

Cool Heads Can Deter North Korea

by Leif-Eric Easley

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When considering how South Korea will respond to the sinking of one of its naval vessels in disputed waters near North Korea, most commentaries stress the lack of military options. In contrast, Ralph Cossa ["Cheonan Incident: Choosing an Appropriate Response" PacNet #21] calls for a United Nations Security Council Resolution mandating that all North Korean submarines and torpedo-carrying boats be restricted to port. Recognizing that the chances of the UNSC passing such a resolution are slim to none, Cossa recommends the United States and South Korea sink North Korean submarines that leave port, and threaten to bomb submarine bases on the North Korean coast. If an international investigation underway into the cause of the *Cheonan*'s sinking indeed concludes that North Korea is responsible, it is important to focus minds on maintaining credible deterrence vis-a-vis Pyongyang. Ultimately, however, it is necessary to pursue a middle course between "turning the other cheek" and moving toward a hot war in the Yellow Sea.

South Korea, the US and other concerned countries have a long wish list for the Korean Peninsula: a democratic, human rights respecting, global trading, non-nuclear, unified Korea allied with the US and favorably oriented to both Tokyo and Beijing. However, there are serious limitations to the ability and willingness of the relevant countries to pay for the items on this list. So unification needs to be peaceful and preferably gradual. Realizing this vision requires drastically changing North Korea's calculus or a bloodless end to the Kim regime.

How to do this? An international coalition – with as much policy coordination and UN support as possible – needs to impose costs on North Korean bad behavior and credibly promise greater costs for worse behavior. The world also needs to credibly offer benefits for improved North Korean behavior. This includes diplomatic engagement in exchange for Pyongyang reducing tensions and economic engagement in exchange for steps toward denuclearization (frustrating as it is to deal with Pyongyang's serial cheating and efforts to front-load benefits for itself).

If North Korea was responsible for the sinking of the *Cheonan*, it is likely that Pyongyang sought revenge for previous altercations in the Yellow Sea in such a way that would not trigger serious escalation or leave clear fingerprints at the scene of the attack. Pyongyang is probably not looking to fight a war (that it would almost surely lose), but is very unlikely to obey an international order to keep its submarines

in port and is almost certain to respond militarily to an attack. In fact, the Kim regime – seeking internal unity for dynastic succession – may be strengthened by such a fight.

Considering its own interests and the interaction with North Korea, Seoul's objective is to maintain deterrence while avoiding serious escalation. To be clear, it may not be possible to deter North Korean bluster, missile tests or even another nuclear test. The point is to deter a North Korean attack. Doing nothing in response to the sinking of the *Cheonan* could undermine such deterrence and allow Pyongyang to believe it can push the envelope further. But doing too much could invite the very attacks that Seoul wants to deter.

While sinking a North Korean submarine would be a proportionate response to the sinking of the *Cheonan*, doing so in textbook fashion would be difficult. Bombing a base on North Korea's west coast would not be proportionate, and the situation could quickly get out of hand. Recognizing this, it is unlikely Seoul will adopt a military retaliation strategy. Such a course would not have domestic political support or be helpful for the South Korean economy. Likewise, Washington has other concerns it prefers to focus on rather than escalate matters with Pyongyang. A more likely and effective strategy for Seoul to respond to the *Cheonan* incident could involve the following military, economic, and diplomatic components.

First, there are important military measures short of a counter-attack. South Korea can upgrade its submarine and anti-sub capabilities, enhance readiness and improve the sophistication of its patrols. This would reduce the chances of another *Cheonan* incident and increase the likelihood that North Korean forces would suffer if a similar attack was attempted. Seoul could redouble efforts to show no daylight between it and Washington on alliance issues such as the transfer of operational control, base realignment, and a civilian nuclear power agreement. US forces in the region could be subtly reinforced, as Washington has done in the past, to send a cautionary signal to Pyongyang. And Seoul could reach out to Tokyo on naval cooperation. Nothing sends quite the same signal to Pyongyang as increased security coordination between South Korea and Japan.

Second, there remain ways of punishing North Korea economically. Data for March 2010 suggests that trade between South and North Korea increased nearly 90 percent compared with the same period last year. There are clearly trade benefits for Pyongyang that Seoul could threaten to take away. More importantly, if the *Cheonan* investigation produces compelling evidence, Seoul can take the high road in rallying international support for strengthening UN economic sanctions against North Korea. South Korea can also make clear it will not tolerate North Korea's violations of contracts in the joint North-South projects at the Mt. Kumgang resort

and the Kaesong industrial complex. Doing so would further deprive the Kim regime of cash until it returns to compliance.

Third, South Korea could leverage the *Cheonan* incident for greater support from China. Seoul might call on Beijing to join the Proliferation Security Initiative, make its aid to North Korea more conditional, and emphasize to North Korean leader Kim Jong-il during his trip to China that North-South relations must improve. If six-party denuclearization talks are not soon revived, China could host five-party talks to draw up an East Asia security mechanism that would include maritime security. It is unlikely that Beijing will explicitly agree to these suggestions. But it would be difficult for China to offer nothing in response to calls for post-*Cheonan* cooperation. Beijing has a keen interest in restraining North Korea from wrecking the neighborhood and cares about building China's image as a responsible stakeholder. If North Korea is found culpable in sinking the *Cheonan*, Beijing shielding and supporting Pyongyang under the circumstances would not inspire international trust in China.

Seoul may develop a strategy combining elements of these measures plus others. The point is there are meaningful options between the maximal strategies of "turning the other cheek" and departing from the Armistice Agreement to teach North Korea a lesson. It is also important to observe how these policies interact with a dynamic political-economic situation inside North Korea. Depending on Pyongyang's words and deeds and the allies' preparation for contingencies, if the North Korean regime reaches the edge of the precipice, South Korea and the US might offer it a hand of assistance or nudge it over the edge. One thing is for certain: Seoul and Washington should not let Pyongyang drag the rest of us down with them.