

The Korean crisis and the threat of a wider war

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This week marks the 60th anniversary of China's entry in force into the Korean War. The attack carried out by some 300,000 Chinese troops resulted in one of the most stunning defeats suffered by the US military in its entire history.

What followed was a protracted and bloody stalemate that ended only with the armistice declared in July 1953. The war had claimed the lives of more than four million people, the vast majority of them Korean civilians.

Six decades after US and Chinese troops waged bitter hand-to-hand combat south of the Yalu River, tensions on the Korean peninsula are arguably at their highest since the end of the Korean War. They are being fed by and are in turn exacerbating great power conflicts between Washington and Beijing.

The arrival in the Yellow Sea this weekend of a naval battle group led by the US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS George Washington, signals another escalation in the current crisis.

The dispatch of the giant warship was announced in the immediate wake of the North Korean shelling Tuesday of the island of Yeonpyeong, killing two South Korean marines and two construction workers.

North Korea has said that its bombardment was in response to shells fired into its territorial waters by the South Korean military during war games held only a few miles from the North's coastline. South Korea launched a retaliatory barrage that it claimed inflicted significant damage, but no casualty reports have been issued in the North. Now new war games—this time with a massive US component—create the conditions for another clash.

Incendiary rhetoric has accompanied the crisis on both sides of Korea's demilitarized zone. On Friday, North Korea denounced the planned joint US-South

Korean exercises as a provocation and warned, "The situation on the Korean peninsula is inching closer to the brink of war."

In the South, the government replaced its defense minister with a former chairman of the military's Joint Chiefs of Staff and announced the adoption of new rules of engagement that would allow the military to respond with disproportionate force to attacks from the North. The garrison on Yeonpyeong (just seven miles from the North Korean coast), meanwhile, has been reinforced with more troops and heavy weapons.

Right-wing legislators, meanwhile have denounced the government of President Lee Myung-bak for failing to take more aggressive action, including the use of air strikes, against the North.

Lee and his Grand National Party (GNP), the party of the former military dictatorships that ruled South Korea with US support, came into office promising a hard-line stance toward North Korea. Its cutting off of aid and rejection of the "Sunshine Policy," through which previous South Korean governments sought reconciliation via investments and aid, have played a significant role in provoking the escalating conflict. Now Lee is under pressure from his own supporters and elements within the military to make good on his hard-line rhetoric.

The potential for a catastrophic confrontation on the Korean peninsula is high. It is difficult to imagine another armed confrontation not provoking a major retaliation by the South Korean military.

What makes the situation all the more fraught with danger is the way in which it is being exploited by Washington to pursue its own strategic aims in the region, particularly vis-à-vis China.

US officials have acknowledged that the dispatch of the USS Washington and its accompanying destroyers

and other escort ships to the Yellow Sea is aimed as much, if not more, at China as at North Korea.

“Mr. Obama’s decision to accelerate the deployment of an American aircraft carrier group to the region is intended to prod the Chinese,” the *New York Times* reported Thursday. “American officials hope that by presenting Beijing with an unpalatable result—the expansion of American maneuvers off its shores—China will decide that pressing North Korea is the lesser of two evils.”

A senior administration official told the *New York Times* on Wednesday: “To the Chinese, the message is that if North Korea undertakes actions such as uranium enrichment or the attack on the South that threaten our equities, the US will respond in ways that negatively affect China’s perceived interests. The response is directed at messaging North Korea and reassuring South Korea, but China clearly does not like to see US aircraft carriers, for example, in the Yellow Sea.”

Washington had threatened to carry out joint US-South Korean military exercises in the Yellow Sea last July, ostensibly in response to the sinking of a South Korean warship in which 46 sailors lost their lives. South Korea has charged North Korea with having sunk the vessel, which went down near the disputed maritime border imposed by the US at the end of the Korean War, but Pyongyang has denied any responsibility.

In the face of Beijing’s sharp protests, the Obama administration shifted those exercises to the Sea of Japan, away from Chinese waters.

This time Washington is deploying one of its most powerful warships in the Yellow Sea as a demonstration of its military supremacy against China.

While the Chinese government issued a measured warning over the exercise, declaring that it opposed “any military acts in our exclusive economic zone”—which extends 200 miles from the Chinese coast—others close to the Beijing government and its military vigorously denounced the US maneuvers.

While the immediate pretext for the provocative exercise is the Korean conflict, it is in line with an increasingly aggressive US policy in Asia. This has included the US attempt to insert itself into territorial conflicts in the South China Sea, backing Japan, Vietnam and other ASEAN countries against China. Washington’s aim in the region has been the pursuit of

a series of alliances and assertions of military power directed against China that stretch from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan to Southeast Asia, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

In the wake of the world capitalist financial meltdown, geostrategic offensive has been coupled with increasingly aggressive demands for Chinese currency revaluations and trade concessions.

Fundamentally, the growing US-China tensions are rooted in deep-going shifts in the world economy and the global balance of forces: China’s rise to the position of the world’s second-largest economy, eclipsing Japan, on the one hand, and the relative economic decline of US imperialism, combined with its growing use of military force, on the other.

This conflict threatens to turn Northeast Asia and the entire planet into a tinderbox. Much as in the period preceding the First World War, seemingly isolated regional confrontations between minor powers have the potential of precipitating a global conflagration, this time between nuclear-armed adversaries.

Such a catastrophe can be prevented only through the political mobilization of the international working class in the struggle for socialism.

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