Has the history of the Cheonan corvette come to an end? P.2

The sinking of the corvette and the national grief that accompanied it virtually gave Lee Myung-bak a reason to openly void all agreements made at summits in the years 2000 and 2007. The tendency to cancel agreements reached at the 2007 summit was apparent from the very start of Lee’s governance, but it’s one thing to openly violate a promise, even one given by a former president, and another thing to give an adequate response to an armed provocation. Sanctions were part of that response, which are now being called into question.

After that, the reaction of the DPRK already fit the typical pattern: “the incident of the destruction of the ‘Cheonan’ is nothing but the result of deliberate inhuman ‘conspiracy’ and ‘forgery’ fabricated by the South Korean traitorous clique to achieve political and military objectives.” Representatives of the Republic of Korea were once again expelled from Kaesong, Red Cross contacts were stopped at the military demarcation line between North and South where negotiations are held in Panmunjom; and air and sea space were closed to aircraft and boats in South Korea.

But Lee Myung-bak went on to play the corvette card both in foreign and domestic policy, especially seeing as the elections for provincial authorities were nearing, and the opposition could be severely pressured against the backdrop of this national tragedy: here you were talking about inter-Korean dialogue, and these scoundrels are killing our guys! At the same time, Lee carried out a whole series of diplomatic motions, including a complaint to the Security Council, but which was unequivocally supported only by Japan and in part by the U.S.. Even the statements made by Secretary of State Clinton were marked by a lower level of intensity than they might have been had this happened under the Republicans. Russia and China have taken a watchful wait-and-see position. Representatives of Beijing have stated that China will not support the perpetrator of the incident, whoever it is, and President Dmitry Medvedev sent a group of experts to Seoul to conduct an independent investigation. Their report is still classified, although related disinformation has occasionally appeared in the media. According to one piece, the corvette’s propeller could have gotten wrapped up in a fishing net, which pulled out an old torpedo lying on the seabed since the Korean War.

All in all, despite the efforts of the Republic of Korea and its “support group”, the UN Security Council’s statement about “Cheonan" contained no direct charges against the DPRK. In essence, it expressed sympathy for the very fact of the tragedy and the hope that it will not happen again.

Nevertheless, up until the first half of 2011, the South's position in response to DPRK initiatives came down to "First: apologize for ‘Cheonan', then for everything else." It soon became dangerous to doubt the official version and the opposition transferred its criticism to "how could something like this happen." Especially since the picture of army carelessness uncovered during the investigation turned out to be very telling, and certain high-profile cases even echoed through the Russian press.

Lee responded to this by increasing combat training, which followed two objectives: to seriously increase the South Korean army's level of preparedness and actively play with North Korea's nerves: military exercises of varying intensity were carried out virtually every month, predominantly in close proximity to the North Korean border.

The natural result of this policy is evidenced by the next notorious incident, but before describing it we’ll step back and express the author's personal view on the causes of the corvette's destruction.
Unfortunately, the more time that separates us from the moment of the tragedy, the less chance we have to understand the situation, even among the most competent experts. The fast current and the thick layer of mud characteristic of the disaster area, in which it is difficult to find anything, the corporatism of the South Korean army, which does not like to wash its dirty linen in public and the political bias of the issue (the President has already spoken, how can he lie to the nation?) will all seriously interfere with the establishment of the truth. Therefore the question of the perpetrator has now become “a matter of faith,” in which supporters of each point of view are already convinced of their rightness and don’t give into persuasion easily.

To me personally, it seems that we should not necessarily look for malice or provocation where an accident might occur as a result of some technical or human error. This is indirectly demonstrated by the fact that even before the Commission of Inquiry's announcement, a number of measures aimed at optimizing the management, monitoring, detection, inspection for readiness, etc. were held in the armed forces of the Republic of Korea. This is also indicated by the significant amount of data on carelessness in the South Korean army; several high-profile scandals were published by various media outlets.

Another thing is that after this stirring to action, a whole set of particular defects inherent in bureaucracy intervene, such as the desire to cover up weaknesses and to wash out dirty linen in public only as a last resort, as well as the "foolish initiative" option, acted out by the lower or middle echelon without informing their superiors about it. However, any "independent initiative" which ends in failure creates a number of problems for said superiors. First, recognizing it means acknowledging incompetence and an inability to control one’s subordinates. Second, even if the initiative were recognized, and “the guilty bear their deserved punishment,” this explanation usually isn't usually credited, considering that the authorities, who compromised themselves, simply found a scapegoat.

Because of this, leadership is often forced to show corporate solidarity, suppressing the unpleasant truth. More often, the investigation is simply transferred to another track before someone suspects something. If the situation is coupled with a critical political order, then the guilty can be dealt with privately, and the public will be shown a beautiful and believable, but not truthful, version. So here, an error or internaval carelessness was passed off as North Korean machinations as soon as something turned up that could be spun as lethal evidence.

In this case, it is understandable why up until a certain time South Korean leadership, taking a sensible pause, held with the prosecutors of the DPRK. The elections for local authorities were nearing, and to acknowledge trouble in the Navy just prior to that was impossible, and at the same time, it provided the chance to kill several birds with one stone.

And so, against the backdrop of large-scale military exercises conducted by the South Korean Army to play with North Korea's nerves, and in which up to 70 thousand people took part, on November 23, 2010 the North Korean artillery opened fire on the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong. As a result of the bombardment, two marines and two civilians were killed, and at least 18 people were injured.

The first artillery skirmish between the Koreas since the 1970s, some experts were quick to call it "the most serious incident" seemingly since the Korean War. Although it is more accurately described as the most serious incident in the past two decades: the North Korean commando raid on Seoul in 1968, the murder of U.S. officers in the demilitarized zone in 1976, or an attempt on the South Korean dictator Chun Doo-hwan in 1981 exacerbated the situation much more.

