

STUART HOLLIDAY

South Korea Crisis: A Test for the U.N.

North Korea's identification as the likely culprit in the March 26 destruction of the South Korean naval ship *Cheonan* has sparked a crisis that may test not only the countries involved but also the United Nations' ability to galvanize a response.

This crisis offers the U.N. Security Council an opportunity to act effectively and send a clear signal. In the long term, the United Nations provides an avenue for the reintegration and redevelopment of North Korea.

Both these issues will be complicated. They depend not on blind faith in the international organization but, rather, on the role they can play for South Korea and key stakeholders — including the United States and China.

The United States and the United Nations have an extended history of engagement in this region. Sixty years ago, 17 countries, led by the U.S., came together under the U.N. flag to defend South Korea against an unprovoked attack from the North.

A misunderstanding of the U.S. sphere of influence in the Pacific, and the messianic leadership cult still in place, set off a major war. Under U.S. command, the U.N. force succeeded in battling North Korean and Chinese troops to a standstill near the 38th parallel. The U.N. force had a death toll of 97,000 — with Americans accounting for more than a third of those deaths.

During a recent visit to Seoul, I saw the government and civil society debate a response to the sinking that would strike a balance among a military retaliation, further economic sanctions and restraint.

At a conference there, former Secretary of State Colin Powell pointed out the U.N.'s role was not just to manage the current crisis but to prepare for an inevitable transition in the North.

I also visited the Korean War memorial. There, I saw the extent to which U.S. leadership and U.N. action inspired and sustained

a strong alliance and an appreciation for effective multilateral engagement.

Now that South Korea has formally referred this matter to the Security Council, U.N. member states have the chance to play a constructive role by sending the signal to the North that the international community is united.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates noted this in Singapore the other day, saying "the nations of this region share the task of addressing these dangerous provocations." Inaction, Gates said, "would amount to an abdication of our collective responsibility to protect the peace and reinforce stability in Asia."

We can expect the United Nations to issue a presidential statement from the council. This requires consensus among all the members but will have little real effect. A resolution imposing measures or sanctions, while a worthy goal, may be difficult to achieve.

For the Chinese government, the Kim Jong Il act must be wearing thin, and this tests its willingness to use its veto power on the Security Council to protect him. For Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, a former South Korean foreign minister, this could be an opportunity for the United Nations to live up to its charter.

It is worth noting that the stalled six-party talks on North Korean denuclearization have taken place outside U.N. auspices, because of North Korea's neuralgia about the Security Council and China's willingness to go along. In addition, there is a lack of confidence in the Security Council's ability to enforce compliance.

South Korea needs to protect its society and vibrant economy — the world's 10th largest — from further instability. It also needs to deter or contain future aggression. South Korea cannot do this alone — or with only U.S. support.

The U.S. has 28,000 troops in South Korea and would defend



While addressing the sinking of a South Korean naval ship, the U.N. has an opportunity to send a signal that could lead to a more stable Korean Peninsula.

its ally in a major conflict. But that would be in no one's interest. Certainly not for nearly 25 million North Koreans who live in poverty and isolation.

A long-term solution will require the international community to use smart power and multiple tools, including strategic communication efforts, to paint a hopeful future.

The United Nations could play a central role in any future humanitarian, economic or democratic development efforts. It is precisely these areas where specialized agencies, like the World Food Programme and the United Nations Development Programme, can excel.

Recalling German reunification, the integration of the East relied on the political and financial support of the United States and the economic power and productivity of the West. The reunification happened faster than almost anyone expected, and Germany continues to drive the European economy — led by Chancellor An-

gela Merkel, a native of the East.

In Korea, the gaps in economic and political development between North and South are even more profound. There is no strong regional alliance — like NATO, which provided stability through the challenging days of German reunification.

It is essential for the U.S. and other responsible nations to stand with South Korea's popular President Lee Myung-bak in the weeks ahead.

It is also time to think strategically about how the United Nations could provide a forum for resolving this current crisis — and its potential role in the long-term stability of the Korean Peninsula.

Stuart Holliday, president of Meridian International Center, a nonpartisan public diplomacy institution, served as a U.S. ambassador to the United Nations for special political affairs from 2003 to 2005.