

## The Korean Crisis: Cui Bono?

The alleged North Korean sinking of a South Korean boat has dramatically escalated tensions between North and South Korea

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In-depth Report: [NORTH KOREA](#)

The alleged North Korean sinking of a South Korean boat in March has dramatically escalated tensions between north and south Korea. It has also caused a reversal of a planned Japanese government push to close the US military base on Okinawa. The major question in the bizarre affair is Cui Bono?

On March 26, a 1,200-ton Cheonan corvette was sunk apparently by a torpedo. Forty-six sailors died when the ship went down near the disputed Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the Yellow Sea following a sudden explosion. On May 26, a special investigative commission of South Korean military and unnamed experts from the US, Canada, Britain, and Sweden, issued their report stating that, "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."

That report has detonated an explosive rise in tensions in the entire Korean Peninsula and beyond to Japan. It has involved the Chinese and Russians in efforts at defusing the crisis. It also comes at an extremely convenient moment for the Pentagon. North Korea vehemently denies that it fired the torpedo and has accused Washington of provoking the clash. North Korea, angered by the accusations, has declared it is cutting all ties with Seoul and allegedly has ordered its 1.2- million armed forces to get ready for combat.

The United States and South Korea will hold joint military drills to practice interception of submarines "in the near future," a Pentagon spokesman has stated, calling the maneuvers "a result of the findings of this recent incident." The Obama Administration has said Pyongyang should face consequences and expressed its "unequivocal" support to South Korea. Obama has directed his military commanders to coordinate with South Korea to "ensure readiness" and "deter future aggression."

Curious proof

The key piece of evidence cited by the anonymous commission is a fragment of a torpedo propeller – somehow recovered at the final phase of the investigation – with a marking which reads "No. 1" and matches a North Korean torpedo found 7 years ago in the Yellow Sea, according to Alexander Vorontsov, Head of Korea Department of the Institute for Oriental studies of the Russian Academy of Science. He adds, "Considering that the blast was allegedly caused by a torpedo carrying a net explosive weight of 250 kg, investigators must have been remarkably lucky to find the right fragment with the marking implicating North Korea. The marking, which is the sole indication of the country of origin of the

torpedo, could of course look exactly the same on a South Korean torpedo.” [1]

The Obama White House has rushed to endorse the Commission report. The White House condemned “the act of aggression” in a statement made available almost immediately on release of the report. Even before the report was released, Obama talked to South Korean President Lee Myung-bak by phone and reportedly told Lee that all contacts with North Korea should be suspended until it becomes clear who perpetrated the attack, not exactly a calming move.

Japan, whose new Government had won election on a pledge to close the controversial US Naval base on Okinawa, suddenly capitulated and agreed with Washington to “settle” the dispute, citing the Korean crisis as grounds. Japan and the United States have now come to an agreement on the relocation of the US military base in Okinawa. Japanese Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa and US Defense Secretary Robert Gates met at the Pentagon the same day the Korean commission issued its “findings.”

To date both the Russian and Chinese governments have reacted extremely cautiously to the Seoul claims. Russian foreign minister Lavrov has stated that Moscow would carefully review pertinent materials, both those from South Korea and “from other sources.” He made clear that Moscow had reservations about the South Korean version of the incident and deemed further verification necessary. Lavrov also urged restraint on both sides, a stark contrast to the Obama Administration.

China’s position is generally similar. China’s foreign ministry spokesman described the sinking of Cheonan as a tragic incident and stated that the priority in dealing with it should be to sustain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the entire North East Asia. Beijing is calling for calm and restraint until it transpires what exactly happened. Unofficially, China criticizes the evidence at South Korea’s disposal as unconvincing, patchy, and contradictory and says it is going to assess the situation independently.

North Korea insists that the evidence was forged and is ready to send its inspectors to assess it. Pyongyang is offering to delegate representatives to review South Korea’s “evidence,” a timely and rational initiative intended to keep the inter-Korean dialog afloat during the crisis and help defuse the conflict. South Korea’s refusal to enter talks with Pyongyang would further diminish the credibility of their evidence.

In addition to the dispute over the status of the key US base on Okinawa in Japan, the US is under pressure to end its military command in South Korea and turn it over to the South Koreans in 2012. The US has 28,000 troops on the peninsula. In line with an agreement reached after the end of the 1950s Korean war, South Korean soldiers follow US military orders in case of war on the Korean Peninsula. The latest incident comes as North Korea appeared ready to resume the six-party talks on North Korea’s nuclear program, involving Russia, Japan, China, the United States and the two Koreas, stalled in April 2009 when Pyongyang pulled out of the negotiations in protest against the United Nations’ condemnation of its missile tests.

In 1999 this writer spoke with a former US Ambassador to Beijing, a career CIA officer and close friend of the Bush family. The former diplomat stated, in an incautious moment, “If North Korea did not exist, we would have to create it. They allow us to keep our fleet in the Japanese waters despite the end of the Cold War.” Perhaps the sudden heating up of Korea

tensions is also related to a longer-term Pentagon agenda for the region. If we ask Cui Bono, the clear reply is Washington.

Note

[1] Alexander Vorontsov, The Conundrum of the South Korean Corvette, RIA Novosti, Moscow, May 26, 2010.

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