Let’s Turn Korea’s West Sea (the Sea of Dispute) into a Sea of Peace and Prosperity

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(Director of the South Korean National Intelligence Service under the Government of President Roh Moo-hyun, 2003-2007)

Translated by Gavan McCormack

1. Sea of Dispute, The West Sea

Despite the fact that the Korean War, the greatest tragedy in modern Korean history, ended on July 7, 1953 with an armistice, the West Sea remains contested, a powder keg capable of exploding into a second Korean War or a third World War.

Under the armistice agreement was reached on a Military Demarcation Line (MDL) on land according to the military line of contact (LC), but at sea no such Military Demarcation Line could be agreed. At that time, the UN forces, possessing overwhelming naval power, controlled most of the regions of the East Sea (Japan Sea) and West Sea (Yellow Sea) and the islands in them, and also some contiguous land areas to the north. After prolonged debate, it was agreed to leave the five islands in the West Sea south of the 38th parallel line under UN forces and hand the islands to the north of the 38th parallel to North Korea. Both sides agreed that the MDL should extent horizontally into the East Sea.

However, the problem was the West Sea. While the UN side, following the international custom of the time, sought to define territorial waters as within three nautical miles of the coastline, North Korea claimed twelve nautical miles. Just over a month after the settlement of armistice, on August 30, 1953, the commander of the UN forces, Mark W. Clark, unilaterally and without prior discussion with the north, proclaimed “the mid-point line between the five West Sea islands [Baengnyeong, Daecheong, Socheong, Yeonpyeong, and U] and the North Korean coast” as a Northern Limit Line (NLL) or line of limitation of naval patrol activities, in order to “prevent accidental naval conflict between south and north and for the sake of stable management of the armistice system.”

Up until 1973, North Korea made no particular issue of the NLL, even though crossing it from time to time. But over a period of two months from October of that year, North Korea deliberately transgressed the NLL on 43 occasions. Further, at the Military Armistice Commission at Panmunjom in December, it unilaterally declared “Navigation Rules for the Five Islands of the West Sea” under which “since the maritime areas to the North-west of the provincial boundaries of Hwanghae and Kyongki provinces belong to us, South Korean vessels need a permit from our authorities to go to and from the five West Sea islands.” Since then, North Korea began openly crossing over the NLL.

Despite its persistent encroachments over the NLL, turning it into something in name only, in the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement of 1992
North Korea agreed to treat the NLL as an “inviolable maritime boundary.” Furthermore, North Korea raised no objection to the (draft) amendments to its “Flight Information Regions” made by South Korea in its May 1993 ‘Flight-Navigation Plan,’ as published by the International Civil Aviation Organization, between 1993 when it was published and January 1998 when it came into effect, or even afterwards. Furthermore, there were cases, in June 2002 and November 2003, when North Korea de facto recognized the existence of the NLL by its patrol vessels crossing the NLL to collect shipping being returned by the South Korean side.

Nonetheless, North Korean patrol boats continually transgressed the NLL especially during the crab-fishing season in May and June every year, under the pretext of protecting North Korean fishing boats.

Even under the Northern-embracing policies of the Kim Dae-jung government from February 1998, the “first Yeonpyeong naval battle” occurred on June 15 1999 during the crab-fishing season. Because of the overwhelming South Korean naval advantage, one North Korean torpedo speedboat was sunk and five other warships severely damaged and four others moderately damaged. At least 30 North Korean soldiers were killed and another 70 injured. On the South Korean side, one patrol ship and four high-speed vessels suffered minor damage and nine soldiers suffered minor injuries. It was an overwhelming victory for the South. The South Korean government then directed the implementation of a five-stage rules of engagement “in order to clearly indicate our determination to defend the NLL and to prevent accidental tension over NLL from escalating.” In case of North Korean vessels crossing the NLL, 1) first, a warning is to be broadcast, 2) second, a show of force, 3) third, if North Korean vessels still do not retreat, start to drive the vessels away, followed by 4) a warning shot, and 5) if the North Korean vessel shoots back, then we shoot back to destroy it.

