

China's Cheonan Problem

by Bonnie Glaser and Brad Glosserman

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Historians may well look back at the sinking of the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* in March 2010 as a turning point in China's relations with Asia and the wider world. Beijing's response to the tragedy has been characterized by a conspicuous reluctance to engage. Instead, it has preferred to keep silent and, when obliged to respond, to counsel patience and calm by all participants. This response has been – to be blunt – insensitive and has alienated the South Korean public. It has exposed the gap between China's internationalist rhetoric and its pursuit of simple self interest, increasing suspicions of Beijing's foreign policy and raising doubts about its readiness to support internationally accepted norms of behavior.

The *Cheonan* suffered an external explosion, broke in two and sank within hours on March 26, 2010. While suspicions immediately fell on North Korea, the Seoul government refrained from blaming Pyongyang. Instead it launched an international investigation to find “scientific and objective conclusions.” Two months after the incident, that five-nation team concluded that North Korea was indeed responsible.

That's a difficult conclusion for China to accept. After all, it would mean that Dear Leader Kim Jong-il lied to Chinese President Hu Jintao when they met in Beijing after the incident and Kim denied any involvement. It would also mean that North Korea was actively threatening the peace, security and stability of Northeast Asia, a direct violation of China's declared interests and would demand a response.

That would oblige Beijing to agree to imposing additional sanctions on Pyongyang, and alienate a nation that it has long seen as a fraternal ally, a like-minded government, and a vital buffer zone on China's border, keeping the United States, its ROK ally, and unbridled capitalism at some distance. North Korea can be an unruly partner, but Chinese policy makers have concluded that a harsh response to Pyongyang's reckless and destabilizing behavior would damage its relations with the North and limit Chinese influence on the regime. They also fear that punitive actions against North Korea could cause Kim Jong-il to take further provocative actions, resulting in increased military tensions and even conflict on the Peninsula.

But the *Cheonan* incident has shifted the calculus. The surprise attack and the loss of 46 lives in the sinking, and one diver in the rescue operation, infuriated South Koreans. China's call for cool heads and the maintenance of peace and

stability – while overlooking the loss of Korean lives and the fact that North Korean actions have threatened those very interests – has angered the South Korea public. Beijing's initial reluctance to send condolences for the loss of lives – leaving aside the cause of the incident – was a diplomatic blunder of the first order and showed extraordinary insensitivity. South Korea was further infuriated by Hu Jintao's failure to inform President Lee Myong-bak during his visit to Shanghai that Kim Jong-il would be visiting China only a few days following Lee's departure. Beijing's readiness to shield Pyongyang only intensified South Korean anger.

Beijing has inexplicably rejected South Korea's request that China send a team to Seoul to review the evidence – a step that the Russians agreed to. And when South Korea dispatched a team of its own to New York to brief the UN Security Council on the findings of the investigation, China curiously asked for a deferral.

China's indifferent response to the deaths of 46 South Koreans contrasts sharply with its reaction to the shooting of a few Chinese by North Korean soldiers along the Sino-North Korean border. In that case, the Chinese demanded that Pyongyang admit its guilt, assume responsibility, punish the perpetrators, and pledge to not repeat the crime.

The tensions in Chinese foreign policy are understandable, but Beijing is making a mistake. The failure to accept the conclusions of the multinational investigation – or to come up with real reasons why they are suspect – will only encourage North Korean provocations and jeopardize the peace and security that China and other nations in Northeast Asia seek.

Equally important, China's position exposes the hypocrisy of Beijing's diplomacy. While Chinese foreign policy pronouncements trumpet China's support for preserving world peace and actively developing good-neighborly relations of friendship with surrounding countries, the readiness to turn a blind eye to a provocation that resulted in substantial losses of life demonstrates that those words are mere rhetoric. China is free to embrace the naked pursuit of national interest – most nations do – but that is not what its diplomats espouse as a guiding principle of Chinese foreign policy.

Coming at a time of increasing tension with Southeast Asian neighbors over territorial claims in the South China Sea, China's response to the *Cheonan* incident reveals a foreign policy mentality that is as hard-nosed and self interested as those of nations it dismisses as dominated by Cold War logic and hostile to new thinking about a peaceful and democratic world.