

Washington's incendiary role in Asia

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Washington's encouragement of South Korea's live-fire military exercise in disputed waters off the North Korean coast is emblematic of the increasingly incendiary role played by US imperialism in Asia.

The latest round of war games was staged on Yeonpyeong island and was virtually identical to the live-fire artillery drill conducted by South Korean forces there last month. That operation provoked a retaliatory artillery barrage from North Korea that killed two South Korean civilians and two marines and sparked worldwide fears of an outbreak of all-out war on the Korean peninsula.

There was one notable difference between the two military exercises. This time the Pentagon ordered the deployment of some 20 US military personnel on Yeonpyeong to ensure that, in the event of a North Korean response, Washington would have a *casus belli* to join with the South Korean armed forces in unleashing massive retaliation.

There is no disputing the provocative character of these actions. Yeonpyeong lies little more than seven miles off the North Korean coast (and some 50 miles from South Korea). The waters into which South Korean artillery was lobbing shells and F-15K fighter bombers were dropping bombs are claimed by North Korea, which rejects the so-called Northern Limit Line, unilaterally imposed by the US military at the close of the Korean War in 1953.

Given the sequence of events last month, the US-backed military exercise amounted to a deliberate dare to Pyongyang to strike again, in order to provide the pretext for a South Korean counter-attack. Appealing to his right-wing base and to the military, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak has instituted a new policy allowing South Korean forces to unleash disproportionate retaliatory force, meaning air strikes on North Korean targets.

After North Korea failed to make any military

response to Monday's exercise, Washington and Seoul were reportedly preparing still more drills in order to "send a strong message" to the North and potentially trigger an armed clash.

The US used its veto power and temporary presidency of the United Nations Security Council to turn an emergency session convened Sunday—after deliberate delay—to stonewall efforts to avoid a renewed confrontation between the two Koreas. Russia had called for the session in an effort to prevail on both the North and the South to refrain from further military actions that could lead to war and to have a UN special envoy dispatched to both Seoul and Pyongyang to seek a resolution of the conflict.

Washington, however, was interested not in diffusing the tensions, but in ratcheting them up as a means of pursuing its own strategic interests in the region. US Ambassador Susan Rice rejected any resolution outside of a unilateral condemnation of North Korea and dismissed any other action by the council as irrelevant.

What is the US ruling elite after in its pursuit of an increasingly bellicose policy on the Korean Peninsula, where nearly 34,000 US troops, at least 114,000 Chinese soldiers and as many as four million Koreans died in a brutal war half a century ago?

The principal aim of US policy is not that of preventing military conflict between the two Koreas, but rather exploiting the danger of conflict as a means of exerting pressure on China and countering its increasing economic and political weight throughout Asia.

In an effort to diminish tensions, China sought to convene a meeting of the participants in the Six Party Talks on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula—the two Koreas, the US, China, Russia and Japan—which have been suspended since 2008. Washington, however, adopted an opposite approach. It hosted its own meeting of the foreign ministers of

South Korea and Japan in Washington in what amounted to solidifying an anti-Chinese bloc over the Korean crisis.

This has been joined by the nearly continuous staging of a US military show of force in the region, with repeated war games and deployments of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS George Washington and its battle group in the Yellow Sea, South China Sea and Sea of Japan, in defiance of Chinese protests.

Posing as a champion of freedom of the seas and inserting itself as a defender of China's adversaries in territorial disputes, such as those over the Spratley and Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, Washington has sought to forge a series of military alliances and agreements aimed at encircling and containing China.

Washington is responding to a profound shift in the geo-strategic situation in Asia and internationally signified by China's rise to the position of the world's second largest economy and by the profound crisis of US capitalism. As in Afghanistan and Iraq, the response of the US ruling elite is an attempt to offset economic decline by ever greater reliance on the residual military power of American imperialism.

Increasingly, the US military is being trained to view China as its most likely adversary in the outbreak of a new major war.

This year's US Joint Forces Command's Joint Operating Environment (JOE) report—a strategic guide to perceived threats and future deployments of the US military—includes the chilling warning, “The course that China takes will determine much about the character and nature of the 21st Century—whether it will be ‘another bloody century,’ or one of peaceful cooperation.”

It goes on to sketch out potential scenarios for US-Chinese military conflicts, including the possibility of a war for oil between the world's two largest economies. The document warns that “China's concern for protecting its oil supplies [in the Sudan]... could portend a future in which other states intervene in Africa to protect scarce resources. The implications for future conflict are ominous, if energy supplies cannot keep up with demand and should states see the need to militarily secure dwindling energy resources.”

In other words, should China's actions cut across US imperialism's own attempts to militarily assert its hegemony over the world's key energy producing

regions, the result could be war.

The implications of such a war, between two nuclear-armed powers, are beyond horrific.

Curiously, last week the *New York Times* ran an article entitled “US Rethinks Strategy for the Unthinkable,” which dealt with the latest thinking within policy circles on the survivability of a nuclear war.

“We have to get past the mental block that says it's too terrible to think about,” W. Craig Fugate, administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, told the *Times*. “We have to be ready to deal with it.”

An article that appeared last December in the influential foreign policy journal *Foreign Affairs* indicated that such consideration of the “unthinkable” has been directly focused on China. It cited a study by US nuclear weapons analysts on the “consequences of a US nuclear attack using high-yield warheads” to knock out China's own intercontinental ballistic missile arsenal.

“Even though China's silos are located in the countryside,” the article reported, “the model predicted that the fallout would blow over a large area, killing 3-4 million people.”

Two decades after the end of the Cold War, the danger of a nuclear conflagration is greater than ever and is growing, driven by the historic crisis of US and world capitalism. This danger carries with it a threat to the future of all humanity.

The only progressive answer to the poisonous growth of militarism in general and the incendiary role played by US imperialism in particular is the struggle to unite the working class across national boundaries in a common fight for the socialist transformation of society.

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