Policy Forum 10-043: Dichotomy of Obama's North Korea Policy: Deterrence and Sanctions Will Not Solve the North Korean Question without Chinese Cooperation

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Tong Kim

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I. Introduction

Tong Kim, Visiting professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul and an adjunct professor at SAIS in Washington, writes, “If there is no exit strategy on the part of Washington or Seoul, the Cheonan incident might become a defining moment for the prolonging of inter-Korean confrontation and the opening of a collision course between the United States and China in the years ahead.”

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II. Article by Tong Kim

-“Dichotomy of Obama’s North Korea Policy: Deterrence and Sanctions Will Not Solve the North Korean Question without Chinese Cooperation”

By Tong Kim

The unfortunate incident of the Cheonan ship, which was torpedoed by North Korea, according to a Sough Korea-led international investigation, sank any chance of diplomatic dialogue with Pyongyang for the resolution of denuclearization or other North Korean issues of concern to Washington and Seoul. The Cheonan incident has strengthened the ROK-U.S. alliance. The Cheonan incident has postponed the transfer of the wartime operational control until 2015. The Cheonan incident contributed to a tipping point toward the resolution of the Fudenma base issue on Okinawa in favor of the United States. However, in the wake of “Cheonan diplomacy” that produced watered-down statements from the G-8, the United Nations Security Council, and the ASEAN Regional Forum, neither Seoul nor Washington is making any visible effort to seek an exit strategy from the aftermath of the Cheonan incident. From all indications, the currently hardening course of confrontation will likely continue at least for the foreseeable future, if not indefinitely. The Cheonan incident seems to

precipitate the re-designation of a new bipolar Cold War order in the region with South Korea and Japan sticking to the side of the United States, and with North Korea and Russia centering around the Chinese axis. This development is known as a G2 phenomenon in South Korea.

From a historic perspective, the Korean War served as the justification for hardening the course of the Cold War, and U.S. envoy James Kelly's 2002 meeting with North Korean vice minister Kang Suk Ju, in which Pyongyang acknowledged that it was pursuing a uranium enrichment program, provided the George W. Bush administration a strong justification for abrogating the Agreed Framework, by which Pyongyang had suspended plutonium production for eight years. The Cheonan incident is not a new turning point towards the deterioration of relations with Pyongyang, in the sense that the relations had already been on the down slope, especially after the takeoff of the conservative Lee Myung-bak government in Seoul and Kim Jong Il's missile launches and a second nuclear test last year. If there is no exit strategy on the part of Washington or Seoul, the Cheonan incident might become a defining moment for the prolonging of inter-Korean confrontation and the opening of a collision course between the United States and China in the years ahead.

A new dynamics of power game is developing in Northeast Asia. It is not the first time that tensions are reaching a dangerous point on the Korean Peninsula, but it is the first time since the end of the Korean War that the United States and China are confronting each other in a clearly competitive show of military force through navy, air force and live ammo firing exercises. Despite the official denials from both Washington and Beijing that their exercises are not directed at each other, it is not hard to believe that the two most powerful nations on earth are flexing their muscles more aggressively than ever to exercise influence on the divided peninsula in pursuit of their respective strategic interest.

The largest ever U.S.-South Korea naval and air force exercise in the East Sea, involving a carrier strike group and F-22 stealth fighter-bombers, lasted four days ending on July 28. Similar exercises will be conducted in September to continue at least once a month until the end of this year, with the next exercise to take place probably on the Yellow Sea. Before and during the first allied exercise, China also conducted a series of firing and transport drills in the Yellow Sea off its east coast – which included shooting live ammunition from naval vessels and China's land-based long-range multiple rocket launchers. Over one hundred Chinese combat airplanes were reported to have taken off from their base in China's northeastern region. Some of the Chinese combat exercises may have coincided with the timing of the combined U.S.-ROK exercises, without a deliberate intent to counter the U.S. exercises. China opposed adamantly against a U.S,-South Korea naval exercise on the Yellow Sea that had been reported to include the participation of the U.S. George Washington aircraft carrier.