After its crushing defeat in “the first Yeonpyeong naval battle,” North Korea completely rejected the NLL, substituting for it a “West Sea Maritime Military Demarcation Line” based on a “12 nautical mile limit principle” that began from a line through the mid Han River estuary. This “West Sea Maritime Military Demarcation Line” not only transgressed South Korean sovereignty by completely cutting off the South Korean islands of Baengnyeong, Dae-cheong, Seocheong, and Yeonpyeong, but was also in breach of general principles of international law which included not only land territorial coast line but also island coast lines.

Subsequently, in March 2000 North Korea promulgated new “Regulations concerning Navigation in Vicinity of the Five Islands in the West Sea” which required that “any US military vessels or South Korean civilian ships entering the region to the north of the military demarcation line must use one or other of the two routes designated by North Korea.”

In June 2000, one year after “the first Yeonpyeong naval battle,” President Kim Dae-jung visited Pyongyang for an historic summit meeting with North Korean Defence Commission chairman Kim Jung-il. However, despite the dramatic progress in the South-North relationship after their “June 15 South-North Joint declaration,” the “second Yeonpyeong naval battle” nevertheless took place on June 29, 2002. On this occasion, while South Korean high-speed vessels were at Phase 2 (show of force) under the 5 stage “Rules of Engagement,” in response to a North Korean patrol vessel that had encroached over the NLL, the North Korean patrol vessel attacked them. Six of our soldiers were killed and eighteen wounded, and while being towed away the high speed vessel from our side sank. On the North Korean side one vessel was badly
damaged and towed away and it was estimated that around 30 members of its crew, including the captain, were injured. North Korea’s sudden attack was retaliation for defeat in “the first Yeonpyeong naval battle.” Conservative critics in South Korea were critical that “our officers and men died because of following mistaken rules of engagement.” Consequently, the “five stage rules of engagement” were amended by the Lee government that took office in February 2008.


2. The South-North Korean Agreement on Establishing a Sea of Peace and Prosperity

(i) The Special Directive issued by President Roh on the Prevention of Military Clashes in the West Sea

As soon as he assumed office in February 2003, President Roh Moo-hyun issued special instructions designed to prevent any such South-North military clashes as the first and second Yeonpyeong naval battles. Thereafter, between May 2004 and December 2007, at the initiative of the South Korean side, high-level talks between South and North Korean senior military officers were conducted on seven occasions, alternating between locations in the South and in the North. Notably during the second talks between senior military officers of South and North held at Mt Sorak in June 2004, both sides agreed on a common inter-ship radio frequency as a means to prevent accidental conflict. At subsequent South-North talks between senior military officers, both sides agreed on the “establishment of common fishing grounds in the West Sea,” on “direct sea access for North Korean civilian ships to the port of Haeju,” and on “necessary military guarantee measures for South-North economic exchange and cooperation.” Although the gap between the two could not be bridged when it came to military matters, still, it was thanks to such measures that placed an emphasis on building military trust, even if at an elementary level, that there was not a single military confrontation along the NLL in the West Sea during the period of the Roh government.

On the basis of adapting and developing the “sunshine policy,” the Roh government proposed a “peace and prosperity policy” as its diplomatic policy for North Korea and
Northeast Asia. It was a plan for the peaceful development of the Korean peninsula that combined “peace” at the security level with “prosperity” at the economic level. Even during the period of heightened crisis that followed North Korea’s “nuclear possession declaration” on February 10 2005, the Roh government affirmed the “‘3 No’ principles of policy towards the North: ‘no war on the Korean peninsula,’ ‘no sanctions or blockade of North Korea,’ and ‘no attempt to cause the collapse of the North Korean regime’.” The Roh Moo-hyun government’s Peace and prosperity policies bore fruit in the historic “October 4 South-North Summit Declaration,” in which both sides agreed on the establishment of “West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation” designed to convert the West Sea from a “sea of conflict” to a “sea of peace and prosperity.”

