

Lee Myung-bak, Cheonan, and the New Cold War

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Recently there has been increasing talk of a ‘New Cold War’, focused perhaps on Northeast Asia. However, because of the involvement of major powers, principally the United States and China, it is one with global implications.¹ The old Cold War in Northeast Asia may be considered to have ended when, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, both Russia (1991) and China (1992) established diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea.² The ROK and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)³ both joined the United Nations on the same day, 17 September 1991. However, the old Cold War never quite died away; Neither the United States nor Japan were willing to establish diplomatic relations with the DPRK, though both have, at times, promised that they will. Indeed, the Agreed Framework between the US and the DPRK in 1994 specifically pledged that ‘the U.S. and the DPRK will upgrade bilateral relations to the Ambassadorial level’.⁴ Unfortunately the US did not fulfil any of the major commitments of the Agreed Framework, which was finally abrogated by the Bush administration in 1992 on the grounds that the DPRK had a clandestine heavy enriched uranium (HEU) weapons programme.⁵ In addition, though relations between the two Koreas have fluctuated over that period — and there have been two summits, to which we will return — there is still no formal ‘diplomatic relationship’ between them. Since they both regard themselves as part of a temporarily divided Korea, a formal relationship would not be the same as one between separate nation states. Nevertheless there are plenty of ways, such as having liaison offices in each other’s capital, whereby a *de facto* normal diplomatic relationship could be achieved.

The New Cold War may be considered to have two interrelated components: The global focus on the attempts of the United States to maintain hegemony, to counter the rise of China and, to a lesser but still important extent, the resurgence of Russia; then there is the regional component covering the Korean peninsula, China, and Japan. This paper will focus on Korea and specifically ROK President Lee Myung-bak and his utilisation of the Cheonan incident to advance his policy vis-à-vis the DPRK.

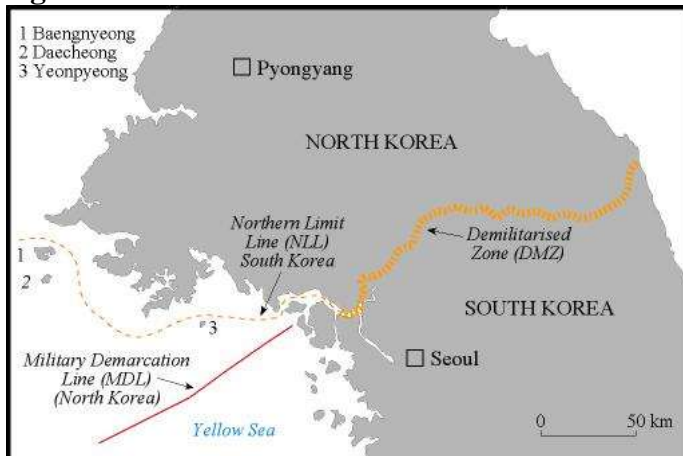
The high point in Inter-Korea relations in recent years was the summit between ROK President Roh Moo-hyun and DPRK in October 2007. That built on the previous, historic first summit between Kim Jong Il and Kim Dae-jung in June 2000.⁶ The Roh-Kim summit made various commitments to promote ‘peace and prosperity’ on the peninsula including the establishment of ‘The West Sea Special Zone for Peace and Cooperation’. This was to:

Encompass [...] Haeju area and its adjoining waters, and actively seek the designation of a common fishery zone and peace zone, construction of a special economic zone, and utilisation of the Haeju port, direct passage of civilian vessels to Haeju, and joint utilisation of the Han River estuary.⁷

The West Sea is a particularly important area because it has been the major scene of confrontation and conflict between the two Koreas. It is a major crab fishing area, coveted by fishermen from North and South (and increasingly from China). More importantly, it has a

disputed boundary. At the time of the Korean War Armistice in 1953 the United States, which had superiority at sea as well as the air, occupied islands off the south-western coast of the DPRK. In order to prevent, it was said, Syngman Rhee from reigniting the fighting the US unilaterally established a North Limit line (NLL) beyond which the ROK was not supposed to venture.⁸ It has since been revealed that US officials, including Henry Kissinger, subsequently accepted that the NLL was illegal, and was an unnecessary provocation against the DPRK, but by that time control had been handed over to the ROK government.⁹ However, it is significant to note in respect of the New Cold War that whereas in the 1970s the US tried to restrain the ROK over the NLL, by 2010 it was supporting its intransigence.¹⁰ This was to have important consequences.

Figure 1 Crucible of crisis - the West Sea and the NLL



Source: Beal, Tim. *Crisis in Korea: America, China, and the Risk of War*. London: Pluto, 2011

Roh's terms of office soon ended and he was succeeded in February 2008 by the conservative Lee Myung-bak. Roh's peaceful Northern policy was reversed and inter-Korean relations rapidly deteriorated. In particular, Lee declared that there would be no compromise over the NLL. By 2010 the West Sea became not a zone for peace and cooperation, but one of violent confrontation, culminating in an artillery exchange, the first since the Korean War, called the Yeonpyeong Incident.¹¹ This resulted in the deaths of four South Koreans on a military base on Yeonpyeong Island and an unknown number of North Koreans on the mainland. The groundwork for the artillery exchange at Yeonpyeong (spelt Yonphyong in the North) was laid by the Cheonan Incident of March that year, and its investigation.

