold back strong measures by the international community (including South Korea and the US), but it also reflects a desire to restrain North Korea from taking strong measures of its own which could increase tensions on the peninsula. After all, North Korea's armed provocations and adventurous stunts could provide the international community with a pretext to take stronger measures.

Considering China's position, what diplomatic steps will it take in the coming months? For the moment China hopes that the Cheonan incident will not come before the UN Security Council. This will depend on whether or not the world community accepts the results of the Cheonan investigation. Thus, disregarding whether or not North Korea is guilty, China will first question the reliability of the investigation results, and even though it may be privately certain it will still look for weaknesses in the results and evaluate the likelihood of their acceptance by the international community.

If, through positive proof of North Korea's involvement or overwhelming international opinion, the Cheonan case inevitably does come before the Security Council, China will consult with Russia and others to see that the Security Council adopts only a weak or non-binding statement. If nevertheless the Security Council does approve additional sanctions, China will focus on keeping the sanctions as moderate as possible. In particular, it will focus on concluding the Cheonan matter quickly and building up international dialogue for restarting the 6-Party Talks. As a permanent member of the Security Council, it may try to work out a compromise with the US, trading cooperation on the Cheonan incident for discussion about restarting the 6-Party Talks.



China's "Cheonan diplomacy" has already begun to be put to the test. While still a minority, there are those in China who say that "China must not be a hostage of North Korea any longer" and, as the *Global Times* editorial stated, "If North Korea was truly not involved in the Cheonan sinking, it will have to be proven." Increasingly voices are calling on China, now emerging as a 2nd global superpower, to take on a role matching that status in pursuing its international diplomacy.

Yet it would be premature to expect a dramatic shift in China's diplomacy. They will have to weigh the potential benefits of taking on greater responsibility in global affairs against the benefits of embracing a pro-North Korea policy. Ultimately, using peace and stability as a justification, they will strive to act as a buffer and crisis manager standing between North Korea and the international community. Thus our diplomatic efforts to persuade China will not be easy. The best shortcut to encourage China's participation will be using strong international coordination to prepare a framework for stable, long-term management of North Korea's improper behavior.

