



The Korean Peninsula Ways Forward after Cheonan?

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In the aftermath of the investigation into the sinking of the Cheonan, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has become isolated to such an extent that the only interaction with the outside world will take place on the football pitch during this year's World Cup. Its relations with the outside world have gone from bad to worse in the past year and a half. As it turns out, the wrecked Six-Party Talks, in hindsight, turned out to be only the tip of the iceberg, with the repercussions from the Cheonan incident triggering a downward spiral in DPRK's external relations that has the potential to reach the lowest levels in decades.

On the positive side it seems as, at the moment, there is a stalling of the action reaction pattern that was emerging after the results of the Cheonan investigation team was made public. The emotions surrounding this incident have also been kept at bay giving involved parties time to look at the situation more dispassionately. It is apparent that the Cheonan incident steered DPRK and ROK to the brink of conflict. The incident led to a situation where the tail wagged the dog. Now the time has come to look for ways to move away from the dangerous implications that this incident had.

Regional Actors and Their Goals

After the results of the investigation of the sinking of the Cheonan, it was difficult to untangle an official policy from involved parties over the sinking from their emotional reactions, with the partial exception of the People's Republic of China (PRC). This was something that might be expected considering the deaths of the sailors and the high risks linked to the incident. However, now that this issue has somewhat receded from the frontpages, it emerges that the stated goals of actors in the region are very much the same as they were as before the Cheonan incident. For DPRK the official view is still that the realization of unification, a peace treaty with the U.S. and the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (not only in the North) remain essential.

The normalization of relations between DPRK and the

Republic of Korea (ROK), and between DPRK and the U.S. are top priorities. DPRK considers these hostile relations to be the precise cause of the problems surrounding the nuclear issue. This is similar for the U.S., who also promotes dialogue and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The difference between the U.S. and DPRK is a question of process; denuclearization or normalization first?

PRC's Korean Peninsula policy focuses on the overarching goals of peace and stability on the peninsula as well as denuclearization. PRC has, throughout the conflict, been arguing for increased communication specifically via the Six-Party Talks. PRC has argued that both denuclearization and normalization have to be pursued simultaneously; otherwise it is impossible to solve either issue. The Cheonan incident must not be allowed to dictate the whole situation as it is only a very small part of a larger challenge. However, this is not to underestimate the severity of the incident, which must be taken fully into consideration within the broader picture.

ROK has not wavered on its goal which remains the same, that is, a possible reunification of the Korean Peninsula. Sometimes, the DPRK interpretation seems to be that the most recent government in ROK seems to favor a collapse of the DPRK regime. However, like DPRK, the ROK government and a majority of South Koreans support denuclearisation and stability on the peninsula. In so doing, they promote peace and stability in the region, whether coexisting peacefully as neighbours to DPRK or



as one nation. In order for the above goals to come about, it is necessary for DPRK and ROK to promote bilateral and multilateral discussions. In fact, the bilateral contacts are in many ways a steppingstone that needs to be resumed before further multilateral discussion can take place. The bilateral contact is a goal in itself for ROK and DPRK and must occur in order to further positive development on the peninsula. However, the pending results of the Security Council Resolution after the Cheonan incident will affect the way in which ROK move forward with regards to bilateral relations with DPRK.

Denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula is secondary for Japan, as well as the cessation of DPRK exports of missile technology. The resolution of the Japanese abduction issue has top priority. Japanese media and public have been close to obsessed with the abduction issue, which has overshadowed all other issues in Japan with regards to DPRK. The abduction issue has evolved into the tail that wags the dog.

