Post-Cheonan Regional Stability: A South Korean Perspective*

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■ 'Liberal Critics' within South Korea

◇ Loss of inter-Korean dialogue channels, Absence of Exit Strategy: "Stop tension-heightening measures and encompass North Korea" "Make the U.S. stop the additional sanction against North Korea." "Revive the dialogue momentum."

◇ Six-party talks: "July 9 Chairman's statement of UNSC concluded the Cheonan case." "Accept the China-North Korea suggestion for resumption of six-party talks."

◇ Negative repercussion of the ROK-U.S. military drill: "South Korea is dragged into the U.S.-initiated anti-China containment policy," "The Drill revives Cold War confrontation on and around Korean peninsula."

◇ ROK-China relations: "Concentration on the ROK-U.S. alliance will destroy the ROK-China relations" "Have empathy with China."

◇ "In sum, MB government's absence of exit strategy and tension-heightening measures coupled with the ROK-U.S. naval drill and U.S. additional sanctions hurt the Korean stability and precipitate new confrontational regional order.”

■ Analyses

◇ Exit strategy is necessary, but conditions for it are not mature

- No apology from NK, no NK veracity for denuclearization talks, and no UN sanction,

- The U.S. additional sanction is necessary since NK has never apologized and the UNSC has actually done nothing to the culprit state.

- MB's May 24 measures are necessary response to NK's Cheonan provocation, not for tension-heightening.

- Repeated tolerance, premature exit strategy will not only lead to NK's indulgence but bungle future inter-Korean relations: Psychological impacts on South Korean voters, manipulation of South Korea's public opinion, loss of Seoul's leverage toward NK, etc.

◇ Six-party talks are not a big deal without NK veracity toward denuclearization

- July 9 Chairman's statement of UNSC is a new start of anti-North Korea measures, not a conclusion of it.

- North Korea has utilized the six-party talks as a tool to evade international accusation, earn time for nuke development, and to muddle through. Moreover, NK argues that DPRK-U.S. peace agreement should be a main agenda. A peace agreement, without veracity, will contribute to early dismantlement of South Korea's security pillars such as the USFK, the ROK-U.S. alliance, National Security Lae, etc.

◇ The ROK-U.S. naval drill represents South Korea's tremendously valuable and immediate security interests

- The Cheonan case rekindles the asymmetric threats and South Korea urgently needs to deter them (examples: scale of regular forces, nukes, missiles, biochemical weapons, artillery forces, special operation forces, submarines, mental readiness to fight, cyber, etc.)

- Strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance (adjustment of the timing for OPCON transfer, 2+2 conference) and the allied military exercise meet the immediate needs.

- The ROK-U.S. military drill is an occasion of showing the U.S.-China confrontation that has begun long before, not a precipitator of it

◇ Alliance with the U.S. is more important than better relations with China
- ROK-China relations are undeniably important. But, to respond to NK threat through strengthened alliance with the U.S. is more important than to worry about future relations with China.
- Any way, China should be held responsible for noncooperation for prevention of NK provocations.
- China's NK protection contributed the U.S.-ROK decision to implement military drill
- China's hegemonic behavior made South Korean rethink of its military modernization and worry over China's future course of action (realists' prediction vs. institutionalists' prediction). Is the Yellow Sea China's front yard? 和平崛起，有所作为，韬光养晦，科技强军?
- Sino-U.S. competition is unavoidable as long as China becomes increasingly assertive in its external policy and military stance.
- South Korea as well as other Asian countries want China to become a moral power before politico-military power. They want China's internal dynamics (3E) to help the nation become an international power.

■ Conclusion

◇ In short-term perspective, in the aftermath of the Cheonan disaster, South Korea has no time to relax and meditate upon future stability on and around Korean peninsula
◇ South Korea as well as the U.S. should be serious about when exit strategy should start. Premature exit plan may help switch to fake dialogue, but make reciprocal inter-Korean relations impossible in the future
◇ In the longer term, emergence of U.S.-China confrontational order, if any, will be decided at the global level (status quo power vs. challenge power or sea power vs land power), not by international response to the rogue states like North Korea.
◇ In the longer term, South Korea will have to play roles to help prevent emergence of U.S.-China conflicts
◇ Though South Korea should stay as a sea power for its continued prosperity in any case, it needs to do its best to maintain and develop non-hostile and economically mutually dependent relations with China
※ China: South Korea's No.1 trading partner, largest trade surplus, 3rd largest GDP, 2nd largest PPP, average GDP growth during the last 5 years 10.52%, average defense spending growth during last 5 years 19.85%
※ ROK-China pending issues: past history, North Korean defectors, illegal fishery, contamination of the Yellow Sea, dust wind, continental shelf, South Korea's participation in the U.S. MD system, etc.

◇ Considering all, "alliance with the U.S. and friendly relations with China (聯美通中)" must be South Korea's long-term survival strategy.