

Rising Tensions on the Korean Peninsula: The Sinking of the Cheonan, Reviewing the Evidence



North Korean Sang-O class coastal submarine

by Gregory Elich / Global Research — *Did a North Korean submarine fire a torpedo at the Cheonan? It seems improbable. If it was a torpedo that sank the Cheonan, then it certainly was not the one that the JIG put on display. It would have been foolhardy for the North Korean government to order such a strike. It had nothing to gain, and absolutely everything to lose by such an act. It may be that a rogue*

commander ordered the attack as revenge for an incident near Daecheong Island the previous November, when South Korean ships chased a North Korean patrol boat, firing on it and sending it up in flames, thereby causing the deaths of several sailors. That attack, incidentally, failed to elicit any concern whatsoever from the same U.S. officials who so sternly pontificate on the unacceptability of allowing the sinking of Cheonan to go unpunished.

Much has been written about the sinking of the South Korean corvette Cheonan, and the evidence is widely regarded as clearly pointing to North Korean culpability. In the Western press, the case has generally been presented as solid and irrefutable. The tragedy is seen as one more example of North Korean perfidy. Yet, doubts persist.

Following the sinking of the corvette Cheonan on March 26, the government of South Korea established the Joint Military-Civilian Investigation Group (JIG) to investigate and determine the cause of the sinking. Two months later, on May 20, the group completed its report and issued a press release outlining its conclusions. In its press release, the JIG firmly announced, “The evidence points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the torpedo was fired by a North Korean submarine. There is no other plausible explanation.”

The JIG concluded that the Cheonan was sunk by a “shockwave and bubble effect” from an explosion set off by a homing torpedo, which caused “significant upward bending” of the center keel. A bubble jet effect is created when an explosion takes place underwater and creates a dramatic change in pressure, resulting in the formation of a strong column of water that strikes its target with great power. In addition to the upward bending of the stern and bow sections at the point of severance, the JIG found “water pressure and bubble effects” on the bottom of the

hull, and the ship's wires had been cut with no sign of heat.

Furthermore, survivors reported "that they heard a near-simultaneous explosion once or twice," water splashed on the face of a sailor at the port-side, and a sentry stationed on the shore observed a "pillar of white flash" rising about 100 meters for two to three seconds. No fragmentation or burn injuries were found on the bodies of the sailors who were killed, and seismic waves were detected at eleven stations. (1)

All of this evidence is consistent with the JIG's conclusion that a shockwave and bubble jet effect from a exploding torpedo was the cause of Cheonan's sinking. (2) As further damning evidence, components of a torpedo were brought up by a two fishing trawlers in the proximity of the site of the sinking. The components appeared to match that of a diagram the South Korean military had in its possession of the North Korean CHT-02D torpedo. Inside the propulsion system of the torpedo were written with blue magic marker ink in Hangul characters "1 beon" (number 1). This was similar to a North Korean training torpedo that the South Korean Navy had obtained seven years before, in which there was written "4 ho" (unit 4). According to one expert on North Korea, "North Korea does not frequently use the term beon." (3) However, it cannot be said that infrequent usage rules out the possibility.

The evidence appeared solid, yet from the first it was apparent that there was a troubling lack of transparency in the JIG's approach, typified by the secrecy surrounding the investigation. The report itself remains concealed, and the public is expected to accept on faith that the JIG's conclusions and brief explanations are backed by the evidence.

Various alternative causes of the sinking were briefly addressed by the South Korean Ministry of Defense. (4) The possibility of a floating contact mine was rightly dismissed due to the lack of signs of a contact explosion. However, most modern non-contact mines rely on creating a shockwave and bubble jet effect to sink ships. In general, the Ministry of Defense considers the possibility of a sea mine having caused the explosion as "unlikely," given the maritime conditions and fast currents in the shallow waters around Baengnyeong Island where the Cheonan sank. Moored mines are rarely used in deeper waters, where currents and swells are stronger than they are closer to shore. According to Retired Rear Admiral Chris Bennet of the South African Navy, "Their major use is therefore limited almost exclusively to coastal or territorial waters." (5) In other words, it is in areas such as around Baengnyeong Island where moored mines are best suited. But the South

Korean Navy's "detailed search" of the seabed failed to locate the anchor that a moored mine would have needed. No details were given to indicate the extent of the search beyond that one phrase.

