

Korean tensions ease—temporarily

John Chan
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Yesterday, the Korean Peninsula teetered precariously on the brink of military conflict after the United States and its allies blocked moves by China and Russia in the UN Security Council to defuse tensions between North and South Korea. Ignoring warnings by Beijing and Moscow, Seoul went ahead with live-fire military exercises close to the disputed maritime border between the two countries, despite threats of retaliation by Pyongyang.

In the event, North Korea, under strong pressure behind the scenes from China and Russia, did not react. In an official statement, Pyongyang declared that there was no need “to retaliate against every despicable military provocation” by the “puppet warmongers” in the south. “The world should properly know who is the true champion of peace and who is the real provocateur of a war,” it stated.

The US and international media were quick to dismiss North Korea’s statement as propaganda. But there is no doubt that the Obama administration engineered this crisis as part of an ongoing campaign directed primarily at undermining China’s growing influence and strategic position in Asia.

Throughout the UN Security Council emergency session, which lasted more than eight hours, the US insisted that any resolution had to condemn North Korea for a November 23 artillery exchange with South Korea that focussed on Yeonpyeong Island. China and Russia opposed such a clause, knowing that it would only inflame tensions amid accusation and counter-accusation over the shelling.

Russian UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin warned “that within hours there may be a serious aggravation of tension, a serious conflict for that matter”. China’s representative Wang Min described the situation as “perilous”. He went on: “If a bloody clash breaks out on the Korean Peninsula, that would first of all hurt the people on both sides of the peninsula and bring a national tragedy of mutual fratricide between the compatriots in the North and South.”

The US, however, did not budge. Ambassador Susan Rice continued to blame North Korea and declared that South Korea had “a sovereign right” to hold the military exercise. Washington and its allies attempted to play down the significance of the war games, declaring them to be routine. Rice insisted that the exercises should go ahead because they “pose no danger to North Korea and threaten no North Korean lives”.

Everyone knew that what was taking place was anything but routine. With 21 US trainers and observers present, the South Korean military carried out the 90-minute drill by firing 1,500 rounds of artillery, from 2:30 pm local time, on Yeonpyeong Island. Local residents had been ordered to take shelter in bunkers.

The South Korean and American military were poised to retaliate in force if North Korea took any action. South Korean warplanes were airborne and on high alert. Two South Korean destroyers patrolled the area of the Yellow Sea just to the south of the disputed Northern Limited Line—unilaterally imposed by the US after the Korean War in 1953. With 28,500 US troops backed by tanks and aircraft stationed in South Korea, the Pentagon clearly had drawn up detailed contingency plans for every eventuality.

South Korean Defence Minister Kim Kwan-jin told the military yesterday it “must take every possible step to cope with possible provocations by North Korea”. President Lee Myung-bak ordered all government officials onto emergency standby. Earlier this month, Kim had threatened to have the air force bomb North Korean artillery batteries if any South Korean territory were shelled again. The South Korean and American forces remained on high alert after yesterday’s exercise.

The Obama administration has exploited the situation to the maximum, in the first instance to pressure North Korea. As the live-fire exercises were underway, New Mexico governor Bill Richardson was in Pyongyang on a “private tour” to hold talks with the North Korean regime.

Pyongyang yesterday agreed to allow the return of UN inspectors to its Yongbyon nuclear complex and offered to sell its 12,000 nuclear fuel rods to a third country. In addition, it proposed to create a joint military commission and hotline with South Korea and the US to avoid future conflict.

The Obama administration quickly dismissed the offer. US State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley declared: “We’ve seen a string of broken promises by North Korea going back many, many years. We’ll be guided by what North Korea does, not by what North Korea says it might do under certain circumstances.” This reaction is in line with the US refusal to compromise in the UN Security Council or to resume six-party talks designed to end tensions over North Korea’s nuclear program.

The chief target of Washington’s reckless provocation was not the small, impoverished country of North Korea, but the rising economic power of China. Since mid-2009, the Obama administration has aggressively intervened throughout Asia—strengthening existing military alliances and partnerships with countries like India, Japan, South Korea and Australia and seeking new ties with countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia and even Burma—in a bid to undercut Chinese influence in the region.

In January, Washington approved a \$6.4 billion sale of arms to Taiwan and subsequently President Obama met with the exiled Dalai Lama—despite strong Chinese opposition. In March, the US backed Seoul’s unproven allegations that Pyongyang had torpedoed a South Korean warship and later held joint naval exercises—firstly in the Sea of Japan in July and then in the Yellow Sea in November-December—ignoring China’s protests. In July, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared at an Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit that the US had a “national interest” in maintaining the “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea and would become involved in territorial disputes between ASEAN members and China.

In September, the Obama administration bought into an escalating row between China and Japan over the latter’s arrest of a Chinese fishing captain near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets in waters between the two countries. Clinton declared twice that the US would be obliged, under the terms of the US-Japan security treaty, to militarily back Japan in a war with China over the islands.

For the US, “freedom of navigation” means the “right” to

send American warships at will into sensitive waters close to the Chinese coastline and key Chinese cities and military bases. Over the past year, the huge nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS George Washington and its associated battle group has engaged in joint military exercises with South Korea and Japan, engaged in a number of port visits, including to the Philippines, and welcomed top Vietnamese officials aboard in waters adjacent to the South China Sea. If China exercised its “right” to send a warship to international waters off the Californian coast, it would be met with rabid denunciations in the American media and political establishment.

Confronted with the challenge of China’s economic rise, the US is responding by using its still considerable military might to undermine its rival. There is nothing innocent about the US exercises in waters close to the Chinese mainland. Since World War II, Pentagon strategists have insisted that the US must maintain naval dominance in the western Pacific and the ability to choke off vital shipping routes to rival powers if the need arises.

To maintain its vital supply routes to the Middle East and Africa, China is being forced to respond and is forging closer ties with Russia. Pointedly, Russia and China have agreed to hold major joint military exercises, dubbed “Peace Mission 2011,” early next year in the Sea of Japan and in Russian-Chinese border areas next to the Korean Peninsula.

With tensions in North East Asia sharpening, the latest crisis surrounding the South Korean live-fire exercises demonstrates how a small incident can rapidly escalate into a broader war. The US and its allies, including South Korea, rejected all compromise and were prepared to risk a war on the Korean Peninsula to ensure that a military exercise went ahead. While North Korea backed away in this instance, there are many other potential triggers for clashes.

On Saturday, for instance, a South Korean patrol ship collided with a Chinese fishing boat, allegedly in Korean waters. Eight Chinese fishermen were arrested, one is dead and another missing. Unlike its earlier confrontation with Japan, China has not reacted to the incident. But there is no guarantee that future incidents or provocations will not escalate into a wider conflict.



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