Military tensions remain high on Korean peninsula

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30 December 2010

With strong backing from Washington, the South Korean government is continuing a series of provocative military drills that threaten to lead to conflict with North Korea. Following live-fire exercises last week in Yeonpyeong and in Pocheon, the South Korean military began another five-day naval live-fire drill in 23 locations on Monday.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates, who is visiting China for talks on January 9, will travel to South Korea as a further show of US support. He will meet his South Korean counterpart, Kim Kwan-jin, on January 14 and, according to the Pentagon, discuss the "threats posed by North Korean provocations and its nuclear and missile programs."

To date, the Obama administration has blamed Pyongyang for last month's artillery exchange between the two Koreas and blocked diplomatic moves by China and Russia to ease tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The US has also rejected North Korea's offer last week to allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to return to the country and sell its nuclear fuel rods.

South Korean President Lee-Myung-bak is continuing his rhetoric against the North. In a radio address on Monday, he called for "national unity", urging countrymen to "stand together, united as one" against Pyongyang. Lee, the former CEO of the Hyundai conglomerate, said: "There can be no difference between you and me when it comes to national security, because our lives and the survival of the nation depend on it."

On Tuesday, Lee held a cabinet meeting to implement what he touted as a major "military reform". According to *Chosun Ilbo*, Lee has proposed a new "united command" of the army, navy and air force. The new command will effectively replace the existing joint chiefs of staff, but will have greater powers such as acquiring personnel and military supplies.

In his radio address, Lee declared that "if (we) are afraid of war, we can never prevent war". In fact, Lee's right-wing Grand National Party (GNP), the party of the country's former US-backed military dictatorship, is recklessly preparing for a confrontation with North Korea. On Wednesday, the South Korean government announced that the age bracket for compulsory military service in time of war would be raised next year to include all men aged 18 to 36, with "simpler" physical tests to increase recruitment.

Lee also offered a sliver of hope to China, declaring yesterday: "[We] have no choice but to resolve the problem of dismantling North Korea's nuclear program through six party talks." There is no sign, however, that South Korea is about to support an early resumption of six party negotiations. The US and Japan have both ruled out any immediate return to talks.

At the same time, South Korea's Ministry of Unification has announced the preparation of plans for the "re-unification" of the Korean Peninsula. In the 1990s, South Korean administrations concluded that a merger with North Korea along the lines of the 1989 German reunification would be far too costly. Former President Kim Dae-jung formulated the so-called "Sunshine Policy" instead, to open up North Korea as an arena for investment and cheap labour, while keeping the current Stalinist regime in power.

The Lee administration, which came to power in 2007, has effectively jettisoned the last vestiges of the Sunshine

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Policy. Its call for "reunification" is a thinly disguised perspective for engineering "regime change" in the North—either by economically crippling the Stalinist state or by means of political and military provocation.

A unification ministry official told *Chosun Ilbo* this week: "We must free ourselves from the perception that reunification by absorption is unfeasible." According to *Dong-A Ilbao*, concrete measures for "reunification", including plans for a unified taxation system and diplomatic efforts to persuade neighbouring countries, in particular China, to accept a united Korea under Seoul's rule.

A major factor in Lee's stoking of nationalism and militarism is an attempt to head off social discontent and recriminations against his government over the deteriorating state of the South Korean economy. While official forecasts estimate growth will slow next year from 6.1 percent to 5 percent, state-run think tanks are predicting 4 percent and private economists barely 3 percent. At the height of world financial crisis in 2009, South Korea narrowly escaped a recession with growth of just 0.2 percent.

As tensions escalate, South Korea's *JoongAng Daily* reported on Wednesday that Pyongyang had conducted unusually extensive winter air drills, despite severe fuel shortages. The number of North Korean military exercises in December increased 150 percent compared to the same period in 2009. A military source told the newspaper: "It shows that the North Korean military has been very tense after the attack on Yeonpyong Island."

North Korea has admitted this week that five of its soldiers were killed during the artillery exchange with South Korea on November 23. Two South Korean marines and two civilians on Yeonpyong Island were also killed.

The US has further stoked tensions by dispatching at least one additional aircraft carrier group to the region. CNN reported on December 25 that the USS Carl Vinson had arrived in Guam. The carrier is to replace the USS George Washington which has over the past month conducted major exercises with the South Korean and Japanese navies. The USS Ronald Reagan is also on its way to an unspecified location in the Western Pacific and due to arrive by about January 20. The USS George Washington will remain in the region—for maintenance at Yokohama in Japan.

The presence of potentially three US aircraft carrier groups has provoked concern in Chinese military circles. Major General Luo Yuan, a prominent Chinese military analyst, told the *China Daily* on Monday that the naval build up was "a signal" that the US was "preparing for war" against North Korea. Luo warned that Washington might be trying to provoke North Korea into a military confrontation, "then the US can perform a surgical strike on the DPRK."

Another military analyst, Liang Yongchun, told China National Radio that the three carrier groups, plus the US forces in South Korea and Japan, would have 400 warplanes in East Asia, enough to carry out large-scale air strikes on North Korea's nuclear and military facilities.

Chinese vice foreign minister Cheng Guoping travelled to Moscow and held talks with his counterpart Alexei Borodavkin on Tuesday. According to the Xinhua News Agency, they issued a joint statement warning that the outbreak of a military conflict between the Koreas could trigger "a wider war". Amid these tensions Chinese President Hu Jintao is scheduled to visit the US on January 19.

However, the Obama administration has shown no sign of backing away from the intense political and military pressure it is applying to North Korea. The stand-off on the Peninsula is being exploited by the US to strengthen its military relations with South Korea and Japan and undermine Chinese influence in East Asia as part of broader American efforts to isolate China throughout the region.

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