

ROK Diplomacy: Navigating Uncharted Waters The Historic Significance of the Cheonan Incident for ROK Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The Cheonan incident occurred when the ROK was faced with unprecedented challenges posed by the great vulnerability and uncertainty of North Korea, its own new role and responsibilities as an emerging international player, and the changing balance among the major powers. The ROK's diplomacy over the incident not only reflected such contemporary international circumstances but also epitomized President Lee Myung-bak's leadership style as well as the goals and resources of his nation. The Lee administration's diplomatic characteristics include: a) foremost priority on the ROK-U.S. alliance; b) principled approach; c) realism and pragmatism, and d) internationalism. These have served as the guiding principles for ROK diplomats in successfully proceeding through the different dimensions of Cheonan diplomacy: a) verification of the truth; b) retaliation; c) international cooperation; and d) transition to the post-incident phase. The crisis appeared to be a proving ground for the nation and its leadership, which shares fundamental values and basic strategic interests with the U.S. and Japan, to set a fundamental course for the nation's long-term foreign policy. Seoul, Washington and Tokyo should take advantage of the currently enhanced momentum to further reinforce cooperation in security areas, bilaterally and trilaterally, and thus consolidate their strategic foothold in the region.

Key Words: Cheonan, Lee Myung-bak, foreign policy, ROK-U.S. alliance, Japan

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Introduction

As is the case with many crimes, there is no dearth of interpretations about the motives and psychologies underlying the culprit's actions. Diverse theories and assumptions have been presented about why North Korea, in the midst of a fragile succession process, committed such an egregious act as to torpedo a naval vessel of the Republic of Korea (ROK) at this particular juncture in history.¹ In contrast, sufficient analysis and assessment has yet to be rendered regarding the significance of the responses that the ROK has adopted since the sinking of the Cheonan, with a death toll of 46 servicemen. No one can fully understand any historic incident without understanding the chain of events and reactions that followed it. This paper purports to examine the policies and measures the ROK painstakingly took in the aftermath of the incident, and to assess the historic significance and long-term implications of the Cheonan incident to the ROK's foreign policy.

Historically, the Korean Peninsula has been a land of clashing interests of neighboring powers, forcing Korea to endure enormous hardships and difficulties for centuries. In the clash of interests over the Cheonan incident, however, the ROK has been a protagonist of international politics, deliberately shaping a course of action and managing its consequences. In many ways, this incident was not another case of the six-decade-long continuum of inter-Korean conflicts. The ship was sunk at the time when: a) Pyongyang was undergoing the greatest period of vulnerability and uncertainty in its history;² b) Seoul was enthusiastic

¹- Sanger, David E., "U.S. Implicates North Korean Leader in Attack," *The New York Times*, May 22, 2010; Michihisa, Narushige, "The Cheonan sinking and Kim Jong-il's China visit: Now what?" *East Asia Forum*, May 10, 2010; Choe Sang-hun, "Succession in N. Korea may be behind new belligerence," *The New York Times*, May 27, 2010; Snyder, Scott, "The Cheonan Attack: Torpedoing chance of peace?" *Yale Global*, May 27, 2010; Cha, Victor D., "North Korea: Succession Signals," *Council of Foreign Relations*, May 26, 2010, et al.

²- Lee, Sung-yoon, "Take Advantage of Kim's Bad Timing," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 7,

about assuming unprecedented responsibilities commensurate with its new status as an emerging major power for the first time since its foundation; and c) the traditional balances among the neighboring powers, most notably the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States of America (U.S.), were being steadily transformed. Considering these circumstances, future historians will have good reasons to interpret this incident as a defining event that consequently set the fundamental course of the ROK's foreign policy for years to come.

To begin with, this paper outlines four guiding principles which characterize the foreign policy of President Lee: 1) foremost priority on the ROK-U.S. alliance; 2) principled approach; 3) realism and pragmatism; and 4) internationalism.³ This paper focuses on the quality of leadership in foreign policy. It aims to illustrate that the ROK's diplomacy regarding the Cheonan incident not only reflected the international circumstances of the time, but also largely epitomized President Lee Myung-bak's philosophy, ideals, and style as well as the goals, instruments, resources, and prowess of his country (*Section: Quality of Leadership: The President Dictating Foreign Policy*).

The paper goes on to examine the specific choices and reactions Seoul took after the incident by dividing the sequence of events into four dimensions: 1) verification of the truth; 2) retaliation; 3) international cooperation; and 4) transition to the "Post-Cheonan" phase. In so doing, the author aims to demonstrate how President Lee's diplomacy offered practical guidance in the nation's crisis. This paper attributes the ROK's success to Seoul's well-weighted decisions, audacious choices and discreet actions throughout the course of events (*Section: Foreign Policy Tested: The*

2010.

³- The foreign policy platform "Creative Diplomacy" denotes a new set of principles which Lee Myung-bak has adopted in his policymaking. "President Elect Vows Creative Diplomacy," *Korea Times*, December 19, 2007.

Nation Setting the Cheonan Diplomacy in Motion).

