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Saga of the *Cheonan* Incident: Sinking of the Six Party Talks?

Dongmin Lee

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On 20 May 2010, the South Korean government officially concluded that Pyongyang had deliberately torpedoed the Cheonan. There might be some difficulties in bringing all the regional powers to the negotiation table. However, the balancing of interests would eventually restore the regional order.

FOR THE PAST 16 months the North Korean nuclear quandary has wandered into a complicated labyrinth without a formal return to the multilateral Six Party Talks. To make things worse, the Northeast Asia security environment reached a dire stalemate with the sinking of a South Korean naval ship on March 26, killing 46 out of 102 sailors. Last week, on 20 May 2010, the South Korean government officially concluded that Pyongyang had deliberately torpedoed the *Cheonan* near the Baek Ryong islands to the west of the peninsula. The North Korean spokesperson of the National Defence Committee has, however, vehemently denied the allegation that the regime is behind the attack. Whatever the case, the *Cheonan* incident has created bitter tension in the Korean peninsula, generating a volatile shockwave throughout the region and the international community.

Kim Jong Il and China

In the midst of this complicated regional tension, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il paid a state visit to Beijing on 3-7 May and toured the harbour cities of Dalian and Tianjin. In response to the summit meeting between Kim and his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao, the former US Director for Asian Affairs in the White House's National Security Council, Victor Cha, adamantly called for a "responsible role for China". He was implying that Kim should not have been invited to China during the investigation into the sinking. At the same time, on 6 May, the South Korean Minister of Unification expressed his concern to the newly-appointed Chinese ambassador that China should play a "responsible role" in the region, revealing South Korea's discomfort. The spokesperson for China's foreign affairs department nonetheless replied emphasising the importance of finding "unchangeable scientific and objective proof of the incident" before coming into any conclusion.

Despite the active effort of South Korea's "*Cheonan* Diplomacy", an awkward and uncomfortable

feeling has been developing between China and South Korea. In contrast, China and North Korea seem to have regained their traditional “lips and teeth relationship” as it was once described by Mao Zedong. It appears that a new wave of tension is developing around the incident.

With the current trend, it is important to consider what would be the long-term consequences of the incident in the context of Northeast Asian security. What would be the impact on the Six Party Talks framework and on efforts to promote regional integration? Although there might be some difficulties, this “small wayward” current should not be allowed to override the larger current in the region. Kim has assured Hu that he would come back to the negotiation table. The larger momentum towards peace and integration in the region will not be diminished if all related parties make enough effort to achieve it. In the broader perspective, both China and the United States strongly desire a return to the Six Party Talks to settle the nuclear problem. Therefore, the balancing of interests should eventually restore the regional order.

Sinking of the Six Party Talks?

As the *Cheonan* incident sends shockwaves across the region, surrounding Northeast Asian countries are forced to make their own strategic calculations. With the official announcement of the cause of the incident, the Lee Myong-bak government will likely continue its hard-line policy towards the North. The Lee government has been attempting to link the incident with the Six Party Talks, insisting that without resolution of the incident it will be difficult to resume negotiations on the nuclear issue.

China is diametrically opposed to the idea of linking the *Cheonan* incident with the Six Party Talks, as Beijing views them as separate issues. On the other hand, as a close ally, US is likely to stand with South Korea in condemning the aggressive action by the North. The US is also likely to solidify the UN resolution 1874 sanctioning North Korea in response to its second nuclear test conducted on May 2009. On May 14, Senator Lieberman proposed a resolution to “punish” North Korea for its bad behaviour. The Japanese Hatoyama government will also stand firmly with South Korea to bring the case before the UN Security Council for further international sanctions on the North. The Lee government is also prepared to terminate its remaining economic cooperation with the North.

Dilemma of Condemning the North

Nevertheless, regional powers are facing the dilemma of condemning the North when all six parties need to come back to the negotiating table. Since it is in the long-term interest of the US to bring North Korea to the table, the Obama administration may not have much manoeuvring room if it wishes to revive the Six Party Talks. Pushing North Korea into a corner will only help to solidify the regime and may steer it toward development of its weapons of mass destruction for international sale.

Beijing will likely pursue proactive diplomatic efforts to manage stability in the Korean peninsula that is tolerable to Chinese national interests. China is not likely to support the policy of steering North Korea into a corner, as Beijing wants neither any elevated tensions nor the collapse of the North Korean regime. From China’s perspective, the collapse of the regime is more threatening than its possession of nuclear weapons or any pattern of skirmishing with the South.

In addition, the lack of “unverifiable” scientific evidence would make it hard to bring the case before the UN Security Council. It may take years to achieve consensus as to the validity of the scientific evidence, especially from China’s perspective. In this context, the international community needs to find a way to resolve the *Cheonan* incident without damaging the momentum of the Six Party Talks – a platform which can be a precursor to any mechanism for multilateral Northeast Asian security dialogue.

Lee Dongmin is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. Prior to joining RSIS, he served as a Research Fellow with the Centre for International & Strategic Studies (CISS) at Peking University.