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The Cold War is Sustained Through Pyongyang: The East-West Divide in Northeast Asia

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STEVEN C. DENNEY, JUN 21 2012

In a recent conversation with a Korean bureaucrat from the Ministry of Unification, the author discussed what is now being acknowledged as a developing Pacific divide centered on North Korea. There is a divide emerging between the Continental Powers—China, Russia and North Korea—and the Oceanic Powers—the United States, South Korea and Japan. The recent U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral meeting that took place in Seoul on May 21, 2012 is indicative of the emerging bi-polar regional order revolving around North Korea.[1] The content of the meeting centered on finding ways for the three allies “to curb further provocations by North Korea amid concerns it may be preparing to proceed with a third nuclear test.” Although China and Russia are specifically mentioned as supportive of U.S.-ROK-Japanese efforts to curtail acts of provocation by North Korea, this is more likely a matter of rhetoric and show of diplomatic niceties disconnected from the geopolitical reality in the region.

From a geopolitical perspective, the meeting can be interpreted as a sign of the lingering East-West divide in northeast Asia. Though much has changed in the region since the Peninsula was first divided following World War II, there has been just as much continuity. In a way similar to Kim Il-sung’s strategy of exploiting the U.S.-Soviet divide in order to receive material aid and diplomatic support from Moscow, the current North Korea strategy is to manipulate the burgeoning U.S.-Sino split to the benefit of the current regime in Pyongyang under the leadership of Kim Jong-un. As Stephanie Kang notes in a recent piece for e-IR: “The North Korean regime has been an adroit user of the ‘wedge strategy’ to expose weaknesses in the relations between major powers by playing one off the other—U.S. driving a wedge between them.”[2] Although there are a number of other issues that act as a wedge dividing the U.S. and China in the Asia-Pacific, North Korea is clearly responsible for dividing the U.S. and China in northeastern region of the Pacific. To help put the May 21 Trilateral meeting into broader geopolitical perspective, a look at the events that took place in 2010 are instructive.

Following the sinking of the *Cheonan* in March of 2010, Victor Cha, in the July 2010 issue of *Comparative Connections* had the following to say:

The cacophony among the six parties [of the Six-Party framework] does not bode well for the talks’ resumption; indeed, disputes over the *Cheonan* incident have created a new Cold War divide pitting South Korea, the U.S., and Japan against China, Russia, and North Korea.[3]

In other words, the *Cheonan* incident clearly illuminated the wedge North Korea drove between major powers in the region. The responses by the major powers—most notably the U.S. and China—show how well North Korea’s “wedge strategy” is working.

Following the sinking, analysts found a “general consensus among policymakers in Seoul and Washington that the U.S.-ROK alliance is in the best shape it has been in recent years.” Instead of straining U.S.-ROK ties, “The *Cheonan*’s sinking brought together two already close allies to become united against” the threat from North Korea.[4] The subsequent “two-plus-two” meeting held in Seoul between Ministers Hillary Clinton and Robert Gates from the U.S. and ROK Ministers Yu Myung-hwan and Kim Tae-young represented an “upgrade’ of the U.S.-ROK alliance from a traditional military alliance to a more comprehensive one.”[5] In addition to making clear the high

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degree of solidarity between the United States and South Korea, the meeting was also used to organize “combined ROK-U.S. military exercises ... aimed at deterring war and maintaining peace.”[6] According to sources, “the first joint military exercises involved a U.S. aircraft carrier, the *U.S.S George Washington*, as well as 20 other ships and submarines, 200 aircraft, and 8,000 military personnel from both countries.”[7]

Contrast the joint U.S.-ROK response to the one from China and Russia. Out of the fear causing instability in the region, both China and Russia “strongly opposed any statement that blamed North Korea for the shelling incident and called upon South Korea not to aggravate the situation.”[8] In a move much more indicative of the divide between the U.S. and China, one *Choson Ilbo* article published shortly after the incident found that “China is apparently displeased that South Korea and the U.S. are maintaining strong cooperation after tentatively concluding that the Navy corvette *Cheonan* was sunk in a North Korean torpedo attack.”[9] Moreover, in the same article, participants representing the Chinese position at a forum discussing the *Cheonan* incident were reported to have shown “concerns that the Lee Myong-bak administration’s strengthened alliance with the U.S. is being seen as a move to restrain China’s rising power.”[10] After a few months had gone by and a team of international inspectors concluded that North Korea was indeed responsible, China began to acknowledge, in a roundabout kind of way, that it considers North Korea responsible, referring to the episode as “North Korea’s *Choenan* incident.”[11] Despite this ambiguous acknowledgement, China’s official line is to avoid the straw that might break the camels back. Beijing has yet to come out and explicitly condemn North Korea.

To balance against strong ties between Seoul and Washington, Beijing reaches out to Pyongyang—even if they do not really care to do so. Herein lies the success of North Korea’s wedge strategy. In a *38 North* article, David Kang argues that despite North Korea’s bad behavior, Beijing “continues to prioritize stability on its borders over the potential costs and chaos of causing regime collapse in North Korea.” This is, as Kang indicates, not done so out of “goodwill towards a communist neighbor, but rather out of clear self-interest.”[12] Aside from the instability that could ensue following a regime collapse in North Korea, it would also create a power vacuum that would not bode well for China. Long-time North Korea watcher Andrei Lankov argues that in the event of regime collapse, one of the chief concerns for people in Beijing would be American troops crossing the 38th Parallel (again).[13] As Lankov suggests, in addition to stability (a largely domestic issue for China), there is also a broader strategic issue—keeping American troops at bay in South Korea. Perhaps less willing than the Soviet Union during the Cold War era, China’s role in the region today as the Continental power is to support those who find themselves at odds with the America.