Finally, the author welcomes the administration's successful endeavors to chart a basic course of foreign policy that future ROK administrations should continue to pursue, and proposes that the ROK and Japan, along with the U.S., should make the most of the enhanced momentum to further substantiate cooperation, particularly in the security realm, and should consolidate a strategic foothold in the region (*Section: The ROK's New Paradigm: A Sea Power Charting its Navigation Map*).

Quality of Leadership: The President Dictating Foreign Policy

The foreign policy that President Lee promotes marks a striking contrast to that of the preceding administrations of the past decade, and particularly that of his immediate predecessor President Roh Moo-hyun, whose diplomacy featured: a) a strong sense of nationalism and anti-Americanism; b) a situational, opportunistic and idealistic approach; c) a rhetorical and ideological method of presentation; and d) populism.

As examined in this Section, President Lee's policy represents a crystal-clear antithesis: 1) foremost priority on the ROK-U.S. alliance; 2) principled approach; 3) realism and pragmatism; and 4) internationalism. Although these are neither coherent nor mutually exclusive when applied in actual terms, the presidential dictum shed light in the darkness of the crisis and guided Korean diplomats and policy-makers throughout the meandering process of Cheonan diplomacy.

Foremost Priority on the ROK-U.S. Alliance

When President Lee took office at the Blue House in February 2008, he began his diplomacy by restoring the relationship with President Bush's America. The bilateral alliance had been tarnished by his predecessor,

a banner-bearer of the so-called “368 generation,” inherently skeptical of the alliance. The bilateral relationship during the Roh-Bush era was punctuated by frictions such as the ROK’s request to return War-time Operational Control, recurring base relocation issues, resistance to the U.S.’s “strategic flexibility” concept, and President Roh’s lukewarm and accommodative position toward the North.⁴ In his inaugural address, President Lee sounded the death knell of anti-Americanism and stressed the vital importance of further strengthening “traditional friendly relations with the United States into a future-oriented partnership.”⁵ President Lee visited Washington for his first overseas trip to meet with President Bush at the White House and Camp David in April.⁶ The president’s reference to the “strategic alliance with the United States” signified more than “traditional” ties; it meant revitalizing the alliance with a broader scope of cooperation over an array of global issues. This policy of prioritizing the alliance and cultivating multilateral platforms to optimize national interests perfectly matched the foreign policy inclination of the Obama administration. President Lee’s pro-alliance approach helped to fill in perception gaps about their common strategic objectives, as encapsulated in the policy document “Joint Vision of the ROK-U.S. Alliance” in June 2009.⁷

4- Funabashi, Yoichi, “The Peninsula Question: The Second Nuclear Crisis of the Korean Peninsula,” *Asahi Shimbun*, October 2006; Flake, L. Gordon, “Ally, Global Partner or Historical Relic? The Necessity and Relevance of the ROK-U.S. Strategic Alliance,” Seminar on “The ROK-U.S. Strategic Alliance: A Future Vision for the 21st Century,” Korea Foundation, June 24, 2008, et al.

5- “Together We Shall Open A Road to Advancement,” President Lee Myung-bak’s Inaugural Address, February 25, 2008, http://www.korea.net/news/Issues/issuesDetailView.asp?board_no=18994.

6- President Bush Participates in a Joint Press Availability with President Lee Myung-bak of the ROK, Camp David, April 19, 2008, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/04/20080419-1.html>.

7- http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-vision-for-the-alliance-of-the-United-States-of-America-and-the-Republic-of-Korea.

The Cheonan incident and the evolving process was a clear testament of the crucial nature of the alliance for the ROK: symbolically, the first foreign ally President Lee contacted was President Obama; the two nations worked together on countermeasures such as joint exercises and enhanced vigilance against any potential provocations by the North; and both sides engaged in close consultations in promoting international cooperation including their policy coordination through the process of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Principled Approach

“The purpose of foreign policy is not to provide an outlet for our own sentiments of hope or indignation; it is to shape real events in a real world” said former U.S. President John F. Kennedy.⁸ Another characteristic feature of the Lee administration’s diplomacy is a principled way of acting. This principle-oriented approach, as opposed to a situational, opportunistic and functional approach, respects a set of ruling principles and fundamental values such as transparency, accountability, and compliance, as well as freedom, democracy, human rights, market-based economics and economic rationalism.⁹

In the context of inter-Korean relations, this approach intends to balance the debt of the “Sunshine Policy” promoted during the decade of Democratic Party rule, which ended up unsettling the alliance with the U.S. allowing Pyongyang to manipulate the relations among Seoul, Washington and Tokyo, and eroding Seoul’s bargaining power over the North. Learning from these bitter lessons, the Lee administration has been faithful to the basic doctrines outlined in the so-called “MB Doctrine” and

⁸ - <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkmormontabernacle.htm>.