(ii) “The West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation” – The Agreement

In the fifth article of the South-North Summit Declaration signed at Pyongyang on October 4, 2007, president Roh Moo-hyun and chairman Kim Jong-il agreed that “the South and North would pave the way for a ‘West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation’ in the Haeju region, establish a joint fishery zone and a maritime zone of peace, construct an Economic Special Zone centering on the port of Haeju, allow the direct sea access to Haeju for civilian ships, and positively promote shared usage of the Han River estuary.”

From the beginning of August 2007, when agreement was reached to hold the second South-North Summit in Pyongyang between August 27 and 30, 2007, President Roh directed the drawing up of a plan for converting the West Sea, the “Sea of Conflict,” into a “sea of peace and prosperity,” personally collecting data and materials and organizing a series of discussions with related officials. As the summit was postponed to the period October 2-4 due to flood damage in mid-August in North Korea, closer attention was paid to the plan for a “West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation” and a talks strategy was drawn up that included “Draft Items for Agreement at the Summit Plenary” and “Draft Items to be drawn up separately for signature.”

When President Roh Moo-hyun proposed his plan for the “West Sea Special Zone” during the morning session of the Second South-North Summit on October 3 2007, National Defence Commission chairman Kim Jong-il seems to have considered it impractical in light of the existing situation of military confrontation in the West Sea and so evaded the discussion by saying, “let the various problems be referred for discussion at the Prime Ministerial level.” In response, president Roh Moo-hyun made greater efforts to press his point, emphasizing its importance from three aspects: first, as the optimal way to resolve possible military confrontation in the West Sea; second, that the West Coast Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation would become the axis of joint South-North prosperity in a future “West Sea Coastal Era,” and third, that not only would it construct peace by ending confrontation in the West Sea but that it was also a comprehensive plan for developing South-North economic cooperation in the West Sea.

Kim Jong-il visits the lodging of the Roh
Party during The South-North Summit, Pyongyang, October 2007. Kim Man-bok is on the right.

At the afternoon session on the same day, Chairman Kim Jong-il welcomed President Roh’s proposal for a West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation, saying, “I discussed the matter over lunch with senior responsible officials of the National Defense Commission. When I raised the possibility of a Haeju Industrial Complex, they replied that that would present no problem. Not only would Haeju itself be fine but Kang-ryŏng township, linking Haeju and the Kaesong industrial complex, and Haeju port, could also be developed.”

(iii) The Significance of the “West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation”

The West Sea: Sea of Peace and Cooperation

Within the West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation, a joint fishery zone and a marine zone of peace were to be set up with an equal area on either side of the NLL. The naval forces of both sides were to be withdrawn beyond that zone and replaced by patrols of lightly armed maritime police vessels. A Haeju Special Economic Zone was also to be developed on contiguous shore land to the northeast of the joint fisheries zone and the maritime zone of peace. As North Korean armed forces were redeployed to the rear to allow the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the tourist road to Mt Kumkang to go ahead, so a significant proportion of North Korea’s heavy military concentration in Haeju would presumably have to be withdrawn. Further, if the Haeju economic special zone were to be connected by land with the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Incheon Industrial Zone, the West Sea coastal area would be transformed from “frontline military confrontation” to “National Economic Community,” thus contributing not only to peace on the Korean peninsula but to the unification that is the deep desire of the Korean people.

The undeveloped area of the Han River estuary could also be jointly developed. The total area of the estuary, stretching from downstream on the Imjin River at the end-point of the MDL to Mal Island, west of Kanghwa island where the NLL begins, is around 280 square kilometers. Enough gravel has accumulated around the mouth of the Han River to meet the needs of Seoul and the capital region for more than 20 years. It goes without saying that joint development of the Han River mouth would serve to ease military tensions. After dredging the river and solving military problems, it should be possible to renovate the waterways of Han River maritime routes. Further, if a direct route is opened to Haeju, that would contribute not only to a dramatic reduction in the cost of moving freight as South-North economic cooperation evolves, but it would also alleviate military tensions in the West Sea area.