On 26 March 2010 the ROK Patrol Combat Corvette (PCC) *Cheonan* sank in 'mysterious circumstances' near Baengnyeong Island, adjacent to the NLL, with 46 casualties. Lee Myung-bak set up an investigation team which purported to be impartial. It described itself thus:

The Joint Civilian-Military Investigation Group (JIG) conducted its investigation with 25 experts from 10 top Korean expert agencies, 22 military experts, 3 experts recommended by the National Assembly, and 24 foreign experts constituting 4 support teams from the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom and the Kingdom of Sweden.¹²

Although it was called a Civilian-Military team it was, in fact, run out of the Ministry of Defence, which issued all its statements, including the final report. One of the civilians, Shin Sang-cheol, an opposition member of the National Assembly with experience in

shipbuilding, was expelled when he challenged the official verdict and was put under investigation.¹³ The international aspect was also bogus. Neither China nor Russia were invited to join the JIG, and the DPRK request to send investigators was rejected.

In the two months prior to the release of the official interim JIG report on 20 May the South Korea press was full of rumours and stories, but most of them assumed that the Cheonan had been sunk by DPRK submarine using a Chinese torpedo or a German one.¹⁴ Evidence of a German torpedo would have been very troublesome because whereas the ROK and US Navies use German torpedoes, the DPRK does not, and it would have been very difficult to acquire one. That did not stop the military spin doctors: 'It's possible that North Korea may have used a German torpedo to disguise its attack, knowing that South Korea uses German torpedoes', the official said.¹⁵

However, there were problems with the assertion of DPRK culpability because there appeared to be no incriminating evidence. Things got to such a pass that officials began suggesting that they did not need evidence directly linking the DPRK with the sinking.¹⁶ Despite these brave words, there was clearly need for a 'smoking gun' that could make the allegation stick. Time was running out because it had been decided to release the report in time to influence the forthcoming local and gubernatorial elections.¹⁷ In the event the government was disappointed and suffered a resounding defeat, partly because of public scepticism over its investigation.¹⁸ But the government was as yet not to know that and so the search for incriminating evidence was considered vital. At the last moment it appeared that the day was saved:

Investigators have found at the 11th hour found a desperately needed smoking gun linking North Korea to the sinking of the Navy Corvette Cheonan, a government official claimed Tuesday [18th May]. Investigators apparently discovered a propeller from the torpedo that likely sank the ship in relatively good condition in waters where it sank and the serial number handwritten on it is North Korean.¹⁹

This gave the government what it wanted and the JIG report of 20 May was adamant:

Based on all such relevant facts and classified analysis, we have reached the clear conclusion that ROKS 'Cheonan' was sunk as the result of an external underwater explosion caused by a torpedo made in North Korea. The evidence points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the torpedo was fired by a North Korean submarine. There is no other plausible explanation.²⁰

However public scepticism continued to mount.²¹ One of the ways in which Lee Myung-bak attempted to tackle this was to pressure the Russians to send a team to look at the evidence assembled by the JIG. Russia has a large debt to the ROK, which is a far more important trading partner than the DPRK, so was not in a position to refuse. Presumably, Lee thought the Russians would accept the JIG verdict. He was wrong. A Russian team came to Seoul in June 2010 and from the time of its departure there were stories that its investigation had been inconclusive.²² It seems that this was a smokescreen, to save face all around. The Russian government never published its report because it would have embarrassed both Lee, and Barack Obama, who had endorsed the ROK verdict.²³ However, the Russian findings were leaked to the Seoul daily *Hankyoreh*. The Russian experts were adamant that the torpedo remnant produced by the ROK had not sunk the Cheonan. Moreover, the corrosion

suggested that it had been under water for six months, not two.²⁴ In other words, the evidence had been fabricated.

The false incrimination of the DPRK in what had been a potentially humiliating and politically damaging accident for the ROK government was more than just a cover-up. It was part of a programme to raise tension with the DPRK in hope of an incident which would precipitate a crisis and lead the way to a takeover of the North. The US government supported it because, amongst other reasons, it was consistent with their strategy of increasing confrontation with China. It was a key component in what is developing swiftly and perilously as a New Cold War.²⁵

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¹ This paper draws on my recent book Tim Beal, *Crisis in Korea: America, China, and the risk of war* (London: Pluto, 2011).

² South Korea, hereafter ROK

³ North Korea, hereafter DPRK

⁴ "Agreed Framework between the United States of America and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," *Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO)*, 21 October 1994.

⁵ Jonathan D. Pollack, "The United States, North Korea, and the end of the Agreed Framework," *Naval War College Review* LVI, no. 3 (2003). Nearly ten years later there is still no indication that such a programme exists.

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