

Mounting Tensions and Political Confrontation on the Korean Peninsula

The Corvette «Cheonan» Incident

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The Pyeongtack naval base near Seoul played host a few days ago to a maritime memorial ceremony for and the funeral of 46 sailors of South Korea's Cheonan corvette, which sank in unclear circumstances when on a patrol mission in the Yellow Sea on March 26th 2010. The 1,200 - tonne corvette exploded for no obvious reason, broke in two and sank in a matter of minutes, which is quite unusual for this class of ship. 46 crewmembers of the 104-strong crew died in what proved the country's biggest maritime disaster ever since the Republic of Korea emerged from Korea's division into two political entities in 1948. The issue of what caused the Cheonan to sink and who is to blame for the disaster is still in the limelight.

On learning the sad news the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that this country felt for the bereaved families. President Dmitry Medvedev sent a telegram of condolence to the Republic of Korea's leaders on the occasion of a period of national mourning in South Korea.

Therefore, current attempts by certain quarters to politicize the human tragedy can only cause a lot of raised eyebrows.

Seoul calls attention to the fact that the sunken ship was on patrol in the vicinity of the DPRK's maritime border, in what is known as the North-South disputed area. It was in that water area that the two Koreas' patrol boats fought battles in 1999 and 2002.

Right after the Cheonan sank, and South Korea launched an investigation (which also involved experts from the US, the UK, Australia and Sweden), the investigators rejected the «North Korean connection» proceeding, among other things, from the relevant US space reconnaissance and acoustic intelligence data, whereby no North Korean boats had been spotted near the place of the Cheonan sinking.

But as time went on, South Korea became increasingly suspicious of its neighbour in the north. After the sunken corvette was raised from the seabed and hauled to the shore on April 24th, and examined both from without and within, the commission in charge reached the preliminary conclusion that the warship sank following an explosion under the hull bottom and that the more likely cause of the Cheonan sinking was a «non-contact external explosion». Although the conclusion is not final, the politicians and top military brass in Seoul claim that the Cheonan was sunk in a mine or torpedo attack from North Korea.

The military in Seoul seem to enjoy stating time and again that all North Korean submarines

are armed with torpedoes with 200-kilo warheads and that all information that the investigators have dug up proves that it is this kind of heavy torpedo that was used in the attack on the South Korean corvette. When countered by claims that no unusual activity of the North Korean Navy was detected by sonar in the shoal area where the tragedy occurred (the corvette sank at the depth of no more than 30 metres to 40 metres), the South Korean news media came up offhand with a still more exotic lead, alleging the use of «live torpedoes», namely underwater torpedo kamikaze pilots or acoustic mines, delivered by mini-submarines at a speed of 2 kilometres per hour, making it impossible for sonar to detect them.

Seoul rejected the DPRK's categorical assertions that Pyongyang was in no way involved in the sinking of the corvette as «below notice».

So far South Korea's leaders have refrained from officially accusing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. But broad hints are sort of unofficially being dropped that if irrefutable evidence is obtained that Pyongyang is involved in the incident after all, the question of retaliatory measures will arise, both in the context of bilateral relations between North and South Korea, and in a broader international context.

The idea is continuously instilled in public consciousness that North Korea is involved in the shipwreck of the Cheonan in some way or other. But since the claims are in no way corroborated by hard facts, one gets the impression that an unbiased investigation is not what Seoul is interested in.

Particularly alarming are the efforts to prevent the issue from being localized within the framework of bilateral inter-Korean relations.

Judging by South Korean news media reports, the Republic of Korea has already got down to considering retaliatory moves against Pyongyang, including taking the issue to the UN Security Council for discussion.

Officials in Seoul are now trying to win over Moscow and Beijing, insisting on the need for a «major international consensus» on the issue.

The tragedy around the South Korean corvette is being artificially brought into increasingly great prominence. Factors are being brought to the fore that can largely aggravate the situation around the six-party talks on Korea's denuclearization, as well as exacerbate the military and political situation on the Korean Peninsula in general. The worst of all possible options would prove Seoul's tough action against Pyongyang under the guise of retribution, to be followed by North Korea's just as tough response. Both the first and the second could bring the developments to the verge of a dangerous confrontation.

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