⁹ - In his inaugural speech, President Lee emphasized this in the context of global diplomacy: “Respecting the universal principles of democracy and market economics, we will take part in the global movement for peace and development.”

the “Denuclearization-Opening-\$3,000 Initiative.” The principles vis-à-vis the North are loud and clear: a) peace should come before prosperity, not vice versa; b) nobody else but Pyongyang should make a strategic decision; c) benefits must not be unilateral but mutual between the two Koreas; d) bilateral activities should be evaluated in terms of economic benefits and fiscal sustainability of the ROK; e) Seoul should squarely address the nuclear issue, not leaving it in the U.S.-North context; and f) inter-Korean relations should not damage ROK-U.S. solidarity.¹⁰

Another quality of President Lee’s principled approach is a distinctive separation of foreign policy from domestic politics. As in other democracies, an aphorism of Alexis de Tocqueville holds true for the ROK: “There is a propensity that induces democracies to obey impulse rather than prudence and to abandon a mature design for the gratification of momentary passion.”¹¹ President Roh’s policy toward Japan has been a telling example of basing foreign policy on domestic considerations.¹² In this author’s anticipation, in the second half of his presidency President Lee should maintain self-discipline and not misuse the two most tempting cards to boost his domestic popularity, i.e. manipulating inter-Korean affairs and antagonizing Japan.¹³

¹⁰ - With regards to its position on human rights, the Lee administration has co-sponsored a resolution on the human rights situation in North Korea at the Third Committee of the U.N. General Assembly since 2008, although the previous administrations had abstained from voting on such resolutions until 2007. The ROK has also co-sponsored a human rights resolution against the North at the U.N. Human Rights Council since 2008.

¹¹ - Alexis de Tocqueville, “Democracy in America,” Vol. I, Part B, 1835.

¹² - “An Open Letter to the Nation by President Roh Moo-hyun Concerning Korea-Japan Relations,” March 23, 2005, http://www.korea.net/news/news/newsView.asp?serial_no=20050324027.

¹³ - Some observers argue that President Lee and his Grand National Party manipulated the investigation process and dramatized the presidential speech in their attempt to blow a “Northern wind” and scratch together supportive votes for the local election upcoming on June 2. Presumably, this was not the case. Even if it had been the case, such calculations proved unrewarding, as the opinion survey and the election outcome

As examined in Section (*Foreign Policy Tested: The Nation Setting the Cheonan Diplomacy in Motion*), the principled approach proved to be a hallmark of the ROK's Cheonan diplomacy.

Realism and Pragmatism

Another idiosyncrasy of the CEO-turned-President is a result-oriented, practical, and matter-of-fact way of addressing problems. President Lee was an early critic of the ideological approach of his predecessor. He stated, "We must move from the age of ideology into the age of pragmatism."¹⁴ This disposition, like a golden rule of any successful corporate manager, features a rational way of calculating costs and benefits, weighing risks and opportunities on a balance sheet, and calibrating the reactions of others to keep matters under control. President Lee brought this approach to his diplomacy and changed the corporate culture of his Foreign Ministry.

President Lee's "Three-Step Process" toward reunification is a hybrid product of the aforementioned principled approach and pragmatism. In the presidential address on the 65th anniversary of liberation in August 2010, he outlined his vision for reunification: form a peace community (which entails denuclearization of the peninsula first), then realize economic integration by carrying out comprehensive exchanges and cooperation, and ultimately reunify Korea.¹⁵ For practical purposes, he proposed considering a unification tax, but did not go beyond suggesting that "these and other related issues should be discussed widely and thoroughly by all the members of our society."

indicated.

¹⁴ In the same speech, he defined pragmatism as "a rational principle prevalent in the histories across the globe, and practical wisdom useful in charting our course through the tides of globalization."

¹⁵ - http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2010/08/113_71472.html.

Lee's pro-alliance inclination, blended with realism and pragmatism, took on another shape in the Cheonan context. While relying on the U.S.'s assistance, the ROK did not allow the incident to escalate out of control and disrupt the wholesome development of its alliance with the U.S. Instead, Seoul deferred to the compelling necessity of Washington to preserve the unity of the P5 and prudently withdrew its original plan to pursue a UNSC resolution.

Internationalism

With its scarce natural resources and the persistent threat from the North, the ROK could not possibly survive in isolation from the world. Internationalism, in its passive sense, has been an indispensable policy to ensure its survival, maximize its national interests and consolidate its standing in the international community.

Today, the world cannot survive without the ROK. With its economic ascendancy to the world's top tier, the nation is becoming more confident in its ability to realize its ambition to become "Global Korea." The ROK has begun pursuing internationalism in its aggressive sense. Internationalism, not nationalism, is the source of its national pride, self-esteem and international reputation. President Lee himself personifies a "rags-to-riches" ideal and the rise of his nation.¹⁶ There are abundant examples of Korea's aspiration for proactive internationalism: its respective chairmanships of the G20 Summit in November 2010 and the Nuclear Security Summit in 2012; its acceptance as the 24th nation to join the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD in 2009 against the backdrop of its

¹⁶- Lee, Myung-bak, "There Is No Such Thing as Myth: A Personal Memoir," 2005, *Shinchosha* [Japanese Translation]. In his inaugural address, the president referred to himself as "a boy from the countryside who could not even eat regular meals" but eventually "became the president," conflating his own image with that of his nation by adding, "As such, the Republic of Korea is a country where we can dream our dreams and bring those dreams to reality."

increasing volume of foreign assistance, its active participation of the United Nations' PKO, its candidacy to become a non-permanent member of the UNSC for the 2012-2013 term, and its chairmanship of the COP 18 in 2015.

