

**The Korean Position on Alliance Formation and
the Change of Public Trust between Korea and the United States:
The *Cheonan* Incident and the OPCON Issue**

Taewoo Kim
Korea Institute for Defense Analyses

ABSTRACT

In macroscopic perspective, the ROK-U.S. alliance has evolved toward a desirable future-oriented one and public trust has been generally robust. Most South Koreans remember it as an unmatched blessing for their security and prosperity. In microscopic perspective, however, the alliance was not without ordeals and tribulations, and the public trust not without dangerous vicissitudes. Today, many South Koreans regard the 2007 OPCON (Operational Control) agreement as a strange decision made in a strange time, thus representing the era of ordeals. The sinking of the *Cheonan* on March 26, 2010, sheds new light on the OPCON issue. For those South Koreans who think that 2012 is the worst time for the OPCON transfer and dismantlement of the CFC, the bloody North Korean provocation reminds us of the Korean War sixty years ago, distinguishes once again friends from foes, and opportunely rekindles the OPCON issue. They believe that an indefinite postponement of the OPCON transfer is what the two nations should do to sustain a more future-oriented alliance and public trust toward it.

Keywords: Alliance, Korean War, Wartime Operational Control, OPCON, *Cheonan* incident, Defense Reform Plan 2020, defense reform

Introduction

Seen in macroscopic perspective, the ROK-U.S. alliance has been on the right track of desirable evolution and transformation. After the alliance formed during the Korea War, the two nations passed through the long era of unbalanced and unilateral alliance, and are now moving toward an era of well-balanced and reciprocal one. During the Korean War, South Korea totally relied on the U.S. for survival, and for the era of unbalanced alliance that followed, South Korea still heavily relied on U.S. allies for much of its security and economy. Since the 2000s, however, with sustained economic growth of South Korea as well as changes in the U.S. alliance policies, the two nations have been successfully shaping a more future-oriented and sustainable alliance. During this period, public trust toward the alliance, in the U.S. or in South Korea, has never been shaken seriously. For most South Koreans, the alliance and presence of the USFK (U.S. Forces, Korea) is remembered as the pillar of national security that has made the nation's miraculous economic growth possible.

Now, no one either in Seoul or Washington objects to the fact that the two nations are moving from the military alliance to a more comprehensive one sharing such political values as democracy, market economy, and human rights. No one protests the fact that the two countries pursue a fairer alliance in which South Korea respects the U.S. strategic flexibility and assumes more burdens for its own defense. No one opposes South Korea's duty to intensify cooperation on global issues such as nonproliferation, peacekeeping operations, and ant-drug, anti-piracy, and counter-terrorism activities. Such directions of mutual understanding and cooperation have been confirmed and reconfirmed via summits since the inauguration of President Lee Myung Bak in 2008.

Ten Lost Years in the Alliance

Seen from a microscopic perspective, however, the bilateral alliance has not been without vicissitudes and complications. For South Korea, for example, the period under the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun governments was like ten lost years for the alliance. Of course, there were discernible differences between the two. The Kim Dae Jung government, though its external policies were unprecedentedly concentrated on North Korea and the so-called Sunshine Policy, never denied the importance of the alliance. Despite its leftist propensity, the Kim government tried to maintain smooth relations with the United States, partly successfully, as the Clinton administration also attempted to engage North Korea. Some South Koreans still remember the two

presidents, Kim and Clinton, as enjoying a honeymoon over North Korea policy at that time.

By contrast, the Roh government outspokenly disparaged the alliance and strained the bilateral relations, ardently meeting the DPRK's (Democratic People's Republic of Korea: North Korea) South Korea policies. President Roh himself frequently stated that he would not mind failure of all other external policies if only inter-Korean relations got better. As a result, the friction between Seoul and Washington became salient, their contention became acute. During this period, Seoul's external policy was dominated by "Korean nationalism," and a "rush to Pyongyang" phenomenon overwhelmed the alliance. It was during this period that the Roh government abruptly pushed ahead with transfer of the wartime operational control. Many South Koreans remember that Roh government's OPCON initiative invited a thorny and emotional response from then U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who had been angry enough with Seoul's straightforward pro-North Korea stance. This is why some South Koreans remember the 2007 OPCON agreement as a strange decision on the part of the both sides made in a strange time.

