Has the history of the Cheonan corvette come to an end? P.1

As reported by a number of news agencies in early November, Seoul is considering the possibility of a large-scale withdrawal of sanctions that South Korea imposed against the DPKR on May 24, 2010. This was stated during a meeting with members of the South Korean Parliament by the Minister of Unification, Ryoo Kihl-jae: "The government is studying the various options of what to do with the so-called 'May 24 measures.' The public is also divided. Some believe that it is time to repeal them. So we too are considering it..."

This set of sanctions against North Korea, which has banned virtually all inter-Korean co-operation with the exception of the industrial complex in Kaesong, was introduced in Seoul after the incident in March 2010, when the South Korean corvette "Cheonan" was sunk. In this context, we must recall the events of three years ago.

On March 27, 2010, near the island of Baengnyeong, the South Korean Navy corvette, which was taking part in the "Foal Eagle" joint military exercises with the USA, sank and broke in two. The impact was so strong that the ship broke in half, and the halves were carried several kilometers by the strong current. Of 104 crew members, 58 were rescued.

The waters of the Yellow Sea have been the scene of incidents involving small ships from both countries on several occasions. Two of the most recent incidents were in 2002 and 2009, and neither was particularly discussed in world media because the winner of both skirmishes ended up being the Southerners. In one case, they sank a North Korean boat, and in another it "retreated, enveloped in flames."

At first, the authorities of the Republic of Korea took a rather cautious approach and declared that no North Korean ships capable of sinking the corvette were found in the area of the tragedy and statements about a possible armed clash have no foundation. Media attention has focused on the rescue operations because the tragedy evoked such strong public outcry. Relatives of the dead sailors nearly tore the saved captain to pieces, asking why he is alive, when our children died. The fact that among the victims there was, for some reason, not a single officer, added fuel to the fire.

However, the right-wing conservative media and representatives of this faction in military circles almost immediately started a campaign blaming the North for this. It came down to openly provocative disinformation, when an NGO representative said that he received a call from a North Korean officer of high rank and a unionist sympathizer, who stated that he all but pulled the strings for Kim Jong-il, when he signed the order for the hero-submariners. Another newspaper tried to run a saboteur bombers version, after all, in the area of the drills, and even on the territory constantly illuminated by U.S. intelligence satellites, no trace of a North Korean submarine was ever really detected.

Leftists also returned the favor, but their disinformation (of about the same degree of validity) spoke of the "extraordinary situation on-board the corvette". Japanese tabloids and some leftist publications in Russia even publicized a version that sounded just like the rumors that circulated here around the loss of the "Kursk" submarine: during drills, the corvette was sunk by an American submarine, but the government is hiding this.
On April 16, 2010, Yoon Doc Yong, the head of the commission to ascertain the causes of the disaster, said that "the probable cause of the sinking of the Cheonan is an external explosion". Throughout the wider audience, controversy spread over exactly how the corvette was destroyed: by a mine or a torpedo. At that time in the region, there were a fair number of mines laid there both from the time of the Korean War, and later, during military rule. More recently, these mines have been pulled out, but is that all?

On April 22, Defense Minister Kim Tae-young suggested that the cause of the explosion that destroyed the "Cheonan" was one of these mines, which was placed by the South Korean military in the seventies to protect Baengnyeong island from invasion by the North Korean navy.

On May 7, 2010, the International Commission (3 representatives from Australia, 8 from the U.S., 4 from Sweden and the UK) stated that the corvette was "destroyed by a torpedo made in Germany." However, it quickly became known that the torpedoes with which South Korean submarines are equipped just so happen to be made in Germany. This theory was then corrected as conjecture, and it was clarified that the point is not the exact type of torpedo, but the type of explosive used in the torpedoes of other countries.

The commission for investigation has continued to work, but the date of the investigation's final announcement of results has been postponed several times. First it was to be held in April, then on May 9 (but just then the "German question" was raised), then the 20th ... It felt like South Korea was actively looking for the "central piece of evidence." And there, it seems as if they found it. A civilian dredging vessel (because of the deep mud it is difficult to search any other way, and an attempt to use divers resulted in the accidental death of one of them) pulled fragments of a torpedo from the area, which were formally presented as fundamental evidence that the sinking of the corvette was, after all, the work of the DPRK.

