

CHEONAN AND YEONPYEONG

THE NORTHEAST ASIAN RESPONSE TO NORTH KOREA'S PROVOCATIONS

SCOTT SNYDER AND SEE-WON BYUN

Divergent responses to the sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 have raised tensions in Northeast Asia. China's enabling response appeared to write North Korea a blank cheque for further provocations; but Beijing has in fact been constrained by fear of destabilisation of the Kim regime. The incidents have prompted a reappraisal of bilateral relations within the region – in particular, the South Korea-US alliance – and revealed the continuing importance of the Sino-US relationship in Korean peninsular security affairs.

The 26 March 2010 sinking of the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* in waters near the South Korean-declared Northern Limit Line (a de facto jurisdictional border with North Korea) initially seemed to be another in a series of tragic and periodic incidents in which ongoing inter-Korean tensions have flared up and then subsided. But as events unfolded, the shockwaves from the ship's sinking and the subsequent tensions generated by the 23 November 2010 North Korean artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island have revealed a different aspect of the current inter-Korean relationship. In the past, the rise and fall of inter-Korean tensions rarely had significant security ramifications beyond the peninsula itself: provocative incidents occurred in the context of ongoing competition for legitimacy between the two Koreas, with little likelihood that isolated incidents would escalate in ways that might decisively shift the inter-Korean balance or result in a tipping point that could eventually lead to Korean reunification. But the growing power imbalance between the two Koreas, especially viewed against the backdrop of an uncertain leadership succession and increasing economic difficulties in the North, has given the

Cheonan and Yeonpyeong provocations a different quality – and has evoked a different kind of response from regional neighbours.

The Context

Following the end of the hostilities of the Korea War in 1953, North Korea followed an aggressive and hostile military strategy into the 1970s that involved hundreds of infiltrations into South Korean territory. However, as South Korea's power increased in comparison to its northern neighbour, Pyongyang's aggressive use of military provocations correspondingly declined to the point that years went by without land incursions across the Demilitarized Zone that separates the two countries; and there were only intermittent challenges to South Korea's declared Northern Limit Line in the 1990s and 2000s. By this standard, 2010 marked a dramatic turning point in the scale of North Korean provocations, involving the highest level of South Korean casualties since the 1960s.¹ Moreover, despite a series of maritime skirmishes involving Korean fishing boats and naval vessels from the late 1990s (including loss of life in the West Sea/Yellow Sea), all incidents had been managed in a strictly inter-Korean context prior to 2010.

Thus, the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong provocations marked a dramatic escalation of confrontation following years of quiescence and a decade of rapprochement under the progressive governments of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo-Hyun. They also established a direct linkage between inter-Korean tensions and the broader regional environment, placing a spotlight on the quality of Sino-US relations and regional crisis management capabilities.

The interplay between inter-Korean tensions and the management of regional security issues, especially the management of Sino-US relations, helps to explain why provocations that might in the past have been treated as serious but routine incidents in the context of the longstanding inter-Korean confrontation might now serve as sparks that have broader ramifications for stability and security in East Asia. Moreover, inter-Korean tensions have occurred in the context of rising Chinese confidence and a deepened recognition of economic and political limitations on US global leadership.

The Aftermath

The *Cheonan* sinking steadily evolved from an inter-Korean incident to a focal



Officers of the North Korean People's Army ground force, navy and air force line up during a ceremony celebrating the re-election of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, Pyongyang, September 2010. Courtesy of AP Photo/Korean Central News Agency via Korea News Service.

point for regional tensions, both at the UN Security Council and through apparently competing Chinese and US-ROK naval exercises. North Korea's artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island reinforced the urgency of regional co-ordination on provocations at a time of declining confidence in the Chinese-mediated Six Party Talks, a regional security forum on Korean peninsular denuclearisation and regional security launched in 2003 involving the United States, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, China and Russia. The management of these North Korean provocations provides a litmus test for the future nature of Sino-US interaction on regional security issues and is an early indicator of how US alliance commitments in Northeast Asia may come into conflict with China's aspirations for expanded regional political and security influence as a result of its rapid economic growth.

The series of actions and reactions among the six parties following the sinking of the *Cheonan* provides insights into regional crisis management capacities and sheds light on the bottom-line positions, preferences and dilemmas harboured by each party. A detailed examination of regional responses to the incident over the key phases of confrontation highlights major differences in strategic perceptions and interests

among the key players that present a long-term challenge to the regional management of Korean peninsula and Northeast Asian security issues. This article will explore these responses through an evaluation of the impact of the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong incidents on respective bilateral relationships among the two Koreas, China and the United States, and will also consider the responses of Japan and Russia.

