

## **Why Did North Korea Attack the Cheonan? - Reviewing the Opinions and Raising Some Questions -**

**Park Hyeong Jung**

(Senior Research Fellow, Center for South-North Korean Cooperation Studies)

It is vital that we analyze the question of why North Korea attacked the Cheonan and come up with an answer. However, overall there does not seem to be an earnest discussion befitting this matter's importance. For the purpose of discussion, this article will mainly provide a summary of the opinions circulating at present. There are two major sets of opinions: there is the view that Kim Jong Il ordered the attack, and the view that one of his subordinates gave the order. Among the former, 10 distinct ideas have emerged as to the cause. First, as revenge for the Daecheong sea battle second, to put the succession plan into action; third, to break down the 6-Party Talks; fourth, to stir discord between the US and South Korea; fifth, as a result of the Lee Myung Bak administration's self-destructive policies towards North Korea sixth, to prompt change to the Lee Myung Bak government's North Korea policy; seventh, (as an indirect background cause) increased boldness upon becoming a nuclear power; eighth, to bind China more tightly to North Korea ninth, to misdirect domestic public attention; tenth, a combination of motives. Then, there is the view that Kim Jong Il had no reason to attack the Cheonan, and that if it was indeed a North Korean attack then it must have been the work of his subordinates. Finally, this article will present some questions in order to gather together and refine the various opinions.

### **10 Views on Kim Jong Il's Reason for Attacking the Cheonan**

The leading argument for why Kim Jong Il must have ordered the attack is that it was revenge for the Daecheong sea battle. This refers to the battle between the South and North Korean navies which occurred November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009 on the West Sea near Daecheong Island. The details are as follows. On November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009, a North Korean patrol boat strayed South, ignoring warning signals and warning shots from the South Korean side. When the North Korean patrol boat suddenly aimed and fired on a South Korean patrol boat, the South Korean navy returned fire. The damaged

North Korean vessel then retreated to the North.

This incident is referred to in South Korea as the Daecheong sea battle. North Korea is said to have internally resolved to get revenge for this defeat. Just 3 days after the battle, on November 13<sup>th</sup>, the North delivered a message to the South in the name of the chief North Korean delegate to the joint military talks (Kim Young Chul), threatening that “Merciless military action will be taken.” Lieutenant General Kim Young Chul, who sent the message, heads the KPA’s Reconnaissance Bureau, which handles operations against the South. On November 27<sup>th</sup> Kim Jong Il visited the West Sea Fleet Command (Navy Combined Unit 587) in Nampo. While there he reportedly remarked that from now on they must train harder “to raise heroes for do-or-die squads at sea.”<sup>1)</sup> In late December Kim Jong Il and his successor Kim Jong Un visited the Nampo Fleet Command again and, it is reported, instructed the high-level naval officers including Fleet Commander Jung Myong Do to get revenge for the Daecheong sea battle.<sup>2)</sup> On Kim Jong Il’s birthday, February 16<sup>th</sup> 2010, the West Sea Fleet Command held a “General Meeting to Decide on Retaliation for the Daecheong Sea Battle” where they resolved to get revenge for the defeat in the West Sea.<sup>3)</sup> After the Daecheong battle, North Korea raised military tensions on the West Sea. On December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009, they established a peacetime firing zone along the NLL. Subsequently from January 25<sup>th</sup> to March 29<sup>th</sup> 2010 they declared two spots off-limits, one northeast of Baengnyeong Island and another to the southeast. It is claimed that the March 26<sup>th</sup> attack on the Cheonan was carried out by Jung Myong Do’s West Sea Fleet Command, under the initiative of the Reconnaissance Bureau, with support from 4<sup>th</sup> Commanding General Kim Kyuk Shik, and with permission from Kim Jong Il.<sup>4)</sup>

It appears that after the sinking of the Cheonan, those responsible were rewarded. Kim Myong Guk, head of the general staff’s operations bureau, had been demoted to lieutenant general following the Daecheong sea clash, but after the Cheonan incident, sometime between April 14-24, he regained his former rank of general.<sup>5)</sup> In addition, on April 14<sup>th</sup> 100 military generals were promoted, including Navy Commander Jung Myong Do who was promoted from lieutenant general to genera

---

1) Lee Young Jong, “Report: North Leader Ordered ‘do-or-die squads’”, *JoongAng Daily*, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

2) Hyun Gun, “The 5 Culprits of the Cheonan Incident,” *Open Radio for North Korea*, May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

3) Lee Young Jong, “North Korea’s West Sea Command Decides to Retaliate …Kim Jong Il gives Instructions,” *JoongAng Daily*, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

4) Hyun Gun, “The 5 Culprits of the Cheonan Incident,” *Open Radio for North Korea*, May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010. Some argue that Kim Kyuk Shik played the leading role, not the Reconnaissance Bureau. Lee Sang Heum, “The Cheonan Incident Was Committed by 4<sup>th</sup> Commander Kim Kyuk Shik Aided by the Reconnaissance Bureau,” *Monthly Chosun*, June 2010.