What enables Korea's active internationalism is its economic ascendancy. Its FTAs with the gigantic markets of ASEAN, India and the EU, and its successful bid to construct the nuclear power plant in UAE, are shining achievements of the ROK government's aggressive internationalism in its economic, energy and resource policies, coupled with the energetic commercial activities of the private sector. Vibrant business activities overseas necessitate favorable environments and friendly relations with other nations. Even though political-military considerations dictated the course of action in the Cheonan case, the ROK also considered the economic dimension of its foreign policy and the compelling need to maintain the cordial relations with China and Russia from a pragmatic viewpoint.

Foreign Policy Tested:

The Nation Setting the Cheonan Diplomacy in Motion

Crisis tests the caliber of leadership. In the wake of the nation's crisis, the ROK's Cheonan diplomacy proved to be the articulate expression and concrete application of the aforementioned philosophies and principles of President Lee's leadership. Seoul's strategy is examined here according to the following sequence of events: 1) verification of the truth; 2) retaliation; 3) international cooperation; and 4) transition to the "Post-Cheonan" phase.

Verification of Truth

"The truth is incontrovertible" contends former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, "panic may resent it, ignorance may deride it, malice

may distort it, but there it is.”¹⁷ While the North denied its involvement and claimed that the incident was fabricated by the South, the single most imperative task for the ROK was to establish the truth by conducting a credible investigation and to gain international recognition in a timely and persuasive manner. Credibility was the crown jewel for enabling the ROK to survive the Cheonan diplomatic process: failure to provide it would damage Seoul’s policies and follow-up measures and jeopardize support at home and abroad. The fact that the result of the investigation came out almost two months after the salvage of the stern of the ship indicates that Seoul considered the modus operandi and conducted the investigation in an extremely cautious way, not rushing to judgment. Elements of a credible investigation include scientific objectivity, persuasiveness of evidence, and transparency and political neutrality in procedures, which Seoul maintained throughout the investigation under enormous time constraints.

Theoretically, there are four possible modalities for such an investigation: a) an independent investigation individually conducted by the ROK; b) an international investigation under the auspices of a third party (e.g. the UN Panel of Inquiry on the flotilla incident involving Israel and Turkey of May 31, 2010); c) an investigation in accordance with the Korean War Armistice Agreement;¹⁸ and d) an international joint investigation led by the ROK. Seoul chose the fourth option out of the desire for credibility and practical necessity. To establish the cause of the incident, the Ministry of National Defense organized the Civilian-Military Joint Investigation Group (JIG) on March 31, which was staffed only by

¹⁷- Talbott, Frederick, “Churchill on Courage: Timeless Wisdom for Preserving,” Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996.

¹⁸- Article 24 of the Korean War Armistice Agreement provides, “The general mission of the Military Armistice Commission shall be to supervise the implementation of this Armistice Agreement and to settle through negotiations any violations of this Armistice Agreement.”

Koreans,¹⁹ but was re-organized to ensure transparency and neutrality on April 12 with a total of 73 personnel (25 experts from 12 Korean civilian agencies, 22 military experts, 3 advisors recommended by the National Assembly and 24 foreign experts from 4 different countries).²⁰ The ministry also organized a Multinational Combined Intelligence Task Force (MCITF) on May 4 tasked with identifying the perpetrator of the incident.²¹

The JIG employed scientific and systematic methodologies to establish the cause. It first enumerated all the possible scenarios and reduced them to three major categories and eleven sub-categories.²² Then it eliminated any preconceptions by thoroughly evaluating various factors such as deformations of the hull, statements by personnel, seismic and infrasound waves and simulations of underwater explosions, using the review standards employed by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). In so doing, the JIG and the MCITF assessed the likelihood of every possible scenario, isolated the most plausible one, and concluded that the Cheonan had been sunk due to the shockwave and bubble effects generated by the underwater explosion of a torpedo, and that the weapon used was a torpedo manufactured by North Korea.²³

Engaging all the parties concerned in a highly transparent and

¹⁹- The original JIG was composed of 59 active service members, 17 government personnel and 6 civilians, who were ROK citizens.

²⁰- In order to enhance scientific objectivity and technical detail, the investigation term was divided into four tasks: scientific investigation, explosives analysis, ship structure and intelligence analysis. Foreign experts from the U.S., Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and Sweden took part in the JIG.

²¹- Experts from the U.S., Australia, Canada and the UK participated in the MCITF.

²²- Among the collected materials and information, the propulsion motor of a torpedo bearing a Korean marking "Il-bon" (No. 1) discovered on May 15 was a "smoking gun" that strongly implicated Pyongyang's involvement.

