

Noose tightens around North Korea following Yellow Sea naval battle

James Conachy
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The short but bloody naval battle on June 29 between North and South Korean warships in the Yellow Sea has been utilised by the Bush administration and the South Korean government to intensify the diplomatic and economic isolation of North Korea. Washington has cancelled a diplomatic visit to Pyongyang this month—the first official talks scheduled since Bush’s installation—on the grounds that the incident was an “armed provocation” by North Korea, which “had created an unacceptable atmosphere in which to conduct the talks”.

The response in South Korea has been just as belligerent. Politicians and the media have launched scathing denunciations of North Korea and also South Korean president, Kim Dae-jung, who has pursued a “Sunshine Policy” of opening up relations with Pyongyang. Veterans of the Korean War, including retired generals, have held anti-North demonstrations and called for military retaliation. Under intense pressure, Kim Dae-jung has demanded a full apology and authorised a change in the military’s rules of engagement to permit a “fire-first” policy if South Korean ships are threatened. A 300,000 tonne shipment of food aid to North Korea is likely to be cancelled, and South Korean and US military forces have stepped up surveillance activity.

While Washington and Seoul blame North Korea for the naval clash, the evidence points in the opposite direction. The incident has the hallmarks of a provocation organised by the South Korean military as a means of galvanising public opinion behind a more confrontational stance towards the North. While there are contradictions between the South and North’s versions of what occurred, both sides agree it was preceded by the incursion of South Korean fishing boats and naval vessels into waters claimed by North Korea.

North Korea alleges that two of its patrol boats were conducting “routine coastal guard duty,” seeking to chase southern fishing boats out of the area, when they were confronted by four South Korean naval speedboats, backed by several larger warships. A 21-minute exchange of gunfire ensued, during which one South Korean boat was sunk and one of the North Korean ships was set ablaze. Four South

Korean sailors were killed, 19 wounded and one is missing, presumed dead. An unknown number of North Koreans were killed or wounded before their ships retreated. Both sides have accused the other of firing first.

Regardless of who initiated the firing, it is indisputable that the actions of the South Korean navy on June 29 were out-of-the-ordinary and aggressive. The battle occurred in an area that has been the subject of a territorial dispute since the UN unilaterally imposed a sea-border, known as the Northern Limit Line (NLL), at the end of the 1950-53 Korean War. North Korea has never accepted the UN line, and declared its own boundary several kilometres further south. To prevent conflicts, South Korea established a “no man’s land” buffer in the form of 9.6 kilometre “no-fishing zone” south of the NLL. Under normal circumstances, both navies prevent fishermen entering the buffer zone.

Over the past month, the North Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) alleges that incursions by southern fishermen, shadowed by the South Korean navy, have been frequent. On June 29, it was reported in the South Korean media that as many as 10 South Korean boats were fishing for blue crab—a prized export catch—north of the “no fishing zone”. A July 3 report published by the *Korea Times* quoted a South Korean fisherman who stated that boats had crossed several kilometres into the zone. One of the wounded South Korean sailors told the newspaper his ship had taken part in escorting fishing boats out of the zone some 40 to 50 minutes after they entered it.

The fact the incursions were not prevented and that a sizeable South Korean naval contingent was lying in wait for the North to send warships into the “no fishing zone” provides ample grounds for suspecting that the South was seeking some sort of confrontation. In June 1999, a naval battle took place in the same area when the South Korean navy launched a massive operation to stop North Korean boats fishing for crab in the disputed waters. In that exchange, a North Korean torpedo boat was sunk and dozens of its sailors killed. This time, however, it appears that the South Korean military were looking to provoke an incident.

The responsibility for creating these tensions rests with Washington. Since its installation in January 2001, the Bush administration has diplomatically isolated North Korea, accusing it of constructing “weapons of mass destruction,” sponsoring terrorism and deliberately “starving its own people”. In January, Bush labelled North Korea, Iraq and Iran an “axis of evil” and the Pentagon named North Korea as one of seven countries the US had targeted for potential nuclear strikes in the event of a conflict.

Under these conditions, North Korea has everything to lose from a clash with the South. The bellicose US stance has already caused international aid to the North to dry up. The Stalinist dictatorship in Pyongyang is presiding over an economy in ruin and a population suffering desperate food shortages. A rise in military tensions on the Korean peninsula would threaten to scuttle the “Sunshine Policy,” which offered the prospect of some relief through investment and economic aid to the North in return for open market reforms.

Under Kim Dae-jung’s plan, the peninsula would remain divided—saving the South the cost of a German-style reunification—while the South Korean corporate elite would gain access to low-cost, regimented labour in North Korea, with rail lines and energy pipelines potentially bringing trade, gas and oil to the South via Russia and northern China. China and the major European Union states have backed the policy, attracted by the possibility of establishing viable land links between Europe and East Asia and undermining the postwar US dominance in the region.

The Bush administration, supported by the Japanese government of Junichiro Koizumi, has attempted to sabotage the “Sunshine Policy” by increasing tensions with the North. Washington and Tokyo are opposed to any agreement on the Korean peninsula that would benefit China and lead to a greater EU involvement in the region. The US is also concerned that any negotiated settlement between the two Koreas would immediately lead to calls for the withdrawal of the 37,000 American troops stationed in South Korea. The Bush administration’s thinly-veiled perspective is to bring North Korea to its knees, collapse the Pyongyang regime and install a pro-US alternative.

Within South Korea, Bush’s stance has emboldened layers of the political and military establishment that oppose the “Sunshine Policy” and want a more aggressive policy towards North Korea. The opposition Grand National Party (GNP), which emerged out of the US-backed military regime that ruled over the South until 1988, has repeatedly denounced Kim Dae-jung for threatening South Korea’s security and economic interests. Claiming it has been vindicated, the GNP has seized on the naval battle to effectively kill the “Sunshine Policy” and reduce Kim to a

lame duck president.

Kim Dae-jung was already under fire over a corruption scandal involving one of his sons. In May, he resigned from his own Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) to give its presidential candidate a better chance in the December elections. The naval incident has erased any political mileage he may have gained from the World Cup. Both the GNP and MDP are demanding that Kim Dae-jung reshuffle his cabinet and sack at least six of his ministers. Pre-election polling suggests the GNP will win a majority in parliament in by-elections in August, and the presidency later in the year.

The North Korean regime faces the prospect of not only hostile US and Japanese administrations, but a South Korean government prepared to openly support their brinkmanship. The degree of concern in Pyongyang was hinted at on July 4. Its main agency in charge of relations with the South issued a statement that omitted any reference to the naval battle and declared the North would “make all our efforts to smoothly promote dialogue and cooperation”.

Any easing of tensions has been rejected thus far in Seoul, Washington and Tokyo. On July 7, the South Korean military issued an official report blaming the North for the incident. The US has made clear it does not intend to re-initiate talks quickly while the Japanese government is devoting up to \$US50 million to recover the hull of an alleged North Korean spy ship the Japanese Coast Guard sunk last December. The Japanese government has alleged the boat was engaged in either espionage, drug-running or terrorist activity. The aim of raising the hull is to “find” evidence to fuel anti-North Korea hysteria and justify Japanese remilitarisation.

The North Korean population will be the first victim of the tensions being encouraged by Washington on the Korean peninsula and in East Asia. David Morton of the United Nations Development Program reported last week that the UN World Food Program had not received sufficient food donations—particularly from the US and Japan—to meet the expected need in the North. “If we cannot maintain the distribution to the end of the year, we will certainly see increases in malnutrition,” he told the *Washington Post*.



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