5) Jeong Yong Su, “Pyongyang Gives General Back His Lost Fourth Star,” *JoongAng Ilbo*, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010.



1.6) On April 25<sup>th</sup>, the 78<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the KPA, Kim Jong Il visited the 586<sup>th</sup> Unit (the Reconnaissance Bureau), and was greeted by Lieutenant General Kim Young Chul.<sup>7)</sup>

A second theory is that the attack was made to put in action the succession plans for Kim Jong Eun. The mainstream opinion among US intelligence agencies is that Kim Jong Il ordered the attack. His motive was to restore his own power and authority which had faltered due to the stroke he suffered nearly two years ago, and thereby consolidate the authority to designate his son Kim Jong Eun as heir.<sup>8)</sup> Some indirect evidence for this is the visit by Kim Jong Il to Unit 586 (the Reconnaissance Bureau) on April 25<sup>th</sup>, the KPA founding anniversary general staff operations bureau chief Kim Myong Guk's promotion back to general after he had earlier been demoted to lieutenant general; and the fact that the various commanders are unable to make independent decisions. Yet the leaders of South Korea and the US have not officially linked Kim Jong Il to the sinking; there are two reasons for this. First, there is no direct proof. Second, in accusing Kim Jong Il directly, the issue becomes entangled in the Kim family's machinations. That is, they risk giving credit to the Kim family for another legendary victory against South Korea and the West. Many South Korean experts have interpreted the Cheonan incident from the viewpoint of the succession issue.<sup>9)</sup> In this view, by sinking a South Korean warship, Kim Jong Il is trying to build up a crisis atmosphere in order to shore up internal solidarity and secure support from the military. Then, based on a solid foundation of military support, he hopes to establish Kim Jong Un as successor. In Kim Jong Il's own succession process there were similar serious provocations against the South which helped to firm up his succession. The sinking of the Cheonan was thus an effort to establish Kim Jong Un as a strong leader capable of commanding the armed forces.

A third theory connects the Cheonan incident to the 6-Party Talks. This set can be divided into two opposing theories as to the motive: breaking down the talks, or accelerating them. The "breaking down" theory is based on the following reasoning.<sup>10)</sup> The US and North Korea agreed shortly before the sinking on March 26<sup>th</sup> to hold joint talks and a preliminary meeting to prepare for the

---

6) Lee Young Jong, "Navy Commander Promoted to 4-Star General; Redeemed Defeat by Planning Attack," *Joongang Ilbo*, April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

7) YTN, "Kim Jong Il Visits Reconnaissance Bureau, 'Base of South Korea Operatives,'" YTN Video, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010

8) David E. Sanger, "US Implicates North Korean Leader in Attack," *The New York Times*, 22 May 2010.

9) Choe Sang-Hun, "Succession in N. Korea May Be Behind New Belligerence," *The New York Times*, May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010.; Kim Yong Hoon, "SK Foreign Minister Blames North for Cheonan," *Daily NK*, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010.; Victor D. Cha, "North Korea: Succession Signals," Council of Foreign Relations, May 26<sup>th</sup> 2010.

10) Kang Chan Ho, "North Korea's Military Blocked the US-DPRK Talks," *Choongang Ilbo*, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010.



6-Party Talks. With this in mind the US had begun preparing a visa for North Korean Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Kim Kye Gwan to visit the US. However after the Cheonan incident these plans fell apart. This was an abrupt reversal. The hard-liners who did not want the talks to proceed, such as the military, used the Cheonan incident to push aside the pro-negotiation faction in the Foreign Ministry and take control of policy-making. Richard Bush of the Brookings Institute argues that Kim Jong Il ordered the sinking in order to stall China’s attempt to host the 6-Party Talks.<sup>11)</sup> He claims that North Korea has no intention of giving up its nuclear weapons and therefore it has no interest in returning to the 6-Party Talks or re-entering negotiations. He adds that the missile launches and nuclear test of 2009 were also used to sidestep negotiations.

The fourth theory is the opposite of the third. It suggests that the Cheonan sinking was meant to accelerate the Talks and in the process increase friction between the US and South Korea. This theory proceeds as follows.<sup>12)</sup> The Cheonan incident was part of a plan for North Korea to advance a more far-reaching military and diplomatic strategy. Ultimately North Korea aims to drive a wedge in US-South Korea relations. North Korea is accustomed to brinkmanship tactics and it knows when to back off. So after taking a provocative action against South Korea such as the Cheonan sinking, North Korea would then make some concessions to the US regarding the nuclear issue and the 6-Party Talks. Then as long as no solid evidence emerged to link it to the Cheonan sinking, the US would try to keep the Cheonan and the nuclear issue separate and pressure an unwilling South Korea to participate in the 6-Party Talks. A similar argument reaches the same conclusion through a different process.<sup>13)</sup> That is, if North Korea eventually acknowledges its involvement in the Cheonan sinking but insists that it was “an independent provocation by the military,” it is likely that the US will conclude discussion on the Cheonan issue and devote its efforts completely to the 6-Party Talks, but doing so could seriously rupture US-South Korean relations.