The West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation would be nothing short of a complete paradigm shift, transforming the West Sea, a danger zone where there is always the risk of military confrontation, so that South and North come together not in military ways but in terms of permanently reducing tension and establishing peace through economic cooperation and mutual prosperity. The
epochal, counter-intuitive quality of the “West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation” lies in the fact that it does not stir up the problem of the maritime border line but instead develops a mutually beneficial economic system, thus converting a “zero-sum” military game into a “win-win” economic game.

(iv) Measures Subsequent to the Agreement for the Establishment of “West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation”

In concrete terms, the West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation included the following: 1) establishment of a Joint Fishery Zone, 2) establishment of a Maritime Zone of Peace, 3) establishment of a special economic zone and utilization of Haeju port, 4) permission for direct access to Haeju for civilian vessels, and 5) shared usage of the Han River estuary. Although no part of the agreement was without significance, in particular the military and economic impact of the establishment of the joint fishery zone and its consequences for the development of South-North relations could easily be imagined. On the southern side, we made efforts to have this spelled out in more concrete terms in the October 4 South-North Summit Declaration, but time ran out before we could come to a detailed agreement.

At this point the leaders of South and North agreed to conduct a Second Round of South-North Defense Ministers Meeting at Pyongyang for three days from November 27, 2007 to discuss and come to agreement on the detailed blueprint of the “West Sea Zone of Peace and Economic Cooperation,” and this was included in the October 4 South-North Summit Declaration. However, at the second South-North Defense Ministers’ Meeting, between Deputy Defense Minister Kim Chang-su from the South and Korean People’s Army’s military affairs Chief Kim Il-chol from the North, it was only possible to come to an agreement in principle “that South and North would adopt military guarantee measures for the ‘West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation.’” A serious error was made by agreeing to “refer the matter of military guarantees in concrete cases to be discussed and agreed as a matter of highest priority at a separate meeting of South-North working-level military officials.” This is something that will have to be dealt with in concrete terms by the convening of a third South-North Defense Ministers’ meeting.

3. The West Sea Transformed into a “Sea of War”

(i) The Lee Myung-bak Government’s Hard-Line policy toward North Korea and the Worsening of the South-North Relationship

By reinforcing its exclusive strategic cooperation with Japan and the United States under the US-South Korea alliance, and by taking the lead in resolutions at the United Nations denouncing North Korea on human rights matters, the Lee Myung-bak government has followed a consistent line of containment of North Korea. By linking the North Korean nuclear issue and the South-North Korea relationship, it has also reverted to Cold War policies of confrontation with the North, insisting that, “in case of a North Korean preemptive nuclear attack being imminent, South Korea would not hold back from a pin-point attack on the North’s nuclear facilities.” In this context, on May 25, 2009, North Korea carried out its second nuclear test, and South Korea the following day declared that it would participate in full in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI, designed to prevent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction), meaning that South Korean warships might inspect or detain North Korean cargo boats.

Furthermore, adopting the conservative critique of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun “rules of engagement based on proportionality,” designed to “prevent local conflicts escalating into all-out war,” that under them the lives of soldiers became collateral, the
Lee Myung-bak government reduced the rules of engagement at sea to the following steps: 1) after broadcast of a warning, (skipping the process of intimidation and moves to intercept) to proceed directly to 2) warning fire and then 3) and then to attack designed to destroy. By doing this, the Lee Myung-bak government made clear its intention to“make a determined, preemptive attack in the event of any North Korean NLL provocation.” At this point, the Daecheong naval battle occurred on November 20 2009, resulting in destruction of North Korean naval guns and machine guns and partial destruction of their patrol vessel without any harm on our side. The battle ended in unilateral victory for the South Korean side.

