

US-South Korean War Games threaten to inflame Korean Peninsula

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Tensions on the Korean Peninsula are again set to escalate as the US and South Korean militaries prepare to hold their annual joint war games—Key Resolve and Foal Eagle. The former is a computer-based simulation running for two weeks from late February, focussed on “crisis management” and aimed against North Korea. The latter is a massive mobilisation, which last year involved 10,000 US military personnel and up to 200,000 South Korean troops in a range of drills extending over two months.

As in previous years, the North Korean regime demanded the exercises be called off. A spokesman for the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea on Wednesday declared that “powder-reeking war exercises are being waged, vitiating the hope-filled atmosphere at the beginning of the new year.” He called on the US and South Korea to stop the drills, warning that they might “push the situation on the peninsula and the north-south ties to a catastrophe.”

At the same time, however, North Korea’s National Defence Commission issued a statement on Thursday proposing that the two Koreas adopt a moratorium on “slander.” It stated: “We propose formally to the authorities of the South that on the occasion of the Lunar New Year holiday beginning on January 30, both sides take substantive steps of halting actions that provoke and criticise the other.” The commission also indicated it would support South Korean President Park Geun-hye’s call last week for reunions of families separated by the Korean War, if the war games were halted.

South Korea rejected the conciliatory gesture, as well as any suggestion that it would cancel joint exercises with the US. Unification Ministry spokesman Kim Eui-do demanded that North Korea take “practical” actions for nuclear disarmament if it wanted peace on the peninsula. Defence Ministry spokesman Kim Min-seok warned: “Should North Korea make a military provocation using our regular drills against contingencies as an excuse, our military will mercilessly retaliate.”

Last year’s US-South Korean exercises dangerously inflamed the Korean Peninsula, which has long been a flashpoint for war in Asia. In the wake of harsher US-led sanctions following a North Korean nuclear test, the Pyongyang regime made a series of belligerent, but empty threats to wage war against South Korea and the US.

The North Korean rhetoric played directly into the hands of the Obama administration, which dispatched B-52 and B-2 bombers to South Korea in a provocative display of force. These were followed by advanced F-22 Raptor fighters and two US anti-missile destroyers in steps that CNN later revealed were taken from a pre-arranged step-by-step plan dubbed in the

Pentagon as “the playbook.”

While Washington insisted that its moves were purely defensive, the dispatch of nuclear-capable bombers to South Korea was clearly designed to intimidate and menace North Korea. At the same time, the Obama administration exploited the opportunity to announce the boosting of anti-ballistic missile systems in North East Asia—measures primarily aimed against China, not North Korea’s crude weapons.

Last year’s Foal Eagle war games not only involved large numbers of US and South Korean military personnel but were very extensive in scope. Over the two months, according to US Forces Korea, there were “a series of separate but inter-related joint and combined field training exercises... spanning ground, air, naval, expeditionary and special operations.”

In the lead-up to this year’s exercises, the Pentagon announced on January 7 that it will send 800 additional troops to South Korea for a nine-month rotation. While the extra forces will only marginally increase the 28,500 American military personnel permanently stationed on the Korean Peninsula, the mechanised units come with 40 of the latest M1A2 Abrams tanks and other armoured vehicles.

The announcement came as US Secretary of State John Kerry met in Washington with his South Korean counterpart, Yun Byung-se. Kerry declared that the two countries were “very firmly united” and “deeply focused on the challenge of North Korea, particularly with events that have taken place in recent weeks” in Pyongyang.

Kerry’s remarks were in response to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un’s factional purge last month, including the execution of his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, who was widely regarded as the regime’s No. 2 official. The very public removal of Jang is a sign of deep political instability in Pyongyang, which confronts a severe economic and social crisis that has been compounded by US-led sanctions.

While the Pentagon claimed its extra troops were “long-planned,” the move is clearly aimed at intensifying the pressure on the North Korean regime at a time of internal turmoil. In an interview with *Dong-A Ilbo* on Thursday, the US ambassador to South Korea, Sung Kim, said Washington and Seoul were “strengthening coordination” in order to be able to respond to an “implosion” in Pyongyang. He also hinted at the aim of any intervention in the North Korean crisis, declaring that a reunited Korea was “a living desire in the hearts of all South Koreans.”

The South Korean government is keen to extend the present exploitation of cheap North Korean labour, currently limited to the north’s Kaesong Industrial Complex. President Park negotiated the reopening of the complex, which was shut down in the midst of last year’s tensions. It employs roughly 50,000 workers in 123 factories, producing mainly textiles, shoes and household goods. North Korea recently announced that it will open another 14 special economic zones in an attempt to attract foreign investment.

The Obama administration’s interest in an “implosion” and regime change in North Korea is bound up with its “pivot to Asia”—a comprehensive strategy aimed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the region and encircling it militarily. The US alliance with South Korea is a critical component of the “pivot,” enabling the basing of American military forces immediately adjacent to the Chinese mainland. Regime change in Pyongyang or the reunification of the Koreas would place a US ally on China’s northern border.

As with the so-called “rogue states” of Burma and Iran, the Obama administration has adopted a “carrot-and-stick” approach to North Korea. The US recklessly maintains pressure on Pyongyang via sanctions and its military ties with Seoul, while holding out the prospect of a rapprochement if it is willing to shift its orientation away from Beijing toward Washington.

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