The 5<sup>th</sup> argument is that the Lee Myung Bak administration brought this incident upon itself. Mike Chinoy argues that the Cheonan attack was predictable following the drastic changes in inter-Korean relations brought on by the Lee Myung Bak government.<sup>14)</sup> That government is unilaterally working to rewrite the rules of inter-Korean relations, which has sparked a cycle of

---

11) Richard C. Bush III, “The mind of Kim Jong-Il II,” *The Huffington Post*, May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

12) Narushige Michishita, “The Cheonan sinking and Kim Jong Il’s China visit: Now what?,” *East Asia Forum*, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

13) Cha Dae Woon, “The Cheonan Incident May Be North Korea’s ‘Strategy to Bind China,’” *Yonhap News*, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

14) Mike Chinoy, “Method in North Korea’s Madness,” *Forbes*, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010.



rising tensions ultimately leading to the attack on the Cheonan. Selig Harrison makes a similar point, saying the Lee Myung Bak administration has reversed past achievements reached through two summit meetings, reviving deep-rooted fears in the North that South Korea is trying to destroy their regime and achieve unification through absorption.<sup>15)</sup> This suggests that the Lee Myung Bak government brought on this act of retaliation by the North.

The 6<sup>th</sup> theory is that the provocation was intended to prompt a change to the Lee Myung Bak administration's North Korea policy. This theory has been presented by both Victor Cha and Scott Snyder.<sup>16)</sup> They argue that the Kim Jong Il regime is greatly unhappy with the current conservative government in South Korea. Pyongyang has become accustomed to the Sunshine Policy of the past 10 years and cannot adapt to the current government's demands for reciprocity. So they are trying to change South Korea's attitude by making provocations. They have calculated that South Korea is willing to work harder and pay more to maintain peace. Thus North Korea is using this small-scale provocation to threaten South Korean prosperity and gain the upper hand in inter-Korean relations, thereby enabling themselves to extort more gains. With its nuclear weapons, North Korea is now able to apply this sort of strategy more confidently.

Seventh, an indirect background factor is North Korea's increased boldness since acquiring nuclear weapons. This argument is as follows.<sup>17)</sup> In the past even when North Korea made serious provocations against the South it did not suffer any repercussions; for example, the 1968 operation to attack the South Korean presidential compound, the 1983 Rangoon terror attack, and the 1987 KAL flight bombing. So they may have postulated that a fresh military provocation would not be enough to prompt South Korea to seek revenge. This traditional thinking has grown even more audacious since they accomplished two nuclear tests, boosting their "deterrent capability." It is North Korea's belief that even if they make increasingly direct conventional attacks, South Korea and the US will not be able to respond effectively out of fear that the North might use its nuclear weapons.

---

15) Selig s. Harrison, "What Seoul should do despite the Cheonan," *Hangyoreh*, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

16) Scott Snyder, "The Cheonan Attack: Torpedoing Chance of Peace?," *Yale Global*, 27 May 2010.; Victor D. Cha, "North Korea: Succession Signals," Council of Foreign Relations, 26 May 2010.

17) Scott Snyder, "The Cheonan Attack: Torpedoing Chance of Peace?," *Yale Global*, 27 May 2010.; Victor D. Cha, "North Korea: Succession Signals," Council of Foreign Relations, 26 May 2010.; David E. Sanger and Coe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Cuts All Ties With South," *The New York Times*, 25 May 2010.



Eighth is the theory about binding China more tightly.<sup>18)</sup> As China had appeared to be drifting away, the Cheonan incident was a means of cementing its friendly ties with North Korea and restoring the blood alliance. It can be expected that a stronger ROK-US alliance and large-scale joint military maneuvers in the West Sea in response to the Cheonan incident will serve to alter the balance of power in the region, and in that case China has no choice but to get more involved with North Korea. Some claim that this was the purpose of the Cheonan attack.

Ninth is the theory that the incident serves to misdirect public concerns within North Korean society. The Cheonan incident can work to quiet internal discontent following the defeat in the Daecheong sea battle and the failed currency reform. This point serves as a supplement to more major motivations.