(ii) The Cheonan Incident and its Significance

After its “great defeat” in the Daecheong naval battle, North Korea declared that, for the period from January to March 2010, five maritime areas in the vicinity of the NLL were “prohibited zones for navigation” and carried out live fire drills along the coast. Then, on March 26, the South Korean anti-submarine patrol vessel, Cheonan, split in two and sank. Following an analysis of the announcements of the South Korean Ministry of Defense and media reports from both Korea and overseas, the sinking of Cheonan gave rise to the following serious security problems.

First, it demonstrated problems in South Korea’s anti-submarine patrolling.

Second, the possibility that a conflict in the West Sea might lead to the outbreak of a second Korean War emerged as a realistic concern. Because of the Cheonan Incident, South Korea suspended aid to North Korea, discontinued relations, and accused North Korea of a “torpedo attack” before the UN Security Council. North Korea responded angrily that, it “had nothing to do with the sinking of the Cheonan.” And it reinforced its confrontation with South Korea by declaring that it would have “no further discussions or contact with South Korea during the presidency of Lee Myung-bak.” With the United States and Japan affirming total support for the findings of the South Korean government’s investigation, but China and Russia supporting North Korea, the situation surrounding the Korean peninsula was thrown back to the Cold War. The conduct of joint US-South Korea anti-submarine drills in the East Sea late in July escalated military tensions on the peninsula to new heights.

Third, frictions within South Korean society deepened, eroding the national strength. Twenty one percent of the people, and in particular forty nine percent of young people in their twenties, did not believe the government report which claimed the “sinking of the Cheonan” was due to an act of North Korea. Since the Government hurried to publish its findings without clear explanation of matters such as “the precise moment of the Cheonan’s sinking,” or “the reason for Sokcho firing its gun,” or “the escape route of the North Korean submarine,” various doubts remained unresolved. Furthermore, when one considers the findings of the independent Russian investigation as reported by the media, the following become apparent: 1) there was a discrepancy of five minutes between the last moment captured by CCTV on the Cheonan as “11:17.03 pm on 26 March,” and the three times revised hour of the sinking (“11:22 pm”) according to the South Korean government, 2) all of the propeller blades on the right side and two on the left side were damaged where the vessel made contact with the sea floor, and 3) it was possible that the Cheonan might have been blown up by a mine. On July 27, 2010, the South Korean Department of Defense rebutted the findings of the Russian investigation by saying 1) although there were, in all, eleven cameras on the Cheonan, they had not been adjusted since their installation and therefore there might be difference between the time they showed and the actual time, 2) based on the law of inertia, the blades on the propeller’s right side had been bent inwards due to a
sudden stop caused by the explosion and 3) all the mines that had been set in the vicinity of where the Cheonan sank had been disabled. Still, many specialists were not persuaded by the rebuttal. And, according to an opinion survey conducted after the findings of the independent Russian investigation had been revealed, only 32.5 percent of the people believed the finding of the South Korean government’s investigation report that “the sinking of Cheonan was due to an act of North Korea.”

At the same time, the United States, with the world’s best intelligence capacity, was negative on the involvement of North Korea, saying on March 30, right after the incident, “there are no grounds for thinking that any third party was involved in the sinking of the Cheonan.” However, following the May 20 publication of the South Korean government’s investigation findings, and without revealing any investigation or analysis of its own, the US just kept repeating that “the United States fully supports the findings of the South Korean government’s investigation,” leaving to the South Korean government the responsibility of resolving the doubts.

(iii) Lessons from the Cheonan Incident

Since there is no guarantee that a tragedy such as the Cheonan incident will not recur, and since it is possible that an all-out war could ensue from clashes over the NLL, we have to draw out the lessons from the present incident and make concentrated efforts in order to prevent its recurrence.

First, new defences against any asymmetric attack by North Korea in the West Sea are necessary.

Second, we must strengthen our security. The Roh Moo-hyun government set a goal of an annual increase of 9 per cent in outlays on security and self-reliant national defense, and in fact did actually increase spending by 8.8 per cent. The rate of increase in national defence expenditure under the current government of Lee Myung-bak is only around 3.4%.

