After the Cheonan:
Where do we go from here?

Evans J.R. Revere*


The North Korean sinking of the Republic of Korea (ROK) warship Cheonan on March 26, 2010 was a tragic and disturbing new development on a divided peninsula that has seen more than its share of confrontation. While military incidents along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) dividing North and South and near the Northern Limit Line (NLL), which has long served as a de facto maritime demarcation line between the two Koreas, have occurred with some frequency, the attack on the Cheonan was quite different, taking place in South Korean territorial waters some distance from the disputed NLL.

The attack was also carried out without warning. Past naval incidents between the two Koreas have usually involved face-to-face encounters between warships in which warnings were issued and shots fired as the DPRK’s naval forces tested the ROK and challenged the status of the NLL as a boundary. But, as a ROK-led international investigation concluded, the March 26th attack was carried out by a North Korean submarine which stalked the ROK warship and fired a torpedo that exploded under the hull of the vessel, causing it to break in two.1

The bold and unprecedented nature of the North Korean action sent a predictable shock wave through South Korea. The attack stoked popular anger at the loss of life (46 ROK sailors perished), prompted concerns about ROK military preparedness, and raised questions about the appropriateness of moving ahead with plans for the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) of ROK forces from the U.S.-led Combined Forces Commander to a ROK general. It also roiled Korean domestic politics in the run-up to local elections in June.

The attack also ended efforts that had been underway to restart the Six-Party Talks. In the weeks before the attack, there was reason to believe that the PRC was making progress brokering a resumption of the talks. During this period, senior Chinese officials expressed optimism about prospects for renewed talks. In March, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi conveyed his “great hope” that the talks would resume, while the senior PRC representative to the Six Party Talks, Ambassador Wu Dawei, even predicted that the talks might begin in the first half of 2010.2 However, any hope that the talks would be re-launched soon was quickly dashed by the North Korean attack, which

---

destroyed in an instant the fragile atmosphere in which behind-the-scenes efforts by China and the United States to jump-start the Six Party Talks were taking place.

Some have speculated that Pyongyang, under considerable pressure from Beijing to return to the negotiating table, might have carried out the attack to sabotage the talks by creating a crisis. This seems unlikely. Such an approach would have carried with it the great risk of angering China, the host and convener of the Six-Party Talks and the North’s major economic benefactor, just at the moment when the North was using a visit by its leader to solicit additional Chinese economic support. If China was upset by the impact of the attack on the Six-Party Talks, it masked its anger well, allowing North Korean leader Kim Jong Il to visit China in early May. However, during that visit Beijing’s leadership made a point of eliciting from Kim his renewed commitment to denuclearization.

After the attack on the Cheonan, both the ROK and the United States evinced concern about China’s deference to North Korean sensitivities over the incident. Beijing has seemed accepting of North Korea’s denials of responsibility for the attack, and the PRC has effectively provided diplomatic “cover” for North Korea, even as the United States and the ROK have tried to mobilize international public opinion and diplomatic action to respond to the sinking. Perhaps reflecting this protective posture, it took China almost one month to convey its initial condolences to the ROK over the sinking. An expression of condolences from China’s leadership came more than two months after the attack, during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s May 29, 2010 visit to Seoul.

Any positive impact these belated statements of sympathy might have had on ROK public opinion was negated by Beijing’s hosting of the North Korean leader only days after a meeting between the ROK and PRC presidents in Shanghai, and as the ROK was in the midst of its investigation of the sinking. Beijing’s invitation to Kim was widely interpreted as a cynical step, although Chinese officials have argued that canceling or postponing the visit would have been inappropriate, since the ROK-led investigation had not yet reached any conclusions, and the ROK government had carefully avoided pointing the finger of blame at Pyongyang pending the end of the investigation and conclusive evidence of a North Korean role in the sinking.

Beijing’s efforts to run interference for its North Korean ally were worrisome to Seoul and Washington, particularly because China seemed oblivious to the mounting body of evidence pointing to North Korea’s role in the sinking. China’s opposition to a tough response to the incident by the UN Security Council was also puzzling, and stood in sharp contrast to Beijing’s past willingness to support a firm UN resolution and new sanctions after the DPRK’s nuclear test in 2009. The fact that Beijing eventually endorsed a UN Security Council President’s Statement in response to the sinking of the Cheonan (the statement left little doubt that the UN believed North Korea carried out the

---


6 A senior Chinese official made this point to me during a discussion in Beijing on May 19, 2010.
attack) did little to ease concerns in the U.S. and the ROK about Beijing’s support for
Pyongyang.

