A Time for Calmer Minds to Prevail
By Jin Jingyi

SINCE SOUTH KOREA’S military-civilian joint investigation concluded that the warship Cheonan was sunk by North Korea, with the loss of 46 South Korean sailors, the Korean Peninsula has been heading toward confrontation. Both Koreas have been talking about the possibility of war, in a dangerous game of chicken. The Korean Peninsula now faces its greatest crisis since the Korean War. How we deal with the Cheonan incident will strongly sway the political situation on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia.

WHERE IS THE CRISIS HEADED?
During the two months since the ship was sunk on March 26, South Korea strongly suspected that the North was responsible and gathered evidence, while simultaneously stepping up its cooperation with the US and Japan in unprecedented ways. Even before clinching decisive evidence that a North Korean torpedo struck the Cheonan, South Korea appealed for international support, particularly from China. After concluding that North Korea was, indeed, culpable, South Korea banned North Korean ships from its waters and ports, and announced sanctions to cut off inter-Korean exchanges. Seoul also announced it would soon resume psychological warfare against the North and is now embarking on so-called “Cheonan diplomacy” to get the United Nations Security Council to impose sanctions on North Korea or at least issue a statement condemning Pyongyang.

South Korea seems intent on punishing the North, or at a minimum eliciting an apology and a pledge to avoid similar incidents. The dominant mood in Seoul has been to punish Pyongyang even at the risk of war. The US and Japan, meanwhile, are actively lining up with South Korea, while other allies are also lending support.

WHAT WILL THESE MEASURES RESULT IN?
There are essentially three possibilities. The first is that North Korea will relent and promise to avoid similar incidents. The second is an end to all inter-Korean exchanges, including the Kaesong Industrial Complex north of the demilitarized zone, where a variety of South Korean companies employ thousands of North Koreans, generating significant revenues for the north. The third is a military clash between the two Koreas.

The first scenario is what South Korea obviously wants. But North Korea is denying any involvement in the sinking of the Cheonan, and has made official announcements and staged daily mass rallies condemning the South. For North Korea to admit culpability now and apologize would be to invite collapse.

The second scenario is currently unfolding, and it is impossible to predict how it will end.

The third scenario is one that both Koreas want to avoid, but if the confrontation worsens, any accident could spark a spiral down this path. If South Korea resumes psychological warfare (such as cross-border propaganda broadcasts by loudspeakers), a military clash might be unavoidable.

Then why is South Korea bent on internationalizing the incident, even at the risk of war?

On the surface, South Korea’s intent seems to be to maintain security by military means – in short, to punish the North by pressuring it to apologize and pledge not to repeat such behavior,
and by doing so, to begin the process of reform and opening up that could lead North Korea to become a normal nation. But given the nature of President Lee Myung-bak’s North Korea policy, what lies beneath the surface is a desire to topple the Pyongyang regime, take over the country and thereby achieve unification.

This is the motive of South Korea’s conservative hardliners, who are emphatic about their willingness to go to war. Furthermore, behind South Korea’s internationalization of the Cheonan incident lies a desire to secure its primacy over affairs on the Korean Peninsula. In this way it can be seen as laying the groundwork for international cooperation to prepare for unification.

It is precisely because of these responses on the part of South Korea that the Cheonan incident is heading toward confrontation. If the South continues down this path, the situation on the peninsula will become unpredictable, and the possibility of a military clash will increase.

Then how should the Cheonan incident be dealt with?

The most important concern is to prevent the worst-case scenario of a military clash. International cooperation to head off this possibility must be the first priority.

The two Koreas are now in a potentially deadly game of chicken, with both sides believing that the only way to win is not to fear war. So both sides are speaking openly of war, and voices insisting on peace are being treated with suspicion. But this game of chicken could lead to mutual destruction.

As the two Koreas try to one-up each other by threatening war, neighboring countries should not fan the flames but keep a cool head. So far, countries in the Western world, led by the US and Japan, have lined up behind South Korea. They have even gone so far as to appeal to China to join their ranks and pressure North Korea. For its part, South Korea has expressed strong dissatisfaction at China’s cautious approach, and called on it to play a responsible role befitting a great power. Seoul has even said China, which is North Korea’s closest ally, holds the key to resolving the Cheonan incident.

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Then what exactly would be a responsible role befitting a great power?

It has to be primarily about preventing a military clash or a war in the region. Indeed, the most important concern of international relations in Northeast Asia is preventing war. Preventing war and maintaining peace and stability is the fundamental solution and the key to diffusing the Cheonan incident.

Then what should the two Koreas and the international community do?

First, a mechanism for inter-Korean dialogue needs to be established to manage unpredictable
events and crises. The Cheonan incident should be an occasion not to cut off but to resume dialogue. In fact, since the sinking of the Cheonan until now, North Korea has had no voice in the matter. When the North proposed dispatching an investigative team to the South, the South rejected the proposal.

If the North, in fact, sank the Cheonan, the issue needs to be raised directly with North Korea to allow it to explain or defend itself. The best way to prevent a recurrence – if the North was responsible – is to talk directly and secure a pledge to avoid similar incidents. Taking the issue to the UN Security Council without giving North Korea a chance to defend itself is fundamentally not helpful to solving the issue. It may be said that the Korean War broke out 60 years ago because of a lack of a structure to suppress war and a mechanism for dialogue. The two Koreas should manage the current situation in a cool-headed and restrained manner through dialogue.

Second, there needs to be international cooperation among the regional powers to prevent a military clash or outright war. When tensions flare on the Korean Peninsula, responsible countries must mediate between the two Koreas and encourage a peaceful solution. To stand on one side and allow the situation to worsen is not the right thing to do. The international community should intercede to prevent a confrontation and overcome the crisis together.

In particular, it is not advisable for the US to be seen as fueling the indignant mood in South Korea, thereby worsening the crisis. Instead, the US should join China in persuading the two Koreas to strengthen cooperation to overcome the crisis. They must work toward a fundamental solution to the problem.

Third, the international community should now actively seek to calm the tensions surrounding the Cheonan incident, because to aggravate them is not in anyone’s interests. Even if the issue comes before the Security Council, it would be helpful if the atmosphere there could be softened in order to enable a solution. The two Koreas and Northeast Asia now need to gradually de-politicize the Cheonan incident.

Fourth, relevant countries should request restraint from both Koreas and discourage them from taking actions that could worsen the situation. For example, South Korea’s threat to resume psychological warfare against the North could only be viewed as an extreme measure that could trigger a military clash. Any action that could lead to a military clash should be discouraged.

Fifth, the two Koreas and neighboring countries need to seek a fundamental solution to ensure that crises like this one do not happen again. That solution can only be inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation, which should be promoted and supported by everyone. Peace and security cannot be defended with military hard power alone. Only dialogue and cooperation can maintain airtight security. The Cheonan incident is not unrelated to the recent steady decline in inter-Korean relations. In the current Cold War armistice situation, inter-Korean relations need to be treated delicately. Not only the two Koreas but also neighboring countries should approach the Korean Peninsula with similar care.

The Cheonan incident reveals that inter-Korean relations remain vulnerable and that regional relations remain under the shadow of the Cold War. This goes against the regional trend of the China-Japan-Korea summit and the US-China strategic dialogue. From the standpoint of regional economic cooperation, if nothing else, the Cheonan incident should not be allowed to become worse. Ultimately, we need a way to bring North Korea into the fold of regional cooperation.

It is now time for the Cheonan incident to move from tension to calm, from confrontation to dialogue. Ultimately, this is in the interests of all countries in the region.

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