²³- The final report states, "The evidence points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the torpedo was fired by a North Korean submarine. There is no other plausible explanation."

timely manner was the ROK's next key task in order to contain skepticism and earn credibility for the investigation both at home and abroad.²⁴ In terms of strategic communication, the JIG held press conferences on its activities on three occasions to satisfy the public interest, and thus successfully ensured transparency and accountability.²⁵ When the final investigation results were released on May 20, the Korean and foreign press corps were provided with extensive briefings and Q&A sessions. In addition, while declining Pyongyang's request to accept their "inspection team," Seoul offered all other relevant nations opportunities for informal briefings prior to the release of the investigation results.²⁶

The credible investigation was a victory of the principled approach, pragmatism and internationalism which the Lee administration embraced: segmenting a comprehensive effort into subject-specific missions, mobilizing the expertise of Korean and foreign professionals from a wide spectrum of scientific fields, validating the results in a systematic and rational way, and presenting them in a transparent and accountable manner. The credibility generally attained at home and abroad proved to be powerful ammunition for Seoul in navigating through the political storm lying ahead.

²⁴- The Ministry of National Defense published its "Joint Investigation Report on the Attack against ROK Ship Cheonan," which comprehensively describes the findings, analyses and conclusions of the JIG and its evidence data in both Korean and English "to resolve unnecessary misunderstanding and suspicions," <http://cheonan46.go.kr/100>. ISBN 978-89-7677-711-9.

²⁵- The JIG held press conferences on April 7, 15 and 20 before announcing the final results.

²⁶- North Korea's National Defense Commission made a counterproposal to send its own inspection team to the ROK to verify the evidence, http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/421857.html. The PRC eventually declined the offer, while the ROK later accommodated a group of experts from Russia to conduct its own research starting from May 30.

Retaliation

Credibility alone is no guarantee of success in politics. Building on its credibility, the ROK needed to express its resolute will and take concrete actions. Because of possible backlash from Pyongyang or loss of control of the situation, the stakes for the Lee administration were high, and it had to fully weigh its various policy alternatives in order to produce the desired consequences against the North without exacerbating the situation.

In his address on May 29, President Lee defined the North's act as "a military provocation" that "violated the United Nations Charter and contravened the existing agreements... including the Korean War Armistice Agreement." He urged the North to apologize and punish those responsible immediately, and cautioned, "North Korea will pay a price corresponding to its provocative acts."²⁷ He also stated that the goal of the ROK was "not military confrontation" but "the attainment of real peace and stability" on the peninsula. The speech was generally received as not only resolute and articulate, but also sober, self-restrained and well-balanced in its tone, language and substance.

As for the timing, it is noteworthy that the speech was delivered four days after the release of the investigation results. This indicates the Blue House's cautiousness in gauging public and international responses and, if necessary, revising the draft speech and the retaliation measures already on the menu. For the venue of the speech, the administration chose the War Memorial in the nation's capital, instead of the Pyongtaek Naval Base where the Cheonan lay as a stark reminder of the North's brutality. The choice implies Seoul's prudence: to attach historic significance to the incident, instead of characterizing it as an ephemeral event; to lower the rhetoric; and to avoid agitating the public and the North.

²⁷ - <http://cheonan46.go.kr/100>.

Regarding the retaliatory measures against to the North, the ministers in charge deliberately selected and announced a complete package following the presidential address: a) inter-Korean sanctions including the closure of maritime routes for inter-Korean exchanges, the suspension of trade and investment, the downgrading of activities at the Gaeseong Industrial Complex, and the resumption of “psychological warfare” against the North; b) military/security responses based on the ROK-U.S. alliance and so-called “proactive deterrence,” including a joint anti-submarine exercise in the Yellow Sea; and c) cooperation with the international players on the UNSC and a PSI exercise.

The ROK’s retaliation proved to be well-balanced, restrained and calibrated.

First, Seoul chose to refer the issue to the UNSC and did not go so far as to exercise the right of self-defense, although the White House defined the North’s act as “act of aggression.”²⁸ It also chose the council as the primary vehicle to address the case, bypassing the normative approach provided by the Armistice Agreement.²⁹ This judgment came from Seoul’s realistic and pragmatic calculation that the North’s involvement would frustrate the process and jeopardize the timely and concerted efforts of the international community. Secondly, Seoul was deliberate in its implementation, as is shown in the Defense Ministry’s self-restraint from activating loud speakers after carefully measuring Pyongyang’s bellicose response.³⁰ Thirdly, the President not only blamed the North, but also

²⁸- The White House Press Secretary’s statement, May 19, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/statement-press-secretary-republic-korea-navy-ship-cheonan>.

²⁹- The letter from the ROK to the president of the UNSC dated June 30 explains, “The UNC-KPA General Officer-level talks have been the designated forum for any armistice-related issues following agreement between the UNC and the KPA in 1998, and the mechanism has dealt with other cases of violation by the North including the North’s submarine infiltration in June 1998 and naval hostilities in 1999 and 2002.”

³⁰- KCNA on June 26, 2010 stated, “Psychological warfare is one of the basic operational forms for carrying out a war and the installing of such means for the above-said warfare

admitted to “mistakes” made by his military and pledged to expedite military reform efforts in his speech. Finally, the ROK explicitly reached out to the PRC and Russia for their cooperation, which demonstrated Seoul’s determination that the international community should join hands in retaliating through diplomacy.

In so doing, the ROK succeeded in expressing its resolute will, laying out concrete goals, managing to keep a volatile situation under its control, and showing leadership in coordinating international pressure against North Korea.