Inter-Korean Relations

The initial impulse of the Blue House on the night the *Cheonan* sank was to delink the sinking from possible inter-Korean tensions despite the temptation to ascribe blame to North Korea before an investigation into its cause. The Lee Myung-bak administration's decision to launch a multilateral investigation of the *Cheonan* sinking led by the Joint Civilian-Military Investigation Group (JIG) drew praise from outside observers and earned credibility and support for the South Korean president from the United States.² However, once the ship was physically recovered from the seabed in mid-April 2010, under extraordinarily difficult physical conditions, the investigation turned towards the consideration of an 'external explosion' as the most likely cause for the sinking, leading to speculation that North Korean special operations forces might have been

responsible for launching a torpedo from a mini-submarine.

North Korea did not publicly mention the *Cheonan* incident until 17 April, when a military commentator called it a 'regretful accident' and denied DPRK involvement, arguing that the Lee administration's accusations were aimed at avoiding 'heavy defeat' at the 2 June local elections, justifying its conservative policy, strengthening US-led international sanctions and undermining North Korean efforts toward building a 'strong and prosperous state'.³

The release of interim results on 20 May 2010, less than two weeks prior to South Korean local elections, left the impression among many South Koreans that the investigation was compromised by ruling party attempts to use North Korean issues as a domestic political lever on public opinion. This perception served to feed the polarisation of South Korean public opinion over the legitimacy of the investigation results, a development that played into North Korean hands. South Korean academic experts pointed to 'serious inconsistencies' in the interim report, arguing that 'the "critical evidence" presented by the JIG does not support its conclusion that the *Cheonan*'s sinking was caused by the alleged DPRK's torpedo'.⁴ Another factor that influenced international perceptions of the credibility of the report was an

independent Russian review of the international investigation team's findings that concluded that the evidence did not conclusively prove that the sinking was caused by a North Korean torpedo. Other factors influencing the credibility of the report in the eyes of the South Korean public were perceived inconsistencies in statements from senior officials in the Lee administration in the early stages after the incident, and an initial unwillingness to release the full JIG report.

North Korean statements initially targeted the Lee administration, and it was not until the release of the JIG interim report that the DPRK Foreign Ministry directly accused the United States of using the *Cheonan* incident to realise its broader strategic interests in the region, claiming that 'the investigation was steered by the US from its very outset'.⁵ During a 28 May press conference criticising the findings of the JIG investigation, the North Korean National Defense Commission suggested that the *Cheonan* case provided a pretext for the US-ROK delay of wartime operational control transfer, and Pyongyang released a statement on 22 June denouncing South Korean participation in the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative, calling the decision 'little short of declaring they would not rule out military conflicts'.⁶

In the aftermath of the Yeonpyeong incident, both US and Chinese diplomatic efforts sought to mediate the situation: joint calls for inter-Korean dialogue were made during consultations led by Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg in mid-December; and these were reaffirmed in the joint communiqué released on the occasion of the Obama-Hu summit in Washington in January 2011. These efforts promoted the reduction of tensions between the two Koreas and created an environment in which South Korea accepted North Korea's offer of preliminary talks between defence ministers immediately after the conclusion of the Washington summit. But the subsequent breakdown in preliminary high-level inter-Korean military talks on 9 February 2011 revealed that differences in opinion over responsibility for the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong incidents are a

fundamental stumbling block to inter-Korean reconciliation. At those talks, South Korea sought a North Korean admission of responsibility for the two incidents as a precondition for the resumption of regional dialogue, while the North attempted to justify its actions. Following the failed talks, North Korea's state newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* accused the South of pursuing a 'policy of confrontation', and stated that 'it is impossible to improve the north-south relations ... unless the South Korean authorities give up their attitude of denying dialogue and seeking confrontation'.⁷ The inter-Korean stalemate is an obstacle to regional efforts toward the resumption of the Six Party Talks through which North Korea's nuclear programme and other issues must be addressed.

China-ROK Relations

China initially saw the *Cheonan* sinking as an inter-Korean incident and appeared frustrated by South Korean efforts to both internationalise the issue by taking it to the UN Security Council and to use the incident as a pressure point against North Korea. Beijing repeatedly called for 'calm and restraint'⁸ in dealing with the crisis and Chinese leaders consistently reaffirmed their commitment to address the case 'in an objective and fair manner'.⁹ China's handling of the *Cheonan* incident, and especially its blocking of international efforts to censure North Korea for the Yeonpyeong Island artillery shelling, have severely damaged the Sino-South Korean political relationship and have created doubts about China's credibility as a broker of the Six Party Talks. There are also concerns that in the process of defending North Korea, China has given Pyongyang licence to undertake even more serious provocations in the future.