Bottom mines rest on the seabed and are ideally suited for deployment in shallow waters, but the JIG dismissed the possibility of such a mine striking the Cheonan because it "cannot split a ship when detonated at a depth of 47 meters." That was the depth of water at the location where the torpedo components were retrieved. However, when it sank, the Cheonan had been sailing in waters that were no deeper than 30 to 40 meters. (6) According to the Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law, "bottom mines tend to work in relatively shallow water (less than 164 feet)." That translates into just under 50 meters, well within the range necessary to have struck the Cheonan. (7) However, the JIG calculates the distance of the explosion as just three meters from the Cheonan's gas turbine engine. (8) If the JIG's calculation of the explosion distance is correct, then that would preclude the possibility of a bottom mine.

There is another type of mine, one which the JIG did not address in its summary of findings. That is the rising mine, which is similar to a bottom mine in that it sits on the seabed. Where it differs is that it contains an acoustic sensor, and when a ship approaches, the mine is programmed to float upwards and explode at a set distance beneath the hull. In essence, the result would be the same as a non-contact torpedo, creating a bubble jet effect. In shallow water, such mines tend not to be moored, hence there would be no anchor. (9) There is also the torpedo mine, which when detecting an approaching ship, opens up and fires a torpedo at its target. (10) This possibility, too, was not mentioned in the JIG's summary.

The centerpiece of the case against North Korea is without doubt the torpedo fragments retrieved by trawlers. At the JIG press conference announcing the results of its investigation, a diagram said to be that of the CHT-02D was displayed. It was not until over one month later, after critics had pointed to discrepancies between the diagram and the torpedo fragments, that the JIG admitted that it had shown a diagram of the wrong torpedo, the PT-97W. This was said to have been caused by a "mix-up by a staff member while preparing for the presentation." (11) That such a mistake could be made is indicative of a careless attitude concerning evidence.

This was not the only point of confusion. One day before the JIG's final results were announced, a Korean government official was quoted as saying that investigators had determined that North Korea sank the Cheonan with a Chinese-made torpedo, as Chinese characters were written on the torpedo fragments collected from the site.

It was said that the torpedo was thought to be a YU-3G, the type North Korea had imported from China more than twenty years ago. (12) One day later, nothing more was said of the matter, and now it was claimed that the torpedo fragments originated from a North Korean-built CHT-02D, with a Korean word written in blue ink. It is true that at one time Hanja (Chinese) characters were incorporated into general usage in Korea, but that practice has long since passed, and not since 1949 have they been used in North Korea. (13) Because the JIG's report remains shrouded in secrecy, it is impossible to know whether or not Chinese characters were truly found on torpedo fragments. If so, that would be at variance with a report that U.S. intelligence had traced the propulsion system on the found torpedo to its manufacture two years ago at a North Korean factory. (14)

It should also be mentioned that the information South Korea had on the CHT-02D was obtained from an export catalogue, as the weapon is among those that North Korea sells abroad. In other words, the torpedo apparently has buyers, and therefore the source of manufacture does not automatically correspond to ownership. So, was the torpedo a Chinese-made YU-3G or a North Korean-made CHT-02D? Or perhaps something else altogether? It is a CHT-02D, the JIG now asserts, without addressing the discrepancy in its claims.

