

Policy Forum 10-034: The Cheonan Sinking and a New Cold War in Asia

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The Cheonan Sinking and a New Cold War in Asia

Policy Forum Online 10-034: June 29th, 2010

By Wooksik Cheong

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I. Introduction

Wooksik Cheong, the Representative of Peace Network, writes, "The *Cheonan* sinking demonstrates the necessity of building a peace regime and resuming the Six Party Talks to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. Now is the time to find the way to prevent a conflict on Korean peninsula and a

new Cold War in Northeast Asia.”

En Hye Lee, an Intern at Peace Network, helped translate this article from Korean into English. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Wooksik Cheong

-“The *Cheonan* Sinking and a New Cold War in Asia”

By Wooksik Cheong

The impact that sunk the *Cheonan* on March 26th had a significant impact on all of Northeast Asia. “The flapping of butterfly’s wing in Brazil can bring about a disastrous tornado in Texas.” Like the butterfly effect, the *Cheonan* incident has the danger to trigger a new Cold War in Northeast Asia. Relations between North and South Korea took a step back toward the Cold War era after President Lee took office but, after the *Cheonan* incident, they are now moving towards a fierce confrontation. South Korea’s allies, the US and Japan, are actively supporting the Lee Administration and attempting to increase the pressure on North Korea through sanctions and other measures. However, North Korea’s long-time friends, China and Russia, which maintained equal relations with both North and South Korea after the Cold War, have had a quite different response. They have raised questions about the results of the Lee Administration’s *Cheonan* investigation, expressing concern that South Korea, the US, and Japan are attempting to push North Korea into the corner. Ostensibly, it can be said that the confrontational structure of the Cold War era is reemerging. Unbalance in the Six Party Talks can be explained by the different geopolitical perspectives in Northeast Asia. The Obama administration capitalized on the *Cheonan* incident to help bolster US-Japan relations and maintain a strong alliance structure in North-East Asia to restrain and contain China. The *Cheonan* incident was used to calm down the opposition to the US in Japan that resulted from the Futenma issue, a “hot potato” between US and Japan that resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Hatoyama. The development of a stronger bond between the US and Japan will help influence the US-South Korea alliance in America’s favor.

In addition, the South Korea-US joint naval exercise, which was expected to kick off in West Sea, can be seen as a demonstration of military force to restrain China as well as a threat toward North Korea. China has seriously responded to this issue. One of the Chinese national newspaper editorials, titled “Yellow Sea No Place for US Carrier” mentioned that, “the deployment of a carrier off of China’s coast is a provocation that will generate hostility among the Chinese public toward the US.” China’s concern is that the naval exercise is a warning sign that the US-led Northeast Asia alliance system will become strong and rigid on account of the *Cheonan* incident.

The fundamental problem is that even if the six parties say they want “peace and stability in Northeast Asia”, there is a huge difference in ways and means. The US, Japan, and South Korea, three nations that concluded North Korea was responsible for the *Cheonan* incident, claim that taking strong actions against North Korea will help promote peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia. On the other hand, China and Russia, nations that have expressed doubts about the results of the investigation, are demanding “calmness and restraint”, mentioning that retaliation against the North will increase tensions and could result in military confrontation. These responses from China and Russia, countries which share a boarder with North Korea, are based on the concerns that increased tensions on the Korean peninsula could damage their critical interests. Unlike Japan, which is located in the East Sea, or the US, which is across the Pacific, China and Russia are very concerned that a conflict could erupt on their border. Surprisingly, however, the South Korean government, separated from North Korea only by the DMZ, does not care about the threat of imminent conflict any more than the US and Japan. This attitude is based on a dangerous ‘strategic miscalculation’ that can be called ‘reunification through absorption’.

US is on Two Tracks, South Korea is on One Track?

The *Cheonan* incident has had a critical impact on the Six Party Talks as well. North Korea, China,

and Russia are generally positive about resuming the Six Party Talks as rapidly as possible. However, South Korea, the US, and Japan are taking a more passive attitude relating to the Talks. There are some important differences between policy in the US and South Korea on this issue though. South Korea is pursuing a one track *Cheonan* policy, arguing that there is no need to resume the Six Party Talks without solving the *Cheonan* incident. On the other hand, the US has a two-track approach to this problem. The US has concluded that the North is guilty and is pushing for increased sanctions against North Korea. Additionally, however, the US is expecting the Six Party Talks to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. The US' diplomatic dogma against hostile nations, which combines both sanctions and dialogue, can be seen in the response to the *Cheonan* incident. However, neither the South Korean, not the US response will be successful. The two-track, 'carrot and stick' approach will provoke a reciprocal response from the North. North Korea has used the strategy of "action for action, dialogue for dialogue" toward South Korea, the US, and Japan. Moreover, North Korea has demanded the lifting of sanctions as a condition for resuming the Six Party Talks. Thus any additional sanctions on the North or UNSC statement denouncing North Korea will prevent the resumption of the Six Party Talks. Furthermore, if the UN Security Council adopts a statement chastising North Korea, it is likely that the North, which has warned of "ultra hard line actions", will counter by launching long range rockets or a third nuclear test.

To keep the *Cheonan* tragedy from leading to a new Cold War in Northeast Asia three things must be resolved. First we must reinvestigate the cause of the *Cheonan* sinking. Not only North Korea but also China and Russia are raising questions on the results of the Lee Administration's investigation. In this situation, the matter will get worse if the US, South Korea and Japan proceed with sanctions against the North. Some have recommended a joint investigation team between North and South Korea, the US, and China. Second we must normalize inter-Korean relations as soon as possible. The DMZ is a 'divided line' across the Korean peninsula and represents 'the line of the balance power in Northeast Asia'. In this sense, it is geopolitically impossible to say that peace and stability in Northeast Asia can be maintained without stabilizing inter-Korean relations. Third the Six Party Talks must resume at the earliest possible time. There has to be continuous investigation for the truth of the *Cheonan* incident and it will take a long time to get the conclusive result through a four nation investigative team. Thus dealing investigation of *Cheonan* now and Six Party Talks later is not an appropriate approach.

The *Cheonan* sinking demonstrates the necessity of building a peace regime and resuming the Six Party Talks to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. Now is the time to find the way to prevent a conflict on Korean peninsula and a new Cold War in Northeast Asia.

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

2342 Shattuck Ave. #300, Berkeley, CA 94704 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org