In a nutshell, at least for South Korea, the years of the Roh Moo Hyun government were a most serious testing period for the alliance. Public trust with regard to the alliance heavily rolled and pitched, thus dividing South Koreans between those idealistic nationalists who led and supported "Korean nationalism" and those realistic internationalists who worried about the future of the alliance. For the realists, the 2007 OPCON agreement was like a watershed in the history of the bilateral alliance. For them, it was a turning point that helped South Koreans regain their composure and mitigate the dangerous dichotomy of public trust, and finally select the Lee Myung Bak government in the 2007 presidential election.

Reminiscence of the OPCON Disputes

When the Roh administration began to push ahead with OPCON transfer in 2005, it frequently shouted such catch phrases as "sovereignty" and "autonomy." Proponents of the transfer insisted: "Putting our national fate at the hands of another country is encroachment upon our military sovereignty and national pride"; "we have spent much more on the defense budget than the DPRK for many years and now we are capable of conducting a war by ourselves"; and "we have no independent diplomacy without the OPCON transfer." They turned deaf ears to worrying opinions of the opponents by insisting that the ROK-U.S. alliance would not wither even after the OPCON transfer and that the US would surely send its troops in an emergency regardless of

dismantlement of the Combined Forces Command (CFC). They also asserted that South Korea and the U.S. would be able to fully cooperate for conduct of war through the Allied Military Cooperation Center (AMCC) even after the OPCON separation.

In the meantime, the opponents argued that despite the military modernization of the ROK, it would be good to utilize the advanced U.S. military technologies particularly in the areas of ISR, C4I, and PGM for better deterrence of North Korean adventurism; that the dissolution of the CFC would weaken solidarity of the alliance; and that only the CFC system would ensure superior cooperative war conduct. To overwhelm the opposing voices, the Roh administration stimulated nationalistic sentiment of the young generations, who became fascinated by the sovereignty slogans and immediately dominated online public opinion. So doing, the opposing voices were easily dismissed as “flunkies” or “anti-unification forces.” On top of this, the government muzzled opposing opinion leaders and experts while many in the mass media circulated one-sided stories supporting the OPCON transfer. It was under this huge top-down populist propaganda that the Roh administration stubbornly pushed for the OPCON transfer and dismantlement of the CFC. There was neither congressional consent nor consideration by the cabinet. Fortunately or unfortunately, the bloody *Cheonan* incident is now shedding new light on the OPCON issue. It may be also a right time for Americans to look back on what happened then over the important issue.

The Bloody *Cheonan* Incident

Like the Korean War in which allied forces fought against the Communist invaders sixty years ago, the sinking of the *Cheonan* on March 26, 2010, which caused the deaths of 46 out of 104 sailors on board the South Korean naval corvette, once again compelled South Korea to make a clear discernment between its friends and enemies. While the forensic investigation to determine the cause of the sinking was in process, a welcome decision came forth at the first Nuclear Security Summit held in Washington, D.C. on April 12-13. South Korea, with U.S. support, was decided as the host of the second Nuclear Security Summit in 2012. This decision carries important implications especially because it provides the nation with another pivotal opportunity to enhance its international status at a volatile time.

On May 20, the civil-military joint investigation team joined by international specialists from four foreign countries, announced its final conclusion that identified North Korea as the culpable actor for this incident. Shortly after that, President Lee Myung Bak made a public

statement in which he introduced a series of punitive countermeasures the ROK government would employ against the DPRK. In response, the U.S. government reassured publicly its full support for the ROK, and furthermore the U.S. Congress unanimously passed a resolution rebuking such a diabolical provocation by the DPRK. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who visited the ROK on May 26, declared: “The investigation was objective, the evidences overwhelming, and the outcome inescapable.” Japan took the same stand as the U.S. On the other hand, China still hesitates to join this international accusation despite the clear evidence the joint investigation team presented.

The naval disaster at large not only heightened the tension in the Korean peninsula but also stimulated an emergence of a new Cold War architecture in Northeast Asia, thus reminding South Korean citizens of the nightmare of the Korean War sixty years ago. Currently, there is an increasingly visible confrontation over the *Cheonan* incident between the U.S.-ROK-Japan sea power and the DPRK-China continental power. South Koreans appreciate the U.S.-Japan support, welcome Russia’s decision to dispatch its own investigation team to double-check what the joint investigation team presents, and still holds hopes that China as a responsible member of the international community will soon take a clearer attitude commensurate with its regional leadership.