Traces of RDX, a high explosive chemical commonly used in torpedoes and mines, were found on the Cheonan's smokestack, stern, and in sand taken from the seabed. South Korean Defense Minister Kim Tae-young dismissed speculation that the RDX was residue from naval drills that had been conducted in the past in the area. Although one South Korean government source claimed that RDX is not used in mines, this was contradicted by the Defense Minister (15). Indeed, RDX has been used in naval mines since the Second World War. (16)

While the presence of RDX would be consistent with a torpedo attack, it cannot on its own be considered as proof of that. Consider that when Canadian authorities intercepted the Princess Easwary as it was transporting illegal immigrants, swabs taken from the ship showed traces of RDX. No torpedo or mine had struck the Princess Easwary. Its past history of gun-running meant that the mere presence of explosives had been enough to leave a residue. (17) The Cheonan, as a military vessel, routinely carried explosives and engaged in naval exercises. Among the Cheonan's armaments were six Mark 46 torpedoes, two Otobreda 76 mm guns, two 40 mm Bofors guns, and twelve Mark 9 depth charges. (18) Both torpedoes and depth charges utilize RDX, and the bursting charge of projectiles fired by Bofors contain RDX. (19) Certainly, explosions from test-fired depth charges would have spread RDX around rather liberally.

It is a striking anomaly that none of the 58 surviving sailors of the Cheonan witnessed a rising pillar of water, without which it is difficult to imagine that a bubble jet effect explosion could have taken place. (20) Perhaps all of those on deck perished during the incident. That might account for this oddity, although it does seem unlikely, given that most of the casualties were said to be of those who were below deck. There is, of course, the shore-based observer who reported seeing a pillar of water, but one would feel more comfortable with his veracity were it backed by other witnesses. Indeed, the Korean organization People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy reports that survivors who spoke at the JIG press conference said they saw no pillar of water. Those who spoke included port-side lookouts, who would have been hard-pressed to miss such a significant sight. (21)

The recovery of torpedo fragments in the vicinity of Cheonan's sinking appears persuasive. It is a strong point in support of the South Korean government's argument. Yet, it is not such an unusual event for torpedoes and components of torpedoes to be found underwater. All sorts of things get dumped at sea, including, it seems, dangerous weaponry. A live torpedo was inadvertently pulled up in a fishing net more than two years ago off the British coast, as was one off the coast of Rhode Island in 1985. (22) In a survey covering the period of March 2002 through February 2003, the British Royal Navy reported that "at least 15 items of explosives ordinance or their components had been recovered in the nets of fishing vessels operating in coastal waters around the British Isles." Among the ordinance recovered were "torpedo components." It was also noted that some items had been "dispersed from their original dumping or loss positions by water movements." Oceanographic factors "can lead to quite substantial movements of large munitions." In the 15-year period ending in 2000, German fisherman reported to officials in Lower Saxony having found a total of more than 11 tons of munitions, while Dutch fisherman net an average of ten explosives per year. (23) The torpedo recovered by South Korea may have been associated with the sinking of Cheonan, but it could also have been dumped at sea, or test fired during military exercises at some point in the past.

It should also be noted that the Cheonan was sunk in disputed waters. After the Korean War, the U.S. unilaterally drew the Yellow Sea border between the two Koreas with a line that curved sharply northward to North Korea's disadvantage, rather than in a straight line, as existed with the East Sea border and which would have been common practice. (24) The area has been the site of periodic naval clashes between the two Koreas, and it is not unusual for North Korean vessels to cross over this line that it does not recognize.

The JIG did conduct a simulation to demonstrate how a bubble jet effect would have impacted a ship's hull. It is an indication of the predetermined approach the JIG adopted that the simulation was not completed until after its report was finished and results were announced. Although a bubble jet effect is capable of severing a ship in two, the JIG's simulation failed to do more than deform and cause a small break in the hull. (25)

What tied the recovered torpedo fragments to the sinking of the Cheonan was not only its proximity to the site of the sinking, but also a chemical analysis of adhered substances on both the torpedo and the Cheonan's hull that were shown to be identical. (26) Two Korean-American physicists, Seung-Hun Lee and J.J. Suh, managed to obtain a copy of one section of the JIG's secret report, in which it was stated that the compounds were a result of an explosion. These compounds were indeed the same on both the torpedo and the ship, the physicists concluded, but the data were not consistent with the conclusion that they had formed during an explosion. The samples, they asserted, "have nothing to do with any explosion, but are most likely aluminum that has rusted after exposure to moisture or water for a long time." Korean-Canadian geologist Panseok Yang determined that the spectroscopic analysis of the compounds reported by the JIG closely matched that of gibbsite, a mineral formed under intense weathering conditions, and often found in clay deposits. (27)

