

Behind North Korea's political crisis

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The summary trial and execution of North Korea's no. 2 leader, Jang Song-thaek, on December 12 points to a deep internal crisis within the Pyongyang regime. Since the death of leader Kim Jong-il two years ago, his son and successor Kim Jong-un has removed around 100 of the country's top 218 officials, including all but two of the seven who accompanied his father's hearse.

The clearest indication of the turmoil inside North Korea comes from Jang's supposed "confession," which declared that he was planning to seize power "when the economy goes totally bankrupt and the state is on the verge of collapse." Jang is being made the scapegoat for a stagnant, crisis-prone economy that is generating profound social tensions and instability in the police-state regime.

Whatever the immediate reason for the factional infighting, the chief responsibility for the political turmoil lies not in Pyongyang, but in Washington. The Obama administration, as part of its "pivot to Asia" aimed at undermining North Korea's chief ally China, has intensified the longstanding US blockade of the country, transforming Pyongyang into a political pressure cooker.

Washington has maintained an attitude of unrestrained hostility toward North Korea for more than six decades. US imperialism and its allies fought a devastating war from 1950 to 1953 to prop up the right-wing South Korean regime of US-installed strongman Syngman Rhee—a war that killed millions of soldiers and civilians and left the Korean Peninsula in ruins. An armistice ended the fighting, but a peace treaty was never signed, meaning that a state of war still exists.

For the US, the target of the Korean War was not just North Korea, but China, where the US-backed Kuomintang was overthrown in the 1949 Chinese Revolution. Commander of the US-led forces, General Douglas MacArthur, advocated the use of atomic weapons against China as its forces pushed back

against American troops approaching the Chinese border. Throughout the Cold War, the US military stationed tens of thousands of troops, as well as warships and warplanes, in South Korea and continues to do so today.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War only resulted in the intensification of American pressure on North Korea. Even though it had kept tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea for decades, the US used North Korea's limited nuclear facilities as the pretext for maintaining its military bases in South Korea and Japan. After North Korea pulled out of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, the Clinton administration took the peninsula to the brink of war in 1994, before pulling back and signing an agreement known as the Agreed Framework to denuclearise North Korea.

The uneasy standoff and tentative moves toward a rapprochement between North and South Korea under the so-called "Sunshine Policy" came to a rapid end with the installation of the Bush administration. In 2002, Bush signalled his determination to escalate the confrontation with North Korea by branding it part of an "axis of evil" along with Iraq and Iran. Bush made explicit what has been the essential US strategy all along—to cripple the country economically in order to produce a political implosion in Pyongyang.

As the US-led occupation of Iraq turned into a military quagmire, Bush was compelled to turn to China to wind back tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The Bush administration took part in Beijing-sponsored six-party talks, but as with the Agreed Framework, never had the slightest intention of making concessions to Pyongyang.

The end of Soviet aid after 1991 left North Korea dependent on China and in a profound economic crisis. Like Stalinist regimes around the world, Pyongyang responded by moving to restore capitalism. However,

its plans were undermined by the US denial of access to the global economy and foreign investment. Pyongyang's nuclear tests since 2006 have been a desperate attempt to gain leverage in negotiations.

The Obama administration has ramped up the pressure on North Korea as part of its shift in foreign policy from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to Asia. The so-called "pivot" is a comprehensive and extremely reckless strategy aimed at diplomatically undercutting and militarily encircling China. On coming to office, Obama made no attempt to restart the six-party talks but instead systematically wound up tensions on the Korean Peninsula—using North Korean nuclear and rocket tests to impose new sanctions and pressure China to do the same. When Pyongyang reacted to the latest UN sanctions in March with wild but empty threats, the US provocatively flew nuclear-capable B-52 and B-2 bombers into South Korea and exploited the opportunity to expand its anti-ballistic missile systems in Asia.

Just as Obama's "pivot" has inflamed territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas, so it has produced a highly volatile situation on the Korean Peninsula. Beijing has propped up the Pyongyang regime as an important strategic buffer against US forces in the region, but it can ill afford a political upheaval on its northern border. Since April, China has been pressuring North Korea to make concessions to the US. The execution of Jang, who was widely regarded as closely aligned to Beijing, appears to be in response.

Behind its façade of unity, the North Korean regime is clearly under stress and very brittle. A political meltdown in Pyongyang would immediately raise the danger of conflict as the US and its allies sought to exploit the crisis to manufacture a regime aligned with Washington—moves that China would certainly try to counter.

The Korean Peninsula is just one of the dangerous flashpoints in the Indo-Pacific that US imperialism has fuelled as it seeks to use its military might to ensure its continued domination of the region. The only social force capable of ending the rising danger of a catastrophic war is the international working class, through a unified struggle to abolish capitalism and restructure society on the basis of a world planned socialist economy.



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