

North Korea's Position on the Cheonan and Its Likely Future Moves

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Investigation of the Cause of the Sinking

The results of the investigation into the sinking of the Cheonan on the night of March 26th in the vicinity of Baengnyeong Island were announced on May 20th. Immediately after the sinking, the dominant assumption among South Koreans was that North Korea was responsible, but the government restrained itself from jumping to conclusions and made every effort to conduct a thorough, scientific investigation into the cause of the incident. Because this terrible incident took 46 young lives, in order to maintain objectivity a large-scale joint investigative team was formed. A multi-national team made up of 49 people, including 22 South Korean military- and government-affiliated specialists, 3 civilian specialists recommended by the National Assembly, and 24 expert investigators from the US, the UK, Australia, and Sweden, announced its complete results after collecting and analyzing the evidence.

The joint investigation concluded, as expected, that the cause was a military attack from North Korea. The team produced a variety of evidence to satisfactorily prove that the ship was sunk by a torpedo carrying about 250 kg of explosives launched from small North Korean submersible. The North Korean military action was proven using all of the scientific methods available, including computer simulations, analyses of sonar and seismic data, and chemical analyses. The most conclusive evidence backing up this conclusion was the piece of the screw from the North Korean torpedo which was retrieved from the sea bed at a depth of 47 meters.

Just 30 minutes after the team began announcing its conclusions, the North Korean National Defense Commission declared the sinking a fabrication produced by South Korea and threatened to take strong measures, including the possibility of all-out war, in the event of any retaliation by South Korea. Even before the team finished reporting on its conclusions, North Korea made a

declaration prepared in advance claiming that it intended to send its own investigative team to observe the evidence. Apparently North Korea anticipated that South Korea would not be able to determine the cause of the sinking. They probably believed that they could continue their political, military, and psychological attacks on the South Korean government and indefinitely evade responsibility. Given the current state of North Korean scientific and technical knowledge it is possible that they were not aware of the various advanced techniques which South Korea could use in its investigation.

North Korea makes much of its nuclear program, but its general level of science and technology is low, and this is not the first time it has faced international disgrace. At the beginning of the nuclear crisis in 1992, when North Korea permitted inspections by the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA), it made a false report on the number of reprocessing cycles and the amount of plutonium extracted from its radiochemical laboratory at Yongbyon. North Korea's decision to terminate its high-level talks with the South and withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was seen as a combative reaction to the IAEA's discovery of its lies, which had driven the North Korean authorities into a corner. The IAEA used sampling technology which was cutting-edge at the time to prove that North Korea had reported falsely, and the international community favored the scientific evidence provided by the IAEA over North Korea's bluster.

In this incident as well, international society is showing faith in the results of our government's investigation. The members of the multi-national team were present at the announcement of the results, and when the Commodore acting as US delegation leader asked if there were any dissenting opinions, all members of the international investigative team agreed with the South Korean government investigation's results.

North Korea's Position

Following the Cheonan sinking North Korea has firmly adhered to its position that this incident was a scheme and a farce instigated by the South Korean government and that they had nothing to do with it. Of course, it would be foolish to expect North Korea, which denied involvement in the 1983 Myanmar bombing and the 1987 KAL 858 explosion even when the perpetrators were in custody, to calmly admit that it sank the Cheonan. They will continue to deny their involvement to the bitter end.



North Korea's first public statement on the Cheonan incident came on April 17th in a military affairs commentary published by the Korea Central News Agency (KCNA). This commentary, claiming to expose the real truth behind the claims that North Korea was involved, linked the incident to South Korean domestic politics. That is, the ROK government, after pinning the Cheonan sinking on North Korea and bringing security issues into sharp relief, now faces the prospect of a crushing defeat in regional elections, and is trying to escape blame for the worsening inter-Korean relationship by justifying its North Korea policy. The commentary also claimed that South Korea's intention is to maintain international sanctions in order to keep pressure on North Korea