When a South Korean congresswoman asked the JIG to release its samples, only two out of the three were made available. The JIG claimed that they had used up all of the third sample, yet the spectroscopic and X-ray analyses done are non-destructive. Seung-Hun Lee and Panseok Yang observed that either the JIG had completely mishandled the samples or they were intentionally hiding them. (28)

The South Korean Ministry of Defense rejected their conclusions, pointing out that the physicists' laboratory tests did not fully replicate conditions during an explosion, and were thus invalid. (29) The physicists argued that their results were "consistent with previous scientific studies." In their experiments they had scaled down both the weight of the explosive and the weight of the water in a metal container to retain the proportion equivalent to that of a torpedo. Full access to the JIG's data and objective analysis would do much to bring us closer to the truth, whichever direction it leads, but Seung-Hun Lee finds that the JIG's report contains "several serious self-contradicting aspects and their interpretations have serious flaws, to say the least." (30)

The propulsion unit of the torpedo was severely corroded, an apparent result of the coat of paint having been burnt away by the heat of the explosion. It seems odd that the “number 1” written in Korean by a blue magic marker would survive intact. The boiling point for ink is less than half that of paint, so it would be more vulnerable to loss. (31) One cannot be sure that the handwriting was not added later by South Korean military officials for enhanced dramatic effect when presenting their evidence.

In the opinion of Seung-Hun Lee, “The government is lying when they said this was found underwater. I think this is something that was pulled out of a warehouse of old materials to show to the press.” (32)

It seems that the JIG’s investigation was something of a rush job, intended to be completed in time to give a boost to the South Korean ruling party in local elections. Among the members of the JIG were a small number of representatives from the opposition Democratic Party, one of whom, Shin Sang-cheol, felt disappointed that members of the team were not given briefing materials or basic information such as the navigation course record and other data. What struck Shin was that the investigation began with the premise that there had been a torpedo attack, and during his time on the team no effort was made to examine other possibilities. (33)

With the South Korean military’s mind made up before it began, little effort needed to be wasted on analysis. According to one anonymous South Korean military source, “If you leave out the time spent moving the torpedo, removing water and dust, and writing a report, the whole examination [of the torpedo components] only lasted about three days. The government has invited distrust by being excessively greedy.” In that span of time, the JIG was not able to even determine how long the torpedo had been corroding underwater. (34)

Shin Sang-cheol was quickly booted out of the JIG for not singing the same tune as the military authorities. With years of experience as a ship navigator and as a shipbuilding inspector at various Korean shipyards, he was not entirely without expertise. He sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in which he included maritime maps of the waters around Baengnyeong Island. These, he pointed out, are marked by shallow waters and rock fields. It was his contention that the Cheonan had run aground, backed out, and then collided with some object. Among the indications Shin cited as evidence were deep scratches on the hull and propeller blades bent forward; that is, toward the direction of the point where the ship split in two, rather than away from it. Perhaps not surprisingly, Shin is being sued for libel by the South Korean military. (35)

Shin's theory, however, does not seem particularly more convincing than that of the South Korean military. The JIG ruled out the possibility of running aground as the ship's sonar remained undamaged. Shin counters, correctly, that a hull can run aground at one point while another is unaffected. But it could be that the ship's propellers were damaged when the stern hit bottom after the Cheonan split in two. Or indeed, the damage to them may have resulted from some previous incident. It is far from certain that Shin's theory accounts for what actually happened to the Cheonan. The JIG's summary points out that there are no signs of collision on the Cheonan, and the hull damage does appear more consistent with that of an external explosion than of a collision. But the possibility of a collision did merit consideration. What is perplexing is that none of the various explanations that have been put forward quite seem to fit the totality of evidence.

