

## Walking the line

*By Dr. John Bruni*

**O**n the 26<sup>th</sup> of March 2010, in the ‘Year of the Tiger’, the South Korean ship ROKS Cheonan exploded, tearing the corvette apart and spilling all 104 sailors into the icy Yellow Sea. Forty-six sailors died, making it the worst South Korean (RoK – South Korea) loss of military personnel since the Korean War (1950-53).

The Cheonan had been patrolling waters



surrounding the contested Baengnyeong Island, a place known to be sensitive to North Korea’s (DPRK’s – the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) marine resources. Initially, there was speculation in the South Korean and international media that the explosion was caused by a deliberate act of North Korean aggression, or perhaps a misplaced North Korean sea mine.

An international team of investigators studied the wreckage of the Cheonan and concluded that the corvette had been blown out of the water by a North Korean torpedo, inferring an attack by a North Korean submarine.

Predictably, Pyongyang stridently denied any wrongdoing.

Nonetheless, in most parts of the world such an overt attack would be considered an act of war, but considering that no one wants a war on the Korean peninsula, Seoul and Washington have been careful not to unduly inflame the political rhetoric. Yes, there has been mention of some form of retribution against the North, but considering that much of the North Korean military is on a hair-trigger alert and that the country’s leaders, when cornered, always bring out the ‘mutually assured destruction’ (MAD) card, it is good diplomacy to let some things pass in the hope that tensions settle and people can get back to business.

However, when examining the Cheonan Incident one can’t help but think that a drama of Shakespearean proportion is heading our way courtesy of the capricious North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-Il and his coterie of equally mercurial advisors and supporters. But before we speculate where all this might be heading, we need to pause and examine a little bit of history.

The Korean War, a ghastly exercise in Soviet, American and Chinese ‘realpolitik’, took place in the early part of the Cold War and lasted three terrible years.

The war was a brutal regional conflict that, like that later and more widely celebrated conflict, the Vietnam War, threatened to turn Asia into the vortex of a global nuclear war between the then superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union.

Self-preservation of Soviet and American interests allowed both these major players to limit the scope of the Korean War to the Korean peninsula, and, in spite of the military intervention of Chinese forces on the side of the North Koreans in October 1950, the Truman administration did not allow itself to be provoked into pushing the war into China – a move that might very well have invited the USSR to intervene to save their then Chinese allies and ideological fellow-travellers.

By the time the war ended in July 1953, North Korea had been pummelled into the ground; its industries razed; its farm land burnt and violated by unexploded bombs, mines and artillery shells. A succession of North Korean and Chinese assaults during the war also heavily damaged the South, its capital Seoul and its surrounding countryside. Overall, the military casualty figure estimates for this war reads as follows:

- North Korean – over 200,000 dead, over 300,000 wounded, and approximately 120,000 Missing-In-Action (MIA)/Prisoners of War (POW)
- South Korean – over 130,000 dead, over 400,000 wounded, and approximately 32,000 MIA/POW
- Chinese – over 300,000 dead, over 350,000 wounded and approximately 21,000 MIA/POW
- UN Coalition – over 40,000 dead, over 99,000 wounded and approximately 17,000 MIA/POW

With some 2.5 million civilians having been killed on both sides of the infamous ‘38<sup>th</sup> Parallel’ (the technical border between North and South Korea before the outbreak of hostilities), what was then loosely termed a ‘limited war’ by Cold War strategists, was in actual fact a nasty, violent ‘free for all’. A free for all that ended in a stalemate.

Interestingly, the war ended in an armistice (and apart from a ‘Basic Agreement’ ending hostilities between the DPRK and the RoK in 1991), there was no peace-treaty between North Korea and the United States. This meant that communist North Korean leaders sitting in their capital Pyongyang had to find a way to defend

their regime from the possibility of South Korean/US subterfuge and even invasion. During the Cold War, this was not difficult. The Kremlin was happy to lend a hand in support of Kim Il-Sung, and his son and successor, Kim Jong-Il. This support provided Moscow a useful strategic pawn with which to intimidate Washington, or so the logic went.

From 1953-91 Soviet economic, technical and military assistance proved vital in keeping the North Korean leadership in place. Chinese support also helped Pyongyang a great deal. The Chinese policy of ‘strategic ambiguity’, i.e., holding out the vague possibility of again intervening to save North Korea should the South Koreans and or the US start a war on the peninsula (why this might be so was never fully explained), kept a strategic tension on both sides of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel which remains to this day.

North Korea was for all intents and purposes an economic and social basket case. Furthermore, its aggressive but highly calculated ‘limited offensive’ posture and its investment in an autarkic (self-sustaining and independent) military infrastructure, together with a militarized society, meant that over time, North Korea developed a capacity to threaten South Korean and US forces stationed in the South without recourse to external allies.

As post-war North Korea rebuilt itself by applying a localised model of a communist ‘command economy’, topped up by Soviet and Chinese aid grants, it eventually grew into a prickly ally for Moscow and Beijing. The notion that North Korea would independently launch another war of unification against the South was speculated freely among Western observers, and those in the corridors of power in Moscow and Beijing.