South Korea’s countermeasures, disclosed by President Lee Myung Bak’s public statement on May 24 and the following joint press interview hosted by the three ministers of foreign affairs and trade, unification, and national defense, include: taking the case to the UN Security Council, prohibiting navigation of North Korean merchant vessels within South Korean territorial seas and approved area of operation (AAO), stopping all inter-Korean trade save the Kaesong Industrial Complex, suspending economic assistance except humanitarian aid, planning ROK-US anti-submarine joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea, and resuming its propaganda campaign across the DMZ (demilitarized zone), which was halted since 2004 by an inter-Korean agreement.

According to the UN General Assembly Resolution in 1974, which defines an attack against another nation’s army, aircraft, naval ships as aggression even without a declaration of war, the sinking of the *Cheonan* was a definite act of war. Moreover, it is a violation of Article 2 of the 1953 Armistice which stipulates “a complete cessation of all hostilities in Korea” and that of Article 2 of the UN Charter which prohibits “threat or use of force.” Therefore, the ROK has every legal right stipulated in Article 51 of the UN Charter to retaliate for the purpose of self-defense against such an aggression. Nevertheless, Seoul’s initial responses did

not include any direct military retaliation. In this context, compared with the degree of flagrancy of the DPRK provocation, South Korea's initial responses sound rather moderate. Given the fact that a variety of possible measures, including direct revenge actions, have so far been discussed in and out of governments, one can safely assume that these initial measures are only part of the options the ROK holds for possible use in the future.

South Korea's decision to withhold its really tough options at this stage reflects its reliance on the possibility of North Korean public apologies and China's participation in the international accusation of North Korea. In this sense, one can say that the Seoul government has adopted a phased approach.

It is also noteworthy that measures like a shutdown of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, which could be a serious political liability for the future of inter-Korean relations, were excluded from the initial list. The Seoul government is heavily relying on harnessing international pressure on the DPRK rather than resorting to tit-for-tat reprisals. This clearly reflects South Korea's will to protect economic prosperity and stability by avoiding tension escalation and thereby another all-out war on the Korean peninsula. In this context, the Seoul government is starting with a rather strategic approach.

Of course, the DPRK's hypersensitivity and temperamental response to the Seoul's initial actions is not surprising. Currently, the Pyongyang government strongly denies involvement in the bloody disaster, complaining that the "South Korean warmongers are creating a conspiracy," and threatens a "punitive all-out war against the South." For the Pyongyang government, stunned by the surprisingly scientific and inescapable investigation work done by the ROK government, there seems to be no other option but to react in such way.

Reemergence of OPCON Disputes

While the ROK government's response toward the DPRK is rather moderate, it is tough enough toward itself. The Seoul government is now conducting a comprehensive review of its whole gamut of security and defense systems. In January 2010, President Lee himself established the Committee for Advanced Defense to oversee the progress of the Defense Reform Plan 2020. Following the *Cheonan* incident, he additionally launched an ad-hoc committee for more comprehensive review of the nation's security system. In line with these efforts, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) are working together to re-prioritize security threats. For instance, the JCS used to put

a threat of an all-out war on the top of the list, yet now that has been replaced by a threat of local limited conflicts or provocations. Also, the two committees are currently in process of redesigning investment profiles of defense budget. Many other ways are being considered to enhance the security awareness of the South Korean public, which has been relaxed significantly during the past two governments. Given this situation, it is a natural development that the voices calling for reconsideration of the wartime OPCON separation by 2012 have become stronger. Particularly for many senior citizens who remember how American soldiers fought for and saved democracy in this once unheard-of country, and those veterans and religious leaders who initiated collection of 10 million signatures to oppose the OPCON transfer, the *Cheonan* incident provides a valuable opportunity to rekindle the OPCON issue.

For those who then opposed the 2007 ROK-U.S. agreement on OPCON separation and dismantlement of the CFC in 2012, there is another legitimate reason to revisit the issue. Contrary to the assumptions and expectations of the Roh government in 2005, when it began to tackle the OPCON issue, threats from the DPRK have increased notably since then. Then, the Roh administration pointed to “improved inter-Korean relations and decreasing threats from the North” as preconditions for the OPCON transfer. But now, the DPRK has conducted nuclear tests twice, in 2006 and in 2009, becoming a *de facto* nuclear weapon state. Despite its faltering economy and extreme destitution, the DPRK has intensified its military forces by adding 16 more army divisions, 400 more tanks, 500 long-range artillery, and 70,000 more special operation soldiers. Now, the asymmetric threat from the DPRK is graver than at any time before. The *Cheonan* incident enabled the South Korean public to witness the reality of the enhanced security threat in the Korean peninsula.