While the U.S.-ROK exercise on the East Sea was hailed as a "clear message" against future North Korean provocation, its scale may have been overkill to confirm the U.S. commitment to South Korea's defense. The message was also directed to the South Koreans -- some of whom questioned the U.S. commitment to "expanded deterrence" after Washington's Nuclear Policy Review that would reduce dependence on nuclear weapons in deterring regional security threats. To the Chinese – who would not reign in the provocative North Koreans more proactively—the message was that the Chinese have to pay a price. One of the stated Chinese rationales for opposing aggressive punishment against the North is said to be their concerns that such punishment would not intimidate the defiant North Koreans but make them even more provocative. The Chinese argument makes sense in view of the North Korean practice of responding to confrontation with confrontation and threats with threats.

The recent Chinese joint military drills also had a message to the two Koreas and the United States. The message was that China has the intent and capability to keep its commitment to help the defense of North Korea, a long-standing treaty obligation, in the event of invasion from the combined forces of South Korea and the United States. To Washington, the Chinese leadership sends an implicit message that although the Yellow Sea is international waters, it is regarded as China's geostrategic backyard. Any politically publicized U.S. naval exercise, particularly those involving a

carrier strike group in the Yellow Sea close to the Chinese territorial waters would be difficult for the Chinese to overlook without taking some comparable response.
Both China and the United States agree on the importance of maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. They share the same goal of the denuclearization of North Korea. As China's role and responsibility have increased in world affairs, China's cooperation is becoming more critical to address the complex global issues of security, trade, and environment. Washington wants to improve dialogue with China hoping that it would help resolve bilateral and multilateral issues – including the issues of the under-appreciated Chinese currency, trade imbalances, and China's territorial and resources claims in the South China Sea. The United States wants to restore military-to-military dialogue, through which Washington would keep Beijing informed of the shifting roles, postures and objectives of U.S. presence in the region, in return for China's transparency on its own military programs – including its plan to develop a blue water capability. The United States remains committed to prevent China's take over of Taiwan by force, an option China has never ruled out. Other than the issue of Taiwan, a focal point of security contention between the United States and China in the region pertains to North Korea. Whereas U.S. policy has vacillated between regime change and conditional accommodation contingent upon North Korea's denuclearization and compliance with the international norm, China's policy has been consistent in supporting the independence and stability of the North Korean regime. Whereas the United States and South Korea keep developing a contingency plan to prepare for a sudden change or collapse in North Korea, the Chinese refuse to discuss any aspect of its own plan, which they must have developed to respond to a contingency situation that might involve intervention from South Korea or the United States. Yet, China has shown its interest to learn about plans being developed by their adversaries.
The North Koreans reacted to the U.S.-ROK exercise on the East Sea with a volley of provocative statements: "Since it has become clear that the United States is clinging to military provocation, we will keep strengthening our nuclear deterrent in various ways for self-defense." (Lee Dong Il, DPRK foreign ministry arms reduction chief on July 25, 2010); "We will confidently confront (the U.S. action) with our strong nuclear deterrent, which we will reinforce in an unprecedented speed. We shall start a sacred war of retaliation at an appropriate time of our choice." (A spokesman of the National Defense Commission on July 24); and (in response to U.S. financial sanctions) "We will respond by strengthening our nuclear deterrent in various ways and by taking a strong physical measure." (A spokesman of the North Korean foreign ministry on July 24).
The North Koreans are well known for putting out belligerent rhetoric. Seoul and Washington may have correctly dismissed Pyongyang's multiple warnings as a bluff. In the past, most instances of North Korea's provocative rhetoric were not carried out in action. The North Koreans did not take any new provocative physical action during the U.S.-South Korea exercise. Conversely, the North Koreans sometimes do fulfill their warning. For example, they quit the six-party talks, after they had said they would do so, if the UN Security Council would condemn their rocket test in April last year, and they proceed to carry out a second nuclear test. In short, nobody can tell what the North Koreans may or may not do. To read the North Korean mind is not an exact science. Yet, given the uncertainty of when the dust of the Cheonan will be settled, and given Kim Jong Il's emotional antagonism against the Lee Myung-bak government, it is possible that the North might launch another major provocation to interfere with Seoul's scheduled sponsorship of a G20 meeting in the fall. Such provocative options may include border skirmishes in the DMZ, more missile tests, and a third nuclear test.

