

The Sinking of the Cheonan

A Blog Review by

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Shock Wave and Bubble: The Untruth About the Cheonan

By Hilary Keenan

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<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=20408>.

Ill-informed speculation about who sank the Cheonan is basically not worth the time and effort of a response. It is so obvious who did it that the boring business of having to refute unfounded claims to the contrary is a task best left to those who may be compelled to do so. Those unfortunate souls may enter the debate for political reasons—the desire to counter the views of the naysayers in some campaign—or diplomatic—the need to explain what happened to foreign governments. In my case, as one who has been writing and reporting from South Korea, has visited North Korea on the usual tourist’s trip a number of times and has been a correspondent in Asia for too many years, I am responding here for one simple reason. Randal Marlin, editor and professor, whom I knew years ago at college, with whom I worked on the campus paper, has asked me to do so.

In the case of the article by Hilary Keenan on which I have been asked to comment, the term “small coterie” appears twice, in the opening sentence and in the ending, with reference to “a small coterie” of insiders, in the United States and South Korea, who might *really* know what happened. I have no idea what’s meant by a “small coterie”—how many people make up a “coterie”, at what point is a “coterie” judged to be “small” or mid-sized or even large.

For that matter, I’m not even sure exactly what is a coterie—is it the numerical opposite of a “horde” or maybe “masses”? One obvious point, though, is that this “coterie” should extend beyond citizens of the U.S. and South Korea since people from several other countries participated in the investigation of the sinking of the Cheonan on March 26 in the Yellow Sea with a loss of 46 lives, and some of them would have the requisite insider’s insight. Many others have first-hand knowledge of the sinking and investigation, beginning with the 58 who survived. Then there are those who rescued survivors or spent months searching for wreckage and, finally, many more who pored over the evidence, which by now is immense. It is not clear, nor is it

meant to be clear, how one qualifies as a member of Keenan's "coterie". Might there be an admissions committee of like-minded academic gatekeepers?

It would seem like an extraordinary waste of time to have to parse the waffling "statement" issued by the United Nations Security Council, or the State Department response, or *New York Times* editorials, which the writer seems to like for saying what he wants said but to dislike for saying what he does not want said. I mean, who cares? This stuff has nothing to do with the sinking as such, though there is a certain entertainment value in the seriousness with which he cites an early off-hand comment by a Blue House spokesman who indicated that who sank the ship was not clear. Would he have preferred for the Blue House or ministry of national defence to have been making accusations before the investigation began? The fact that these quotes came from the website of *Hankyoreh Sinmun*, an opposition voice that strongly opposes the current South Korean government, raises the added question of their context and completeness. His selectivity gets even funnier when he quotes the London *Daily Mail* on uncertainty about the investigation. I've never seen the *Daily Mail* taken quite so seriously other than on stories about British royal scandals and political brouhahas.

What matters is what happened and what came out in the months of investigation. Come to that, he does not seem to like the fact that South Korea's ministry of national defence should have taken it upon itself to investigate the episode. Oh dear. Since when did a defence ministry not have the right to look into the sinking of one of its ships? He notes that most of the investigators were from the ministry or Korean think tanks and institutes. Was that a mistake for South Korean experts to take the lead? He thinks still less of the minority of foreign experts who were called in to assist. Did he want more of them? Should the team have been half Korean, half foreign? Or would he have preferred that South Korea turn the whole investigation of the death of its sailors and the loss of its ship to an international agency? (He seems to have forgotten it was a South Korean ship that sank and South Koreans who died).

As for the non-participation of China and Russia, they wanted no part of the investigation—just the right to see the results. Neither has publicized technical analyses, but China's overwhelming desire is for "stability" on the Korean peninsula, which it seeks to dominate as North Korea's sole ally and major source of aid and as South Korea's biggest trading partner. For evidence of the Russian view, and South Korea's response, again we are asked to rely on a report in *Hankyoreh Sinmun*. The article suggests the Russian team was ambivalent about whether a "bubble-jet torpedo" could have split the vessel in two, sinking it in minutes. The reason the Russian team refuses to release its report, purportedly questioning the investigation results, is that Russian team members agreed with the basic conclusion of the South Korean investigation—a detail the Russians, for political and diplomatic reasons, would rather not be known. The Russians were not in the least concerned about embarrassing the U.S.

From what little we do know of the conclusions of the Russian team, the impression is one of compromise intended to side with North Korea to the degree of not actually saying what sank the vessel—just why other views might be conceivable. Contrary to the commentator's opinion, the Russians do have a stake in North Korea—a shared 12-mile border with a vital rail link across the Tumen River, visions of the North as a conduit for trade from South Korea across Siberia to Europe, and competition with Russia's not always friendly neighbour, China. (The writer neglects to mention that control of the peninsula was the common denominator of the Sino-Japanese war of 1895 and the Russo-Japanese war of 1905. History is so boring).

