

The Cheonan: A National Funeral but Matter Still Not Resolved

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On April 29, with national flags lowered to half-mast across South Korea, a siren blew at 10 a.m. calling for a moment of silence for the 46 sailors lost in the tragic sinking of the Cheonan on March 26. At the same time, at Pyeongtaek naval base, 2,800 mourners including President Lee Myung-bak, first lady Kim Yoon-ok, and the bereaved families, sat as an emotional military funeral for the sailors commenced, broadcast live across the country.

A somber President Lee placed before each portrait of the dead and missing sailors the Hwarang Order of Military Merit, the fourth-highest distinction to service members, and laid white chrysanthemums at the altar. In the eulogy that followed, Admiral Kim Sung-chan, the Navy chief of staff, hailed the heroic endeavors of the Cheonan sailors and vowed to take revenge on whomever attacked the ship. “What happened on March 26 at Baengnyeong Island [near which the ship sank] should not have happened,” Kim read, his voice trembling. “We cannot and must not forgive this or forget this. Whoever caused our people great pains, we will not sit idly by. We will pursue [the responsible party] to the end and make it pay a huge price.”

But what will that price be and who will pay it?

North Korea is the primary suspect, but South Korea has not officially blamed the communist regime, and the North has denied involvement. Seoul officials have cautioned against reaching a hasty conclusion until their investigation is finished, however, with the salvage of the ship finished on April 25, Defense Minister Kim Tae-young did announce that the likeliest cause of the explosion was a torpedo attack. He also said it was determined that the explosion was not caused by direct impact. Investigators under the command of a vice admiral were then told to give top priority to finding torpedo shrapnel. The military has collected about 330 pieces of debris from the scene of the shipwreck and has since been analyzing them but has reportedly failed to find any parts of a torpedo or a mine so far.

But even if it is found, it may still be difficult to finger North Korea as the culprit because most North Korean torpedoes were made in China or the former Soviet Union, experts said. No decisive evidence has been found to indicate the involvement of a North Korean submarine. The only circumstantial evidence found so far is that around the time of the sinking, two North Korean Shark-class submarines temporarily disappeared from radar surveillance from their base at Cape Bipagot about 80 km from where the ship sank.

North Korea’s first and only comment on the incident came earlier on April 17 from its official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). The announcement said directly that that the North was not responsible for the sinking of the Cheonan. “The ruckus kicked up by the puppet authorities while peddling the story is designed to stir up the atmosphere of international sanctions against the north and increase pressure upon it in various aspects.” KCNA continued that South Korea’s “war maniacs” also want to justify policies antagonistic toward the North, which have driven relations between the two nations to their worst level.

The South's military has been under fire for its inadequate response to the incident, especially given that an overwhelming majority of South Korea's population believes North Korea is to blame. If proven that North Korea was involved, this incident will count as the second deadliest attack by the North since the Korean War—the first being the bombing of Korean Air Flight 587 in 1987 killing 115. It would also prove to be the deadliest military clash in terms of South Korean casualties since the war.

Finding an appropriate and adequate response will likely prove to be much more difficult than finding a culprit. Recently, Seoul's Foreign Minister, Yu Myung-hwan, announced that the process of restarting the six-way nuclear talks will undoubtedly be hampered if North Korea is found to be responsible. He suggested that Seoul would consider submitting the issue to the United Nations Security Council if the communist regime is accused of masterminding the sinking. For its part, the South Korean Board of Audit and Inspection announced that after the funeral, it would begin a probe into the military's botched crisis management and reporting structure. The nation's senior military commanders will also sit down this month to discuss problems in crisis management.

But so many from the international community are calling for more. As Glenn Kessler of the Washington Post commented at a recent KEI event, "Ignore North Korea at your peril." The United States and the ROK need a proactive policy of some sort that deals with all the questions that the North Korean government raises month by month by its actions. "I find it hard to see what the [current] policy is except that we're waiting for them, and maybe this [the sinking of the Cheonan] was North Korea's answer."

And there are other actions that will depend on the results of the investigation.

The remuneration to be given to the families of the 46 deceased Navy crewmembers, 38 of whom are now buried at the National Cemetery in Daejeon, will also depend on what caused the vessel to sink, possibly amounting to as much as five times the basic amount. Defense Ministry Kim Tae-young has pledged to provide the maximum settlement to the distraught families, compensating them as they would war victims, the highest level of state restitution.

If the North's involvement is confirmed, the ministry said, families of the late 36 commissioned and non-commissioned officers will be paid up to roughly \$321,000 by the ministry. Families of the other 10 conscripted Navy crewmembers will be given roughly \$180,000. If it is confirmed by the investigation that the ship's sinking was an accident and nothing to do with the North, each family will be given just \$33,000 in official compensation. However, families of the 46 dead and missing will also receive a monthly military pension, insurance payments where relevant, as well as moneys collected through various nationwide fund raising efforts.

The one-hour ceremony on April 29 ended with 46 of the Cheonan's surviving sailors, each carrying a portrait of a fallen comrade, leaving the base to the Navy Band's renditions of "The Song of the Cheonan" and "Let's Go to the Sea," two favorite military songs of the Cheonan crew.

The debates inside Seoul and Washington about what their response will be if it is proved that North Korea is to blame continue.