What the North Koreans might do with their nuclear program is a central point of question. They may have completed a uranium enrichment program to produce a uranium bomb. Pyongyang has claimed it had "succeeded in a test in the final stage of uranium enrichment," while its latest claims that it made progress in a nuclear fusion test was largely discredited in view of the scientific difficulties involved. They may be nearing to a perfection of technology for miniaturize weaponized warheads mountable on the fully tested mid-range Rodong missiles, instead of the still developing

Taepodong II. There is no report yet that the North has completed the restoration of the plutonium production facilities at Yongpyon to increase its plutonium arsenal. To conduct a third nuclear test, the North should use up more of its limited hoard of plutonium – for which a fairly reliable estimate is available, based on Pyongyang's declaration as part the February 13 nuclear agreement and its additional reprocessing after the breakdown of the nuclear talks. As an alternative to plutonium, the North Koreans might use weapons-grade enriched uranium, if they have it.

In a strategic perspective, the number of nuclear bombs – whether it is 6 or 12 -- does not really matter in North Korea's case. A few bombs with a working delivery system backed up by chemical and biological weapons are enough to impose an asymmetric threat to South Korea. It is also interesting to note that Pyongyang had said before the flare-up of the Cheonan incident that it would not increase its nuclear arsenal beyond "an adequate quantity for deterrence." Under the current circumstances of pressure from within and without, the North Korean leadership might choose to conduct another nuclear test under the pretext of self-defense. The leadership is likely to believe that would not trigger an all-out military attack against North Korea. The North Koreans are said to be ready to fight a war that they choose. The North believes it has less to lose than the South. The North says all its soldiers and people are ready to die to protect Kim Jong Il and his system, which the West discards as propaganda. But this presumption is not certain until it comes to pass a test. To be able to tell what is really going on inside the North Korean leadership is an impossible task. It is like blind men touching an elephant. It is worrisome to see policy makers in Washington and Seoul depend on the simplistic views of blind men, many of whom never had any interactions with North Koreans in person. North Korean collapse theories could offer an attractive approach to the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. If convinced of an imminent North Korean collapse, there would be no need to waste time to tackle a diplomatic solution. The problem is that most collapse scenarios are based on a compilation of unconfirmed, partial or limited information, speculation and wishful thinking. These theories lack an objective study based on reliable information. Since none of us can predict the future, these theories may thrive as an academic exercise until proven one way or the other. However, if policy were formulated based on a theory of speculative assumption, not on actionable intelligence, it would become a risky gamble.
At present, the Obama administration has no plan in place to workout a diplomatic solution to the North Korean issue. Obama solidly supports the Seoul government's North Korea policy, which is not to engage the North Koreans unless and until they accept their responsibility for the attack on the Cheonan and apologize for it. Washington and Seoul demand that Pyongyang show an irreversible commitment to denuclearization. In the practice of "strategic patience" or "strategic distance," Washington still keeps the door open to nuclear diplomacy but under a stringent set of conditions -- which could lead to normalized relations and a peace agreement with the United States, if all goes well. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spelled out some of those conditions: "…North Korea cease its provocative behavior, halt its threat and belligerence towards its neighbors, take irreversible steps to fulfill its denuclearization commitments and comply with international law." (Clinton's press availability after the 2+2 meeting in Seoul on July

22).

Washington has increased pressure on Pyongyang with some specific measures, which include the strengthening of the alliance with Seoul, reinforcement of deterrence against the North that will require an increased defense spending for Seoul, and expanding military exercises. The additional U.S. pressure measures include financial sanctions by way of designating and freezing assets of entities and individuals involved in the proliferation of WMD, strengthening international cooperation to disrupt illegal transactions by the North, and prohibiting North Korean officials from getting involved in proliferation and other illicit activities. Most of these sanctions are already stipulated by UN Resolutions 1718 and 1874.

With regard to the efficacy of sanctions as they are applied to North Korea, many realists have argued: while sanctions may contribute to reduction of illegal transactions and they may well hurt the North Korean leadership, they would not change North Korean behavior or bring them down, unless China would fully participate in the implementation of sanctions. Since the UN sanctions were put in place and South Korea cut off its aid to the North, China has sharply increased its economic support for the North.