Against the backdrop of the new round of exacerbation, two moments slipped, as it were, from the majority of media attention.

The first is a telephone message from the North to the South with a protest and a question of whether this is all preparation for an invasion: recall that 70 thousand is the strength of first-tier of the North Korean army, which launched a military action 60 years ago, and the active participation of the marines could be taken for landing practice drills. In addition, large-scale maneuvers in the border area of North Korea are traditionally perceived as a rehearsal or a cover for armed invasion of their territory. Southerners, however, responded in the manner of: "in our territorial waters, we do what we want."

The second is South Korea's acknowledgement that gunnery training was conducted in the course of the drills, directed toward the area from which North Korea's blow was later struck. This is important, since in the following explanations, their actions are put forward as a response to enemy provocation. Southerners claim that they shot not directly north, toward the DPRK, but to the west, but if you look at the border in the area, this direction, generally speaking, is also "toward the enemy." A couple of years later, it was leaked to the press that for the sake of courage
someone gave the order to fire on the disputed waters that North Korea claims as its own, simply out of a desire "to hussar" (put on airs) and tease the opponent, who unexpectedly fell for the provocation, and responded inadequately. Despite the fact that from a formal point of view the scale of the conflict was greater (the territory of the country was bombarded, civilians were killed) the Republic of Korea did not open a discussion of this incident at the UN Security Council. And this may mean that during a comprehensive investigation, facts could emerge, that would make the South's position even more controversial and vulnerable than in the history of the corvette, when the UN Security Council did not name Pyongyang as the perpetrator of the incident.

For example, one may recall not only the incidents involving the North, but also a sufficient number of strange events occurring at that time in the South, whether it be the incident occurring five days later in Paju, when from the South Korea side a howitzer was "unintentionally discharged", and whose shell exploded on the South Korean half of the DMZ, miraculously just short of the North, or the bombardment of a South Korean plane by South Korean marines, when it was taken for a North Korean military freighter.

Tension was high: a former director of U.S. National Intelligence Dennis Blair even stated that South Korea is preparing to conduct a military operation against its northern neighbor, and some paleoconservatives openly started talking about the South's need to acquire nuclear weapons as the only way to counter North Korea. "At a time when the world community is helpless in the face of North Korea's nuclear weapons, the leadership of the Republic of Korea should summon the courage and wisdom to convince the public at home and abroad that Pyongyang will only be able to properly negotiate in the case of Seoul's development of its own nuclear weapons. At the same time, South Korea should make it clear that it is not interested in possessing nuclear weapons for any other purposes."

So on December 18-21, 2010, when South Korea was about to conduct gunnery training in the Yellow Sea, North Korea warned that in response to the South Korean military artillery firing it would deal an even more severe blow to southerners than in November. Concerned about the escalation of tensions, Russia convened a meeting of the UN Security Council. And although the parties were unable to agree even on the level of a joint statement, tensions have eased slightly, and the maneuvers have become less demonstrative.

It is difficult to say if that was the time that the military lobby began to spin politicians. But the current situation in the Republic of Korea shows fairly well how certain groups exploit human misery and cry out for retribution, despite the fact that the true cause of the tragedy is still not clear.

March 26, 2013 was the third anniversary of the ship's destruction. The ceremony held at the National Cemetery in Daejeon, was attended by about five thousand people, including the president of the Republic of Korea, Park Geun-hye, government members, relatives, friends and colleagues of the victims, and ordinary citizens who came to honor the memory of the dead sailors. As part of the ceremony, flowers were laid out, ceremonial incense was lit, and a video was shown.

The South Korean armed forces declared March 26 the "Day of Retribution." In all parts of the Navy, rallies were held in which the participants expressed strong support for increasing combat readiness. In the Yellow Sea, large-scale naval maneuvers involving patrol ships were conducted.

However, six months have passed, and now we're hearing statements of a completely different kind. Earlier, representatives of South Korea stated that the lifting of sanctions is only possible once the DPRK takes responsibility for the incident with the "Cheonan" and guarantees that nothing like this will happen in the future. But the Minister's statements show that, perhaps the government of the South is ready to soften its stance on this issue and make an important step forward in inter-Korean dialogue.

Moreover, if you believe the report published by the Hyundai Research Institute, analyzing the economic effect of the "actions of May 24," the South has suffered four times more damage from the sanctions than the North. Rossiyskaya Gazeta cites the following data: if the losses for South Korea's economy are estimated at 9.4 trillion won (8.84 billion dollars), then the DPRK has "only" suffered 2.4 trillion. Included in the South's losses are the damage from the collapse of trade with the North (4.59 trillion won), loss of revenue from the ban on the expansion of the Kaesong industrial park (3.44 trillion won), the damage from the termination of tourist trips to Mount Kumgang (1.25 trillion won) and to the city of Kaesong (35 billion won), as well as the fact that South Korean aircraft have to
fly around the airspace of North Korea (about 100 billion won). If you count all of the indirect losses to the South Korean economy, then the overall damage, estimated by Hyundai economists, amounts to 27.2 trillion won.

So perhaps the new President of the Republic of Korea should strengthen the objectivist approach and appeal to Russian leadership to declassify the investigation of the "Cheonan's" destruction, conducted by Russian experts. It seems that the very fact that these materials were not made public earlier shows that there are significant differences between the conclusions drawn by the Russians and the so-called official version, in which there are a number of weak points. In theory, this could allow Park Geun-hye to crush the military lobby, which currently opposes her at the moment, and take a step forward in the development of inter-Korean dialogue. And at the same time, we will all get the chance to finally learn the truth of what happened three years ago, and learn the final lessons from this story.

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