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# The Korean Powder-Keg

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North Korea is a powder keg, and the Obama Administration "like the Bush Administration whose bellicose policies it inherited" is playing with matches. Why are the U.S. and its allies hysterical about the Iranians whose nuclear programs might at some future time lead to nuclear weapons while recklessly provoking the North Koreans, whose stock of tested nuclear weapons are presumably operational now?

The Korean powder-keg is the kind of situation that calls for delicate diplomacy, yet the U.S. chose to send the atomic-powered aircraft carrier George Washington to join the provocative U.S./South Korean war-games in contested waters just off the coast of North Korea. While the Administration and the media chose to focus on the fatal shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in order to portray the N. Koreans as homicidal maniacs, placed in the context of the U.S. imperialism's far more aggressive and provocative behaviors, N. Korea's brutal 'signals' may best understood as defensive.

### **Look at the facts from the N. Korean point of view.**

Under the pretext of 'live-fire' war games, the U.S./S.Korean command assembled a huge armada including the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit and the 7th Air Force in the South China Sea where U.S. and South Korean marines planned to stage a combined amphibious landing exercise. This was to take place on the west coast of Korea a few miles from Incheon, where, as every Korean school-child knows, in June 1950 Gen. MacArthur pulled off his historic amphibious invasion of in and set out to conquer the North. The N. Koreans had every reason to fear that history will repeat itself, given that such maneuvers have often been preludes to war (as in Europe in 1914).

Moreover, North Korean schoolchildren (not to mention military leaders) are also painfully aware that sixty years after MacArthur's invasion, the U.S. has still not made peace or recognized their government. Thus the most powerful nation on earth is still officially at war with their country and free to attack them without warning. Are their fears irrational? Let us recall that from the official U.S. point of view, the Korean conflict of 1950-1953 was not a "War" but a "Police Action," [1] part of America's self-appointed role as policeman of the world and leader of the anti-Communist crusade. Washington still considers itself the world's policeman and has declared the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) part of the 'Axis of Evil' placed on the U.S. agenda for Iraq-style 'regime change' (i.e. invasion and occupation).

### **Give Peace a Chance?**

On the other hand, the goals of the legitimate (if repugnant) government of the DPRK are equally simple: As the N. Korean leadership has repeatedly stated, they would give up their nukes in return for diplomatic relations and a peace treaty ending the war [2]. Moreover, such promises have proven reliable in the past [3]. What is the U.S. counter-offer? The same one they gave to the Indians: turn in your weapons first, and trust the Great White Father in Washington to treat you fairly afterwards. A century ago in the Far West, the Apaches and the Comanches only had bows and a few rifles, but rather than submit to living death on the Reservation they chose to fight on. The Comanche of today's Far East have a huge, modern mechanized army backed by nukes. It is unlikely that they will submit, and if they feel threatened they will not hesitate to attack first, as they have proven in the past.

The deliberately lethal N. Korean shellings of last week and their deliberate revelation of new, more advanced nuclear facilities were designed to convince Obama and the South Koreans they mean business [4]. It would be sheer madness to call their bluff when, to quote Lennon, 'All they are saying is give peace a chance.' Yet,

Washington, apparently still obsessed with America's John Wayne image as hard-nosed Indian-fighter and implacable Sheriff of the world, adamantly refuses to negotiate and insists on playing 'chicken' with an adversary who has much less to lose and is therefore unlikely to blink first. If the DPRK is pushed too far and decides to attack, what might happen next?

### A New Korean War?

The 1950-53 Korean Conflict between a United Nations Police Force headed by the U.S. (including notably G.B. and Turkey) and the DPRK ended in a stalemate, with a Cease Fire and the creation of a narrow Demilitarized Zone dividing the two Koreas along the 38th Parallel. Along this Cease-Fire line, fortified on both sides, bloody skirmishes have been taking place for sixty years. Half of South Korea's population is within 50 miles of North Korea's arsenal of almost 12,000 artillery guns and rockets. Those weapons are 'more than sufficient to destroy much of what South Korea has created in over half a century.' [5] Recently discovered were two North Korean infiltration tunnels: 2 meters wide, 2 meters high and 65 meters underground, capable of transporting 10,000 soldiers an hour right up to the outskirts of Seoul, South Korean capital. The existence of 15 other tunnels is suspected.