Tenth is a set of several motives working together. Most experts suggest some combination of 3 or 4 of the above motives were behind the attack. One such expert suggests possession of nuclear weapons, the succession plans, and the need to cover internal dissent as factors.<sup>19)</sup> Another points to revenge for the Daecheong sea battle, anger at the ROK government's policies, and the succession issue.<sup>20)</sup> There are even those who combine all these factors together. For instance, one writer suggests the purpose of the attack was to restore the loss of face suffered after the Daecheong sea battle, to redirect public attention from the troubled economy and the side effects of the failed currency reform, to strengthen internal unity, to gain the upper hand in discussions with the US over the 6-Party Talks, and bring about a change in the ROK government's North Korea policy.<sup>21)</sup>

## The View that the Cheonan Attack Was Ordered by a Subordinate, Not Kim Jong Il

Finally, there are some who suggest that North Korea and Kim Jong Il had no reason to attack the Cheonan, and that it may have been done by someone else down the chain of command. In view of the international situation, it is difficult to see why North Korea would have risked this attack, and if it did in fact deliberately order it then its motives are inscrutable.<sup>22)</sup> One expert argues that, by

---

18) Cha Dae Hoon, "The Cheonan Incident May Be North Korea's 'Strategy to Bind China,'" *Yonhap News*, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

19) Yoon Young-kwan, "The Gambler of North Korea," Project Syndicate, 13 May 2010.

20) Victor D. Cha, "North Korea: Succession Signals," Council of Foreign Relations, 26 May 2010.

21) "Military intelligence suspects North's Reconnaissance Unit," *Yonhap News*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010.



looking at North Korea's 3 highest priorities - a higher standard of living, improved relations with the US, and expanded trade with China - it is possible to predict the regime's behavior, and they must have anticipated that the attack would hinder all of their core objectives. In the same vein, another expert writes that the North Korean military, blind to the international situation and eager for payback for the Daecheong sea battle, orchestrated the attack (without Kim Jong Il's orders). One expert points out that assuming Kim Jong Il ordered the torpedo attack, the act was indeed a gift to North Korea's enemies.<sup>23)</sup> This suggests that Kim Jong Il is himself a right-wing spy hidden within North Korea. Thanks to the Cheonan sinking, South Korea took steps to more thoroughly isolate North Korea, and the US and Japan reached a compromise on the issue of moving the Okinawa military base. Another expert says is difficult to imagine how the North Korean leadership, which prioritizes its own survival above all else, could order such a reckless act.<sup>24)</sup> Attacking a South Korean military vessel is an act of war, and open war against South Korea would be suicidal for the North. The proponents of this view argue that it is unthinkable that Kim Jong Il would have ordered the attack himself, and far more likely that the attack was ordered by someone else in the North Korean hierarchy. But such a situation would only be possible if Kim Jong Il's authority were unstable or collapsing. If so, this is deeply troubling as it foreshadows internal disorder in the future.

## Conclusion

All the various views presented here are mere deductions, lacking definitive proof. While this is unavoidable under the circumstances, it is not a futile effort. In each theory there is probably some grain of truth. However we must be careful to treat them all as mere deductions and leave them open to refinement. In particular, we must endeavor to take these pieces of the truth and try to fit them into a more comprehensive logical framework.

The following are several questions to help develop the existing viewpoints. First, there is something odd about the Daecheong sea battle theory. This battle was essentially a charge by a

---

22) Lee Do Kyung, "Experts Cannot Accept Theory that North Korea Attacked the Cheonan," *Kookmin Ilbo*, April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010.

23) John Feffer, "Kim Jong Il: Right-Wing Mole?," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

24) Ruediger Frank, "An Act of Open Insubordination? Implications of the Cheonan Incident for Domestic Politics in North Korea," 38 North: Informed Analysis of North Korea, 9 May 2010.



single North Korean patrol boat into the midst of a powerful, well-prepared enemy camp. North Korea internally used this as a pretext to sharpen its knives for revenge and attack, dramatically raising inter-Korean military tensions. It is possible that North Korea deliberately planned to be defeated. Second, as to the succession theory, this reduces North Korea's foreign and domestic policies and actions to a single cause - implementing the succession plan. This argument ignores various distinct structural problems and motives independent of the succession, such as the nuclear issue, the influences of neighboring countries, the internal economic situation, relations between the government and society, etc. Third, the theories about disrupting the 6-party process, driving a wedge between the US and South Korea, the Lee Myung Bak administration's self-destructive policies, changing South Korea's policy toward the North, and the theory of a subordinate actor, all need to be re-examined and refined.

Therefore, to put it very briefly: in response to strategic crises such as Kim Jong Il's health issues and worsening inter-Korean and US-North Korean relations, North Korea has adopted a breakthrough hard-line response, and has pushed ahead with the mutually contradictory goals of developing nuclear weapons and acquiring foreign investment. In order to achieve these goals, it has applied a combination of hard-line and soft-line policies depending on the situation. The Cheonan attack can be considered as a product of this context.