No less problematic has been the PRC’s opposition to the just-completed U.S.-ROK
“Invincible Spirit” joint naval exercise off Korea’s east coast. In recent weeks, we have
seen witnessed Beijing take a strident position against the exercise, despite repeated U.S.
and ROK efforts to assure China of the defensive nature of the exercise and to point out
that it was aimed at sending a deterrent message to North Korea and enhancing U.S.-
ROK ability to deal with future DPRK provocations. For a time, Beijing’s vocal and
determined opposition to the exercise seemed to risk turning this incident into a crisis in
U.S.-China relations.

Beijing’s protective posture towards the DPRK seemed to exceed even the PRC’s past
aversion to alienating its traditional ally or its traditional call for “moderation” and
“dialogue” in resolving issues involving its problematic neighbor. By pursuing this
recent approach, the PRC risked damaging its relations with the ROK and adding yet
another burdensome problem to the basket of contentious issues in the U.S.-China
relationship. It also raised questions about whether China is indeed prepared to play the
role of “responsible stakeholder” when it comes to the Korean Peninsula.

The aftermath of the Cheonan incident raises issues for the United States and the ROK as
we look to the future. The first concern is that the incident highlighted significant
shortcomings in the ROK’s anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities. Importantly, the
ROK and the United States are addressing this problem through a series of military
exercises and training. China’s objections to the recent “Invincible Spirit” exercise
notwithstanding, it will be necessary to carry out additional ASW exercises, especially in
the Yellow Sea off the ROK’s west coast, since the characteristics of those waters are
quite different from those on the eastern side of the peninsula.

Secondly, while opinions may be divided in both Seoul and Washington over the wisdom
of delaying OPCON transfer, the postponement should be used as an opportunity for the
ROK, with U.S. assistance, to improve procedures and systems that were found to be
deficient in preventing the attack on the Cheonan. On a priority basis, the ROK should
acquire those ASW capabilities that it lacks so that when OPCON transfer is
implemented the ROK Navy will be able to take the lead in its own defense against
submarine incursions.

Thirdly, the boldness of the attack on the Cheonan raises questions about whether North
Korea might be willing to launch new and unprecedented types of attacks against the
South in the future, perhaps in the belief that the ROK and its U.S. ally are unwilling or
unable to respond. In that light, the “Invincible Spirit” exercise and the impressive array
of forces that were deployed in the exercise helped send a strong message of U.S.-ROK
determination to deal with future aggression. This is a message worth repeating. The
United States and the ROK should use appropriate opportunities to conduct similar high-
profile exercises, particularly exercises that require the participation of visible, highly-
lethal assets (aircraft carrier battle groups, F-22 aircraft, etc.). The allies should also
consider extending the length of selected exercises during the year – a step that will place
an additional burden on the KPA, forcing it to expend scarce resources to deal with our
expanded and lengthier training.
Finally, the Cheonan incident raised important questions about China’s willingness to cooperate with us in pressing the North, and about the prospects for the Six-Party Talks themselves.

As for China’s future role in dealing with the challenges on the Korean Peninsula, there is clearly a need for a dialogue with Beijing to better understand what is driving China’s shift on North Korea and to clarify the PRC’s intentions. The United States and the ROK should try to engage the PRC, trilaterally if possible and bilaterally if necessary, to explore current Chinese thinking about North Korea. Should the PRC prove reluctant to conduct such a dialogue officially, we should support efforts to carry it out in Track 1.5 or Track 2 channels.

As for the Six-Party Talks, prospects are far from clear. The sinking of the Cheonan mandated a “pause” in efforts to resume the talks while the cause of the sinking was being investigated. Having uncovered the North’s role in the attack, it was understandable that the ROK, with the support of the United States and other members of the international community, would demand an explanation, an apology, and perhaps even seek compensation from the DPRK. The heinous nature of the attack also made it difficult, if not impossible, to return to the negotiating table with the North until some passage of time and only after some mechanism or process that would allow “closure” after the sinking.

