

## **By Thomas French**

### North Korea's 'Falklands Moment'?

Argentina launched its bid to recapture the Falkland Islands from Britain in 1982 largely in response to bolster the Junta's tottering legitimacy and popularity. This move aimed at diverting the people's attention from the country's chronic economic problems and the regime's ongoing human rights violations through uniting them in a patriotic struggle in defence of their homeland.

This form of aggression to preserve the ruling elite could have some parallels in present day North Korea. Reeling from catastrophic monetary reform which further weakened an already embattled economy, alleged public unrest, and with a frail and ailing leader keen to quickly install a successor, the North may be attempting to steer a similar course, albeit without actually going to war, if possible. Through provoking the South through the sinking of the Cheonan, the Kim Jong Il regime may be seeking to re-legitimise itself as the guardian and rightful ruler of North Korea, through creating an image of being threatened by the South. The fact that there has been virtually no mention of the sinking of the Cheonan in the North Korean press, and that the regime disputes the fact that it was they who sunk the ship illustrates this. Thus the familiar North Korean propaganda image of being threatened by a belligerent neighbour supported by the United States would actually ring true to a certain extent and the likely resulting public anger could be harnessed to boosting the support for the faltering regime.

The regime must be aware that if it came to war the North would almost certainly be defeated, but brinkmanship, although risky, could be one of the few tricks the regime have left in order to hold on to power.

Paradoxically, the efforts by the regime to cling on to power, although possibly successful in the short term could well scupper North Korea in the long term, with the most likely outcome of further, harsher sanctions being certain to further damage an already moribund economy.

However, if the regime's senior leadership thinks that it is in imminent mortal danger, a 'roll of the dice' may result, with the leadership taking the very slim chance of military success in preference to the perceived certainty of destruction at the hands of their own people.

### South Korean responses

With the discovery that the North was behind the sinking of the Cheonan, the question arises of what the South could or will do in response. With the North vowing that even the application

of sanctions, will result in 'all out war' the South must tread carefully, but what are the possible avenues actions are available to a country which has already promised 'resolute measures' to punish the North?

### Sanctions

Although the least punitive of the measures available even the introduction of further economic sanctions has the chance of further escalating the crisis. With the North's economy already weak after the abysmal failure of recent monetary reform and the alleged resulting internal unrest, the further blow of renewed, strict sanctions could topple the Kim regime. This could trigger a collapse of the North, resulting in waves of refugees fleeing to China and the South, an outcome the Chinese are especially keen to avoid. The Chinese fears of North Korean collapse, the fact that they are the regime's major supporter and its second largest trading partner (after the south) and their desire to see the regime survive may see them attempt to undermine or weaken any package of sanctions proposed through the UN.

### Naval blockade

Another, more aggressive, response and one which could be taken in tandem with sanctions could be the imposition of a naval blockade of the Northern ports by the Southern Navy. Whether the South Korean Navy could handle this task without US support is debateable, and whether the US would be willing to give such support is highly questionable. Furthermore, with most of North Korea's trade taking place across its land borders the economic impact might not justify such a provocative move. However, the South Korean public may not be satisfied with sanctions alone and a move such as this, being short of military action, might prove an acceptable alternative. Such an option could also provide an opportunity in which the dented pride of the South Korean Navy could be somewhat restored.

### Military action

Whether in the form of a limited airstrike against the North's nuclear, missile, aerial or naval facilities, or a larger scale attack, this option is both the most dangerous and the least likely. Despite the fact that the South, supported by the US and possibly other allies would almost certainly defeat the North, the damage caused to the South would be extensive. Despite possessing a huge military much of the North Korean arsenal is entirely obsolete and although almost certain to be defeated by the vastly technologically superior Southern / US forces, North Korean missiles could devastate Seoul and strike as far as major cities in neighbouring Japan. With the staunch opposition of a United States unwilling to become involved in third simultaneous war, and the reluctance of the South to risk widespread devastation, this option seems very unlikely.

Tom French is a graduate of Durham University and is currently completing his PhD in Northeast Asian Security from Southampton University.

US House Armed Services Committee Chairman Ike Skelton said of the report investigating the sinking of the Republic of Korea Navy Ship, the Cheonan, released yesterday:

"I am deeply troubled by the report issued today by a team of international investigators that points to the conclusion that North Korea was responsible for a torpedo attack against the Republic of Korea Navy Ship, the Cheonan, on March 26th. The loss of 46 Korean sailors on that ship was a tragedy and I strongly condemn any act of aggression by North Korea that led to their deaths.

"Today's report suggests that North Korea has once again defied international law and undermined international peace and security, in direct violation of the Armistice Agreement. Such behavior is unacceptable.

"I am pleased that the Obama Administration is making efforts to fully support the Republic of Korea, both in securing justice for the 46 sailors killed in this attack and in its defense against further acts of aggression. And I encourage the Administration to continue working closely with the Republic of Korea and our other allies and partners to ensure peace and stability in the region."