However, this evidence still raises a lot of questions. The fragments, especially the propeller and tail section, were so covered with shells and corroded that many wonder how the torpedo could accumulate such growth over such a short period of time. Judging by the rust, the fragments of the torpedo had been in the water for many years, not just a month. In addition, the pieces submitted resembled not only a North Korean torpedo design, but also the aforementioned South Korean/German version, and altogether (according to the official statement, due to an error by technical staff), the design "fitting" the fragments was figured out only by the second or third time.

The decisive piece of evidence was announced as "the North Korean mark/stamp", or more precisely, Inscription No. 1, which was written on one of the parts with a purple marker. Naturally, this gave rise to a new wave of doubt both within South Korea and outside of it, to the extent that the latest model of iPhones were "photoshopped" with a similar inscription: "decisive proof that the iPhone was made in North Korea." In reality, the commission's findings were based solely on an arbitrary interpretation of the ownership of the torpedo fragments, judging only by its external markings, without carrying out an open typological examination.

One member of the commission, Shin Sang-cheol, even wrote an open letter expressing his disagreement and a fairly detailed analysis of his reasons. In his opinion, based on tactical maps of the area, the corvette ran aground. In addition, Shin hinted at the fabrication of evidence, and said that the inscription "No. 1" seemed to have been made in South Korea.

Other arguments made by dissenters point out that none of the survivors had sustained injuries characteristic of the effects of a torpedo attack, in addition to points about the overall context. The corvette, specifically designed to hunt enemy submarines, was involved in joint US-South Korean military drills. It is strange that in the close-combat conditions, and low (15-20 m) depths in the area of the tragedy, its crew not only did not find an enemy ship, but also could not detect any torpedo firing. In such a case, the enemy boat as described above had to overtake the ASW barrier deployed near the border, make its way unnoticed into the waters off the island of Baengnyeong teeming with enemy ships, submarines and aircraft, then discreetly attack the corvette, sink it with the very first torpedo, and then safely leave, avoiding other anti-submarine ships and helicopters. But if an old submarine could sink the newest corvette, then either South Korea's Navy is a blatant mess, or North Korea, under harsh sanctions, somehow miraculously acquired sophisticated weapons.

However, according to several naval experts with whom the author spoke, although the evidence of the official version was completely transparent, doubting them publicly soon became dangerous. The military appealed to the prosecutor's office to charge Shin Sang-cheol with "spreading false information and damaging the authority of the armed forces." The prosecutor's office summoned the secretary of unification strategy and security from the former president's administration, Pak Song Wong, for questioning, who claims that the South Korean government is concealing a wealth of information about the "Cheonan" incident. And when a very well-known Korean NGO
delivered a letter to the ambassadors of the member countries of the UN Security Council containing a few questions about the outcome of the investigation, it was threatened with prosecution in accordance with the "Law on National Security." The justification is simple: questions about the outcome of the investigation undermine the diplomatic efforts of the Republic of Korea, which is looking to punish Pyongyang. These questions therefore benefit the enemy, that is, the North, and for this the "the National Security Law" stipulates prison.

Although the questions themselves were, according to the official version, called crimes against the state, representatives of the secret services reported on hundreds of North Korean hackers who steal personal data on South Korean citizens, and then write "irresponsible anti-government statements" in the name of law-abiding students and housewives. The latter is important as far as the fact that there is no anonymous registration at forums in the Republic of Korea; each participant uses his own identification card.

Note that the Northerners were behaving unusually. Generally, throughout all the past clashes in the disputed area of the Yellow Sea, they almost immediately began to denounce South Korean war provocateurs and push their own, alternate version of what really happened. This time they were silent, snapping back with flowery and pretentious traditional rhetoric only in response to direct accusations pronounced by representatives of South Korean authorities.

However, on May 24, 2010, on national television Lee Myung-bak addressed the nation and solemnly named the culprit: "It was North Korea." It turns out that, after all, the corvette was sunk by a mini-submarine, capable of carrying heavy torpedoes and operating in shallow waters. The question of how it managed to remain undetected during the exercise and sink a vessel intended for combating enemy submarines remained open, but that no longer bothered anyone.

Lee Myung-bak's statement ran a close second to the rhetoric of the angry North Korean rebuke, but it started to become clear to experts that what's important is not who actually sank the ill-fated corvette, but who is named responsible for the tragedy: "We will take firm actions against the North. On the basis of international cooperation, we will make the North admit their actions and once again become a responsible member of the world community." Naturally, Lee Myung-bak stated that the country will address the UN Security Council to punish North Korea, and that from that moment on any provocation will be dealt a strict response.

(To be continued...)

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