

State of Affairs on the Korean Peninsula after the *Cheonan* Incident

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On the evening of March 26, 2010, a South Korean Navy's 1,200t frigate *Cheonan* sank off the country's west coast the waters controlled by the South Korean Navy, between Baengnyeong and Daecheong Island killing 46 out of 104 personnel on board. The ROK government recovered the hull and formed a Joint Civilian-Military Investigation Group (JIG), and has since investigated the cause of the incident. On May 20, 2010, government has finally concluded that "the *Cheonan* had been sunk by the North Korean torpedo attack." Subsequently on May 24, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak released a public statement clarifying that "the *Cheonan* sinking had been committed by North Korea (DPRK)," and that South Korea "will firmly deal with the situation" so that the DPRK will "pay proper consequences for her action."



1. South Korea's Sanctions against North Korea and the Consequences

The May 24th public statement has illuminated that South Korea's policy on defense and diplomacy as along with policies toward North Korea will shift considerably after the incident. First, policies on defense and security have intensified in the direction of imposing sanctions against North Korea, particularly since the presidential statement was released. At a joint press conference with Minister of Reunification, Minister of Diplomacy and Minister of Defense, Minister of Diplomacy Yoo Myung-hwan said that "[the South Korean government] will respond with all possible diplomatic measures in close cooperation with her allies, friends, major states concerned as well as international organizations." Minister Yoo moreover alluded to imposing additional embargos, i.e. prohibition on entering, investing in, and sending aid to the DPRK. Amidst doubts surrounding the South Korean government's official report on the investigation, the Lee administration has mobilized all possible economic, military, psychological and diplomatic measures to sanction North Korea. Since inauguration, the top priority task of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula has been overlooked. Sprouted by the *Cheonan* sinking, MB's punitive policy against North Korea has quickly become a top priority for policy agenda. Amidst his efforts was securing cooperation of China and Russia as well as ratification of a punitive resolution at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

MB's "*Cheonan* diplomacy" primarily required a strong support from the United States which would then buttress other diplomatic efforts. A "2+2" ministerial conference on defense and diplomacy was held for the first time between the two nations to display the bilateral collaboration. However, American support came at an expense. On June 24, 2010, President Lee met with President Barack Obama at the fourth G20 Summit in Toronto, Canada. President Obama expressed particular interest in discussing the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA) by affirming, "When we visit Korea in November we wish to make a leap forward and to submit the agreement to the Congress in just a few months' time." Accordingly, President Lee replied that "South Korea welcomes President Obama's proposition." President Lee moreover said that "the ROK agrees entirely with the UN resolution on denuclearization of Iran, and it wishes to actively participate in the implementation process." In case South Korea joins the collective effort against Iran, the nation's economic and diplomatic cost is expected to be high. Thus so far, the U.S. has displayed full support for the Lee administration's

embargos against the DPRK, seeking in return South Korea's cooperation in the re-negotiation of the Korea-U.S. FTA, joint embargo against Iran, dispatching of troops to Afghanistan, etc.

The ROK government's diplomatic effort in renouncing the DPRK for sinking the *Cheonan* resulted in adopting a statement at the UNSC. The Lee administration seems to have adopted as priority goals of *Cheonan* diplomacy, or as a condition for inter-Korean dialogue, the DPRK's apology for the *Cheonan* incident, punishment of the chiefs of staff, and prevention of recurrence. The official staff under President Lee after the release of the May 24th statement has often implied the administration's pursuit in adopting a UNSC resolution ratifying sanctions against the DPRK. Nevertheless, following the June 2 local elections and Vice Minister of Diplomacy Chun Yung-woo's visit to the U.S., the ROK administration's *Cheonan* diplomacy has downward adjusted its set of goals to secure a unanimous statement at the UNSC. As predetermined, on July 9, 2010, the 15 members of the UNSC have adopted a UNSC Presidential Statement, composed of South Korea's compromise and the international society's concerns and expectations. A Presidential Statement as such drafted and adopted is neither a collective victory nor a step towards mutual interest. Given this, what must be noted is the content under Article 10, which states, "The Security Council calls for full adherence to the Korean Armistice Agreement and encourages the settlement of outstanding issues on the Korean peninsula by peaceful means to resume direct dialogue and negotiation through appropriate channels as early as possible, with a view to avoiding conflicts and averting escalation." In spite of the effort, such vindictive approach as the policy set forth by the Lee administration to exclude the DPRK from the international arena has faced with the callous political reality. Adopting a resolution that renounces the DPRK at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was even more difficult than it was at the UNSC, with North Korea as a friendly member of the group. Presidential Statement with regards to the *Cheonan* incident was finally adopted at the 17th ARF held in Hanoi, Vietnam on July 24, 2010. The Statement was a blunt expression of support for the UNSC Presidential Statement and a return to the Six-party Talks.