One other unfortunate aspect of Keenan's commentary is that when he wrote it he only had seen the seven-page summary that was released on May 20 by the Joint Civilian-Military

Investigation Group, the formal name of the investigative team. The group in September released a report of between 200 and 300 pages. At this writing I have yet to see this fuller account, published in Korean and English. The fullest possible version, with supporting documents, would probably run to several thousand pages. Whatever, this latest report has to have embroidered a lot on the summary—though no amount of evidence will satisfy those who dispute the initial findings. Have any details of the 9/11 plane crashes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon convinced the naysayers that anyone other than henchmen of George W. Bush were responsible?

One oddity of Keenan's commentary is the emphasis he places on conjecture during the investigation that the torpedo was German or based on a German model. He seems unhappy that a South Korean official was quoted at one stage as opining that the torpedo was German-made and then that the torpedo in the summary report was described as a match for a torpedo that North Korea had produced for export. How awful to find a North Korean brochure displaying a torpedo among its famed military export products—and then to learn that this torpedo was a different model from the one that sank the Cheonan. And how stupid to find the torpedo that did the deed resembled one that had drifted into a fisherman's nets some years ago. (Come to think of it, I do not see where he actually mentions that earlier find—could it have been too much of a nuisance to have to explain away?). Somehow he does not seem to like the idea that North Koreans, not noted for their originality while mass-producing Soviet-era rifle and artillery pieces and missiles, could be just as adept at copping torpedoes of German design as they are of copying the Russians? I mean, if they can fabricate nuclear warheads to Soviet specs, torpedoes should be a piece of cake.

No denunciation of the Cheonan investigation would be complete without reference to the North Korean-style numbering on the interior portion of the torpedo that was dredged up. Put it down to my failing eyesight, but I could have sworn the symbol was in black paint or ink, not blue, when I saw the hulk of the torpedo on display under glass at the ministry of national defence, not the "blue" tint referred to in stuff he quotes. Never mind. The question is how any paint or marking-pen job could have survived the extreme heat of the explosion. The simple answer is that this portion of the torpedo was shielded by another portion that blew loose. Should we also ask why parts of the torpedo were rusted and crusted, parts of it unblemished? The sceptics have so much fun challenging the North Korean writing that it might have been better if it had not been there. What should investigators have done? Tried to shave off or blot out the characters? Regardless, that numbered symbol is not the evidence for North Korean responsibility, just a value-added feature.

The commentator relies on the analysis of two Korean-American university physicists while disregarding the views of any number of scientists who would disagree and dismiss their findings as those of politically motivated activists. One of the more dubious statements in their criticism is that the bubble effect of the torpedo would have caused a "spherical deformation" rather than "an angular shape". Since they are physicists, they seem to think we should take their word here. Why indeed would they have to explain how they come to this conclusion when it is unlikely they have tested this hypothesis? Or might they find it too difficult demonstrate that a "bubble" with force enough to tear a 1,200-ton vessel asunder would produce merely "a concave sphere"? And what is the basis for their conclusion that none of the victims suffered from this kind of a shock when their deaths, as revealed in post-mortems, were demonstrably not caused by shrapnel from a mine or internal explosion? What is most odd is that their peers and colleagues do not seem to share their view.

Keenan no doubt would ascribe the silence of scientists in South Korea to government repression. That view would jibe with the need to accuse the government of prosecuting those who doubt the report. How *Hankyoreh* and the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, a like-minded grouping that has disputed the investigation in a statement to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, can then carry on with their critiques is not explained. *Hankyoreh* is not, as he claims, Korea's fourth largest newspaper. The fourth largest paper, after the conservative "big three", *Chosun Ilbo*, *Joongang Ilbo* and *Dong A Ilbo*, would be *Meail Kyungje*, the financial paper. *Hankook Ilbo* probably ranks ahead of *Hankyoreh*, a minority voice whose average daily sales of 100,000, maybe 150,000 on a good day, place it far behind the front-runners, with circulations ranging from one to two million a day. The oracular *Hankyoreh* has gone on with lengthy, if skewed, arguments that Keenan accepts without question, much less a look at other Korean sources. Physicists around the world are free to join in the debate. Why just two Korean-Americans? Where are all those "concerned scientists" who espouse worthy causes? Saving the best for last, he links the sinking of the Cheonan with the ambition of those villains, the Americans, to cling to their bases in Okinawa. Did not the Cheonan episode give the Japanese reason to believe they had to keep the bases for defence against the evil North Koreans? And did not that debate lead to the downfall of a peace-minded Japanese prime minister, who had campaigned on the pledge to get rid of the hated American bases? He stops just short of the far-out view that actually the sinking was a dastardly American plot to bring the Japanese to their senses about the bases and compel them to beg the imperialist conquerors, please stay where you've been ever since the terrible battle of Okinawa in June 1945.

There is one obvious reason Keenan does not quite go there. The theory of a US. plot to give the Japanese a pretext to let the Americans hold on to the Okinawa bases is so absurd as to make a joke of all else he has said. But Keenan is a little too smart to go on record with the American plot theory—one that North Korea propounds by accusing the U.S. of involvement in Cheonan. Instead, he winds up where he began, riffing about that "small coterie in South Korea and the US"—the only ones who "know with any certainty" what happened. Then, some day, "maybe far in the future"—hopefully long after this article is dead and gone and forgotten—"some key documents will possibly be declassified, and a future generation will discover the truth about the Cheonan".

