

China's neo-Maoists hail North Korea's nuclear program

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The reactionary character of China's neo-Maoist tendencies emerged clearly in a Chinese-language statement in February on one of their leading web sites, *Utopia*, promoting the North Korean regime. It "congratulated in rapture ... respected Comrade Kim Jong-un and the great Korean Workers Party" for carrying out a third nuclear weapon test.

The neo-Maoists are a heterogeneous political grouping, ranging from retired Mao-era officials to younger Western-educated economists. They first emerged in the mid-1990s in reaction to the regime's acceleration of capitalist restoration, the sell-off of state-owned enterprises and the destruction of tens of millions of jobs. They sought to appeal to discontent in middle class layers, while blocking the development of a movement in the working class against the restoration of capitalism in China.

The anti-imperialist posturing of the *Utopia* statement on North Korea is typical of the neo-Maoists' phony left-sounding rhetoric, which is designed above all to prevent the emergence of a genuine socialist movement of the working class to challenge China's capitalist elite.

Criticising the US-led wars in Iraq, Libya and Syria and warning that the global order is moving toward "neo-imperialism," *Utopia's* statement hailed the North Korean regime in Pyongyang as a bastion against imperialism. "North Korea's mastery of nuclear weapons is a new contribution to the force of justice against imperialism ... It will greatly contain the wild ambitions of imperialism and reactionary forces to strangle and encircle North Korea and China," it declared.

This is an absurd falsification of the politics of the North Korean regime and its relation to imperialism. The development of a few crude North Korean nuclear devices will not alter the military superiority of the United States, the regional balance of power, or the rising threat of a US-China war.

The only force that can halt the threat of military conflict in Asia is a common struggle against war by the workers in the imperialist countries and their class brothers in the Asia-Pacific, including in China and across the Korean peninsula.

The neo-Maoists, however, are hostile to the perspective of mobilising the international working class in a struggle against war. Instead, they promote the dangerous illusion that workers can fight the rising danger of imperialist war by boosting the military strength of the existing Chinese and North Korean regimes in an armed stand-off with Washington.

The neo-Maoists' reliance on an arms build-up in Northeast Asia to counterbalance US imperialism does not diminish the threat of war in the region. On the contrary, North Korea's nuclear test this winter and Kim Jong-un's subsequent empty threats against the US played straight into Washington's hands. It gave the US a pretext to ratchet up tensions on the Korean Peninsula, leading to a major war scare in March-April, and an expansion of US anti-ballistic missile systems as part of the Obama's administration's "pivot to Asia" against China.

The ruling elites in South Korea and Japan, Washington's two main East Asian allies, also exploited the Korean crisis to expand their own military capacities and drum up militarism at home.

Utopia favourably compared North Korea's nuclear program to Chairman Mao's efforts 50 years ago to set off China's first atomic bomb in 1964, which "undermined the nuclear blackmail by the US and Soviet Union, guaranteed China's national security, and elevated its international standing." *Utopia* insists that North Korea is now in a similar position.

Leaving aside *Utopia's* false assessment of Mao's atomic test, *Utopia's* claim that the atomic bomb has put the small, economically-backward country of North Korea in a position of strength vis-à-vis US imperialism is ridiculous.

In fact, Pyongyang's overriding goal is a rapprochement with the US, the lifting of decades-old US sanctions and the complete integration of the country into global capitalism as Asia's newest and cheapest low-wage platform. In this quest, Pyongyang has repeatedly tried to use its nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip, to be dismantled in the event of an agreement with Washington.

Already in the 1990s under Kim Jong-un's father, Kim Jong-il, the North Korean regime moved to restore capitalist relations, setting up private enterprises and cheap-labour export zones with South Korea. Pyongyang's Chinese counterparts have long urged them to follow a capitalist "reform and opening up" policy, as began in China under Deng Xiaoping in 1978.

Obama has hinted that a deal is possible. Last year when he visited Burma—a country that previously relied for its security on relations with China, like North Korea, but that now has re-established ties with the US—Obama publicly stated that Burma was an example for North Korea to follow. Knowing the thinking in Washington, Kim Jong-un has made various pro-Western gestures, inviting Google CEO Eric Schmidt and former basketball star Dennis Rodman to visit Pyongyang.

To date, however, Obama has shut the door on any negotiations unless North Korea meets all the US demands. That could change, but only if North Korea indicates its willingness, like Burma, to move out of China's orbit—a move with immense and unpredictable consequences.

Sections of the Chinese bureaucracy fear that a pro-US regime in Pyongyang, on China's borders, would pose a dire military and strategic threat. They argue for maintaining China's military alliance with North Korea—views that find reflection in the writings of the neo-Maoists, including *Utopia*, who claim that a nuclear-armed North Korea is a useful buffer against the United States.

The class basis of the neo-Maoists

The stance of the neo-Maoists and *Utopia* on North Korea is of a piece with their foreign and domestic policies as a whole. Deeply hostile to the working class and the urban and rural poor, they orient to what they claim

are “healthy forces”—that is, anti-imperialist or even socialistic elements—inside the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Their essential aim is to promote the lie that, even though capitalism was restored in China decades ago, there are still leaders within the CCP who can be pushed to adopt socialistic or “left” policies.