However, the Sino-South Korean relationship had begun to sour even prior to the release of the JIG's interim report on 20 May 2010. An initial sign of China's insensitivity to South Korean concerns was the fact that the Chinese government took weeks to acknowledge and offer condolences for the deaths of the *Cheonan's* crew. Although Lee Myung-bak met with President Hu Jintao

on the occasion of the opening of the Shanghai Expo on 30 April, China did not inform South Korean officials in advance of plans to host North Korean President Kim Jong-il days later for a summit with President Hu Jintao on 6 May. Officials in Seoul had expected the Hu-Lee summit to lead to intensified consultations with China on laying out an international response to the *Cheonan* incident, but the Shanghai summit failed to produce a joint understanding on how to address the tensions.¹⁰ At the onset of Kim Jong-il's five-day trip to China, ROK Unification Minister Hyun In-taek urged China to play a 'responsible role',¹¹ while South Korean editorials argued that 'the warm welcome to the Kim entourage is particularly offensive ... since it comes on the heels of South Koreans' mourning the sailors killed on the *Cheonan*'.¹²

China's prioritisation of regional stability and relations with the North at the expense of China-ROK relations revealed a surprising South Korean miscalculation regarding Chinese strategic priorities and its likely response to South Korean efforts to secure a strong UN condemnation of North Korea. In view of the relative weight of China's significant trade with South Korea versus trade with the North, this was a logical projection, but it failed to take into account China's historical and ideological ties with North Korea or deep Chinese concerns about prospects for North Korean instability in the context of succession. This misreading may have occurred in part as a result of Premier Wen Jiabao's statement in Seoul that China would 'value the outcome of the international probe and the international community's reaction to it', and that 'following that decision, we will shield no one'.¹³ A week later, South Korea pressed for a direct condemnation of North Korea when it formally requested that the matter be considered by the Security Council on 4 June,¹⁴ but this effort misjudged China's response at the Security Council as well as US capacity to elicit Chinese support. While the Obama administration voiced strong support of President Lee's handling of the incident, Chinese reluctance to join international condemnation of Pyongyang undermined ROK efforts to secure a timely international response. The 9 July Security Council Presidential Statement

was perceived as a 'diplomatic setback' for South Korea.¹⁵

The impact of the *Cheonan* incident has intensified debates inside South Korea regarding how to deal with a rising China and Seoul's policy orientation toward the United States and China respectively. An earlier phase of this debate occurred in 2008 when South Korean president Roh Moo-Hyun put forward a 'balancing' concept that would involve less dependence on the alliance with the United States and the strengthening of South Korea's relationship with China. But Lee Myung-bak's emphasis on the importance of the US-ROK alliance since his inauguration has appeared to come at the expense of effective Sino-ROK relations, even while the two countries announced the establishment of a 'strategic partnership' in May 2008. In the summer following the *Cheonan* sinking, a South Korean editorial noted that 'Seoul and Washington have come to a new chapter in their strategic alliance and partnership', to which 'no doubt the North's torpedo attack on the South's warship *Cheonan* in the West Sea in March has contributed'. But it also argued that: 'the two countries should be careful not to bring about unnecessary conflicts with neighbouring countries, especially China ... It would be better for the South to avoid being caught in the rivalry between Beijing and Washington.'¹⁶ This is an expression of the conventional wisdom among South Korean foreign policy specialists on how to manage respective relationships between China and the United States.¹⁷ South Korean analysts appear wary of the long-term risks of Sino-US tensions as raised by the *Cheonan* incident versus the need to maintain a favorable China-ROK partnership. These analysts privately express grave concerns about the weakening of the relationship with China.¹⁸ A May editorial argued that 'the "strategic partnership" signed between the two countries last year must not be burned in fiery emotion and rhetoric'.¹⁹ A major challenge for South Korean policy is how to build sufficient trust in Sino-South Korean relations to win more active co-operation with China on political issues, especially as it relates to the future of the Korean

peninsula in the event of North Korean instability.²⁰

China-DPRK Relations

Beijing's cautious approach to dealing with the *Cheonan* incident is probably best explained by ongoing concerns about North Korea's internal stability at a time of leadership succession in Pyongyang. While the United States and South Korea viewed the incident as an unprovoked attack by North Korea and attempted to hold the North accountable for its actions, China saw the subsequent US-ROK naval exercises in response to the attack as underestimating the serious risks of further provoking Pyongyang and escalating regional military tensions. In response to President Obama's remarks at the G20 summit in Toronto criticising China's 'willful blindness' on the issue,²¹ a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman on 29 June reaffirmed China's 'fair and irreproachable' position, stating that 'China borders on the Korean Peninsula, and we have our own feeling on the issue ... we have more direct and intense concerns'.²² In addition, China's response to the *Cheonan* sinking and its aftermath appeared to widen the internal divisions between Chinese civilian party and military leaders regarding North Korea policy which had surfaced after North Korea's May 2009 nuclear test. According to US officials, Chinese party leaders have reportedly expressed increasing anxieties about Pyongyang's provocations while military leaders have tended to defend North Korea's position.²³

