

Cheonan Sinking

Background:

South Korea and North Korea experienced a four-month crisis over the sinking of the ROKS Cheonan on 26 March 2010. The area where the Cheonan sinking incident happened has always been a site of considerable tension between South Korea and North Korea. The situation is further complicated by the presence of a rich fishing ground in the area used by North Korean and Chinese fishing vessels. There were numerous clashes over the years between South Korean and North Korean naval vessels attempting to police what both sides regard as their territorial waters.

PRE-CRISIS:

On the night of the sinking of the Cheonan, the United States and South Korean navies were engaged in joint anti-submarine exercises 75 miles away from the site of the sinking. This exercise was part of the two countries' annual Key Resolve/Foal Eagle war exercise, described by the US Pentagon as "one of the world's largest simulated exercises," and involved modern US and South Korean warships.

Summary:

On 26 March 2010, an explosion was reported to have occurred near the ROKS Cheonan, a South Korean warship. This triggered a crisis for South Korea. Initial reports suggested that the ship was hit by a North Korean torpedo, and that a South Korean vessel had returned fire. Of the ship's crew of 104 men, 46 died.

South Korean officials initially downplayed suggestions that North Korea was responsible for the sinking. After raising the ship, South Korea and the US formed a joint investigative team to discover the cause of the sinking; South Korea led the team. A second, separate, and broader South Korean-led investigative effort followed; the US, Sweden, Australia, and the United Kingdom also participated in this effort. On 19 May, this second investigative team concluded that a North Korean torpedo sank the ship. Around this time, North Korea's supreme leader, Kim Jong-Il, ordered North Korea's forces to be ready for combat. Near the end of May, a team of Russian experts visited South Korea to conduct an assessment of the results produced by the second South Korean-led investigation. The Russian assessment concluded that the Cheonan was not sunk by a North Korean bubble jet torpedo, but it did not come to any firm conclusion about the cause of the sinking.

After the release of the official report in which North Korea was blamed for the sinking, South Korea announced on 24 May that it would stop nearly all of its trade with North Korea and prohibit North Korean vessels from using its shipping channels. This constituted South Korea's major response to the crisis trigger, and it in turn triggered a crisis for North Korea. That same day, South Korea also demanded an apology from North Korea for the sinking and announced a resumption of "psychological warfare" tactics aimed at North Korea. Also on the same day, President Lee Myung-bak said that South Korea would respond to further military provocations from North Korea with self-defense measures, and that he supported readopting the official description of the North as the "main enemy." Finally on that day, the US and South Korea announced that they would conduct joint naval exercises in response to the sinking.

North Korea's major response to the South Korean embargo that triggered its crisis came on 25 May and consisted of putting its troops on high alert and reverting to a wartime footing in

regard to South Korea. That same day, North Korea also severed most remaining ties and communications with South Korea, with the exception of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, and forbade any South Korean ships or aircraft from entering North Korean territory. Also that day, the South Korean military resumed “psychological warfare” directed at North Korea as planned; this included both loudspeaker and FM radio propaganda broadcasts across the Demilitarized Zone.

On 27 May, North Korea announced that it would scrap an agreement aimed at preventing accidental naval clashes with South Korea. It also announced that any South Korean vessel found crossing the disputed maritime border would be immediately attacked. The following day, the North Korean Central News Agency released an official response to the second South Korean-led investigation, denying having had anything to do with the sinking.

On 14 June, South Korea presented the results of its investigation to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). On 9 July, the UNSC issued a Presidential Statement condemning the attack but without identifying the attacker. Amid heightened tensions with North Korea, the US and South Korea launched joint military exercises on 25 July despite strong objections from China. The exercises were focused on anti-submarine and maritime interdiction capabilities. Hostile rhetoric from both sides gradually died down and tensions started to fade after the military exercises. The crisis terminated for both sides on 26 July without a clear-cut terminating act.

The US and China were both involved in the crisis. The US was mainly involved via its staging of joint military exercises with South Korea, but it also condemned North Korea. China voiced strong opposition to the joint US-South Korean military exercises, but its main involvement was effectively resisting US calls for a tougher line against North Korea throughout the crisis.

The UN’s condemnation of the attack had little to no effect on the crisis proceedings. NATO also condemned the attack, but went further than the UN by singling out North Korea’s role in the attack. Nevertheless, NATO’s involvement also did not contribute to crisis abatement.

References:

Al Jazeera; Associated Press; BBC; CNN; Daily Telegraph; Financial Times; Guardian; Hankyoreh; Korean Times; Letter to the UN Security Council (from South Korea) ; New York Times; Reuters; South Korean Ministry of National Defense news releases; The Age; The Times; UN Security Council press release and Presidential Statement; Washington Post; Yonhap.