One's already low level of confidence in the South Korean military's sincerity was undermined when it was revealed that it had deliberately fudged initial reports on the sinking of the Cheonan. The Naval Operations Command reported that the sinking occurred at 9:15 PM (which was later corrected to 9:22 PM) and that there was the sound of an explosion. The Joint Chiefs, however, altered the time to 9:45 PM and omitted mention of an explosion in order to cover up their slow responsiveness. Then the Ministry of Defense botched the release of thermal observation device recordings by using those from thirteen minutes after the sinking, while ignoring recordings taken from just three minutes afterwards. It was also eventually revealed that the on-duty Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was drunk that night, and only arrived at command control headquarters at 10:42 PM, where he managed to stay awake at a meeting for ten minutes before falling asleep. (36)

That high-ranking military officers would so causally lie and distort facts during a moment of crisis does not encourage confidence in their reliability to objectively analyze data and come to a considered conclusion in the investigation into the sinking of the Cheonan. Certainly not when political pressure to reach a predetermined conclusion would have been so intense. Interestingly, the investigators who probed into the military's mishandling of its initial response to the sinking of the Cheonan revealed only a portion of the problems they had found. Information which they considered militarily sensitive was excluded. (37) That would seem to imply that additional distortions or misrepresentations had taken place.

The South Korean military believes that it was a North Korean Yono (Salmon) class

midget submarine that fired a torpedo at Cheonan. Of limited range, midget submarines must be ferried and launched by larger submarines. They can operate in shallow waters, unlike their larger counterparts. Even so, the waters around the sinking were too shallow even for a midget submarine, so it is thought that it had to have been operating from much farther away, in deeper waters. South Korea did track the departure of a Yono-class submarine and its mother ship from a North Korean port days before the sinking of Cheonan, as well as their return to base days after the incident. For the JIG, that constituted direct evidence of North Korean responsibility, although logically speaking, this is not in fact direct causal proof any more than a man would be proven guilty of murder simply because he was away from his home at the moment the murder took place. The most that could be said of the submarine tracking is that it is suggestive of a possible connection.

Oddly, the Cheonan's sonar failed to detect anything unusual, but a South Korean military source pointed out that the ship's sonar "is an old model with a limited range, so there's a strong possibility that it failed to detect the torpedo which was launched from far away." (38) That may be true, but one must add that sooner or later a torpedo fired from long-range distance would approach closely enough to be detected. Kim Jong-dae, editor-in-chief of D&D, a defense journal, observes, "A submarine is supposed to be difficult to detect militarily, but most torpedoes can be detected. It is doubtful they would have been completely unable to detect the launch." (39)

No one would call the JIG's investigation a model of transparency. It was led by South Korea, who chose the nations that would participate: the U.S., Great Britain, Australia and Sweden. On the Multinational Combined Intelligence Task Force, Canada replaced Sweden. Aside from Sweden, what all of these nations share is a uniformly hostile attitude towards North Korea. Sweden, according to CBS News, was "a reluctant partner in blaming the North Koreans." (40)

Unquestionably, the South Korean government is sincere in its belief that a North Korean submarine fired a torpedo at the Cheonan. But in one sense that is the problem. So convinced was the JIG, that the team had a set of blinders on during the investigation, so that only one outcome was possible. And nothing would seem amiss if, whether knowingly or blindly, evidence was fudged or ignored to strengthen that case, as that would not change the overall facts as the team perceived it.