North Korea's dependency on China has increased amidst heightened tensions between China and US allies in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* incident. South Korea's trade cut-off following the *Cheonan* sinking and continued efforts to enforce international sanctions under UN resolutions have left North Korea with no recourse but to rely more heavily on China for economic assistance. A symbolic result of the impact of this shift was North Korea's rebuff of former US President Jimmy Carter's visit to Pyongyang in August 2010, when Kim Jong-il chose to meet President Hu in Changchun instead, with the apparent mission of securing Chinese economic aid and support of its unfolding leadership succession.²⁴

Despite pledges of strengthened co-operation between Beijing and Pyongyang's new leadership since the historic Workers' Party of Korea conference in September 2010, several potential conflict points in the relationship have appeared to test China's patience with DPRK provocations. First, China's diplomatic and economic support of Pyongyang, and China's willingness to prevent international efforts to punish North Korean bad behaviour, has undermined perceptions of China's role in the regional and global community. Second, North Korea's renewed nuclear ambitions as represented by revelations to a private American delegation of a new uranium enrichment facility in mid-November 2010, shortly before the Yeonpyeong attack, have challenged Chinese efforts to lead regional efforts on DPRK denuclearisation. Third, North Korea's continued emphasis on self-reliance as its national development strategy has contradicted Chinese efforts to promote reform and opening in North Korea. Fourth, North Korean provocations have heightened frictions in China's bilateral relationships with major regional partners, including South Korea and the United States.

The Chinese greeted with alarm joint US-ROK military exercises involving the USS *George Washington* following the Yeonpyeong incident. But China's response appeared to focus more on the need to calm down Seoul and to prevent South Korean military exercises in the aftermath of the shelling rather than to identify or punish North Korea as the perpetrator of the incident. China's refusal to go along with the Security Council's condemnation of North Korea for launching the unprovoked shelling (or for revelations regarding North Korea's enriched uranium programme) and criticisms of South Korea for undertaking military exercises designed to show South Korea's will to respond to future North Korean attacks, illustrated a widening gap between China and the US and South Korea in the aftermath of North Korea's Yeonpyeong artillery shelling.

US-ROK Relations

US responses to North Korea's provocations have been treated primarily

as an opportunity to show solidarity with its alliance partners in Northeast Asia. President Obama affirmed that the United States 'fully support[ed]' Lee's approach in the run-up to the 20 May release of the JIG interim report.²⁵ After the publication of the Security Council Presidential Statement on 9 July, Secretary Clinton stated that 'we applaud the Republic of Korea's careful handling of this situation'.²⁶ Immediately following Seoul's release of the JIG interim results confirming North Korean responsibility for the sinking, Washington 'condemned' the attack while emphasising its security commitment to South Korea:²⁷ this was arguably the most important of the American responses. The summit with Lee Myung-bak on the sidelines of the Toronto G20 gathering in June marked the sixtieth anniversary of the Korean War and the first meeting between the two presidents since the *Cheonan* incident. There, President Obama called the alliance a 'lynchpin' of Asian security, and pledged to 'deter any acts of North Korean aggression'.²⁸ The joint communiqué of the US-ROK Security Consultative Meeting on 8 October 2010 'reaffirmed the continued US commitment to provide and strengthen extended deterrence for the ROK', and produced 'Strategic Alliance 2015' through which 'the Republic of Korea and the United States are more united than ever before to deter North Korean provocations and aggression'.²⁹

However, the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong attacks have raised questions about the long-term role of the US-ROK alliance in preventing recurring North Korean military provocations and the challenge of managing Chinese reactions to efforts to enhance the US-ROK security alliance. In immediate response to the Yeonpyeong shelling, the United States joined South Korea in four-day joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea on 28 November–1 December 2010. This response was effective and reassuring to South Korea, especially following the decision to exercise the USS *George Washington* in the East Sea/Sea of Japan rather than the West Sea/Yellow Sea following the *Cheonan* incident. Only days after the Yeonpyeong artillery shelling, Secretary Clinton hosted a

trilateral foreign ministers' meeting with Japanese and South Korean counterparts in Washington where the three leaders 'strongly condemned the attack'.³⁰ This meeting served both to underscore solidarity among allies in response to North Korea's provocation and to send a message to Beijing that North Korea's continued provocations were driving US allies together in ways that are not in China's national security interests. The meeting was also a rejection of Chinese calls for 'emergency consultations' among the six parties following the attack and drew a sharp response from the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, who stated that 'military alliances and displays of force cannot solve the issue'.³¹

