

South Korea imposes penalties on North over naval incident

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Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have escalated markedly after South Korea accused North Korea of deliberately sinking the Cheonan, a South Korean warship, on March 26. In findings released last Thursday, South Korean investigators claimed that the warship was sunk by a North Korean torpedo, fragments of which were recovered and displayed.

In a statement yesterday, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak announced a series of retaliatory measures, including ending all trade and most investment with North Korea, and referring the incident to the UN Security Council for action. North Korean merchant vessels will also be denied access to South Korean waters. In a separate announcement, the South Korean defence ministry announced that it would resume its propaganda barrages using high-powered loudspeakers on the border with the North. These were suspended six months ago.

In an ominous move, Lee declared that South Korea would “maintain a principle of proactive deterrence ... If our territorial waters, airspace or territory are militarily violated, we will immediately exercise our right of self-defence.” By placing the South Korean military on a hair-trigger, Lee has heightened the danger of a broader conflict.

US President Obama also ratcheted up the threats, ordering the American military to “ensure readiness and to deter future aggression”. The US and South Korean military had already placed their forces in South Korea on the second high-level of alert. Obama also called for a review of “existing authorities and policies” on North Korea. The US navy has announced two joint exercises with its South Korean

counterpart—focussing on anti-submarine warfare and the interdiction of banned North Korean weapons shipments.

North Korea has denied responsibility for sinking the Cheonan, which resulted in the deaths of 46 South Korean sailors. It dismissed last week’s findings and warned that the peninsula was heading towards war. Pyongyang declared it would respond to South Korean retaliation by shutting down North-South ties, abolishing cooperation projects, and abrogating their non-aggression agreement.

Joint US-South Korean naval exercises, particularly any near the disputed naval border with North Korea in the Yellow Sea, have the potential to trigger a confrontation. After the end of the Korean War in 1953, the US-led United Nations Command unilaterally drew the Northern Limit Line, which in places runs a few kilometres off the North Korean coastline. This was never accepted by Pyongyang.

In 1999, North Korea declared its own demarcation, leading to several deadly clashes in the area, including one naval firefight that saw at least 17 North Korean sailors killed. In 2002, four South Koreans and around 30 North Koreans died in a similar skirmish. Last November, South Korean warships fired on and badly damaged a North Korean patrol boat that had allegedly crossed the Northern Limit Line. The South Korean and American press have speculated that the sinking of the Cheonan was a North Korean act of retaliation.

The incident has ended any immediate prospect of reviving the so-called Sunshine policy initiated by South Korean President Kim Dae Jung to ease tensions

and open up North Korea to South Korean investment. Lee, who was critical of the Sunshine policy, came to power in 2008 advocating a more aggressive stance and quickly cut off food aid to North Korea. He is a member of the right-wing Grand National Party (GNP)—the party of South Korea’s Cold War military dictatorships.

From the outset Lee has been under pressure from hard-line sections of the GNP and military to immediately blame North Korea for the sinking. Heightened tensions, however, threaten to provoke further financial turmoil and to undermine relations with China, a formal ally of North Korea and South Korea’s largest trading partner. The South Korean currency and shares fell sharply on Friday after the findings on the Cheonan were announced.

At the same time, Lee will undoubtedly exploit the issue in key elections next month for mayors and local councillors. By focussing on North Korea, the GNP will seek to divert public attention from rising unemployment and deteriorating living standards. Lee won the 2008 election by promising to fix the economy and his poll ratings have plummeted as the global financial crisis impacted on South Korea.

The Obama administration has strongly backed Lee for its own ends. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton condemned the sinking last Friday and declared that it would not be “business as usual” with North Korea. She called for an international response. Currently in China with a huge delegation for talks on a range of issues, Clinton is pressing Beijing to take punitive steps against North Korea.

To date, however, China has been non-committal, last week describing the incident as “unfortunate”. Beijing has neither accepted the South Korean findings nor is it backing North Korea’s denial of any involvement.

By taking the incident to the UN Security Council, South Korea, with US backing, will put China on the spot. Beijing has previously supported UN sanctions resolutions on North Korea over its nuclear and missile tests, but might be reluctant to openly back Seoul against Pyongyang. China gained considerably more

leverage over North Korea earlier this year through a huge infrastructure package of \$10 billion for the economically crippled country—equivalent to 70 percent of its estimated gross domestic product. During a visit to Beijing by North Korean leader Kim Jong-il two weeks ago, further steps were taken to open up North Korea to investment by Chinese companies.

Rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula also provided Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama with a convenient diversion as he reneged on a key election promise to renegotiate a deal over the location of a major US military base on Okinawa. Faced with US intransigence, Hatoyama announced on Sunday that his government would relocate the base to northern Okinawa—largely in line with the 2006 agreement with the previous government. In recent weeks, major protests on Okinawa have demanded Hatoyama keep his promise to move the base out of Okinawa. The Japanese prime minister told reporters yesterday that the Japan-US relationship was of “utmost importance” given the current situation on the Korean Peninsula.

The danger is that as China, the US and Japan all jostle for strategic advantage in the region, the dispute over the Cheonan’s sinking can escalate into a full-blown confrontation.



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