A month later on May 17th, as the investigation's conclusion was drawing near, a high-level official statement was released. On the 30th anniversary of the 5.18 democracy movement, at a rally in Pyongyang, Vice Chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly Yang Hyung Sup stated that the South Korean government "is deliberately linking us to [the Cheonan incident] and trying to drive the situation to an extreme confrontation," and warned that that "we will never stand idly by in the face of their confrontations and war machinations." A day before the joint team announced its findings, the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland denounced the ROK government, calling the Cheonan incident a "grand scheme," "a vile last-ditch attempt" for an easy win in the regional elections, and "the height of confrontation and war machinations."

At 10:30 AM on May 20th, while the joint investigative team was announcing its results, a spokesman for the National Defense Commission, the DPRK's highest ruling body, announced the following three positions.

1. To verify South Korea's accusations regarding the Cheonan sinking, North Korea wishes to dispatch an investigative team to the South and demands that the ROK authorities allow the team to examine the physical evidence linking it to the incident.
2. North Korea will respond to any act of punishment or retaliation, or any sanctions harmful to its national interests, with the strongest measures, including the possibility of all-out war.
3. North Korea views even the slightest incident occurring in territory over which North Korea exercises sovereignty, whether on land or sea, as a provocative act, and will respond with unlimited means of retaliation and merciless physical force.



On May 21st, a day after the NDC’s statement, the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland also issued a statement clarifying the following two positions.

1. From this time North Korea considers the current situation to be a state of war and will deal with all issues that arise in its relations with the South in a firm matter befitting the circumstances.
2. If South Korea makes any retaliatory acts using the Cheonan incident as an excuse, the North will respond strongly and mercilessly by cutting off all aspects of inter-Korean relations, discarding all inter-Korean non-aggression pacts, and shutting down all South-North cooperation projects.

The same day, a spokesman for the North Korean Foreign Ministry made a statement criticizing the US. The spokesman said that the US, while claiming the Cheonan sinking was “a North Korean attack” and “a challenge to global peace and security,” was still pursuing its constant hostile policy of isolating and smothering North Korea, and that the joint team’s investigation results were a complete fabrication produced under the patronage, protection, and encouragement of the US. Further, mentioning that the Bush administration used false information in 2003 to justify the Iraq invasion, the spokesman added that the US must understand that it is not so easy to fool the entire world.

North Korea suggested sending an investigation team through the South-North Controlled Area of the West Sea, but the ROK government replied that, as a violation of the armistice agreement, the Cheonan sinking must first be discussed under the terms of the military armistice. In response to this the head of the NDC’s People’s Armed Forces Department sent a communiqué on May 22nd again insisting that the ROK accept a North Korean investigative team. This communiqué stated that since from the beginning this incident was fabricated by the South to create discord with the North there is no justification for involving the bogus military armistice commission, and furthermore South Korea is obligated to admit a North Korean investigative team under article 10 of chapter 2 of the basic non-aggression agreement and article 8 of chapter 2 of the supplemental agreement.

After President Lee Myung Bak’s statement to the people on May 24th, the NDC declared the 5/24 statement “yet another weak performance to conceal the truth of their fabrications and schemes” and again demanded that the South accept an investigative team from the North. In addition a Foreign Ministry spokesman, mentioning the 8th NPT Review Conference underway in New York, stressed that “we have the right to continue to increase and improve our nuclear deterrent as much as is



necessary to protect our national interests.” The North Korean Commander of the Central Front Line Region issued a public warning regarding the move by the ROK Ministry of National Defense to restart psychological warfare, as follows.

1. Slogans on the walls of buildings at South Korean military police checkpoints will be immediately removed and those responsible will be severely punished
2. Aside from the wall slogans, in the event that new devices such as loudspeakers are installed, they will be destroyed by gun fire.
3. If the South challenges the Northern side’s actions, this will be followed by firm attacks of physical force in order to eliminate the root cause of provocation.