Suspensions of unrestrained DPRK hostility were confirmed a number of times during the Cold War. There were the attempted assassinations of South Korean presidents by North Korean agents/sympathizers; the 1983 Rangoon (Burma) bombing by DPRK agents which killed 21 people, including 4 visiting RoK cabinet ministers; the 1987 bombing of South Korean flight KAL 858 which resulted in the killing of 115 people; a spate of naval clashes along the poorly demarcated maritime border and not to mention the North Korean Army penetrations of the demilitarized zone (DMZ). All these incidents seemed to underscore the maleficence of North Korea and its leadership. However, during the Cold War, when push came to shove, Moscow could always rein in the North Koreans by threatening to pull the plug on its aid. Post-1991, this threat no longer applies.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and aid shipments to Pyongyang ended, the North

Korean leadership used its last real trump card, 'full-scale' belligerence, to blackmail neighbouring South Korea and the US into economic concessions.

By threatening full-scale war every time the RoK, Japan and or the US curtail DPRK interests, international attention is focussed on how to de-escalate the crisis. The prospects of war are far too traumatic to contemplate.

During the 1990s, North Korea cannibalized the remainder of its economy to build-up its underground fortifications adjacent to the DMZ, create a small nuclear arsenal (October 2006) and increase its stocks of artillery and ballistic missiles. This, together with the proximity of the 1 million-strong North Korean Army along the DMZ (which is only 34 kilometres from the South Korean capital at its closest point) is considered a credible threat to the survival of the RoK, as well as to Japanese and American strategic interests in northeast Asia.

As for China, it is no longer a reliable or even desirable ally for the DPRK because now there are more things that divide Beijing from Pyongyang. For instance, China, while a growing international player, is not interested in overthrowing the established global balance of power. It might want to change aspects of it to accommodate Chinese interests, but destroying it outright would destroy the very foundations of

China's successful economy. Consequently China wants stability between the Koreans. During the 1990s when the DPRK experienced massive crop failure and famine, North Korean refugees streamed into China causing China's first major refugee crisis. Should the DPRK implode as a consequence of war or catastrophic internal upheaval, the likelihood of tens of thousands of North Koreans fleeing to China cannot be discounted.

The North Korean leadership on the other hand, while fighting to survive in isolation from the international community, seeks to exploit any perceived weakness in the US position in Korea; the US position in Japan; Japan's incapacity to more aggressively assert its interests in Asia, and China's fear of a renewed Korean refugee crisis.

For Pyongyang, now is the perfect time to make a move.

American forces are bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan. The poor shape of the American and global economies are forcing countries to reassess government spending, including spending on their militaries. As austerity measures begin to bite around the world, Pyongyang might conclude that ramping up pressure on the peninsula will net it strategic and perhaps even economic gains. After all, North Korea is not part of the global economy and needs to poach what it can by the threat of force

alone. This is a stark fact. Presently North Korea has cut all ties to the South and the South has launched a psychological warfare (propaganda) offensive against the North. Things are looking edgy indeed.

The DPRK's economy is effectively non-existent and its technological base, while functional, is not sophisticated. The time of continued reliance on a weak international response to its bellicose diplomatic over-reactions and tactical provocations may be waning. We need to ask therefore, if the DPRK crosses 'a line', will the RoK together with its American ally choose more robust engagement with the North Koreans? Would a military strike against specific targets within the North actually elicit a massive DPRK counter-attack as long feared?

Let us for a moment reflect on what a possible outcome of a major war on the Korean peninsula would be like.

Lacking the technological wherewithal to actually win a war against the South, Northern military leaders probably calculate with some certainty that the damage they can inflict on the South, and especially on US forces based there, would be significant.

A war on the Korean peninsula would plunge Asia into a major economic meltdown with

global ramifications. While North Korea would cease to exist, so would the South. A major war would unleash extraordinary political forces within Korea. It may result in the creation of a new, more powerful Korean state stretching from the Yalu River in the north to the tip of Pusan in the south. In time, the tough, poor but fanatically disciplined North Koreans might even be mythologised. Their stout resistance against all odds could be seen to have acted as the catalyst to unification, the withdrawal of American forces and the flag-bearer of a new Korean nationalism.

But this scenario is premised on the eventuality that this present crisis or some future inter-Korean crisis sparks a war. No doubt American, Chinese, Japanese and South Korean diplomats are currently scrambling to find a solution to this ongoing uncertainty. But as Kim Jong-Il is nearing the end of his physical and political life, the questions that should be asked are: can the dying state of North Korea reinvent itself? Does it even want to? Or, as in some Shakespearean final act, does Kim seek to find immortality by sacrificing the state he inherited from his father in the hope that a new united Korea can rise from the ashes?

\*\*\*

**Image of 'raising' the ROKS Cheonan:**  
<http://joongangdaily.joins.com/> (Accessed: 28/05/2010)