South Korea enjoys particular status as an internationally responsible player and close ally of the Obama administration, which has pledged its support for the idea of Korean unification. For instance, the June 2009 US-ROK Joint Vision Statement declares both parties' commitment, stating that: 'Through our Alliance we aim to build a better future for all people on the Korean Peninsula, establishing a durable peace on the Peninsula and leading to peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy'.³² But even despite such expressions of solidarity, the United States has harboured concerns that North Korea's provocations continue to drive South Korea into a situation in which an increasingly frustrated South Korean public expect a stronger response from the ROK government, including the adoption of more aggressive rules of engagement by border forces. This includes proposals by a South Korean defence review commission that South Korea should adopt a policy of 'proactive deterrence' that might involve striking North Korea first in self-defence rather than suffering further provocations. These measures carry with them risks of potential escalation that require careful management; the results may also be harder to control than many South Koreans realise.³³

US-China Relations

China's strong reaction to the US-ROK military drills in the East Sea in July

merged concerns about a more 'assertive' Chinese approach toward maritime security and regional political issues with efforts to manage tensions on the Korean peninsula, where China's preferred objective has been to maintain rather than challenge the status quo. The response to the provocations highlighted the importance of Sino-US co-operation as a potentially effective mechanism for limiting inter-Korean escalation and keeping a lid on confrontation. It was also a litmus test on whether China and the United States would compete or co-operate in support of Asia's regional stability. But it also illustrated a gap in Chinese and US approaches, especially as they relate to the preferred strategies, tools and outcomes that each side seeks on the Korean peninsula.

One characteristic of the Chinese response has been the tendency to look at the Korean peninsula through the lens of Sino-US strategic relations. This view is reflected in growing concerns about the intentions of the US-ROK alliance, as shown in China's expression of concern about US-ROK military exercises in response to North Korea's provocations. An editorial in China's party paper *Global Times* argued that 'Whatever the explanations the US and South Korea offered, the military drills surrounding China's offshore sea obviously have the intention of targeting China'; and warned that 'Seoul may not have fully realized the consequences of upsetting China-US ties ... a stronger South Korea-US alliance might jeopardize the trust of Seoul with its neighbours'.³⁴

At the same time, China's enabling response to North Korean provocations has become a growing source of irritation in Washington as China has seemingly turned a blind eye to North Korean actions and given North Korea a 'blank cheque' to pursue provocations with apparent impunity. Washington's growing frustration with China's insistence on 'calm and restraint' when dealing with North Korea was clearly reflected in President Obama's remarks at the G20 Summit in Toronto, where he noted: 'there's a difference between restraint and willful blindness to consistent problems'.³⁵ On the other hand, Washington appears to recognise

both the critical importance of Chinese co-operation on North Korea and related Chinese sensitivities that limit such co-operation. At a speech at the MacArthur Foundation on 9 July 2010, US Forces Korea Commander General Walter Sharp stated that: 'The Republic of Korea-US alliance needs more from the entire international community and all countries in the region, in particular China. We believe all countries in the region and China need to work in co-operation in addressing North Korean aggressive behaviour. In particular we will welcome Chinese action even behind the scenes.'³⁶ When Admiral Michael Mullen visited South Korea in December to strengthen co-ordination of future responses to North Korean attacks, he stated that 'China has unique influence. Therefore, they bear unique responsibility.'³⁷

The US dismissal of Chinese proposals to convene an emergency meeting among delegation heads of the Six Party Talks immediately after the Yeonpyeong incident, and its hosting of trilateral foreign ministerial talks with Japan and South Korea in December 2010 provided a complex backdrop for joint Sino-US calls for direct inter-Korean dialogue in mid-December in the run up to the Hu-Obama summit in January 2011. The summit's joint statement made the right noises but failed to explicitly address several differences in Chinese and American approaches toward North Korea, including the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 1718 and 1874 condemning North Korea's two nuclear tests (for which Chinese support has been critical); differences in view on 'recent developments' that led to heightened tensions on the peninsula; and the naming of specific 'necessary steps' towards the resumption of Six Party Talks.³⁸

Japanese and Russian Responses

While Japanese observers saw the *Cheonan* sinking as 'a warning signal' for the Japanese government about the North Korean military threat,³⁹ Japanese concerns have been driven by the regional repercussions from the incident and implications for the US-Japan alliance, perceived to have suffered under Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama. During

his joint press conference with Secretary Clinton in Tokyo on 21 May, Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada stated that 'the importance of the Japan-US alliance is increasing amid the unstable and insecure situation in East Asia, with incidents like the sinking of the South Korea warship'.⁴⁰ The *Cheonan* incident and its aftermath have also provided a context that justified an improvement in ROK-Japan security co-operation. South Korea and Japan are reported to be negotiating agreements on intelligence sharing, and acquisitions and cross-servicing as technical measures that would dramatically reinforce the potential for security co-operation on military issues between the two countries.