It is not clear today how such “closure” can be obtained, as a North Korean apology or acceptance of responsibility for the sinking is unlikely. Since the attack, Pyongyang has adamantly and repeatedly denied responsibility. The North’s leadership will not want to take a step that would cause it to lose face or to embarrass its Chinese patron, which has thus far accepted the North’s denial.

One mechanism that may prove useful in getting past the Cheonan tragedy is the recent UN Command-Korean Peoples’ Army (KPA) dialogue at Panmunjom. Three rounds of colonel-level talks have taken place, with a fourth session scheduled for early August. Surprisingly, the North has continued these discussions despite the recent U.S.-ROK joint military exercise, an event which would normally have provided a convenient pretext for the North to refuse to return to the table. It may be too much to think that the North might use this dialogue to somehow signal its acknowledgment of responsibility for the attack on the Cheonan. Nevertheless, it is possible that these talks could provide a face-saving mechanism that would allow the parties to move past the Cheonan tragedy and resume tackling the thorny issue of the North’s nuclear weapons program.

For the United States and the ROK, addressing the nuclear issue remains a central priority and one that must be pursued vigorously as a matter of self-defense. The last round of Six-Party discussions took place more than 18 months ago. Since then, the DPRK has almost certainly made additional strides in its efforts to develop more sophisticated plutonium-based weapon and perhaps even in its now-acknowledged program to create a uranium path to nuclear weapons development. Meanwhile, the passage of time has not diminished the threat of proliferation of nuclear material and/or technology by the North – a critical concern for the United States and a direct challenge to the viability of the international non-proliferation regime.
The absence of a current dialogue channel with Pyongyang on nuclear matters has left us without a mechanism for exploring North Korea’s willingness to discuss restraints on its nuclear weapons program. Today, we have no channel through which we can test whether North Korea might be willing to resume its past commitment to freeze and eventually dismantle that program. At the current juncture, U.S. policy seems to rely primarily on financial sanctions and a plan to intensify such sanctions as a way of applying pressure on the North’s leadership by attacking their economic underpinnings.  

Experience has shown that sanctions are a valuable component of an overall policy approach towards North Korea. There is considerable value in applying pressure on the North through such measures, particularly if they focus on the income streams that support and sustain the DPRK’s leaders and its military-industrial complex. However, unless the United States and its partners are prepared to engage in a broad assault on North Korea’s assets, on financial flows into and out of the country, and to take extraordinary measures against those financial institutions that do business in or with North Korea, sanctions alone are not likely to convince the DPRK to change its current course.

The Six-Party Talks, as unsatisfactory as they have been in achieving the denuclearization of North Korea, still remain a useful device for engaging North Korea on the nuclear issue, leveraging the influence of the other parties against Pyongyang, exploring the DPRK’s bottom line, and devising credible packages of rewards and incentives that may eventually appeal to the North. An eventual resumption of the talks would at least offer some prospect that a freeze on the North’s weapons program might yet be negotiated, which in turn might allow the parties to resume implementation of the far-reaching denuclearization commitments made in the September 19, 2005 and subsequent Six-Party agreements.

But lest I end on a note of excessive optimism, it must also be pointed out that since late 2008 North Korea has made it emphatically clear that the previous agreements concluded and commitments made in the Six-Party Talks are null and void; that it is and will remain a nuclear weapons state; and that it will never give up its nuclear weapons “even in a dream.”

While the other participants in the Six-Party Talks may still retain their commitment to the denuclearization process, by its own words and actions the DPRK seems to have declared this process dead. If the Six-Party Talks are to have any hope, Pyongyang will need to demonstrate that it is prepared to take major steps to resuscitate them, particularly by clearly reaffirming its denuclearization commitments and by taking concrete steps to realize them. Regrettably, North Korea’s shocking attack on the Cheonan gives us little reason to hope that cooperation on this front will be forthcoming from Pyongyang anytime soon.

---


*Evans J.R. Revere is Senior Director with the Albright Stonebridge Group, a global strategy firm. He is a retired senior American diplomat. During a 35-year career in government service, he was one of the U.S. State Department’s leading Asia experts. He is also former president/CEO of The Korea Society in New York City. The views expressed in this paper are solely his own.