This is a blatant falsification of the reactionary, pro-capitalist politics that dominates the entire CCP. All factions have shed the Maoist brand of Stalinism that formed the ideological basis for the deformed workers’ state established after the 1949 Chinese revolution. The openly bourgeois character of the current Chinese regime is acknowledged even by the strategists of US imperialism. A 2009 American diplomatic cable published by WikiLeaks likened China’s Politburo Standing Committee to “the executive suite of a large corporation,” with then-President Hu Jintao acting as the chairman of the board, arbitrating between competing “vested interests.”

The cable explained how the CCP’s senior figures divided up China’s “economic pie.” Former Premier Li Peng’s family controlled the electric power sector, former security chief Zhou Yongkang’s faction dominated the oil interests, former top leader Chen Yun’s family was in charge of most of the state Chinese banking, while “Hu Jintao’s son-in-law ran Sina.com; and [Premier] Wen Jiabao’s wife controlled China’s precious gems sector.”

The neo-Maoists are aligned with particular sections of the CCP bureaucracy. Their ideological roots are in the so-called “Old Left,” who opposed Deng’s pro-market reforms from the standpoint of preserving their privileged existence, which was dependent on state-owned enterprises. The anti-working class character of this bureaucratic layer was demonstrated by their wholehearted support for Deng’s decision to send tanks to crush the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests when workers began to join the students and voice their social demands.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Deng dramatically accelerated the process of capitalist restoration, transforming China as a whole into a giant manufacturing sweatshop for world imperialism. The neo-Maoist tendencies emerged among layers of the educated urban middle class alienated by the changes, which for them meant an end to a guaranteed and relatively privileged jobs in state-owned enterprises or the state bureaucracy. Not a few students and academics studied in the West and came under influence of various forms of middle class radical politics, from environmentalism to anti-globalisation, which they repackaged for a Chinese audience with a Maoist colouration.

The common battle cry of the neo-Maoists is to “oppose neo-liberalism.” Their aim is not the expropriation of China’s new property-owning elite and the building of a genuine workers’ state in China, as a part of the global struggle for socialism, but to encourage illusion and subordination to the existing political regime in China.

Their criticisms of “neo-liberalism” meet up with the interests of substantial layers of the state bureaucracy, as well as Chinese exports firm owners whose profit margins are being “unfairly” squeezed by the major transnational corporations operating in China. At the same time, these social layers are deeply fearful of growing social unrest and hostile to the prospect of any revolutionary movement of the working class and rural poor.

Business management professor Han Deqiang, who set up the *Utopia* web site in 2003, does not oppose “market reform” and capitalist property relations, but calls for “fair distribution” and “just wealth creation.” He publicly stated that he chose the name *Utopia* to distance himself from “the scientific socialism of Marx.” He rejects the Marxist conception of socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class through the class struggle.

Explaining to a British diplomat why he supported the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement in the US, Han concisely spelled out the social aspirations he represents. He complained that “because transnational

corporations are in China, China’s own enterprises can only labour for transnational corporations—being second-tier, third-tier and fourth-tier bosses, but not the big boss.”

On this basis, he insisted that China’s capitalist elite are part of the “99 percent” in the world, opposing the “1 percent” super-rich in the West. *Utopia*’s goal is the transformation of China’s largest state firms into multinational corporations—to be controlled by the families of the “Red aristocracy”—initially through strong state financing and protection, in a manner akin to the South Korean or Japanese conglomerates.

Unsurprisingly, Han insisted the *Utopia* web site represents no danger to the Chinese government or Chinese political stability. “This is because *Utopia* does not call for overthrowing the government, but for reform, a change of line from the top, an integration of the party with the masses, and a return to socialism,” he said. “From the standpoint of more ‘leftist’ people, this is ‘reformist.’ So how could you call *Utopia* ‘ultra-left’?”

Just as it advocates Chinese capitalist “national champions” that can compete with existing transnationals, *Utopia* also speaks for a hawkish layer in the military that calls for far greater investment in a strong military, with a blue-water navy and an offensive air force, to protect China’s overseas interests against US threats.

Professor Han and other neo-Maoists played a leading role in the violent anti-Japanese protests in September 2012. They pushed Beijing to take more aggressive action against Japan’s provocative “nationalisation” of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, while supporting a predominately middle-class campaign to “boycott Japanese goods.”

Workers and youth in China should reject the petty-bourgeois phrasemongering of the neo-Maoists. Behind their glorification of North Korea’s nuclear weapon program is their rejection of an independent intervention by the working class internationally to challenge the fundamental cause of war: the profit system and its reactionary division of the world into rival nation-states.

The only way to halt the drive to war is through the unification of workers in struggle in China, the Korean Peninsula, and internationally, including in the United States, on the basis of replacing the profit system with a globally planned socialist economy.



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