Third, the government should heed the demand of citizens who desire peace not war. Since it became clear from the results of June 2 local government elections that people want peace, not war, we have to seek ways to construct peace on the Korean peninsula. For this, all channels of South-North communication have to be quickly restored and expanded and the accumulation of problems between the two sides resolved through dialogue. In particular, communication must be restored between the ships and naval commands of South and North, and the system of emergency communications between responsible staff offices of both sides must be restored. If necessary, unofficial delegates should be exchanged, and as a further step in this direction, a third South-North Summit Meeting should be promoted.

Fourth, the frictions within South Korean society over North Korea must be resolved. Though divided like us due to the Cold War confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union, it is already twenty years since Germany was unified. Still divided, we remain the world’s only “Cold War desert island.” There are various factors that made German reunification possible, but the most significant is that there was no history of internecine killing in Germany. It goes without saying that because of this tragic history unification is difficult for us, frictions within South Korea are exacerbated, and South and North contend fiercely, shouting abuse at each other.

Fifth, South Korea must keep working to strengthen diplomatic ties with China, overcoming the slight estrangement that has affected the relationship recently due to the Cheonan incident, and improving the relationship.

Lastly, the most certain measure to prevent any
second Cheonan sinking is to implement the South-North Summit Agreement by establishing the “West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation,” thereby transforming the “West Sea, the Sea of Conflict” into the “West Sea, Sea of Peace and Prosperity.” To do that, our government must fulfill its historic responsibilities by restoring trust between South and North, fulfilling the “October 4 South-North Summit Declaration,” establishing peace, and paving the way for reunification.

Postscript

The above text was written prior to the Yeonpyeong incident of November 23, 2010. At that time, the author asserted that “there must be no repetition of South-North military clashes along the NLL. To that end, while strengthening the country’s defences, the Lee Myung-bak government should implement the South-North Summit Agreement on establishing the ‘West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation.’” This author also felt that the Lee Myung-bak government could learn a lesson from the sinking of the Cheonan and take effective measures for peace and security along the NLL.

However, at the Yongsan War Memorial museum on May 24, 2010, President Lee Myung-bak commented on the Cheonan incident that, “the sinking of the Cheonan was a North Korean military provocation and an attack on the Republic of Korea” and “North Korea will have to pay a price for its action.” Also, the Lee Myung-bak government announced that “we will proceed with determination to take necessary measures to pursue North Korea’s responsibility,” and said that it was “annulling the South-North Maritime Agreement and suspending trade and exchange between South and North.” Since then, the South Korean government filed its complaint about the sinking of the Cheonan with the UN Security Council. However, on July 9, 2010, the UN Security Council, able only to loosely cobble together the demands of China and Russia on the one hand, and Japan, the US and South Korea on the other, simply issued a Statement in the name of the president of the Council, which said, “taking note of the results of the joint civil-military investigation conducted by five countries under the direction of South Korea which came to the conclusion that North Korea was responsible for the sinking of Cheonan, we express our deep concern. We are also concerned with North Korea’s response denying any connection with this incident, and with the responses from other related countries.”

Amid the deterioration in the security situation on the Korean peninsula caused by the sinking of the Cheonan, the “Yeonpyeong attack” occurred on November 23, 2010. From November 22, South Korea’s military had been conducting live shooting training into the seas around Yeonpyeong Island as part of “Hokuk exercise.” It ignored North Korea’s repeated warnings by telephone during the morning of 23rd that these South Korean shooting exercises “constitute de facto an attack on the North,” and, at 2:25 pm on November 23, North Korean troops fired a barrage of 150 artillery shells at Yeonpyeong Island. 13 minutes later, South Korean forces retaliated by shooting 50 artillery shells to which North Korea responded with 20 artillery shells at around 3:12. Three minutes later, our troops responded with 30 more artillery shells. We have no way of knowing the damage inflicted on the North Korean side, but the South Korean side lost two marines and two civilians. To put it simply, “defeat in the battle of Yeonpyeong” blew a large hole in South Korea’s security system.

