

South Korean military exercise raises danger of war

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In a calculated and reckless provocation directed in the first instance against North Korea, the Obama administration has encouraged South Korea to hold live-fire drills in the vicinity of Yeonpyeong Island. The highly sensitive island was the site of artillery exchanges on November 23 between South and North Korea.

South Korea has ignored North Korea's threat of retaliation and calls by China and Russia for calm and restraint. The live fire exercise not only has the potential to provoke a military confrontation between the two Koreas, but carries the danger of a broader conflict involving the major powers.

US is backing the South Korean exercise not just as a means for exerting pressure on North Korea, but also on China. In recent months, the Obama administration has waged an aggressive campaign throughout the region aimed at undercutting China's growing influence. Washington has repeatedly blamed China for not doing enough to "rein in" North Korea and rebuffed every effort by Beijing to ease tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea has announced that the artillery drill will proceed today. The announcement came within hours of the breakdown of an emergency session of the UN Security Council called by Russia, with China's support. According to a Reuters report, Russia circulated a draft statement to Security Council members that called for "maximum restraint" and urged UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to send an envoy to Seoul and Pyongyang to prevent the crisis spiralling out of control.

The US and its allies, Britain, France, Japan and

South Korea, blocked the resolution, voicing support for a British draft that blamed the crisis solely on North Korea and condemned it for last month's shelling incident. The US ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, ruled out any compromise, declaring that "it would not be productive for there to be a statement that was ambiguous in some fashion."

Yeonpyeong Island lies just to the south of the disputed North-South maritime border in the Yellow Sea. The border, which was unilaterally declared by the US in the aftermath of the Korean War in 1953, has never been accepted by Pyongyang. Although Seoul and Washington have insisted this week's drills will only fire into the water, and not toward the coast of North Korea, Pyongyang claimed that last month's large-scale South Korean military exercises in the same area fired shells into its territorial waters. It insisted that its subsequent shelling of the island, which killed four people, including two civilians, was a counter-attack. South Korean artillery then returned fire on the north.

The White House had deliberately escalated the tensions by publicly endorsing the South Korean drill. Last Friday, US State Department spokesman Philip J. Crowley declared that as "a sovereign country," South Korea "has a right to exercise its military as it sees fit". A total of 21 American military trainers and observers will participate in the drills.

Last Thursday, US Marine Corps General James E. Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, insisted the war games were "routine". But he admitted: "If North Korea were to react to that in a negative way and fire back... at those firing positions on the islands, that would start potentially a chain reaction of firing and counter-firing".

The US and its allies are well aware that the exercise could trigger a war. An unnamed US military official told CNN last Friday that the Obama administration and the South Korean government had established “contingency communication plans” in the event of North Korean retaliation. He said the US side would be ready to discuss with Seoul various “courses of action,” including “the most dangerous courses of action”.

The sensitivity of the island is heightened by the fact that it lies on the eastern side of the Yellow Sea, which is strategically sensitive for China. Earlier this year, Beijing urged Washington not to hold naval exercises in the area. For South Korea to hold a live-fire exercise, shortly after a major US-South Korean joint war game in the Yellow Sea, can only be viewed as provocative towards China, as well as North Korea.

Last week, China summoned the South Korean ambassador and Russia summoned both the South Korean and US ambassadors, and urged Seoul to cancel the drills. On Saturday Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu warned that any bloodshed on the peninsula would “destabilise the region and endanger neighbouring countries.” Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, declared that the situation “directly affects the national security interests of the Russian Federation”.

But the Obama administration has continued to demand that China and Russia act to pressure North Korea to end its supposedly “rogue” behaviour. State Department spokesman Crowley declared last Friday: “We want to see other countries, including China, Russia, and others, send a clear message to North Korea to cease its provocations.”

In reality, the provocations have come from South Korea and the US. South Korean President Lee Myung-bak’s Grand National Party (GNP) government has taken an increasingly hard-line stance. After the November 23 shelling, Seoul changed its military rules of engagement, allowing troops to use greater force in response to any North Korean retaliation, thus threatening to trigger larger military clashes. Last week, the GNP government held its biggest ever emergency drills, with sirens sounding across the country and

fighter jets buzzing over Seoul. Thousands of civilians were directed to shelters or took cover in office basements and subway stations.

US Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg went to Beijing for a three-day visit concluded last Friday to reiterate Washington’s rejection of China’s call for the resumption of six-party talks involving the US, China, Russia, Japan and two Koreas to ease the danger of war. Although much of what Steinberg said was not made public, the *South China Morning Post* reported that “there are no signs the US has shifted from its demand that North Korea must first make real steps to end confrontation and restart nuclear disarmament”. Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo reportedly told Steinberg: “We need easing not tensions, dialogue and not confrontation.”

Far from showing any willingness to negotiate, the US, South Korea and Japan met separately on December 6. According to Japan’s *Asahi Shimbun* last Thursday, the three powers want Pyongyang to take five specific steps before any talks, and these demands have been relayed to Moscow and Beijing. The three known conditions are that Pyongyang implement its 2005 pledge to abandon its nuclear program, stop uranium enrichment and accept inspectors from the UN International Atomic Energy Agency. Both the Bush and Obama administrations, however, have refused to deliver what was agreed in the 2005 six-party agreement, that is, to seriously negotiate an end to US hostility to North Korea, normalise relations with the country and lift decades-long sanctions.

All the signs are that the Obama administration in league with South Korea and Japan has embarked on a reckless course of action that could plunge the Korean Peninsula into war and potentially trigger a wider conflict between the major powers.



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