

## Playing for time

*If North Korea did deliberately destroy a South Korean warship, what next?*



IT WAS a dignified address. Before wiping tears from his eyes with a folded handkerchief, President Lee Myung-bak (above) read out the names of 46 sailors who died last month when their ship, the Cheonan, exploded in South Korean waters. He carefully avoided pinning the blame on anyone, but on April 22nd, Yonhap, South Korea's news agency, reported that the government's military-intelligence agency, using intelligence gathered jointly with America, had concluded the regime in North Korea had deliberately attacked and destroyed the 1,200-tonne warship.

Even if tangible evidence of North Korean involvement emerges, the president's caution on April 19th will nevertheless be understandable. Hot-blooded retaliation against a nuclear-armed despot would be fraught with danger for the peninsula, and for relations between America and China, the main backers of south and north respectively.

But ever since a preliminary investigation of the Cheonan's salvaged stern concluded that the blast did not come from on board the vessel, suspicions have turned towards North Korea. This, analysts say, puts Mr Lee in the most delicate position of his two-year-old administration. If the suspicions prove correct, a tough response would be expected and perhaps unavoidable. Yet Mr Lee had been hoping to focus on showing off South Korea's economic prowess as host of the Group of 20 this year—not the missile threat on its doorstep. The pressure on Mr Lee is all the greater because local elections are due on June 2nd, and they may serve as an unofficial referendum on his handling of the crisis.

So far, the regime in Pyongyang has only indirectly denied involvement. After three weeks of silence on the incident, it said on April 17th in a news report: "Failing to probe the cause of the sinking of the ship, the puppet military warmongers, right-wing conservative politicians and other traitors in South Korea are now foolishly seeking to link the sinking with the North at any cost." A non-denial denial.

Signs of aggression continue. On April 21st South Korea said it had arrested two northern agents who, it claimed, had been sent to assassinate a prominent defector to the south. And speculation abounds, fed by defectors and South Korean analysts, that the north may be preparing for a third nuclear test in defiance of United Nations Security Council resolutions.

The government in Seoul is publicly discussing its options, but these look limited. Yu Myung-hwan, the foreign minister, has said South Korea would take the matter to the UN Security Council for additional sanctions if there were hard evidence that North Korea was involved. But North Korea is already subject to stiff sanctions. Mr Yu also says stalled six-party talks on the north's nuclear disarmament might be suspended indefinitely. But he has flatly ruled out calls

from conservative politicians in the south for nuclear weapons to counter the threat from the north.

The hawks are taking wing. On April 20th the Chosun Ilbo, the south's biggest-selling daily, urged the government not to rule out military action. However, as an official notes, there is as yet little support in the south for warmongering, and the stockmarket has held firm. That suggests people believe the crisis will be defused, as happened after previous flare-ups on the UN-mandated Northern Limit Line, the disputed maritime border. Mr Lee, who hopes to show off South Korea's economic prowess as host of the G20 summit this year, is a conservative more interested in economic strength than the military sort.

Some analysts commend him for his handling of the crisis so far. He has bought himself time by refusing to speculate publicly on the cause of the blast. Yet as commander-in-chief, he bears responsibility for the military shortcomings if, as some suspect, North Korea torpedoed the Cheonan from a semi-submersible vessel and got away with it.

If that is indeed what happened, many will wonder what lies behind North Korea's aggression. Kim Jong Il, its despotic leader, is desperate for financial aid and his government had recently signalled that it was keen to return to the six-party talks. Of all recent South Korean presidents, Mr Lee has taken the hardest line against bailing out Mr Kim's bankrupt regime unless it pledges to destroy its nuclear weapons first. The senseless murder—if that is what it was—of 46 young sailors under his command is hardly likely to soften his line.

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