The Lee administration's *Cheonan* diplomacy based on a series of sanctions against North Korea once hit a deadlock called China and Russia, nearly falling through. China and Russia have already been adamant against the punitive atmosphere toward North Korea. On May 20, 2010, ever since the JIG report was released, China

has clearly urged that "both nations objectively, and in a refined manner, cope with the problem at hand so as not to intensify the tension on the Korean peninsula," displaying the conflict of opinion with South Korea. Likewise, Russia has since the early stages of the incident been aloof from MB's disposition, pulling out its team of investigation from identifying the cause of the sinking for which the country was invited on the ROK government's request. Russia's report to the U.S. and China of the investigation was later found to be in conflict with the results concluded by the ROK government.

Cheonan diplomacy pursued by the Lee administration has been a reminder of the fact that the Korean peninsula is still one of the conflict-stricken regions and distrust and tension are still prevalent between the two Koreas. On the other hand, the administration has been consistent with its punitive line of measures, free from the frustration of causing expenses in accordance with the policy, i.e. American demands of commercial and security exchanges, and conflict with China and Russia. At the end of the day, the question is whether bringing tension upon the peninsula as well as all of East Asia and generating conflict with neighboring states for the sole purpose of containing the DPRK deserves the name "pragmatic diplomacy." Especially if the Lee administration while wholly reliant on American ally dismisses the significance of the relationship with China and Russia as a mere tool for securing support in its policy toward the DPRK, this would be an example of how wishful thinking fails in the cold-hearted world of international politics.

2. The Worst-ever Inter-Korean Relation

Second, the ROK government's punitive measures against the DPRK backed by the president's statement on May 24 led the inter-Korean relationship into an even deeper slump. After the *Cheonan* incident, the relationship has been symmetric with a typical chicken game. South Korea's public announcement of its policy of sanctions in all aspects against the DPRK has outraged the nation. Prohibiting contact with South Koreans, capturing South Korean fishing boat, military training near the Northern Limit Line (NLL) are examples of the DPRK's stance since MB's public statement in May. On the other hand, North Korea consistently has tried to loosen up the pressure of Lee administration, initially focusing on trivializing South Korea's attempt to adopt an embargo against the DPRK at the UNSC. On August 25-27, 2010, North Korea

permitted former U.S. president Jimmy Carter's visit for the homecoming of Aijalon M. Gomez, a then American prisoner of the DPRK, back to the U.S. However Chairman Kim Jong-il neglected Mr. Carter in favor of a summit with President of the People's Republic of China Hu Jintao on August 27. The apparent double standard in North Korea's policy line displays the country's attempt to escape from South Korea's sanctions and to avoid international isolation which particularly intensified with the *Cheonan* sinking.

One of the results of North Korea's response was a little shift in South Korea's policy toward the DPRK. The Lee administration has begun seeking dialogues, which seemed to have crystallized into a series of inter-Korean talks since August of 2009. The cause then was the flood damage in North Korea, and accordingly the South Korean government delivered on August 26 its aid in the rehabilitation process. On the 31st, the Lee administration expressed its intent on aid to north that amounts to a 10,000 million won. On September 4, Chosun Red Cross groups of North Korea sent a letter of request to south, listing rice and cement for the process of rehabilitation. Moreover on the 7th, the South Korean fishing boat and the seven members of the crew that were held captives by the DPRK were returned to their home across the NLL of East Sea. On September 17, at an inter-Korean meeting within the Red Cross, North Korea proposed a reunion of 100 separated families in Mt. Kumgang District in late October. At this juncture, the two Koreas have set the date on October 30, 2010 for the planned reunion. Unfortunately, Minister of Reunification Hyun In-taek pronounced that the administration is still adamant on its policy toward North Korea, the so-called "Denuclearization·Opening·3000." Through a series of contact with north it was found that North Korea's anger with South Korea's demand of apologies for the *Cheonan* sinking and a promise of non-recurrence was the main obstacle in the inter-Korean dialogue. It seems that the brief series of talks in 2010 are not likely to continue, just like the previous year.

