

Unexplained naval sinking produces political crisis in South Korea

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The unexplained sinking of the South Korean navy's patrol ship Cheonan on March 26 has triggered a major political crisis for the government. President Lee Myung-bak is increasingly under pressure from sections of his right-wing Grand National Party (GNP) and the military to point the finger and take action against North Korea over the incident.

The 1,200-ton warship sank in the Yellow Sea in disputed waters with North Korea, resulting in the loss of 46 sailors—the largest number of South Korean military casualties in more than 20 years. A diver has also died in the rescue and salvage operations. The stern section of the vessel was raised on April 16, with the remainder was raised last Saturday.

A great deal of speculation surrounds the sinking. Last November, a North Korean naval boat was badly damaged in a firefight with South Korean gunboats near the disputed area of the Yellow Sea, leading to accusations that North Korea sank the Cheonan in retaliation. Pyongyang has publicly denied any involvement.

After examining the stern section, South Korea's chief investigator Yoon Duk-yong declared that a steel plate on the ship's port side was curved inward, suggesting it had received a powerful impact from outside. There was no evidence of an internal explosion in the ammunition storage or engine room, or of a fire having broke out on board. If the findings are accurate, the ship was likely sunk either by a torpedo or a mine, possibly left over from the Korean War in the 1950s.

To date, the response of the Lee administration has been uncharacteristically low key. President Lee has

not directly accused North Korea and has appealed for calm, saying that a detailed investigation was needed. The reaction is at odds with the previous hardline approach of the GNP—the party of the country's Cold War military dictatorships.

Lee was a long-time opponent of the “Sunshine policy” advocated by his two immediate predecessors—Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun—of improving relations with Pyongyang and opening up the North for investment. He came to power in 2008 advocating a more aggressive stance towards Pyongyang and quickly cut off food aid to North Korea.

A major factor in Lee's reaction has been Washington's response. The Obama administration is already embroiled in an escalating war in Afghanistan and Pakistan and is ratcheting up threats against Iran over its nuclear programs. Not wanting a crisis over North Korea, at least in the short-term, the White House has urged caution over the naval incident and is seeking a resumption of six-party talks over North Korea's nuclear programs if Pyongyang is cleared of any involvement.

The Obama administration is taking a direct hand in the South Korean investigation, sending 12 experts to assist. The US has also declared that its military satellites observed no unusual movement by the North Korean military on the night of Cheonan's sinking.

Kurt Campbell, the US assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, said that Washington's primary objective was to work with South Korea to recover the ship, after which “we will be able to make

some judgments about the way forward.” He stated that there was “complete agreement” between Seoul and Washington on the next steps, “if there are to be next steps given recent developments.”

In line with Campbell’s comments, Lee told the *Washington Post* on April 12 that the most important thing for his government was to “come up with a result, a report, that the international community will find acceptable and approve.” He added that his administration would respond “in a firm manner” if anyone was held responsible for the sinking.

Another consideration for Lee is the potential impact of any confrontation with North Korea on the fragile South Korean economy. The *Financial Times* noted on April 16 that a confirmed North Korean attack would deal a blow to Seoul, which is trying to use its presidency of the G20 “to trumpet Asia’s fourth-biggest economy as a stable destination for investment”. Lee came to office promising economic growth and jobs, but South Korea was hit hard by the global economic crisis and his support has plummeted. GDP growth last year was just 0.2 percent.

In a televised address to the nation over the sinking of the Cheonan last Monday, Lee read out the names of the dead sailors, promised to “get to the bottom of the case”, and to “deal resolutely with the results and make sure such an incident does not occur again”. But he carefully avoided any direct reference to North Korea and put more emphasis on the South Korean military’s poor leadership.

At the same time, Lee is under growing pressure from the GNP to take a tougher stance against North Korea. GNP chairman Chung Mong-joon declared on April 16 that it was time to “make a critical decision” implying his support for accusing North Korea of being the attacker. Stoking up tensions with North Korea in the lead up to key elections in June for mayors and local councillors would be one way of diverting public attention from rising unemployment and falling living standards.

After the ship’s stern was recovered, Defence Minister Kim Tae-young called for harsh action against

whoever was responsible, declaring: “The government and military see this incident as a grave situation of national security”. Foreign Minister Yu Myung-Hwan told KBS television on April 18 that South Korea would take the issue to the UN Security Council if North Korea was found to be involved. The major conservative daily *Chosun Ilbo* has called on Lee not to rule out military action against North Korea.

The military and intelligence establishment are pressing for strong action. Last Thursday, the South Korean press claimed that the Defence Intelligence Command had informed the presidential office and defence ministry immediately after the sinking that North Korea was responsible. The reports stated that military intelligence had warned weeks before the incident that North Korea had deployed mini-submarines for suicide missions to take revenge for last November’s naval skirmish.

Tensions in South Korea were raised another notch when South Korean security agents arrested two men last week allegedly involved in an attempt to assassinate a top North Korean defector. Speculation also spread in the South Korean press that North Korea was preparing for a third nuclear test, which was quickly denied by Foreign Minister Yu. While Washington for its own purposes is counselling restraint, Lee may yet take retaliatory action that will rapidly lead to a dangerous new confrontation on the Korean peninsula.



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