The Committee for Advanced Defense recently identified the DPRK’s belligerent strategies, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), artillery forces deployed north of the demarcation line, special operation forces, and submarines as the five major asymmetric threat areas. It demanded that the MND and the JCS find effective ways to fill the windows of vulnerability. As the *Cheonan* incident has focused the Korean public on the security threats posed by the DPRK, increasing numbers of South Koreans now support an indefinite postponement of the OPCON separation. The same support is also felt within the ROK’s MND and JCS.

A Less Palpable but Significant Move in Washington

On the other side of the Pacific, there is also an increasing concern over the OPCON transfer, though not as palpable as in South Korea, especially since the *Cheonan* incident. For example, Professor Victor Cha has suggested that the two allies should postpone the date of the transfer and take more time to reevaluate the security environment that has drastically changed since 2007.¹ Of course, the U.S. government has not so far shown any willingness with regard to reconsideration of the OPCON agreement. Many specialists in Washington still believe, at least outwardly, that the OPCON transfer should take place as agreed. Some of them advocate it because the OPCON transfer will be commensurate with “strategic flexibility” as well as with the Obama administration’s alliance policy in which the U.S. urges its allies to take greater responsibility for their own defense. Others point out that the transfer is a must-to-do task South Korea should accept sooner or later anyway, and thus it is just a matter of time. Some government officials simply argue that the decision has already passed the point of no return.

In this context, what is particularly noticeable is the opinion of some American experts requesting the ROK to spend more for its own defense. Bruce Bennett of the Rand Corporation, for example, argues that the ROK government should spend 621 trillion won (some \$6 billion) of its defense budget, the amount specified in the Defense Reform Plan 2020 when the plan was first adopted in 2005.² Such arguments seem to reflect the views of many other Americans in the government. However, at this time of insecurity South Koreans want the U.S. government to understand that the Defense Reform Plan 2020 will not be a panacea for all the insecurity elements South Korea faces.

Limitations of the Defense Reform Plan 2020

The Defense Reform Plan 2020 was an alternative designed by the Roh Moo Hyun government when it began to carry forward the OPCON transfer. The official goal of the plan was to transform the current quantity-oriented military into a quality-oriented one using state-of-the-art technology and information capability. The plan would reduce military manpower from 680,000 to 500,000 and instead, enhance defense capability by pouring 621 trillion won into the budget by 2020. Most of the manpower reduction plans were to take place in the Army while the Navy and the Air Force were to be reinforced under the slogans of “Blue Ocean Navy” and “Space Air Force.” The plan was revised in 2009; the goal of investment size was reduced to 599 trillion won and the target of manpower size was resettled at 517,000.

In retrospect, the Defense Reform Plan 2020 was an appeasement tactic toward conservative South Koreans who opposed the OPCON separation. Simultaneously, the Roh government tried to let the Pyongyang know that the plan did not aim at it. The navy and air force slogans as well as reduction of the Army's manpower reflected the Roh government's intention of assuring that the defense reform plan would not be directed at the DPRK. In fact, separation of the wartime OPCON itself would be a great gift for the DPRK, which has long craved weakening and eventual dissolution of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Likewise, the Roh administration's external policies heavily focused on inter-Korean relations and protection of the Sunshine policy.

The reason why his successor, President Lee, is carrying out the Defense Reform Plan 2020 is not because it does not know the impure political motivations behind the plan, but because it still encompasses elements indicating the correct future direction the ROK military forces should move toward. Taking the current low birth rate in the ROK into account, for example, a down-sized military with higher quality of technological and information power is what the ROK military should strive to achieve in the future. Strengthening the Navy and Air Force is also the right way to be prepared against all sorts of uncertainties in the post-DPRK era. Nevertheless, the Defense Reform Plan 2020 still possesses many limitations.

First of all, the ROK as a member of all nonproliferation regimes and a country without any WMD has no means to offset the DPRK's WMD threat. This is not a matter of how much money South Korea puts into the Defense Reform Plan 2020. The only possible solution is continuing reassurance of extended deterrence provided by the U.S. However, the nuclear protection the U.S. provides to its allies is now increasingly hazy under the Obama administration. Different from the earlier version of the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) during the Bush administration that clearly stated that a WMD attack on its allies would meet nuclear retaliation by the U.S., the new NPR released on April 4, 2010 lists non-nuclear elements such as bilateral alliance relationship, the U.S. security assurance, the U.S. military presence overseas, and missile defense as the key deterrence mechanisms. The new NPR reaffirms the nuclear protection merely by excluding the DPRK and Iran from the countries to which U.S. applies negative security assurances (NSA). This is why many South Korean experts express concerns that the Obama administration, preoccupied with the vision of a "world free of nuclear weapons," may neglect the importance of nuclear protection for its allies.