In a nutshell, the inter-Korean relationship has deteriorated since MB took office in 2008, as the South Korean government has neglected the inter-Korean agreement and demanded unilateral denuclearization of North Korea. The times are ripe for exit strategy, but a good excuse and the right circumstances are yet to come.

3. A Dead-end Relationship between the U.S. and the DPRK

Whereas the U.S.-North Korean relationship has improved since the disablement stage of nuclear facilities in North Korea in 2008, it has faced more obstacles in 2009 with the second missile testing and exacerbated after the *Cheonan* sinking. This trend clearly displays the codependence between the inter-Korean relationship and the U.S.-North Korean relationship. Paradoxically, American relations with North Korea have worsened since the inauguration of President Obama, who has persistently renounced the Bush administration's unilateral diplomacy and emphasized the significance of dialogue.

Ever since the second nuclear test on May 25, 2009, the U.S. has pushed for an embargo on North Korea. Under such circumstances, the Obama administration was unable to take lead in talks with the DPRK. On July 22, 2009 at the ARF held in Thailand, Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton made public America's official stance, mentioning that an irreversible denuclearization of North Korea is a necessary condition for normalization of its relations with the U.S. Credit is due to her for bringing up the issue of normalizing relations before anyone else given the recent missile launch and nuclear test. Still, such outlook was only conditional upon "if the DPRK agrees to a complete and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea." Of course, Secretary Clinton has already made clear that "the U.S. and her partners will proceed with a package deal including compensation and normalization of their relations with the DPRK, only if the DPRK renders an irreversible denuclearization," thereby alluding to the inclusion of a normalization deal in the package. At that point Clinton emphasized that her statements are officially agreed by the other four parties of the Six-party Talks, excluding North Korea. Nonetheless, the American stance was in accordance with MB's inclusive "Grand Bargain" approach which also assumed denuclearization of North Korea as a necessary condition. Both administrations were consistent with that North Korea firstly proceeds with denuclearization. Clinton, on October 21 the same year, once again insured that the U.S.-North Korean relationship will not resume until the DPRK carries out denuclearization. It was her most candid rendition of the Obama administration's policy toward North Korea. She particularly said "relations with North Korea will resume only after a complete denuclearization will be achieved through verifiable and irreversible measures," which is deemed to be a mutual agreement with South Korea.

At the end of the day, the Obama administration's policy direction toward North

Korea is determined under the framework of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Obama's main focus renouncing the Bush administration's policy on security and diplomacy was his self-righteous stance. In this perspective, upholding the ROK government's stance toward North Korea seems to be an obvious choice for the Obama administration and with benefits. The *Cheonan* incident added fuel to the American ambivalence, as Seoul is politically situated between Washington and Pyongyang. In such regards, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell noted at a Congressional hearing on September 17, 2010 that "the U.S. will normalize relationship with the DPRK upon the resumption of the inter-Korean relations." The statement clearly explains that the U.S. will respect the South Korean government's stance as far as dialogue with North Korea is concerned.

In seeing the reality with a sense of balance, we question whether the second nuclear test had anything at all to do with North Korea's interest in improving its relationship with the U.S. Through a statement released by the Foreign Ministry in the DPRK on January 17, 2009, North Korea made a clear distinction between normalization of relations and the issue of denuclearization, asserting that "building nuclear weapons was not to seek normalization of the U.S.-North Korean relations or American economic support, but solely to protect the nation." The statement is note-worthy particularly as North Korean response to the approach taken by the Department of State in taking on denuclearization as a necessary condition to resume dialogue with the DPRK. In fact, North Korea will not be free from the criticism that it has exacerbated situations by conducting missile testing and launching, before Obama's inauguration and subsequent settlement of policy direction toward North Korea. Moreover, based on the outcome of the third representatives conference of the ruling Workers' Party on September 28, 2010, North Korea is hardly willing to carry out denuclearization. More realistic and long-term policy is needed.

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