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# China's Dilemma regarding the *Cheonan* Incident and the Future of ROK-China Relations

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On May 20, 2010, the Joint Civilian-Military Investigation Group, which included twenty-four foreign experts from the United States, Britain, Australia, and Sweden announced its results on the *Cheonan* incident. The South Korean government presented the group's conclusion that the *Cheonan* sank due to an attack by a North Korean torpedo. Twenty-two countries including the United States announced that they are in complete agreement with and support the South Korean government. Contrary to Seoul's expectations though, China displayed a reserved attitude. As soon as the Group began its investigation on the incident, China stressed the need to obtain "scientific" and "objective" results, and continues to make such broad remarks instead of specifically criticizing the South Korean government's findings.

Since the outbreak of the *Cheonan* incident, China's official position is focused on "being a responsible great power" and "striving to maintain peace on the Korean Peninsula." With its own definition of "a responsible great power", China highlights the compatibility between being a responsible power and maintaining the China-North Korea alliance. Moreover, China has put political emphasis on the need to prevent further tension and uncertainty in the Korean Peninsula in order to maintain peace and stability in the region. The idea of a "responsible great power" and "peace and stability maintenance in the Korean Peninsula" defines well Beijing's political interests regarding the *Cheonan* incident.

The reason why China is reluctant to comment about the results from the South Korean government's investigation results is because analyzing the findings both "objectively" and "scientifically" will inevitably force the Chinese government to acknowledge North Korea's responsibility for the *Cheonan* incident. If Beijing admits that North Korea was behind the sinking, it will have to make decisions about issuing statements condemning the attack, and even imposing sanctions at the United Nations Security Council. Conversely, to deny North Korea's role in the attack, it would then have to debate on the scientific validity and objectivity of the investigation results with those countries including United States who blame North Korea for the incident. This is why China is reluctant to issue any form of assessment.

No matter what the reality is regarding the incident, China has not shown any initiative in acknowledging North Korea's responsibility for the *Cheonan* incident. Beijing has taken this cautious approach because it sees the current situation in Pyongyang as not very stable. Due to the increasing isolation from the international community, the worsening economic situation since the failed currency reform of late 2009, the declining health of Kim Jong-il and uncertainty over leadership succession, North Korea is confronting severe difficulties both at home and abroad. Therefore, China seems to have concluded that too much external pressure upon Pyongyang may threaten the regime's stability. The difficulties

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for ROK-China cooperation over the *Cheonan* incident lie in that the two countries’ strategic visions for the long-term future of the North Korean regime are not accordant. Beijing is concerned whether in the future Pyongyang will be in favor of China’s own national interests, if it agrees with South Korea’s sanctions against North Korea. In light of this, if South Korea fails to prove that its current tough policy will lead onto the path for improved inter-Korean relations and stability on the Korean Peninsula then Beijing will pursue a policy toward North Korea based on its own national interests.

China is not supporting North Korea unconditionally. It has also been exerting pressure on Pyongyang to prevent further provocations and instability. As demonstrated in Chinese President Hu Jintao’s five proposals mentioned during the China-DPRK Summit, China made demands for enhanced strategic communication between the two countries. Primarily, this carries an important message that Pyongyang should hold close consultations with Beijing on North Korea’s major domestic and diplomatic issues. This statement is extremely contradictory with China’s traditional foreign policy that has been rooted in nonintervention. Through this strategic enhancement in bilateral communications, Beijing wants to prevent any surprises coming from North Korea that could threaten Northeast Asia’s peace and security. Mainly because these threats negatively affect one of China’s top-priority goals, economic development.

Despite the difficulties arising from China’s passivity, South Korea is working step by step to draw up stronger diplomatic countermeasures against Pyongyang from the international community. In actual fact, South Korea, just like China, does not wish to propose

another UN resolution against the North Korean regime. Drafting another resolution for sanctions would be meaningless, especially considering that North Korea is already under strict sanctions from previous UN Security Council Resolutions. Instead, the South Korean government is pushing for a UN Security Council Presidential Statement so that it can lead the voice of the international community without having to impose de facto sanctions against North Korea. Still, it is unlikely that China will agree to a presidential statement being issued. As long as North Korea continues to strongly deny being behind the *Cheonan* incident, China will most likely refrain from condemning North Korea.

Still, it would be a considerable diplomatic burden for China to oppose a UN Security Council Presidential Statement. Irrespective of the *Cheonan* incident, China has underscored the need to resume the stalled Six-Party Talks, differing from South Korea, which insists on “resolving *Cheonan* incident first, resuming Six-Party Talks after”. In order to overcome such differences, both China and South Korea need to pass the UN Security Council Presidential Statement, through which the *Cheonan* issue can be finally resolved and focus can then be redirected to resuming the Six-Party Talks. However, the real problem lies in the decision whether to implicate North Korea as the culprit of the *Cheonan* incident in the Presidential Statement or not. While mentioning North Korea in the statement appears fair from South Korea’s perspective, China has expressed difficulties in doing so.