International Cooperation

In advancing international cooperation, the ROK’s diplomacy was handicapped from the outset: a) the ROK was not a member of G8 and the UNSC, two major avenues for obtaining international support; b) the ROK’s lack of experience about daily procedural matters and backdoor deals at the UNSC could entangle its initiative; c) the track record of precedents in which the ROK and the North were direct parties put Seoul in a considerably weak position to make a case again at this time;³¹ d) tenacious interference from Beijing and Moscow was anticipated; and e) the UNSC was preoccupied with other major outstanding matters such as Iranian nuclear development, and the calendar did not favor the ROK’s timeline.³²

Under the circumstances, Seoul attempted to overcome these

is a direct declaration of a war against the DPRK.” “KPA General Staff Issues Crucial Declaration,” June 26, 2010, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm>.

³¹- The U.N. General Assembly, not the Security Council, addressed the case of the Rangoon bombing incident in 1983 under the subject of international terrorism, but issued no statement or remarks. On the Korean Airline 858 incident in 1987, the UNSC discussed the case in February of the next year, but only issued the President’s oral remarks.

³²- The Chiefs of Mission of the UNSC members visited Afghanistan and were absent from the debates over the Cheonan incident and other matters from June 20 for about a week.

deficiencies by closely coordinating policies with Washington and Tokyo based on the strong relationship of trust with U.S. President Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama.³³ Upon the release of the investigation result, on May 20 the Japanese government issued a Prime Minister's comment strongly condemning the attack and robustly supporting the ROK. Japan expeditiously upgraded its already tight measures against the North on May 28.³⁴ The ROK also made the best use of upcoming diplomatic events such as the Trilateral Summit with Japan and the PRC (May 29-30), the G8/G20 Summits in Canada (June 25-26), and the ASEAN/ARF Ministerial Meeting in Vietnam (July 21-23) to engage partners and third parties and gather international support while targeting the UNSC as the primary venue for deciding a response.

The goal of the ROK in terms of the UNSC's outcome was unequivocal yet overly ambitious: to adopt, at the earliest possible time, a UNSC resolution containing such elements as endorsement of the investigation results; condemnation of the North; demands for an apology and reparation; punishment; prevention of further hostilities; and decisions by member states to take measures. Seoul issued its letter to the president of the Security Council on June 4, attaching a document describing the investigation findings, and requested that the council "duly consider the matter and respond in a manner appropriate to the gravity of North Korea's military provocation in order to deter recurrence of any further provocation."³⁵ The North reciprocated with its own letter on June 8. The

³³ President Obama spoke with President Lee on May 17 to clarify the U.S.'s support for the ROK and "its defense against further acts of aggression." Prime Minister Hatoyama spoke with President Lee on May 19 and May 24.

³⁴ http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/hatoyama/statement/201005/20comment_souri_e.html.

³⁵ Regarding the right of a non-UNSC member to bring an issue to the UNSC, Article 35 (1) of the U.N. Charter states, "Any member of the United Nations may bring any dispute, or any situation of the nature referred to in Article 34, to the attention of the Security Council or of the General Assembly." The UNSC Provisional Rules of Procedure

ROK held an informal interactive dialogue to share the JIG results with representatives of the relevant countries, including North Korea and China, on June 14. The objective and highly transparent scientific investigation served as a strong diplomatic weapon at the UNSC discussion. The tactic of converging efforts at the UNSC with mounting momentum from the G8/G20 Summits proved to be effective, since the G8 Muskoka Declaration was fairly robust in supporting the ROK's interests.³⁶

The PRC insisted adamantly that it would neither accept any UNSC resolution nor accommodate any language that directly condemned the North and outlined measures against it. The ultimate goal of China's Cheonan policy was to prevent further escalation, maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula, and sustain the North's regime. Beijing's displeasure about the ROK's position was obvious when President Hu Jintao kept silent about Kim Jong-il's upcoming visit to China at his meeting with President Lee on April 30. China was skeptical of the investigation results and remained instinctively uncompromising over the wording of the UNSC document, and it aligned with a dubious and lukewarm Moscow to frustrate the outcome. The two countries allegedly obstructed the ROK's initiative and also hinted to Washington that they would sabotage cooperation on other pending Security Council issues and in their respective relations with the U.S. It is also alleged that the ROK, in its desperate pursuit of a UNSC resolution and frustrated over the impasse, went so far as to consider putting a ROK-revised draft to a vote and embarrassing the PRC and Russia on the spot.

As a result of intensive discussions with the U.S. and Japan and heated debates with the other camp, the ROK finally reached a pragmatic

(2) state, "The president shall call a meeting of the Security Council if a dispute or situation is brought to the attention of the Security Council under Article 35."

³⁶ - <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/economy/summit/2010/index.html>. The Declaration called "for appropriate measures to be taken against those responsible for the attack" and condemned the attack which led to the sinking of the Cheonan.

conclusion and agreed on July 9 to a UNSC President's Statement (PRST), which was weaker in binding force but still reasonably robust in substance.³⁷ Through the challenging process at the Council, the ROK consistently "held a pen" over the document and utilized an informal framework of "P3+2" i.e. the U.S., the UK, and France, plus Japan and the ROK, in order to weather the opposition of the PRC and Russia.