The report itself remains secret, and all requests for it to be made public have been rejected. A copy did go to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who pronounced

the evidence against North Korea “overwhelming.” If the evidence is truly so convincing, it would only help South Korea’s case for it to be made publicly known. Or could it be the case that the evidence falls short of Clinton’s assessment? South Korean legislators have not seen the report, nor have they been given access to even partial information of relevance. Assemblyman Choi Moon-soon of the opposition Democratic Party comments, “We asked for very basic information – interviews with surviving sailors, communication records, the reason the ship was out there.” But no information was forthcoming from the government. (41)

North Korea vehemently denies the accusations being made against it. As the accused, North Korea is an interested party. It feels it has the right to see the evidence supporting the charges. North Korea asked on two occasions to send its own inspection team to operate under the joint control of both South and North Korea in order to conduct an investigation, but its requests were turned down by the South Korean government. North Korea sent a similar suggestion to the United Nations, only to be rebuffed by the United States, who indicated that the case against North Korea was already proven. Instead, the U.S. pushed hard for the strongest language in a UN Security Council statement, and attempted to browbeat China into going along. China, though, held firm in the interests of peace, ensuring that a more moderate UN statement resulted. With the U.S. and South Korea committed to taking a hard line, even North Korea’s proposal to reopen talks on denuclearization was snubbed.

China, which has received a modicum of information from South Korea, remains unconvinced. “I have to say the majority of Chinese policymakers and academics feel that the Cheonan report does not hold water,” remarks international studies scholar Zhu Feng. (42)

In order to bolster its case, South Korea agreed to allow a team of Russian naval military experts to visit and analyze the evidence. For the first time, there would be an objective assessment of evidence. There was good cooperation during the visit, and then the Russians returned home where they spent several weeks in analyzing the data. Russia, however, was in a delicate position when it came to publicizing its determinations. Openly backing Seoul would only encourage attempts by the U.S. to ratchet up tensions in the region, whereas dissenting from the JIG’s conclusion could strain relations with South Korea, an important trading partner. So it was not surprising when it was announced that Russia would not publicize its own report.

There have been various leaks and comments made to the media which gave a fair indication of the Russian team’s evaluation of the evidence, clearly regarded as

inconclusive. Russia supplied its report to the U.S. and China, but not to the South Koreans, apparently in a bid to avoid antagonizing them. But it did not take long for South Korea to be apprised of the results, no doubt by the U.S. Whereupon the Russian ambassador was called to the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and given a heated reception.

According to a South Korean diplomatic source, “The Russian investigation team’s primary interest was in whether North Korea, which had been unable to produce its own torpedoes until 1995, suddenly was able to attack the Cheonan with a state-of-the-art bubble jet torpedo.” It has been pointed out that this technology is possessed only by a small number of countries, and the weapon has been successfully used only in test firings on stationary targets. (43)

If a North Korean source speaking on condition of anonymity in Hanoi is to be believed, Russia informed North Korean officials that it did not trust the results of the JIG investigation. “The Russian delegation said if the truth is revealed, then South Korea and the United States could be caught in an awkward position,” an apparent reference to the manipulation of evidence. (44)

Yet there was still much that the Russian team was unable to determine. It sent requests for further information, but so far South Korea has failed to respond. “We still have some questions regarding the results of this work to which we have not received clear answers,” Naval Commander Vladimir Vysotsky said. Whether or not answers would be supplied, he added, “doesn’t depend on us.” (45)

In an explosive recent development, the South Korean newspaper Hankyoreh obtained a copy of a Russian documented summarizing their investigators’ findings. The Russians agreed with the JIG that the Cheonan sank as a result of a non-contact external explosion. Commenting on the propeller blades that were bent forward, the Russians noted that remnants of a fishing net were tangled around the right screw axle. They posited that while the Cheonan was sailing close to shore the ship touched bottom, damaging the propellers, and became entangled in a fishing net. As a result of the net and damage, the Cheonan “must have experienced restrictions in its speed and maneuvers.” No definitive determination could be made as to the cause of the explosion, but the Russians felt that the most likely explanation was that as the Cheonan struggled to maneuver to deeper waters, it struck a non-contact sea mine. “The area of the ship’s accident is at risk of ocean mines, which is indirectly proven by the fact that the docking locations and voyage paths are restricted to the west seacoast of the Korean Peninsula.” (46)