If the UN Security Council Presidential Statement is adopted, the South Korean government will work to resume the Six-Party Talks. North Korea has asked for the alleviation or termination at best of the UN-imposed

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sanctions in exchange for resuming the Six-Party Talks. The South Korean government will have to push North Korea for more willing participation, while at the same time working to resume the Six-Party Talks with support from China and the United States. If the Presidential Statement is not issued, there is a high possibility that China will face considerable difficulties in exercising its leadership to resume the talks. Thus, the *Cheonan* incident is an important opportunity for China to construct its future leadership in the international community.

Ever since the establishment of ROK-PRC diplomatic ties in 1992, South Korea has believed that it needs to maintain a cordial relationship with China so that the Chinese leadership would direct North Korea in a manner which Seoul desires. This has been mainly because of Beijing's considerable political, economic, military, and diplomatic leverage upon Pyongyang. Hence, Seoul has focused more on retaining an easygoing relationship with China instead of pursuing its national interests. Regardless of South Korea's position toward China, Beijing has always pursued China-DPRK relations based on its own national interests. If Seoul wants to affect North Korea with the help of China's leverage, South Korea needs to make China's national interests coincide more with its own national interests toward the region, or at least regarding the Korean Peninsula. In this way, Seoul needs to draw Beijing's attention to the changes in the current international environment.

The ROK-U.S. joint naval exercise, currently being considered in response to the recent *Cheonan* incident, has many implications for Beijing. In the process of assessing the deployment of the aircraft carrier USS

*George Washington*, China responded in a sensitive way as it considers the entrance of a U.S. aircraft carrier into the Yellow Sea as a considerable threat to its own security. Lacking any feasible means for restricting the U.S.-ROK joint military exercise, the only practical option for Beijing is to express its opposition through diplomatic means. China will realize that the ROK-US partnership, in case of the *Cheonan* incident or any future contingency related to the Korean Peninsula may not always be in line with its own policies toward the Northeast Asia region. Beijing should recognize that it needs to collaborate with Seoul and Washington to discuss about and develop a vision for future contingencies related to North Korea. The current response to the participation of the USS *George Washington* in the ROK-US joint naval exercise could be a signal for China to recognize that North Korea-related contingencies in the future may significantly change the balance of power in Northeast Asia.

China itself needs further strategic cooperation with South Korea and the United States to secure peace and maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula, because Beijing's leverage to control North Korea is fairly limited. In order to resolve the 'North Korean issue', there is a need to develop various 'mini-multilateral' cooperation forums depending on issues, in addition to the Six-Party Talks, in which related parties can efficiently discuss the issues. South Korea, China, and other related nations can confront various regional security problems including North Korea's regime stability and future uncertainty, nuclear threats, and defectors. The way in which these different forums could cooperate on different issues could be South Korea-China-United States cooperating on the future of the

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North Korean regime, while South Korea-China-Mongolia and even Japan could discuss on issues related to defectors, and finally South Korea-China-United States can work together on the nuclear crisis.

Along with the rise of China, the importance of PRC-ROK relations is progressively increasing more than ever before. The relationship between the two countries is no longer just bilateral, but is the key to the fate of the Korean Peninsula in the 21st century. Unfortunately, considering the two countries' geopolitical positions and the differences in national power, South Korea's actual leverage on China is limited. Understanding the goals of China's policies in foreign affairs is the first and most important step for South Korea. In addition, Seoul should strengthen its efforts to correlate its own strategic interests with those of Beijing in a phased fashion. As seen with the *Cheonan* incident, smooth cooperation between China and South Korea can hardly be expected, unless there is active strategic communication upon the future of North Korean regime and the Korean Peninsula. Seeking a clue for further ROK-China strategic cooperation for North Korean nuclear issue, the Six-Party Talks, regime instability, and the succession issue in Pyongyang is really needed.

As well as to reinforce capabilities and secure the balance of power, South Korea should seek to enhance its 'network power' in global society. The *Cheonan* incident has revealed that Seoul should deal more earnestly with the complexities surrounding the Korean Peninsula. If it fails to map out the whole network for problem solving, a mis-connected node will lead to a total failure. In order to do so, South Korea needs to develop the existing ROK-U.S. alliance into a 21st century com-

prehensive alliance, and to enhance 'new-era' cooperation with Japan.

The expansion of a diplomacy network must occur and influence the involved parties so that strategic cooperation between China and South Korea can be further developed. South Korea's diplomatic alliances and relationships with the United States, Japan, and China are no longer a question of choice, but a problem that must be dealt with according to the dynamics of power at the time of concern. ■