It is worth noting that Seoul skillfully avoided alienating Washington and Tokyo or clashing against Beijing and Moscow, minimizing the deficit and maximizing the surplus on the ROK's total balance sheet, which includes its growing economic ties with China³⁸ and business opportunities for natural resources in Siberia, Russia.³⁹ After all, an "exit strategy" entails close consultations and cordial relations with those two countries, as they all must move on to the next phase sooner or later.

Transition to the "Post-Cheonan" Phase

What was the ROK's "exit strategy" following the Cheonan incident?

The first pillar of their exit strategy was, paradoxically enough, the continuation and enhancement of the consequences against the North Korean regime. Although the PRST was a fair and reasonable outcome by any realistic and pragmatic measurement, the ROK was far from satisfied. The nation was driven to maximize and institutionalize the positive effects that could be gained from its tragic incident. The ROK-U.S. Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting on July 19 in Seoul highlighted a sobering recognition that such a tactical attack was a present and clear danger

³⁷- "Presidential Statement: Attack on Republic of Korea Naval Ship 'Cheonan'" UNSC, July 9, 2010, S/PRST/2010/13, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2010/sc9975.doc.htm>.

³⁸- The PRC was the ROK's No. 1 trading partner (20.5%) in 2009, followed by Japan (10.4%) and the U.S. (9.4%) [Korea Bank].

³⁹- In September 2010, President Lee and President Medvedev agreed to jointly pursue a project that would bring Russian natural gas to the ROK beginning in 2015.

creeping beneath the everyday lives of the South Korean people. The ROK armed forces began improving capabilities and interoperability with the U.S. for defense against asymmetrical warfare including anti-submarine warfare (ASW). The “National Defense Reform 2020,” which emphasized long-range power projection, went under revision to improve its defense posture against conventional warfare.⁴⁰ Out of its elevated taste for internationalism, the ROK hosted an international exercise of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) on October 13-14.⁴¹

The second pillar of the “Post-Cheonan” policy concerned efforts to resurrect dialogue with the North. Since Pyongyang accepted general-officers-level meetings under the terms of the Armistice Agreement in June after repeated refusals, the UNC-KPA has held colonel-level talks several times. Seoul has kept a channel of dialogue open to see if Pyongyang would come prepared to settle the Cheonan case and honor its commitments to the 2005 Joint Statement. Seoul has also provided humanitarian assistance and agreed to hold reunions of separated families, but apparently nothing positive and substantive has occurred to date.

The third pillar is close coordination with Six-Party partners. There is general consensus that the ROK will remain in the driver’s seat, conditioning the resumption of the talks on Pyongyang’s genuine readiness to negotiate terms. “Strategic patience” is the name of game that Seoul, Tokyo and Washington are playing at this juncture, whereas Beijing is impatient to resume the talks and take the wheel on issues of the Korean Peninsula and regional politics.

⁴⁰- http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2010/07/205_66548.html.

⁴¹- The ROK hosted a PSI international exercise for the first time in October, named “Eastern Endeavor 10,” which was joined by vessels and aircraft from the U.S., Australia and Japan, along with military and civilian observers from 10 other countries. It is noteworthy that Japanese and Korean destroyers set sail side by side, representing the first such exercise conducted in the territorial waters of the ROK.

The ROK's New Paradigm: A Sea Power Charting its Navigation Map

To the Lee administration, returning to “normalcy” hardly means turning the clock back to the *status quo ante*. It means a new paradigm for ROK diplomacy with further articulation of its foreign policy principles and nuanced revisions. How will the Cheonan incident influence the ROK's diplomacy in the meantime? What are strategic implications, if any, of the ROK's foreign policy?

Impacts on the ROK's Diplomatic Equilibrium in the Region

The immediate impacts and implications of the Cheonan incident on the ROK's policy can be most effectively analyzed in terms of its diplomatic equilibrium with the other regional players: the U.S., the PRC and Japan.

First, the attack revealed the necessity for the ROK to further solidify its defense posture and the conservative value of the ROK-U.S. alliance: defense and deterrence against the North Korean threat.

Secondly, the Cheonan aftermath prompted Seoul to redefine its relations with Beijing. When President Lee first visited China in May 2008, the two leaders elevated their relationship to a “strategic cooperative partnership” which underscored the essential importance of the bilateral relationship on one hand, but on the other hand showed a certain degree of ambivalence and reluctance to go beyond that level.⁴² Though Sino-Korean relations have been periodically strained by such issues as the history of Koguryo, North Korean defectors, illegal fisheries, and the ROK's participation in the U.S.'s BMD system, these political frictions

⁴²- China-ROK Joint Statement, May 28, 2008, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/2649/t469103.htm>.

were marginalized by the overwhelmingly vibrant commercial interactions. However, Beijing's detrimental responses to the Cheonan incident sparked Sino-phobia, giving rise to animosities and anxieties about its present misbehavior, casting doubts about the legitimacy of China's chairmanship of the Six-Party framework, and enhancing alertness toward China's potential claims and challenges to ROK interests in the future.

