

Backed by Washington, South Korea stages further military provocations

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23 December 2010

The South Korean military is today carrying out further provocative military exercises, just days after a tense standoff on Monday over its last live-fire military drill near its western maritime border with North Korea. The war games involve tanks, artillery, warplanes and 800 troops at Pocheon—only 20 kilometres south of the heavily militarised border with North Korea.

This step further demonstrates the reckless determination of the South Korean regime and its chief backer, the Obama administration, to intensify the diplomatic, economic and military pressure on North Korea. It is increasingly obvious that Seoul, with the full support of Washington, is prepared to risk a war on the Korean Peninsula in order to achieve their aims—either a complete capitulation to US demands by North Korea or the destabilisation of the Stalinist regime.

For the Obama administration, the campaign against North Korea is part of a far broader strategy aimed at undercutting China's growing influence in Asia. Over the past year, the US has taken a series of aggressive steps to boost its alliances and military ties throughout the region, including with South Korea, to reassert its military predominance in the region.

Today's live-fire exercise was announced despite China's deputy UN ambassador Wang Min warning on Tuesday that the two Koreas had come "close to fighting a war" on Monday, when South Korea fired 1,500 artillery rounds on Yeonpyeong Island—the site of the last exchange of shelling between the two Koreas on November 23.

While many exercises have been staged in Pocheon before, Seoul clearly intended to send a message by emphasising the scope of the winter live-fire drills. A South Korean army spokesman declared yesterday: "The scale of mechanised assets taking place is enormous. When we would normally have six K-9 mechanised artillery, we'll have 36. We'll have the F-15 jets firing. We'll have choppers. You can say most of the mechanised assets taking part will be firing live ammunition."

The US and South Korea again insisted, as they had done on

Monday, that today's live-fire exercises were "routine", but the conduct of the US military high command has been very different. Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, reportedly went to the Pentagon in the early morning hours of Monday, monitoring the South Korean exercises and Pyongyang's reaction. No doubt, if the North had retaliated, as it did on November 23, contingency plans existed for the US military to join the South Korean forces in attacking the North.

In declaring its support for today's exercises, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs declared that North Korea had no reason to react as South Korea's military drills were "defensive" in nature and publicised in advance. Behind the scenes, however, the US and South Korean militaries are well aware of the provocative character of the drill and have prepared accordingly.

A statement from a senior South Korean commander made clear that any action by North Korea could trigger a military conflict. Choo Eun-sik, commander of First Armoured Battalion told the Yonhap news agency yesterday: "We will retaliate thoroughly if the north commits another provocative act like the shelling of Yeonpyeong."

Yesterday, South Korea also commenced a four-day anti-submarine naval exercise off the country's east coast, involving at least six warships. The South Korean military has remained on high alert on the western coast, on the pretext that the North has deployed anti-ship and anti-air missiles in the area. On Tuesday, South Korea's hawkish recently appointed defence minister, Kim Kwan-jin, further inflamed the situation by telling legislators that Pyongyang would carry out a "surprise attack" when Seoul "lets its guard down".

Washington has fully backed the military exercises to deliberately cut across the efforts of China and Russia to ease tensions on the Korean Peninsula. On Sunday, the US and its allies blocked a Russian and Chinese-sponsored UN Security Council statement on Sunday calling for "maximum restraint" on both Koreas.

The US has rebuffed China's proposal to restart the six-party talks, involving the US, China, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas, over North Korea's nuclear program, and dismissed Pyongyang's latest offer, made this week, to allow International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors back into the country.

On Tuesday, China moved again to head off a confrontation. Foreign ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu declared that North Korea had the right to use nuclear power for "peaceful purposes" but also "must allow IAEA inspectors in". At the same time, she warned: "All parties should realise that artillery fire and military force cannot solve the issue on the peninsula, and dialogue and cooperation are the only correct approaches."

By contrast, the White House ratcheted up its rhetoric. Spokesman Gibbs declared yesterday: "We're not going to get a table and a room and have six-party talks just for the feel-good notion of having six-party talks." He added: "When and if the North Koreans are ever serious about living up to their obligations, then we can think about restarting six-party talks."

The six-party talks broke down because both the Bush and Obama administrations failed to deliver their agreed obligations to normalise relations and lift sanctions on North Korea as part of a 2005 accord to dismantle the latter's nuclear programs. By heightening tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the US is seeking to strengthen its alliances with South Korea and Japan as a means of containing China's rising influence. For that purpose, the Obama administration is accusing China of failing to curb North Korea's supposedly "rogue" behaviour.

There is a real danger that, whatever the intentions of those in power in Beijing and Washington, the Korean Peninsula could become the flashpoint for a wider conflagration. That danger was underscored by a report in Singapore's *Lianhe Zaobao* on Tuesday that some of China's armed forces had been activated for "combat readiness" in preparation for a possible Korean emergency. The report named China's Shenyang and Jinan Military Regions, which are close to Korea, the navy's North Sea Fleet and part of China's ballistic missile forces. A Beijing-based analyst told the newspaper that China did not want to become involved in a conflict, but was deeply concerned about the prospect of a flood of refugees into the country, or of a conflict that spread to the Chinese-Korean border.

Confident of US backing, South Korea's conservative Grand National Party (GNP) government is whipping up the tensions for its own political purposes. The confrontation with the North provides a diversion from the austerity measures being implemented by the government and major employers, which are fuelling social unrest, most recently expressed in a near month-long sit-in strike by Hyundai Motor's temporary

workers in Ulsan.

At the same time, there are deep popular fears of another war on the Korean Peninsula, with memories still alive of the estimated two million civilian and military Korean deaths in the 1950-53 Korean War. Partly reacting to these concerns, the five opposition parties headed by Democratic Party issued a joint statement on Tuesday, urging both the South and North to end all military actions and engage in dialogue immediately. The opposition stance also reflects the interests of sections of South Korean business that have sought to open up North Korea as a cheap labour platform or that depend on China, which is South Korea's largest trading partner.

Divisions have also emerged in the ruling GNP party. According to the *JoongAng Daily* yesterday, at a party meeting one faction called for an "easing" of the tensions, while another camp condemned such a position as "appeasement" of Pyongyang. The GNP is the party of the previous South Korean dictatorships that were backed by the US and ruled the country until the late 1980s.

The political situation in South Korea adds another volatile factor in the face-off with North Korea, but the essential driving force behind the Korean tensions is the aggressive intervention of the US government. In all the statements from the White House and the Pentagon, the line has been intransigent: no talks, no negotiations, no backing off from the showdown with North Korea and China. Today's military drill is a further demonstration that there will be no relenting in the stance of the Obama administration, regardless of the risk of a potentially catastrophic war.



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