As for the recovered torpedo components, the Russian investigators reported, "It may be possible that the presented torpedo part was made in North Korea, but the ink mark is inconsistent with the normal standards of marking (the locations and the method of the mark). Visual examination of the torpedo part indicates that the torpedo had been in the water for more than six months." In other words, long before the Cheonan sank. "We do not conclude that this particular torpedo was launched to and impacted on the Cheonan ship." (47)

The South Korean Ministry of Defense dismissed the possibility of sea mines being present around Baengnyeong Island, saying that it had disabled all of the mines that it had laid in the area. A retired South Korean admiral, however, testified that sea mines were present, and that if the sheath of the leading wire were removed on a mine, then the voltage going through the Cheonan would have been enough to set it off. (48)

It is interesting to compare the U.S. response to Cheonan's sinking with its reaction to the Israeli attack on a ship bringing aid to the Gaza Strip, in which several unarmed civilians were shot dead by soldiers storming aboard. Whereas in the case of the Cheonan, culpability remains uncertain and evidence is contradictory, there was no ambiguity about the Israeli action. It was an unprovoked attack on a ship operating in international waters. There was no question as to who attacked the ship. In response to that incident, U.S. officials worked behind the scenes to prevent the UN Security Council from giving the go-ahead for an investigation into the attack. U.S. officials argued that instead Israel should investigate its own action. U.S. Ambassador Alejandro Wolff saved his harsh criticism for those who had been delivering aid, calling their effort "neither appropriate nor responsible." (49) Punishment for Israel is swift in coming. The proposed U.S. 2011 budget calls for \$3 billion in aid to be provided to Israel. (50)

Contrast that with U.S. plans for North Korea. That nation is quite likely correct when it claims that it had nothing to do with the Cheonan's fate. But who needs an ironclad case when there are geopolitical goals to be achieved? The U.S. and South Korea launched large-scale joint military exercises in the East Sea, including the aircraft carrier USS George Washington, and for the first time U.S. F-22 stealth fighters flew in Korean airspace. The war games were clearly intended to be intimidating.

There are plans afoot for the possible deployment of an advanced airborne communications network on the Korean Peninsula, which would enable U.S. troops to overcome the limitations of communication in the mountainous terrain prevalent

in North Korea. (51) Also on the U.S. drawing board is an expansion of psychological warfare against North Korea, including the use of internet technology, leaflets and radio broadcasts. (52)

More importantly, as political commentator Stephen Gowans puts it in a nice turn of phrase, "The United States has announced that it is adding a new tranche to the Himalaya of sanctions it has built up since 1950 against North Korea." (53) The U.S. State Department and Department of Treasury plan to expand the list of businesses and organizations subject to sanctions, freeze bank accounts, work with various foreign governments to stop North Korean trading companies from doing business on the allegation that they are involved in illegal operations, impose travel restrictions, and implement a host of other measures. (54) Approximately 100 bank accounts linked to North Korea are to be frozen. "The U.S. has continued to consult the banks and will likely induce them to quietly close the accounts," a diplomatic source revealed. (55)

It is planned that the effort will induce foreign banks to stop doing business with North Korea, and thereby deny that nation the possibility of engaging in normal trade. According to a source speaking on condition of anonymity, the larger Chinese and other foreign banks dealing with North Korea could be adversely impacted, as all of their transactions are processed through the U.S. "This means that for everyone dealing with North Korea, it will become difficult for them to send money from the North." (56)

As a consequence of blacklisting North Korean organizations and individuals, a diplomatic source says, the U.S. will suspend ties with any banks dealing with them. "Think of Citibank or Bank of America suspending business ties with Bank of China or Bank of Shanghai. That will be a great burden to China." (57) There is debate within the Lee Administration as to how hard a line to pursue against North Korea. There are many who want to use the opportunity to topple the North Korean government, while those who favor dialogue are concerned that a harsh approach "could give rise to severe disorder." According to one South Korean source, "If the government decides to continue sanctions for more than six months even after the G20 summit, it could be interpreted as an important strategic choice to actively pursue regime change in the North." (58) Leaving aside the question of the inevitable hardship and misery for the North Korean people that would ensue from tightening the screws, there could be a heightened risk of conflict between the two Koreas if the situation deteriorates out of control.