Secondly, regardless of continuation of the U.S. extended deterrence, the DPRK's WMD now poses a different kind of threat: "increased

easiness and boldness of regional provocations under nuclear blackmail.” The DPRK is well aware that the U.S. will not use its nuclear weapons for retaliation as long as the North does not actually use nuclear weapons against South Korea. Put differently, North Korea has reasons to believe that nuclear blackmail can easily scare South Korea, which fears a total war against the nuclear-armed North Korea, and limit the South’s responses to regional provocations. The U.S. extended deterrence is almost useless in deterring this sort of threat since Pyongyang knows that use of nuclear weapons simply for blackmail will not invite U.S. nuclear retaliation.

It is in this line of logic that I have been persistently stressing for years that the easiness and boldness of North Korean local provocations would increase in proportion to its completion of nuclear weapons and that the Yellow Sea would be the most likely battlefield. The *Cheonan* incident amply proves this. Unfortunately, this sort of danger stemming from the lethal connection between the North’s nuclear weapons and more likelihood of local provocations has largely been neglected by both governments.

As for a remedy to offset and deter this threat, the ROK needs a non-WMD strategic second-strike capability that can be translated into an ultimate and decisive threat to the very existence of the DPRK. To do so, the ROK government should develop another defense scheme that goes beyond the Defense Reform Plan 2020, thus requiring new weapons systems, including long-distance ballistic missiles and strategic submarines. Yet, the U.S. simply continues to dissuade the ROK from developing long-range ballistic missiles for the sake of missile nonproliferation, revealing that the U.S. does not fully understand the delicate nature of threat facing its South Korean ally.

Thirdly, even completion of the Defense Reform Plan 2020 does not necessarily mean elimination of chronic asymmetric threats in the Korean peninsula. For example, the DPRK has all valuable crucial targets such as Seoul within the range of its artillery forces, while the ROK does not. More defense spending does not solve such geographical asymmetry. To cope with asymmetry in non-material elements requires much more time and effort. For instance, North Korean soldiers serve for more than seven years while South Korean soldiers do so for less than two years. This can create a large gap in the degree of their combat skills. No one can argue safely that an expensive South Korean tank operated by a newcomer will defeat a cheaper North Korean tank driven by a veteran soldier. Differences in psychological elements such as perception of threat and enemy also matter a lot. If South Korean soldiers consider North Korean soldiers as brothers, not the enemy of the nation, while the

vice versa is not true, the South's economic and technological superiority will be of no use to win a war against the North.

In fact, the spirit of the ROK military was seriously damaged under the Sunshine Policy during the two previous administrations. Today, some recruits as well as newly commissioned officers believe that the Korean War was triggered by a North-bound invasion. For them, the fact that Seoul was occupied by the Communist forces in four days after the outbreak of the war on June 25, 1950, or that some 40,000 American soldiers sacrificed their lives to save people they had never met, is no more than a part of forgotten history. Of course, a large portion of blame should go to the teachers who belong to the Korean Teachers and Educational Workers Union (KTU) that was legalized by the Kim Dae Jung government. They taught distorted and biased modern history in middle and high schools. Really, South Korea needs more time to correct the biased history taught in the classrooms, to properly educate soldiers and officers, and to adequately deal with the asymmetric threats. No matter how much more defense budget the *Cheonan* incident may make available, the simple increase in amount of money will not dissolve all these issues. South Koreans want American allies to heed to this reality.

Two Faces of OPCON Transfer

If the wartime OPCON will be separated in 2020 as agreed, both the ROK and the U.S. will face various consequences. First, there will be a clear distinction between beneficiaries and losers in the ROK. The OPCON separation will greatly help the so-called "progressive factions," a minor group that once succeeded at taking power with populist politics, get new political momentum. This may mean the reincarnation of the Sunshine Policy. On the contrary, the mainstream of South Korean people who are concerned more about national security than about political gains and wish to remain as a member of the U.S.-led sea power, will be crestfallen. Above all, the OPCON transfer at the time of escalated threats from the nuclear-armed North Korea and amid repeated provocations on the Yellow Sea will make them feel highly insecure and suspicious about the future of the ROK-US alliance. In a worst case, an OPCON separation at a troubled time may compel South Korean strategic planners to rethink the overall national survival strategies.