Oh sure. Better we should "discover the truth" about this sort of nonsense. Here's the real truth, which he never suggests. Nobody but nobody in South Korea wants a second Korean War. That is just as true of the conservative government that was swept into power in a landslide in the December 2007 election, after a decade of disillusionment over the Sunshine policy of Kim Dae-jung and North Korea's broken promises to get rid of its nuclear program, as it is of the opposition Democratic Party and the activists who regularly protest the current government. For all the inequities of South Korean society, the country ranks as one of the world's more prosperous and freer while North Korea is one of the world's poorest and most repressive. Those who propound erroneous theories about the Cheonan sinking, against any and all possible arguments and evidence, may be placing higher priority on their pet theories than on getting on with efforts at reconciliation.

The Chinese, by not taking a stand on Cheonan, are not looking for plot theories. They are trying to bring about "stability". The North Koreans, after repeatedly denying anything to do with the sinking, are now begging for return to six-party talks on their nuclear program that they have been boycotting since the end of 2008. They also are making other noises about reconciliation, including suggestions for another round of those all-too-brief, agonizingly stilted

“family visits” as prescribed in the June 2000 inter-Korean summit between South Korea’s President Kim Dae-jung and the North’s Dear Leader Kim Jong-il. North Korean leaders know very well what they did, and they also know their people are starving, suffering from record low yields as floods strip ever more fertile soil off hills laid bare by desperate deforestation, and they need hundreds and hundreds of thousands of tons of rice, fertilizer, cement and much else to stay alive.

Under the circumstances, North Korea has scant resources for war, other than the occasional quick strike, whether the sinking of a ship, the explosion of an airliner, as happened in 1987 over the Indian Ocean, or assassination plots against Korean leaders, as carried out in Rangoon in 1983 against Chun Doo-hwan, then the South’s president, who survived while 21 people, including 17 Koreans and 4 Burmese, were killed. (Need it be said that North Korea has always denied anything to do with these episodes?) Or the North could fire a missile on a live target, not just a stage another “missile test”, or heaven forbid, drop a nuclear warhead for real rather than merely frighten everyone and get a few news cycles of headlines and bulletins with a third underground nuclear “test”.

As of now, however, the North Koreans have to cool it. The last thing the Chinese or Russians want is for their North Korean ally, read protectorate, to do anything rash and plunge the Korean peninsula into the horrors of a second Korean War. Nor do the Americans, bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, want to risk hostilities. They even chickened out of sending the aircraft carrier George Washington for post-Cheonan anti-submarine war games for fear of upsetting the Chinese, who see the Yellow Sea, like the South China Sea, as their lake.

In the end, Keenan’s article is a distraction from the pursuit of peace and understanding. Everyone who knows anything about the sinking of the Cheonan knows perfectly well the North Koreans did it. For that matter, so do the Chinese and the Russians. They also know they have to save face for a dilapidated country that is now a pathetic dependency. That quest assumes greater urgency in the midst of a leadership crisis in North Korea in which Kim Jong-il, long ailing from a variety of illnesses, may not have that much longer to hang on and has to rev up support for his third son before his brother-in-law and aging generals decide to take over instead. Who knows what chaos would then ensue?

Those are questions we have to conjure and consider in a period of uncertainty on the Korean peninsula. Those who still want to believe the case Keenan builds off Google will no doubt continue to do so, but sooner rather than later they should focus on ways to avoid a second Korean War and, at the same time, to rescue millions of North Koreans, including about 200,000 consigned to unspeakably cruel conditions in the country’s gulag system. By undermining understanding that is urgently needed to achieve these ends, articles such as this one perform a distinct disservice.

Some day, we may learn if Kim Jong-il personally ordered the sinking of the Cheonan, whether third son and heir Kim Jong-eun spurred on the attack to show off his youthful strength and qualifications to lead the country. Or did a regional commander act on his own in revenge for the attack in November 2009 by a similar South Korean corvette on a North Korean patrol boat, which was sent back to port “in flames”. Answers to those questions, however, can wait. Right now the overriding need is to reduce tensions and head off a war. This article, an affront to common sense as well as empirical research, represents a retrograde step away from that goal.

About the Reviewer

Donald Kirk, a correspondent in Asia and Washington since the 1960s, is the author most recently of *Korea Betrayed: Kim Dae Jung and Sunshine* (Palgrave Macmillan, NY, UK, 2009). He is the author of two other books about Korean business and economic issues, two books about the Vietnam War and one book about the Philippines. Donald is correspondent in Seoul for the *Christian Science Monitor* and also files for CBS Radio, the *Asia Times* and others. He has previously been a correspondent for the *International Herald Tribune*, *USA Today*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the old *Washington (D.C.) Star*, has written for numerous other newspapers and magazines and has received George Polk and Overseas Press Club awards for reporting from Vietnam. He holds degrees from Princeton, the University of Chicago, and Columbia.

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