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Hong Kong paper mulls China's stance in six-way talks

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Increasingly, academics are using fictional devices to grab the attention of readers. Thus, in 2005, Ted Galen Carpenter of the **Cato Institute** wrote America's Coming War with China, whose first chapter was "How the War Began" in 2013, describing how a pro-independence leader of Taiwan precipitated war with the mainland, leading to hostilities between Washington and Beijing.

There were conflicting accounts of who fired the first shot. But a Chinese missile attack sank the USS Ronald Reagan, with the loss of the carrier, three other ships and 1,832 lives.

Last December, James Kraska, a professor at the US Naval War College, wrote a piece in Orbis magazine called How the United States Lost the Naval War of 2015. Kraska, a commander in the US Navy and an expert in international law, ostensibly recounts a conflict in which the Chinese destroyed the USS George Washington in the East China Sea.

In this fictional account, there was no war over Taiwan. In fact, there was no declaration of hostilities. Without warning, a Chinese anti-ship missile struck the George Washington, causing the carrier to erupt in a cataclysm and sink to the bottom of the East China Sea with the loss of 4,000 men and 80 aircraft.

Beijing denied carrying out the attack and claimed that an explosion on board the carrier had created "a radioactive incident" in its fishing zone, "spreading nuclear fallout throughout the air and water in the region". China sent a flotilla to rescue survivors in the oily waters. "The Chinese media," Kraska wrote, "reported on the bravery of Chinese naval forces, fisheries enforcement police and common fishermen who were able to save numerous lives."

The political fallout from the war, which was over almost as soon as it started, ended 75 years of American dominance in the Pacific Ocean and cemented China's position as the Asian hegemon.

Now, it seems, life is beginning to imitate art.

On March 26, at about 9.30pm, a 1,200-tonne South Korean naval vessel, the Cheonan, on a routine patrol mission with a crew of 104 men, sank in disputed waters in the Yellow Sea near North Korea after a mysterious explosion tore the ship apart. Forty-six members of the crew died while 58 were rescued.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of the explosion. South Korean experts are investigating the sinking with experts from Sweden, Australia and the United States.

However, the day after the stern of the ship was lifted out of the water, the South Korean government announced that investigators believe the sinking was not the result of an "internal explosion" on board but the result of an "external explosion". In other words, the ship had probably been hit by a torpedo.

Quite naturally, suspicion has focused on North Korea, which is very much a rogue regime that cannot be trusted. The Stalinist nation has still not apologised for a North Korean soldier's killing of a tourist from the South who wandered into a restricted zone at the Mount Kungang tourist resort in 2008.

In the wake of the Cheonan incident, all eyes are now turning to China, which is the primary sponsor of leader Kim Jong-il's regime and the host of the six-party talks.

While Kim, who has just been feted in Beijing by President Hu Jintao, is said to have agreed to return to the six-party talks, there is a real question as to the value of such talks. They should not be resumed until the Cheonan investigation is over.

And if investigators should conclude that the North was responsible for the Cheonan's sinking, then the onus will very much be on Beijing to see to it that Pyongyang does not go unpunished for such a crime.

For too long, Beijing has been on both sides of these talks, working with the US, South Korea, Japan and Russia to make North Korea abandon its nuclear weapons - while sheltering North Korea from the wrath of other nations and watering down sanctions against its military ally.

Beijing cannot both run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. It can only do one or the other.

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