The assertion that the North Korean accounts to be targeted are linked to illegal

operations is reminiscent of similar efforts by the George W. Bush Administration, when North Korean accounts engaged in legitimate business were closed and banks throughout the world were threatened with harsh financial consequences if they continued to allow North Korea to conduct normal international financial operations. All that was done under the unproven (and in some cases clearly disproven) contention that the accounts were connected with illegal activities. The intent was to dry up North Korea's access to foreign currency, and thus its ability to import essential items such as food, spare parts and machinery.

Indeed, even before June the U.S. already began freezing North Korean accounts held in foreign banks around the world. According to an unnamed diplomatic source, "The moves should be interpreted as a part of new sanctions on the North to hold it responsible for the sinking of the Cheonan." U.S. diplomat Robert Einhorn plans to visit a number of countries in an attempt to pressure them to enforce sanctions against North Korea. (59) It is not difficult to imagine the effect on the people of North Korea. Already existing sanctions have caused a shortage of raw materials, says Korean economic analyst Cho Boo Hyung, which has led to reduced output. And a decrease in food production will trigger negative economic growth. Cho feels that sanctions could produce another famine in North Korea, comparable to that of the 1990s. (60)

President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea has also seized the opportunity presented by Cheonan's sinking to further his goals. As a long-time opponent of the Sunshine Policy of his two predecessors, Lee never hid his ambition to dismantle all of the progress that had been made in recent years with relations between the two Koreas. No sooner had Lee taken office than he announced that he had no intention of observing the agreement signed by former President Roh Moo-hyun that set up a joint fishing area in the disputed waters at the Northern Limit Line, and which included measures to discourage military clashes there. Several economic agreements that had been reached were put on hold.

Once the JIG had announced the results of its investigation, Lee outlined a new policy with his northern neighbor. "From this moment," he said, "no North Korean ship will be allowed to make passage through any of the shipping lanes in the waters under our control, which has been allowed by the Inter-Korean Agreement on Maritime Transportation." In addition, "Trade and exchanges between the Republic of Korea and North Korea will also be suspended." Relations between the two Koreas have deteriorated to their lowest point since the period of military dictatorships in South Korea, and U.S. sanctions will only exacerbate tensions.

Did a North Korean submarine fire a torpedo at the Cheonan? It seems improbable. If it was a torpedo that sank the Cheonan, then it certainly was not the one that the JIG put on display. It would have been foolhardy for the North Korean government to order such a strike. It had nothing to gain, and absolutely everything to lose by such an act. It may be that a rogue commander ordered the attack as revenge for an incident near Daecheong Island the previous November, when South Korean ships chased a North Korean patrol boat, firing on it and sending it up in flames, thereby causing the deaths of several sailors. That attack, incidentally, failed to elicit any concern whatsoever from the same U.S. officials who so sternly pontificate on the unacceptability of allowing the sinking of Cheonan to go unpunished.

While reviewing the evidence, it began to appear to me that the most likely cause of the Cheonan's sad fate was having had the misfortune to inadvertently sail into the path of a sea mine, and this feeling has only been strengthened by the reports of the Russian investigation team's findings. Given the fast-moving currents in the waters near Baengnyeong Island, it may be that over time a rising mine gradually migrated from where it had been initially deposited, so that its position was unexpected. That is just speculation, of course, and other possibilities exist. A broad-based international investigation needs to take place, and its results made fully public. The 46 sailors who lost their lives when the Cheonan sank deserve the truth, whatever it may be. As do the peoples of both Koreas, whose future is intertwined in so many ways. But geopolitical considerations guarantee that no such international probe will take place. Tensions are likely to remain high as long as South Korean President Lee remains in office. No conceivable change in U.S. administrations will bring about an improvement in the security environment on the Korean Peninsula, but the 2012 election in South Korea might. That is something to hope for.

Article Link: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=ELI20100728&articleId=20334>

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