Thirdly, the incident has given rise to progressive ideas about ways and means of promoting cooperation with Japan on security matters.⁴³ Japan consistently supported the ROK's Cheonan diplomacy, because Tokyo believed that: a) the attack constituted a security threat to Japan and the region; b) Japan's support would help alleviate tensions during the year of the 100th anniversary of Korea's annexation; and c) it would pave the way for bilateral cooperation in the security and defense areas.

A New Paradigm for ROK Foreign Policy

Considering the changing equilibrium of the ROK's relations with other regional powers, Seoul's trilateral solidarity with Washington and Tokyo is of vital importance in its security and diplomatic policies. As analyzed in the preceding sections, the single most important and overarching effect of the Cheonan incident was the realization that the ROK would best thrive as a "sea power," as opposed to a "land power," standing fast on a set of universal values and principles, anchored on its strong alliance with the U.S., and nourishing wholesome internationalism.

The three-way partnership among these sea powers has five core strategic values. Trilateral solidarity serves as: a) defense and deterrence against the North's provocations; b) diplomatic coercion against Pyongyang and its "strategic decisions"; c) a mitigation system against potential

⁴³ Four officers of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force observed the ROK-U.S. joint exercise "Invincible Spirit" in the Sea of Japan on July 25-28.

contingencies such as outflows of refugees; d) a safeguard for the ROK's rather nascent initiatives at international venues including the Six-Party platform and the U.N.; and e) a strategic stronghold in the regional context to cope with a wide range of security challenges.

It is imperative that Seoul, Tokyo and Washington seize the current momentum to promote substantial cooperation, particularly in the security field, by sharing basic recognition of their strategic interests. In this regard, the author proposes that they take the following concrete steps.

First, regarding the Korean Peninsula: a) Since it is time-sensitive to analyze the on-going succession process and civil-military relations in the North, the three nations should closely “compare notes” and assess the current situation in the North. b) Since it is high time to prepare for various scenarios that could occur during the transitional period and the post-Kim Jong-il era, the authorities should start discussing concerted responses to potential contingencies on the peninsula, including non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) of their citizens and third parties. c) In order to deter its provocations and influence Pyongyang's strategic decisions, they should take a lead in the international endeavors to render consequences by strengthening sanctions measures and the international non-proliferation regime. d) They should reestablish coordination mechanisms such as “TCOG” to lay the groundwork for negotiating terms with the North.

Secondly, regarding the PRC, the author proposes that they should substantively engage in a strategic discourse about China in the broader context of regional security, yet in a discreet way. Specific issues of discussion may include: a) how to ensure a more constructive role for the PRC in terms of North Korea and other issues of mutual concern; b) rapid and opaque modernization of its military capabilities; c) the assertive and expansive naval activities by China in the East China Sea and the South

China Sea, which threaten territorial integrity of neighboring countries and the sea line of communication (SLOC), when the very survival of sea powers depends on freedom of navigation; and d) China's encroaching influence in the Indochina region, the underbelly of ASEAN. The ROK-U.S. joint exercises in Beijing's vicinity produced the side-effects of checking China's assertive naval activities and challenging Beijing's lukewarm stance to the Kim Jong-il's regime. Since the ramifications of the incident have been detrimental to its national interests in many ways, Beijing may reasonably question the value of its perennial brotherhood with the North and begin regarding it as more of a strategic "liability" than an "asset."

Finally, Tokyo and Seoul should waste no time in filling the conspicuous vacuum in their security cooperation. Washington's facilitation is necessary to rectify the misshaped triangle, given the tendency of Japan and Korea to recoil at the sensitive nature of such cooperation due to their respective domestic considerations. Once introduced, an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) or a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) would be widely applicable in various fields of activities such as PKO, PSI and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) overseas, widening the horizon of the strategic partnership.

Conclusion

Concerning the policies and reactions of the ROK following the Cheonan incident, there is a whole spectrum of criticism: some criticize that the "hawkish" approach of President Lee antagonized North Korea, closed the door with Pyongyang, and polarized the Six-Party members into two camps. At the opposite end of spectrum, others complain that the "dovish" approach failed to pass a UNSC resolution, left the culprit at large and exacerbated the tense situation surrounding the peninsula.

When the ship was sunk, the country was faced with unprecedented challenges posed by the great vulnerability and uncertainty of North Korea, its own new role and responsibilities as an emerging power, and the changing tide of international politics. A crisis tests leadership and strengthens its philosophy. It seems to this author that the set of principles and rules followed by President Lee successfully enabled the nation to shape appropriate choices and actions throughout the Cheonan aftermath and steered the nation in the right direction. This author supports the ROK's audacious yet discreet actions in pursuit of its foreign policy as a sea power that cherishes fundamental values such as democracy, human rights, freedom, rule of law, economic rationalism and free navigation, anchored solidly in the alliance with the U.S. and the strategic partnership with Japan, embarking on a joint venture of regional and international cooperation. In this sense, the Cheonan crisis was a perfect proving ground for the ROK to test the quality of its leadership and to chart a navigation map of its foreign policy for years to come, as the nation navigates the unmapped waters of international politics.

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