



# Rock Bottom Sinking of Relations with North Korea

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*Since the Cheonan incident on March 26th, relations between North and South Korea have rapidly deteriorated, with the international community seemingly intent on punishing North Korea through further sanctions and disengagement. At the current juncture, however, this would be unwise as it would only push Pyongyang further into isolation. In a longer perspective, the only possibility for exerting a positive influence on North Korea is through deepened engagement and dialogue.*

North Korea has been in an isolated position for a long period and the Six-Party Talks have been deadlocked for more than a year now with little communication with North Korea. The *Cheonan* incident and the subsequent investigation, that named North Korea as the culprit, have moved the relations from bad to worse.

The South Korean government came out, in no uncertain terms on May 20, 2010 claiming that North Korea was not only guilty, but should be punished by South Korea and the international community. The responsibility for this action has been denied by North Korea, which has demanded to send their experts to analyze the material that the investigation took under consideration. This has been denied by the North Korean government and South Korea has subsequently frozen all of its remaining contacts with North Korea and demands that the international community follow suit. North Korea has argued that further military actions and sanctions are equal to a declaration of war, and that it would have to respond to such scenarios with force, even if not necessarily military force. There is no reason to doubt that North Korea would view this as a threat to the government and the country at large, and that they would take actions to sustain its political and military independence.

Needless to say, the relations are at an all time low, and there is an increasing tension between North Korea and the outside world that could develop into a threat to peace and security, not necessarily due to invasions or deliberate military action, but more likely through increasing tension and miscalculations. China is one of the few countries that have argued for a calm response and a return to the Six-Party

Talks, rather than emotional reactions in the form of increased isolation and sanctions directed at North Korea.

## Torpedoed Six-Party Talks

There seems to be no doubt that the Six-Party Talks have taken a beating that will be difficult to recover from, not least from a South Korean perspective. The Chinese position is that the continuation of the Six-Party Talks should not be linked to the *Cheonan* incident. However, this seems to be disregarded by all other parties to the Talks. The South Korean President Lee Myong-Bak has taken a hard-line position against North Korea; a position that Japan and the U.S. have followed. This is more than understandable from a domestic perspective, but from a regional and international perspective, it is unfortunate.

The ensuing isolation of North Korea (partly self selected and partly imposed) will not only decrease the possibility of understanding North Korea's actions, but also increase the unpredictability of North Korea over time. There is no doubt, even if unsatisfactory for some, that the only way to change and influence the North Korean government and the North Korean army, peacefully, is through engagement. Further tension will only decrease the possibility to influence positive development in the relations with North Korea. Threats have never had a positive impact on the North Korean government, and there is no doubt that further sanctions will only have negative effects.

Regardless of anger and hatred, there will be a need to continue to engage the North Koreans at any level possible, not least for purposes of information exchange. Out-



side of the Six-Party Talks, there are few, if any, active dialogues that could be used to function as a point of contact with the international community. If further sanctions are implemented, there is a high likelihood that the North Korean government will react by closing down embassies and by decreasing political dialogue; actions that would have a devastating effect on relations with North Korea. There is a need for both sides, at this stage, to take one step back and view the problem from a long-term perspective, where the relations post-*Cheonan* is the primary focus.

## The Effects of Sanctions

Apart from the further isolation of North Korea, there is not much that sanctions would accomplish. Decreasing economic assistance would not only destabilize North Korea. It would also increase suffering among the population at large, especially if the harvest encounters problems. This situation will not lead to regime change or popular uprising, but it will have deadly effects on the poor of North Korea.

By increasing sanctions, the international community also loses its only opportunity to influence the country. The criticism is that aid only has a small impact anyway, but the reality is that it does have some impact, which can be used to gain some positive influence. This is something that sanctions cannot achieve. Sanctions would only increase anger and bitterness against the outside world, and more importantly would be ineffective, because China will continue to sustain, and potentially increase, its assistance to North Korea.

There are always difficulties in seeing any positive effects of sanctions, even so called smart sanctions, because they hurt the population more than the leaders. In this case, it is even more difficult to see any positive effects, as the North Korean government would view further sanctions as a threat not only to themselves but also to the country at large. This would not only push the decision making into a more militaristic mode, but would also undermine the outside world's fragile relations with North Korea.

## The Need for a Golden Bridge

China is unlikely to assist in strategies that would lock a frustrated Pyongyang into a corner. The government in Beijing rightly views increased tension with, or a collapse of North Korea, as being much worse than continued commu-

nication with a neighbor that might have a nuclear capacity. China may be the only bridge North Korea has to find a way out of the current tension, and the international community would do best to assist the Chinese government in their strategy.

Engagement is necessary at this time, especially when dealing with North Korea and the already fragile communications lines that exist (or more correctly lacks). There are few states and international organizations that have the contacts and possibilities to engage North Korea on the levels that are needed, and all connections established should be utilized.

## Peace: A Causality?

The sad and unfortunate death of the South Korean sailors is a devastating blow for many families in South Korea, but the situation could get out of control, causing more havoc and tension, if this fragile line between war and peace goes astray. Peace and engagement are the two other victims that have been sacrificed in this process, and new contact points need to be established and old ones reestablished.

North Korea and the international community have roiled each other up in the last few days, and there is not a question if there is brinkmanship at play. The question is what will happen when someone blinks? The lack of communications and hottempered emotional behavior will increase the possibility for overly aggressive action. There is in no country that is interested in initiating a militarized conflict, but miscalculations and surgical military operations will be on the agenda for the future, and once these are on the table, the situation could go in any direction. Each action taken by the different parties is met with counter actions that will escalate the tension in the Korean Peninsula.

Both North and South Korea have taken all the military precautions for continued tension and there are few options available for either of them. It is very much up to the imagination and willingness of the international community to search for options to reverse this alarmingly negative development.

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