After “defeat in the battle of Yeonpyeong,” there was dissension in the ranks of the South Korean government. The immediate response of President Lee Myung-bak to the attack on Yeonpyeong Island was to order “resolute response while managing things carefully to
avoid escalation.” However, as time passed and criticism of “the lukewarm presidential directive” spread, he changed it to “retaliate with double the force” and “attack them if there is any sign they are about to fire.” Furthermore, the President defended himself saying that there had been “mistakes” in the process of communication of directives from the head of National Security Council and the Blue House spokesman. However, the Minister of National Defense, Kim, Tae-young, who had been a participant in the National Assembly’s Defense Committee meeting, said that the directive of “resolute response while managing things carefully to avoid escalation” had been issued. The people knew who to believe.

It is not surprising that people were confused by the conflicting statements. Although he was the responsible minister, Kim Tae-young, came one hour late to the emergency ministerial meeting called by the president’s office to discuss the attacks on Yeonpyeong Island. Responding to congressional representatives who criticized the “belated response of the military,” he explained that actual battle was different from computer games and that “anyone who had served in the military would know this,” thereby insulting core officials who had not served in the military. Subsequently, Defense Minister Kim was reshuffled without any clear reason being given.

Around this time, on November 28 ‘Wikileaks’ released some of the 250,000 US State Department diplomatic cables it had acquired, including seven cables from the US embassy in Seoul to Washington. The summary they gave of what had been said by senior officials in Seoul included the following:

1) North Korea is likely to sell to some other country not only nuclear technology but also plutonium.

2) Chairman Kim Jung-il is not likely to live more than another three to five years and North Korea would likely collapse within two or three years after his death.

3) North Korea’s military provocation against South Korea is a last-ditch struggle by a collapsing dictatorship.

4) The Lee Myung-bak government has resolved to put a freeze on South-North relations for the remainder of its term.

5) When President Lee Myung-bak raised the situation in North Korea during the China-South Korea summit meeting with President Hu Jintao in 2008, asking whether “China has contingency plans,” Hu pretended that he had not heard (according to a US diplomat).

6) In the event of a North Korean collapse, there is no dissent among South Korean government departments from the proposition that South Korea and the United States would have to move swiftly to unify the Korean peninsula.

7) In case of its unification of the peninsula, South Korea planned to placate China by guaranteeing participation by Chinese enterprises in the development of North Korea’s rich underground resources.

8) The new generation of leaders in China would not be worried about unification of the Korean peninsula under South Korea or about a “purely benign” alliance between a unified Korea and the US.
Reading the above reports in the media, this author becomes even more firmly convinced that the present situation of heightened tension on the Korean peninsula was due to “the Lee government exacerbating relations with the north because it is convinced that North Korea will collapse.” Even in the short period remaining of his term of office, President Lee Myung-bak must make efforts to resume the Six Party conference to achieve a peaceful resolution of the North’s nuclear problem and contribute to the peace and stability of Northeast Asia by implementing existing agreements for the establishment of the “West Sea Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation,” towards the ultimate goal of peaceful unification of the Korean peninsula.

We must not sacrifice any more of our officers and soldiers, or see the lives and property of more innocent civilians destroyed, because of the freeze in South-North relations.

**Author on front page of Joongang ilbo, January 10, 2008**

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Kim for revealing in the Sekai article matters only known to him through his official position as head of the National Intelligence Service. Days later (31 January), Sekai editor Okamoto Atsushi commented on the home page of Sekai that the charges seemed to signify “oppression of views critical of the Lee Myung-bak government’s policies,” adding that “South Korea since its democratization has earned the profound respect of democratic countries for the free and vigorous expression of opinion. It would be a matter of deep concern if it were now to revert to military government style practices under which once again the state intimidated and oppressed opinion...”

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Notes

1 The South Korean Navy’s combat corvette Sokcho fired northward at an unidentified object near Baengnyeong Island in the Yellow Sea shortly after the sinking of the Cheonan. The National Defense Ministry later explained that the target on the radar was identified as a flock of birds. (translator’s note).

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