

# Washington and Seoul ramp up tensions on Korean peninsula

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Joint United States and South Korean military exercises that began on March 1 have enraged North Korea's regime and heightened the danger of war on the peninsula. In the lead up to the operations, Pyongyang's state-owned newspaper *Minju Joson* declared that the exercises constituted "reckless war provocations". The North's *Rodong Sinmun* newspaper stated this week: "If a war breaks out on the peninsula, only a nuclear catastrophe will be triggered."

Two series of exercises, "Key Resolve" and "Foal Eagle," will run until March 10 and April 30 respectively. The first involves some 200,000 South Korean regular troops and reservists, and 12,800 US troops. The second includes a US Seventh Fleet battle group, headed by the aircraft carrier Ronald Reagan, which will arrive in mid-March.

Tensions remain high in the region following South Korea's allegation that one of its corvettes was sunk by a North Korean submarine in March 2010, and the exchange of artillery fire between North and South Korean troops on Yeonpyong Island on November 23. That exchange, which was in a disputed border area at the eastern side of the Yellow Sea—an extremely sensitive strategic region for China—threatened to spark a wider conflict.

The South Korean-US Combined Forces Command has insisted that the current exercises are an annual event and are "defensive in nature"—"designed to enhance readiness, defend the Republic of Korea and respond to any political situation".

Articles in the South Korean press, however, have only fuelled Pyongyang's fears and led to claims that the exercises are part of planning for an invasion of the North. On the day the exercises began, the Seoul daily *DongA Ilbo* reported that there would be simulations of fighter jets attacking Pyongyang, and that South

Korean commandoes would rehearse the seizure of the North's Yongbyon nuclear site, in the case of a "military coup or the death of (North Korean leader) Kim Jong-Il". The military exercises shed light on the scenarios for which Washington and Seoul are preparing.

The element of provocation in the manoeuvres was accentuated by a propaganda campaign that began in mid-February, which has involved right-wing and militarist elements, implicitly backed by the South Korean government, using balloons to send tens of thousands of leaflets into North Korea. According to South Korean sources, the leaflets include information on the uprisings against the regimes in Egypt and the Middle East—essentially encouraging North Koreans to rise up against their dictatorship. The South Korean authorities, which have previously sought to prevent such balloon operations, have this time facilitated them.

The propaganda was clearly designed to unnerve the unstable and moribund Stalinist regime in Pyongyang, which is presiding over insoluble economic problems and mounting social tensions, fuelled by inequality and severe food shortages. A senior South Korean military official told the *New York Times*: "The most dangerous virus for the regime is the truth about the outside world and the truth about themselves. They try to contain and prevent information from infiltrating. But they don't have a vaccine against this kind of virus."

The leaflets produced a predictable response. Pyongyang replied with a bellicose warning: "If the South Korean military leadership continues to engage in psychological warfare, North Korea will in self-defence fire directly on the source of the psychological warfare operations in places such as Imjingak [a South Korean facility not far from the border]."

The South Korean government has issued equally

aggressive instructions to its armed forces. The *Korean Times* reported on March 1 that Defence Minister Kim Kwan-jin issued orders to the commanders of the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Corps, which covers the sensitive Imjingak sector, to “not hesitate whether to shoot or not” and to “report after taking action first”.

The defence minister’s remarks are in accordance with new rules-of-engagement that the government of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak issued after last November’s incidents. Myung-bak has ordered the military to retaliate with three artillery rounds for every round fired by the North.

Since taking office in February 2008, Myung-bak’s Grand National Party (GNP) government has abandoned the “sunshine” policy of diplomatic engagement with the North and adopted a hard-line stance. It has sought to apply the maximum economic and political pressure on the desperate northern regime. Alongside trade sanctions, figures within the GNP have publicly called for the redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea. Others have suggested that South Korea embark on its own nuclear weapons program.

There is no doubt that elaborate plans exist in South Korea for an intervention into any major crisis in the North. The aim would be to ensure that the North is either reunified with the South on Seoul’s terms or left as a southern-dominated, dependent state that functions as a cheap labour zone for South Korean corporations.

The GNP government and the South Korean military are being actively urged on by Washington. A belligerent policy by Seoul meshes with the aggressive efforts of the Obama administration to contain China’s influence in North East Asia.

The Chinese leadership, which fears a US-aligned regime on its border with the Korean peninsula, is continuing its efforts to stave off Pyongyang’s political or economic collapse. On February 23, China used its veto powers in a closed door session of the United Nations Security Council to scuttle the adoption of a sanctions committee report on North Korea’s uranium enrichment program. The report alleged the existence of clandestine facilities and recommended increased penalties against the North.

China insisted instead that the question of North Korea’s nuclear program had to be resolved through the framework of the six-party talks that had involved

China, the US, Japan, Russia and the two Koreas. In February, Beijing sent two delegations to Pyongyang to pressure Kim Jong-Il to tone down the conflicts with the South so that the talks could resume. The six-power forum has not met since December 2008, however, and has been virtually scuttled by the US and South Korea, which are now insisting on United Nations involvement.

On Tuesday, Lee Myung-bak used a speech marking the anniversary of Korea’s independence from Japanese imperialism to bait the North Korean regime and pressure Beijing. While declaring that the South was ready to talk with the North and resume the six-party talks, he made clear the condition would be that the North ends its nuclear program. As the stalemate drags on, the danger of a conflagration and a far wider regional conflict is growing.



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