The *Cheonan* incident also prompted Japanese calls for closer trilateral co-operation with the United States and South Korea on both deterring the North Korean threat and addressing potential North Korean instability. Japan's greater willingness to co-operate with the United States and South Korea on security matters was perceived as an important signal of resolve in response to North Korean provocations. Noting that the *Cheonan* sinking occurred at a time of North Korea's uncertain domestic transition, a Japanese editorial argued that 'given North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles, we must never omit precautions for unexpected contingencies. Now is the time for Japan, South Korea and the United States to first start discussions on contingency planning [to respond to potential instability in North Korea]'.⁴¹ The strengthening of trilateral co-ordination following the Yeonpyeong shelling catalysed further discussion of enhanced Japan-ROK defence co-operation, including strengthened logistical and intelligence co-operation between the two militaries.

While Russia has tended to play a relatively marginal role in Northeast Asian security relations in recent years, its active response to the *Cheonan* sinking has served as a key influence on both international condemnation of Pyongyang and South Korean domestic perceptions. Russia's early co-ordination with China demonstrated its diplomatic support of Pyongyang and Beijing as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met senior

Chinese officials including President Hu Jintao in Beijing days before Russia's expert team began their investigation in South Korea. The immediate Russian response to Seoul's conclusions fell in line with Chinese fears about provoking a military conflict on the peninsula; during his meeting with the foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, in June in Beijing, Lavrov reportedly affirmed that both China and Russia were 'deeply concerned' about the inter-Korean situation.⁴²

Russia's decision to send its own investigation team to South Korea and related South Korean media debates served to widen the domestic debate in South Korea over North Korea's responsibility for the sinking.⁴³ Despite Moscow's decision not to disclose the conclusions of its navy-led independent investigation, progressive South Korean media reports on its alleged findings in July refuted various aspects of Seoul's multilateral report.⁴⁴ The Russian report is significant for the fact that it was the only national review independent of the South Korean-led investigation and also made Russia the first nation to deny North Korean responsibility. But, described by some Russian analysts as being 'as equally unconvincing as the South Korean-led report',⁴⁵ the Russian report seems more important as an indicator of Russian strategic efforts rather than a basis of contradictory evidence. According to Leonid Petrov of the University of Sydney, 'the whole purpose of Russia's move was to restore the balance of power in Northeast Asia. There was no balance of power when South Korea with its allies, including the US, Japan, the UK, and Australia, produced a document, unilaterally accusing North Korea over the incident.'⁴⁶

In the aftermath of the Yeonpyeong shelling, Russia appeared to break with China by urgently pressing for a Security Council discussion of peninsular tensions in mid-December, motivated by concerns that South Korean military exercises might stimulate an escalatory North Korean counter-response. Russia did not try to shield North Korea from international criticism, in contrast to China's position at the Security Council discussion. Moscow has held to the position that denuclearisation of the

peninsula should be pursued through the resumption of Six Party Talks. Indeed, Foreign Minister Lavrov has stated that 'there is no other mechanism to settle the problem'.⁴⁷

Regional Security Dynamics in the Post-Cheonan Environment

The 26 March 2010 *Cheonan* sinking and 20 November 2010 Yeonpyeong attack have deepened mistrust among regional actors while exposing the negative consequences of heightened tensions. China's unwillingness to condemn North Korea following the Yeonpyeong artillery shelling widened the gap in both Sino-South Korean and Sino-US relations. Although China has been preoccupied with promoting stability on the Korean peninsula and inside North Korea at all costs, this approach appears to have unleashed rather than restrained North Korean leaders to pursue provocations with apparent impunity. As a result, divergent responses to North Korean provocations have introduced tensions at a regional level, even as Sino-US co-operation proved to be an essential element in limiting inter-Korean tension-escalation following the Yeonpyeong artillery shelling.

It is possible to draw several lessons from the impact of the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong incidents on Northeast Asian security relations. First, they demonstrated the importance of strengthening regional co-ordination mechanisms on North Korea and broader security issues through overlapping

US-ROK-China and US-Japan-ROK trilateral efforts. Such efforts appear to require a greater Chinese willingness to consult with regional partners, a more honest Chinese assessment and response regarding who is to blame for recent provocations, and a reconciliation of US alliance commitments and the increasing role of Sino-US relations on key regional issues.