The Obama administration's security and nuclear policies are succinctly defined in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and Obama's statement at the 2010 Nuclear Summit. In summary, the United States continues to seek non-nuclear proliferation, reduction of existing nuclear weapons, and securing nuclear material and preventing it from falling into the hands of a third party state or a non-state organization. A note-worthy aspect of Obama's nuclear policy is the exclusion of North Korea from the category of countries for which a "negative security assurance" is provided.

To be eligible for a negative security assurance, a country must be a non-nuclear state member of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in good standing in terms of its non-proliferation obligations. North Korea withdrew from the NPT and pronounced itself as a nuclear weapons state, although the United States would not recognize it as such. Therefore, North Korea remains a potential target for U.S. nuclear attack. In view of the fact that one obvious U.S. goal in Korea is to achieve North Korean denuclearization, it is questionable whether the NPR as applied to North Korea would be constructive. Some may argue that the NPR clause may be effectively exploited as a coercive negotiating tool, if and when negotiation takes place.
The Obama administration seems to be determined not to let any gap in view or approach slip in its close relationship with the government of Lee Myung-bak. Washington and Seoul are now in the same boat staying together steadfast. But, there is an uneasy question: Where are they heading for, if North Korea does not surrender to their pressure? China, for its own interests – political, security and economic -- is committed to keep providing a lifeline to the North. There is nothing new in that the North Korean system is unacceptable to most Americans and South Koreans alike, who view North Korea as a failed state that is unable to feed its people and suppresses their freedom. On the other hand, the North Korean regime still exists, with no definitive sign of an imminent change or collapse. Undoubtedly, it will continue to expand its nuclear arsenal if there would be no efforts for engagement or attempts at intervention from outside.
It would be a real nightmare that the North Korean leadership, if completely cut off in aids from China, consider selling fissile materials to a non-state organization for badly needed foreign currency. This would be the last resort before they might choose to start a major war in a suicidal attack. Intensified implementation of financial sanctions could help reduce North Korea's proliferation activities, but it is not sure that all available nonproliferation measures currently in place, including the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and international networks of surveillance, would succeed to detect and prevent transfer of a grapefruit size ball of plutonium.

There is an economic side to denuclearization. To treat the North Korean case in isolation, it would be far inexpensive to resolve the issue diplomatically even if the international community pays rewards to the North, as progress is made in denuclearization talks. Aggravation in the persistence of the North Korean nuclear issue entails more defense spending to strengthen deterrence for South Korea, which will be compelled to develop and procure newer and more lethal weapons systems. Since the Cheonan incident, South Korea intends to increase its defense budge by 5%. There is no question that the benefits of a diplomatic settlement would far exceed the cost of a continuing military confrontation.

The North Koreans are squarely blamed for scuttling hopes for a resumption of denuclearization

talks. They committed a series of provocations since the start of the Obama administration, including the recent attack of the Cheonan ship. (Press reports of a Russian investigation that the Cheonan may have been exploded by a mine, not by a North Korean torpedo fans the flames of the lingering doubts among skeptics suspecting the authenticity of the official South Korean investigation. No definitive motivation for the North Korean attack has been established. Again, so much is unknown about North Korea. Russia is yet to release an official conclusion of its own investigation.)
Obama and Lee Myung-bak have approximately two and a half years left of their terms of office to make a strategic decision to rebuild the path to the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. Conservatives as well as progressives welcome a strengthened alliance to deter war in Korea, but the progressives are concerned about mounting tensions and prolonged confrontations on the peninsula and in the region, which would bring about an arms race between the North and the South and the two blocks of a newly emerging cold war map in the region.
Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Senate foreign relations committee, has the right recommendation for the Obama administration: "Even as we are fully prepared to deter and defend against any North Korean aggression … we must remain equally ready to pursue a peaceful, negotiated solution to the underlying security challenges that have kept the Korean Peninsula locked in a cold war for far too long. It is not enough for us to avoid another war on the Korean Peninsula. We must forge a lasting, just peace. That is …why it is more important than ever that we find a path forward to the resumption of dialogue with the DPRK as soon as possible." (Kerry on July 28)

III. Nautilus invites your responses
The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org