Obstacles to the Goals

There are a large number of obstacles that must be attended to before any of the goals of parties involved can be reached. Even if there are a number of issues that could be seen as the most important today, there is no guarantee that new ones will not emerge tomorrow and become the new tail that wags the dog. For DPRK, democratization of the whole Korean Peninsula, normalization of bilateral relations and denuclearization are problematic for many reasons. The most important factor is that there is no confidence between the U.S., ROK, DPRK and Japan which creates too much suspicion in order for important issues to be resolved. It seems that each time DPRK offers its hand, it is shunned by the U.S. and ROK. However, this also works the other way. There are many examples where the U.S. and ROK has tried to engage DPRK only to be ignored or criticised. The lack of trust between the actors seems, on many occasions, to give much excuse for refusing engagement. This is a serious problem since the conflict can only be dealt with through stronger engagement and dialogue, unless more violent solutions are considered.

Moreover, DPRK does not believe (or at least cannot confirm) that ROK is fully denuclearized because DPRK has never been allowed to verify the absence of nuclear

weapons in ROK. Similarly the U.S., ROK and Japan have suspected North Korea of developing nuclear weapons; something that was acknowledged both in words and later through the DPRK nuclear tests. The nuclear situation on the Korean Peninsula has produced a situation that constitutes a real threat to peace, and which needs to be resolved. DPRK has refused to denuclearize before its security has been guaranteed and before the normalization of relations with the U.S. has been accomplished. The U.S., on its side, has guaranteed that it has no interest in resolving the conflict militarily. This is something that Pyongyang doubts due to its lack of trust of the U.S. Similarly, due to their lack of trust in DPRK, the other parties involved are not ready to discuss the nuclear issue before the other issues are resolved.

To make matters worse, DPRK is suspicious of Japan and still has a bad taste in its mouth due to the history between the two countries. This suspicion is shared by ROK and the PRC, who also have historical grudges towards Japan. For Japan, on the other hand, the abduction issue forms an historical cloud on its relations with DPRK, which has made it virtually impossible for Japan to progress on any other issue.

DPRK believes that the U.S. strategy towards DPRK needs to be revised as the joint U.S.-ROK military activities undermine trust that has not even begun to exist. This is a part of the Catch 22 situation where ROK and the U.S. have to react to what they see as a blunt act of war, but at the same time DPRK will have to react to what it views as a flagrant breach of its security concerns. The lack of confidence is evident, and is not the only barrier. Even if high level politicians from the U.S. want to engage DPRK, domestic factors within the U.S., such as a lack of understanding of DPRK and fear mongering media, make it difficult to change U.S. policy towards DPRK.

For China, it is within its best interest to sustain the current DPRK government, because if the Kim Jong-il rule did collapse, this would mean great risks to security in the region, in particular the border areas. On the other hand Beijing does perceive the latest incidents as an issue of concern, not least DPRK's development of nuclear weapons. The government in Beijing will have to manoeuvre carefully so as not to appear to favor any side if it wishes to continue to function as the honest broker.

Other barriers to the stated goals are the tendency of



governments to react emotionally to incidents such as Cheonan, rather than reacting rationally. This is something that has been apparent in the recent event that brought us to the current crisis. However, it must be noted that although there were harsh emotional exchanges between ROK and DPRK, both parties have shown great restraint in their actions; something that bodes well for the future.

Getting Past the Barriers

It is now apparent that the single most important factor in getting past the barriers is to improve confidence between the parties. The one million dollar question is how? There are a number of things that can be accomplished and the more difficult they are, the more media attention they get, and the more trust they need. One solution is to focus on low hanging fruits which will allow each of the countries involved to interact positively without much resistance from policymakers and ill informed members of the general public. For example, there could be joint efforts to improve humanitarian aid, or more specifically, the U.S., Japan, and ROK could promote health care initiatives by sharing limited health care technologies including the manufacturing of medical products and also provide training for medical staff in DPRK. This could be one way to build confidence from the bottom up, all the while avoiding sensitive issues which can easily become politicized. If trust is built from the bottom up and therefore occurs naturally, it will be easier to improve the situation. This is not to say that these issues are easy but by comparison they are easier to pursue in comparison to more sensitive issues.