Second, the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong incidents highlighted the contradictions China faces in its desire to promote engagement with North Korea as a means by which to manage crisis, and its unwillingness to acknowledge North Korea as the instigator of crisis. One result has been declining confidence among American and South Korean officials in Chinese efforts to play a responsible role in the region as mediator of the stalled Six Party Talks on DPRK denuclearisation.

Third, the *Cheonan* sinking has increased the spotlight on North Korea's domestic transition, which many US and South Korean observers have linked to the incident.⁴⁸ While Pyongyang will likely remain preoccupied with securing a smooth leadership transition following its historic September 2010 party conference, the *Cheonan* incident has challenged North Korean efforts to balance its domestic goals with foreign policy priorities.

Finally, the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong incidents have highlighted the linkage between inter-Korean tensions and regional stability in ways that underscore the need for a unified regional approach

to the management and resolution of inter-Korean tensions that might presage or result from North Korean instability. At the same time, a regional unified approach is also a necessary prerequisite for managing inter-Korean tensions and providing a suitable path for addressing these issues through negotiation. But the likelihood of progress on that path will only come in the context of greater unity of purpose, priority and focus among major powers, especially the United States and China. Otherwise, North Korea may continue to exploit differences and collective action problems among neighbours of the two Koreas in ways that both highlight the instability of the current balance of power on the Korean peninsula and which potentially jeopardise the collective interest in regional stability that is shared by all parties. ■

Scott Snyder is Director of the Center for US-Korea Policy at the Asia Foundation, Adjunct Senior Fellow for Korean Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, and Senior Associate of Pacific Forum CSIS. He received a BA from Rice University and an MA from Harvard University. His latest book is China's Rise and the Two Koreas (Lynne Rienner, 2009).

See-Won Byun is the Research Associate of the Asia Foundation's Center for US-Korea Policy in Washington. She is also the non-resident Kelly Fellow of Pacific Forum CSIS. She received a BA from Brown University and MA degrees from Yonsei University and George Washington University.

NOTES

- 1 Narushige Michishita, *North Korea's Military-Diplomatic Campaigns, 1966-2008*, Abingdon: Routledge, (2009). See especially appendices A-C, pp. 199-203.
- 2 Joint Civilian-Military Investigation Group (JIG), 'Joint Investigation Group Report on the Attack against ROKS *Cheonan*', Interim Report, May 2010, available at <<http://www.Cheonan46.go.kr/100>>, last accessed 25 March 2011.
- 3 *Korean Central News Agency*, 'Military Commentator Denies Involvement in Ship Sinking', 17 April 2010.

- 4 Seunghun Lee and J J Suh, 'Rush to Judgment: Inconsistencies in South Korea's *Cheonan* Report', *Asia-Pacific Journal* (Vol. 28, No. 1, July 2010).
- 5 *Korean Central News Agency*, 'Who Wire-pulled Shocking Case Behind Scene', 28 May 2010. Also see Haksoon Paik, 'An Analysis of the North Korean Perspective on Post-*Cheonan* Regional Security', Paper presented at an Asan Institute Symposium on Post-*Cheonan* Regional Security, Center for US-Korea Policy and Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Seoul, 13 August 2010.

- 6 *Korean Central News Agency*, 'Lee Myung Bak Groups' Confrontation with DPRK Blasted', 26 June 2010.
- 7 *Korean Central News Agency*, 'S. Korea Denounced for Sticking to Their Policy of Confrontation', 12 February 2011.
- 8 *Xinhua*, 'China Again Calls for Restraint, Calm over ROK Warship Sinking', 10 June 2010.
- 9 *Xinhua*, 'China to Make Objective, Fair Judgment on S. Korean Warship Sinking: Wen', 28 May 2010.