North Korea’s Likely Future Course

The North Korean authorities probably expected that even if their sneak attack by miniature submarine was not a perfect crime, it would likely remain an unresolved incident lacking definitive proof. They anticipated that while the ROK government may have absolute certainty, without physical evidence it would remain stymied, and they hoped that this would present the ROK with the dilemma of being criticized by conservatives for incompetence on national security matters while at the same time being assailed by progressives to relinquish its hostile policy towards the North

However, with the scientific and objective evidence presented by the international team, these hopes went up in smoke. On the contrary, since the Cheonan sinking was exposed as a clear military provocation from the North, the North Korean authorities have been driven into a corner. When its deceptive tactics fail, North Korea often chooses to escalate the situation. A classic example was its behavior in the early 1990s when its false declaration was exposed by the IAEA then, the North Korean authorities cut off all communication with South Korea and withdrew from the NPT. Judging from that experience, in this case as well they will likely take a strategy of lashing out in order to avoid being forced into a defensive position, and they could quite possibly respond with aggressive moves that damage stability on the peninsula. Under the basic premise that North Korea was not responsible for the Cheonan sinking, they will define all such moves as acts of self-preservation against the international community’s pressure.



In the future North Korea will likely raise tensions through a combative strategy towards the South, and by striking blows to the South Korean politics, economy, and psychology they will strive to incite mistrust and criticism of the ROK government and create conflict within South Korea. North Korean naval vessels will continue to intrude across the NLL and there is also a possibility of battles erupting between the two navies. As a counter to South Korean moves, they may also launch ground-to-sea missiles. In regards to the Kaesong complex, considering the economic benefits at stake and the domestic and external burden that would be caused by its closure, they will not easily be able to shut it down. In the short-term they will likely make tactical use of the threat of taking Southern workers hostage as a means to pressure South Korea. However, if the situation continues to worsen, we cannot exclude the possibility that they will close Kaesong.

While inter-Korean relations will inevitably be stagnated for some time to come, North Korea's domestic policies will also require some adjustment. While promising to enter a new era as a strong and prosperous nation in 2012, they will have to proceed with extra emphasis on the military in order to make the power succession process a reality. Abandoning any practical hope of economic aid from South Korea, they will try to find a solution to their economic losses through the military. That is, they may be able to accomplish the succession amidst a war-like atmosphere as they establish points of confrontation with South Korea and put the nation on a war footing. In this way they will try to counteract the dissatisfaction of the people towards the deteriorating economy and the 3rd generation succession by building up the threat of war.

On the world stage and at the UN, they will present their position based on the dual axes of “North Korea's innocence” and “acts of self-preservation.” North Korea's best option for producing a big shock to the outside world is a 3rd nuclear test. Thus there is a high likelihood that they will make such a test sometime after the 8th NPT Review Conference ends in late May and before the US elections in November.

On a related note, the *Rodong Shinmun* announcement on May 12th that North Korean scientists had succeeded at producing a nuclear fusion reaction deserves some attention. Nuclear fusion is the technology used to produce a hydrogen bomb, which can be tens or hundreds of times more powerful than an atomic bomb built based on the principle of nuclear fission. It appears likely that considerations of doing another nuclear test were behind this announcement. By achieving a 3rd test much more powerful than the previous two, they could imply that they have manufactured new nuclear warheads based on nuclear fusion technology and thus inflate their nuclear deterrent power.



The nuclear tests of 2006 and 2009 were both small-scale explosions, with forces of about 1 kiloton and 2 kilotons, respectively. North Korea may have had its own reasons for making these small-scale tests, but since in the West the opinion has emerged that the North Koreans' nuclear program is no great threat, they are likely planning to produce an additional nuclear test of far greater destructive force. Thus the announcement on nuclear fusion can be seen as a piece of political strategy or a preliminary move in anticipation of a 3rd nuclear test, making use of the atmosphere of heightened tension created by the Cheonan incident.