Within these trust building endeavors, diplomacy should be used as an instrument of dialogue rather than as a reward for positive behavior, as is now often the case. This will mean that no matter what incident, accident or deterioration in relations that occur, avenues for discussion will already be in place. Therefore, there are ways to reduce misunderstandings and avoid action reaction patterns which can lead to unwanted responses. It is vital that an avenue exists where the U.S. and DPRK and other actors involved can discuss possible roadmaps for the future. The bilateral relations between ROK and DPRK are pivotal in this process. Not much can be accomplished without their relations getting back on track again. This does not indicate that all means of communications need to be open, or even at the

highest level, but some form of communications needs to be continued.

A first step on the Korean Peninsula is to restore some form of communication. This will both help to build confidence from the bottom up as well as taking small steps in the direction of the normalization of relations. Moreover, while confidence is being built from the bottom up, confidence would need to be reinforced from the top down, where the armistice agreement could be replaced with a peace treaty; even if this cannot be done without some form of countermeasure from DPRK. This follows from the Chinese approach of pursuing goals from different paths simultaneously, each adding confidence along the way.

It must also be taken into account that DPRK is suspicious of ROK and the U.S., and does not believe that ROK does not have nuclear weapons. A verification team made up from members of DPRK and other parties could be allowed access to ROK with the aim of verifying the absence of nuclear weapons. It could even be useful to allow the DPRK side to write its own verification standards for their assignment in the South on the terms that the U.S./ROK or the UN can follow the same verification standards in the North. This would be a significant confidence builder, but so far it is too far from what can be accomplished, and a well thought through formula will need to be explored.

It would also be useful to develop an incident prevention body for Northeast Asia, which would have the possibility to slow down action reaction loops that will develop when future incidents, similar to the Cheonan, occur. This could, for an initial period, start with fishery issues, smuggling and other issues that all involved actors would have a great interest in pursuing. In the aftermath of the Cheonan incident there will be a great deal of tension and any minor incident could easily trigger new conflicts, furthering the tension on the Korean peninsula.

Even if the cathexis surrounding the Cheonan incident has somewhat dissipated, it will still need to be addressed in the future as it is too much of a major issue to be swept under the carpet. However, in the short run there is not much that indicates that this would add to a positive development on the Korean Peninsula. DPRK claims that it had nothing to do with the incident so it not useful to demand an apology and a domestic investigation. Due to the uncertainty of DPRK and China with regard to the outcome of the investigation, which was debated by the UN Security Council,



a new investigation team including DPRK representatives should be allowed to conduct another investigation in to the incident. This will allow China to be fully certain of the result, which will, in turn, have an impact on the DPRK reaction. This is not to say that this would lead to any new breakthrough, but it would at least show good faith from the ROK/U.S. side.

Looking to the Future

The future of the Korean Peninsula looks slightly grim with increased potential for mistakes and tension if the situation is allowed to continue to develop without control. What is needed in the short term are focused measures to increase trust and to allow all actors involved to look at the greater picture rather than to let each and every incident impact the situation. Effective measures and channels between governments need to be established, which will give them the tools to handle future incidents, both large (like Cheonan) and small (like fishery issues), in a way that reduces the possibility of actions and reactions that are derived quickly and emotionally. There is a need of some sort of a buffer that will increase the time between incidents and statements/actions.

In the near future, the actors involved in the Korean peninsula should identify low hanging fruits that can be agreed on. They should not let the future tension, which will no doubt arise, affect diplomatic dialogue. This could bring actors involved into a more institutionalised relationship – outside of the Six-Party Talks, or within it. It is not to reward bad behavior or accept bad behavior from either side but to make sure that military solutions are avoided and

that communication and peaceful relations are the primary tool, and that all actors are aware that this is the case. Most importantly, it is necessary to realize that this is not an overnight endeavor, as even the smallest step forward will take a lot of hard work and a lot of time. The main aim is to take small steps that will increase trust, all the while lessening tensions that arise due to incidents.

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