The shelling of Yeonpyeong-do in November of the same year could warrant another section of analysis, but it would seem much like a re-run of a bad movie. In this incident as well, a clear divergence is apparent between the Sino-U.S. responses. Like before, the U.S. aircraft carrier *U.S.S George Washington* departed for joint exercises in the Yellow Sea to re-establish deterrence;[14] and China urged all parties “to do things conducive to peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula” without condemning North Korea’s belligerency.[15] The fact that in the case of the Yeonpyeong-do shelling there was not even plausible deniability for North Korea makes China’s response that much more indicative of a clear Continental-Oceanic divide and the effectiveness of North Korea’s wedge strategy. In this context, China is the new Soviet Union.

Thus, seen from a broader geopolitical point-of-view, the May 21 Trilateral Meeting in Seoul is simply another event indicative of the Continental-Oceanic divide that has emerged. Despite the perception that Russia and China are supportive of U.S.-ROK-Japan pressure on North Korea to find a “different path,” it is more than likely that the two powers will prioritize their broader political and strategic goals in the region. To the chagrin of diplomats and policymakers in Seoul, Tokyo and Washington, this means taking a measured approach towards North Korea’s provocative behavior. An indication of what may come, in the event of a third nuclear test, is revealed in the dialogue between U.S. envoy for North Korea, Glyn Davies, and Special Representative Wu Dawei of the Chinese Government on the Korean Peninsular Affairs, that took place two days after the trilateral meeting. According to Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei, Dawei conveyed to Davies that, despite the shared view of “maintaining peace and stability of the Peninsula,” the two countries differ in their approach towards this goal.[16] The view communicated to Davies was that “China does not approve of any party’s action that might complicate the situation on the Peninsula.” A translation of Dawei’s “diplomat talk” could read as follows: In the event of a third nuclear test, all parties can expect a response by China similar to 2010. Though frustrating for the U.S., South Korea and Japan, it

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is the geopolitical reality in the region. Northeast Asia remains mired in a Cold War-*esque* East-West divide between the Continental and Oceanic powers.

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Steven C. Denney is a second year master's student at the Graduate School of International Studies, Yonsei University. He is the Editor in Chief of the *Yonsei Journal of International Studies* and an Assistant Editor for *SinoNK.com*. His research interests are in comparative politics and American foreign policy towards the Korean peninsula.

[1] For a report on the meeting, see: "S. Korea, U.S., Japan warn N. Korea over nuclear test, urge 'different path,'" *Yonhap News*, May 21, 2012, accessed June 16, 2012, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/fullstory/2012/05/21/59/4500000000AEN20120521004300315F.HTML>.

[2] Stephanie Nayoung Kang, "Regional Implications of the 21 May U.S.-South Korea-Japan Trilateral Meeting," *e-International Relations*, June 13, 2012, accessed June 16, 2012, <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/06/13/regional-implications-of-the-21-may-u-s-south-korea-japan-trilateral-meeting/>.

[3] Victor Cha and Ellen Kim, "The Sinking of the Cheonan," *Comparative Connections*, 12, no. 2 (July 2010), <http://csis.org/node/26181>.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Victor Cha and Ellen Kim, "Smooth Sailing in the Wake of *Cheonan*," *Comparative Connections*, 12, no. 3 (October 2010), <http://csis.org/node/27346>.

[6] U.S. Department of Defense, "Joint Press Conference with Secretary Gates, Secretary Clinton, and South Korean Official from Seoul, South Korea," July 21, 2010, accessed June 13, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4661>.

[7] "Smooth Sailing."

[8] Victor Cha and Ellen Kim, "A Tumultuous U.S. Ending of Year 2010," *Comparative Connections*, 12, no. 4 (January 2011), <http://csis.org/node/28679>.

[9] "China Signals Displeasure with Cheonan Reaction," *Chosun Ilbo*, May 19, 2012, accessed June 13, 2012, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/05/19/2010051901203.html.

[10] Ibid.

[11] "China Hints at N. Korean Built in Cheonan Sinking," *Chosun Ilbo*, September 1, 2010, accessed June 15, 2012, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/09/01/2010090101011.html.

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[12] David Kang, "China and the Cheonan Incident," *38 North*, June 2, 2012, accessed June 15, 2012, <http://38north.org/2010/06/china-and-the-cheonan-incident/>.

[13] Steven C. Denney, "China's Pragmatic Approach to the North Korean Problem: Andrei Lankov on What China Wants," *SinoNK*, April 11, 2012, accessed June 15, 2012, <http://sinonk.com/2012/04/11/lankov-on-china-nk/>.

[14] John Pomfret, "U.S. aircraft carrier's arrival off Korean peninsula also sends a message to China," November 25, 2012, accessed June 13, 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/24/AR2010112407028.html>.

[15] "China expresses concern over alleged exchange of fire between DPRK, ROK," *Xinhua*, November 23, 2012, accessed June 13, 2012, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-11/23/c_13618711.htm.

[16] "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Regular Press Conference on May 23, 2012," May 24, 2012, accessed June 16, 2012, <http://cebu.china-consulate.org/eng/fyrth/t935032.htm>.