- 10 Na Jeong-ju, 'President Lee's China Trip Half Success', *Korea Times*, 2 May 2010.
- 11 Sam Kim, 'S. Korea Calls For "Responsible Role" by China in Dealing with N. Korea', *Yonhap*, 4 May 2010.
- 12 *JoongAng Daily*, 'Let's Cool Off Over China', 8 May 2010.
- 13 *JoongAng Daily*, 'China Won't Shield Cheonan Culprit', 29 May 2010, <<http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2921121>>.
- 14 Park In-koo, 'Letter dated 4 June 2010 from the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council', S/2010/28, <<http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/DPRK%20S%202010%20281%20SKorea%20Letter%20and%20Cheonan%20Report.pdf>>, last accessed 25 March 2011.
- 15 *Korea Times*, 'Closer Alliance', 21 July 2010.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Chung Jaeho, *Between Ally and Partner: Korea-China Relations and the United States* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008).
- 18 Author conversations in Seoul, December 2010.
- 19 *JoongAng Daily*, *op. cit.*
- 20 Bonnie Glaser and Scott Snyder, with David Szerlip and See-Won Byun, *Responding to Change on the Korean Peninsula: Impediments to US-South Korea-China Coordination* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2010).
- 21 The White House, 'Remarks by President Obama at G20 press conference in Toronto', Canada, 27 June 2010, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-g-20-press-conference-toronto-canada>>, last accessed 25 March 2011.
- 22 *Xinhua*, 'China Rebuffs Criticism over Stance on Korean Peninsular Situation', 29 June 2010.
- 23 Mark Landler, 'US Stands with an Ally Eager for China to Join the Line', *New York Times*, 26 May 2010.
- 24 Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun, 'China-Korea Relations: Consolidating Ties with New DPRK Leadership' in Carl Baker and Brad Glosserman (eds.) *Comparative Connection* (Vol. 12, No. 3, October 2010).
- 25 Office of the Press Secretary, 'Statement by the Press Secretary on the Republic of Korea Navy ship the Cheonan', 19 May 2010, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/statement-press-secretary-republic-korea-navy-ship-Cheonan>>, last accessed 25 March 2011.
- 26 Hillary Rodham Clinton, 'UN Security Council Statement on the Cheonan attack', Washington DC, 9 July 2010, <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/07/144407.htm>>, last accessed 25 March 2011.
- 27 Office of the Press Secretary, *op. cit.*
- 28 The White House, 'Remarks by President Obama and President Lee Myung-bak of the Republic of Korea After Bilateral Meeting', Toronto, 26 June 2010, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-and-president-lee-myung-bak-republic-korea-after-bilateral->>, last accessed 25 March 2011.
- 29 Joint Communiqué, 'The 42nd US-ROK Security Consultative Meeting', Washington DC, 8 October 2010, <<http://www.defense.gov/news/d20101008usrok.pdf>>.
- 30 'Trilateral Statement: Japan, Republic of Korea, and the United States', Washington DC, 6 December 2010, <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/12/152431.htm>>.
- 31 *Xinhua*, 'China Refutes Criticisms on Efforts for Emergency Six-party Consultations', 2 December 2010.
- 32 Office of the Press Secretary, 'Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea', 16 June 2009, <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/usa/2009/usa-090616-whitehouse01.htm>>, last accessed 25 March 2011.
- 33 Author conversations with ROK government and US Forces Korea personnel, December 2010.
- 34 *Global Times*, 'Military Drills Leave S. Korea Insecure', 20 August 2010.
- 35 The White House, *op. cit.* in note 21.
- 36 Song Sang-ho, 'US Expects More N.K. Provocations', *Korea Herald*, 10 July 2010.
- 37 Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Speech at the Ministry of National Defense, Seoul, South Korea, 8 December 2010, <<http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?id=1502>>, accessed 25 March 2011.
- 38 The White House, 'US-China Joint Statement', 19 January 2011, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/19/us-china-joint-statement>>, last accessed 25 March 2011.
- 39 *Nikkei Weekly*, 'Sinking of S. Korean Ship Demands Strong Response', 24 May 2010.
- 40 Masamiito, 'Clinton: Sinking Also Threat to Japan', *Japan Times*, 22 May 2010.
- 41 *Daily Yomiuri*, 'Maintain Vigilance Against North Korea', 12 July 2010.
- 42 *RIA Novosti*, 'Russia, China to Try to Prevent Conflict on Korean Peninsula—Lavrov', 4 June 2010.
- 43 Yu Yong-won, 'Russia's Cheonan "Investigation" Is a Political Minefield', *ChosunIlbo*, 10 September 2010; Ha Uhyeong, 'Lee Administration Responds to Russian Investigation Report', *Hankyoreh*, 28 July 2010.
- 44 *Hankyoreh*, 'Russian Navy Expert Team's Analysis on the Cheonan Incident', 27 July 2010; *Hankyoreh*, 'Russia's Cheonan Investigation Suspects that the Sinking Cheonan Ship Was Caused by a Mine in Water', 28 July 2010.
- 45 See Leonid Petrov's remarks in Sunny Lee, 'Why Russia doesn't share its Cheonan results with Seoul', *Korea Times*, 12 October 2010.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 *RIA Novosti*, *op. cit.*
- 48 Ruediger Frank, 'An Act of Open Insubordination? Implications of the Cheonan Incident for Domestic Politics in North Korea', *38 North*, SAIS US-Korea Institute, 9 May 2010.