The OPCON transfer at a bad time will have both bright and dark sides for the U.S., too. It will immediately reduce the U.S. financial burden and lubricate the "strategic flexibility" policy. However, it will not take place without far more laborious after-effects. North Korea will interpret it as increasing uncertainties revolving around the U.S. security assurance toward its East Asian allies, thus helping further increase the

boldness and easiness of the North's limited provocations against the South. More importantly, such an OPCON separation despite the two nuclear tests of the DPRK, may give the DPRK a false impression that the U.S. accepts its nuclear arsenals and help the Communist hermit country further stick to its WMDs. It can send a wrong message to Beijing, too. China considers such a drastic transformation in the U.S.-ROK combined commanding system as a decline of alliance cohesion and may become increasingly assertive in exerting its influence over East Asia. Obviously, these developments will be injurious to the U.S. global and Asian policies. An inescapable conclusion after considering both good and bad sides is that the wartime OPCON as well as the CFC should be kept intact at least during this precarious period.

Clearly, 2012 is the worst time for the OPCON transfer. It's the first year of the so-called "Strong and Great North Korea" that the top leaders in the North have long proclaimed. The best way to celebrate it may be a show of WMD power via another nuclear test or ICBM test launch. It is also the year Pyongyang will celebrate the 100th birthday of Kim Il-sung and the 30th birthday of Kim Jong-un. In the same year, a change in government or leadership will take place in the U.S., South Korea, and China. On top of these, the inter-Korean tension has now reached its peak with the *Cheonan* incident, pushing the DPRK, which faces international isolation, to further cling to its own "survival game of the nuke by the nuke and for the nuke." Now is the time to postpone the wartime OPCON transfer indefinitely and reassess the security environment on and around the Korean peninsula, as suggested by Victor Cha. The argument that the OPCON issue has passed the point of no return since a formal agreement was signed by the two defense ministers does not sound quite tenable. Any agreement or even treaty can be made, changed, or remade legitimately by another agreement.

However, it has to be the ROK that should initiate new consultations on the postponement of the OPCON transfer. For this purpose, the ROK government can reconfirm the will of ordinary South Koreans through open public debate, and then suggest additional negotiations to Washington. Once the U.S. accepts postponement, what the two nations need will be a summit that will confirm and declare it via a new agreement.

Conclusion: Toward a More Future-oriented Alliance

In retrospect, formation of the ROK-U.S. alliance was an unmatched blessing to South Korea for its survival and economic prosperity. This is the way most South Koreans remember it, though the public trust in the nation toward the alliance has fluctuated from time to time. At least for

them, the two nations should overcome remnants of the tribulations if any, and should strive to usher in a more future-oriented alliance. They prefer that this be an unhampered process, and believe rethinking of the 2007 OPCON agreement is one way to do so. This is why many South Koreans believe that the *Cheonan* incident will turn out to be a boon in the long run.

Most South Koreans, even while deeply lamenting the death of the 46 sailors, expect that while the *Cheonan* incident causes distress today, it will bring blessings tomorrow for four reasons. First, by perpetrating such a heinous crime, the Pyongyang regime is pulling the noose around its own neck. Undoubtedly, the *Cheonan* incident will further isolate the DPRK from the international community. Second, the North's economic difficulties, which will be further worsened by international sanctions and cessation of inter-Korean trade, will undermine the already weakened foundation of the North Korean regime. Third, the incident clearly taught the South Korean public a lesson, thus renewing the public trust toward the ROK-U.S. alliance.

Finally, the tragic loss of young lives will eventually turn out to be a priceless blessing for the nation by educating the disillusioned younger generations about the stark security reality they live in. This will mean a loss of the "revolutionary potential within the South." Although the incident may have brought a momentary sense of victory to the DPRK leadership, the culprit regime will suffer much harsher and prolonged consequences. The bloody *Cheonan* incident is a timely reminder to South Koreans of the Korean War sixty years ago, aptly distinguished friends from foes, and opportunely rekindled the OPCON issue. This is the bright side of the tragic incident.

Notes:

¹ *Chosun Ilbo*, April 28, 2010.

² "Wartime OPCON and the ROK Defense Reform Plan 2020," presented at a seminar co-hosted by the Council on Korea-U.S. Security Studies and the Korea Institute for Crisis Management Analysis in Seoul on May 18, 2010).