The North Korean army has [6], 1,000,000 soldiers, well armed and well fed despite widespread shortages generally. North Korea is one of the poorest countries in the world, South Korea is one of the richest. The opportunity for North Korean troops to plunder the South, as they did in 1950, would relieve the North's economic crisis and restore popularity to the dictatorial regime. If they feel threatened enough, the North Koreans are in a position to over-run South Korea in a matter of days, just like they did in 1950. And this time, they would be protected by a nuclear umbrella.

The North Korean government began its atomic program in the 1950s, constructed reactors in the 1960s and eventually succeeded in producing atomic weapons and in testing missiles to launch them. Military experts estimate that the DPRK has built 8 to 12 nuclear warheads, but they may have many more. In a situation where it will no longer have much to lose, the North Korean regime will not hesitate to use them. Assuming a 50% or even a 90% failure rate among their Soviet-era medium-range missiles, the North Koreans could still take out the U.S. fleet and obliterate Seoul and Tokyo. Would they dare?

North Korean generals have been cited explaining why Saddam lost the 1991 war: "Iraq lost because it stayed on the defensive. You must take the offensive. Iraq didn't use all its weapons. If we are at war, we will use all of them. And if there is war, we must attack first, take the initiative." There is nothing secret or ambiguous about official Peoples' Army doctrine. Those were precisely the tactics of the North Korean army when it attacked on 25 June 1950 and succeeded in a few weeks in driving back the American and South Korean forces to the Sea of Japan.)

According to pundit Leslie Gelb, current U.S. policy is to let the South Koreans take the lead in this confrontation ('after all, it is their country') and South Korea's aggressive President Lee has said he 'would order military strikes on northern bases if Pyongyang seemed poised to launch further attacks' while his new defense minister declared on Dec. 1 that the South would use air strikes against North Korea if it carried out further attacks [7]. A land-based North Korean counter-attack would put the U.S. in an untenable position.

With its ground forces tied down in the Afghani and Iraqi quagmires, there is no way America could fight a land war in Asia, so U.S. war plans call for massive air attacks. On the other hand, the use of U.S. nukes so close to the Chinese border would have to be ruled out, unless Washington is willing to risk and open break with the Asian giant and the risk of thermonuclear war. Obama's senseless provocation of a desperate, cornered enemy seems like a formula for disaster, but it wouldn't be the first time in history belligerent countries blundered into war.

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From the point of view of the objective self-interest of U.S. imperialism, it is difficult to imagine a positive outcome if the explosive Korean situation reaches the unknowable tipping point. Yet the Obama Administration, with Cheney's twin Gates in charge of the Defense Department, continues to pursue Bush's hysterical cowboy crusade against the Axis of Evil, escalating the pointless fighting in Afghanistan, not-so 'secretly' expanding the military conflict into Yemen and unstable, nuclear-armed Pakistan (Woah!) and now stirring up the North Korean nuclear hornet's-nest. Why?

As we will show in our next article, the answer to that question is rooted in the history of the Cold War, indeed, precisely in the history of the Korean conflict, which is where the Cold War began (or rather turned hot). Meanwhile, readers should do everything possible to build opposition to a new Korean war before it is too late. Please click on <http://www.endthekoreanwar.org/> Please feel free to post and to pass on this article.

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[1] This border line was imposed unilaterally by the U.S. Navy in 1953 right after the Korean war. That line has never been recognized by North Korea, nor by the international community.

[2] "Pyongyang has sent a consistent message that during direct talks with the United States, it is ready to conclude an agreement to end its nuclear programs, put them all under IAEA inspection and conclude a permanent peace treaty to replace the 'temporary' cease-fire of 1953." – Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter.

[3] Under the 1994 Agreed Framework the DPRK agreed to stop its nuclear program in exchange for energy alternatives and a non-aggression pact with the United States. This stopped DPRK's fuel-cell reprocessing and restored IAEA inspection for eight years until Bush refused to negotiate with a state he deemed 'terrorist,' placed North Korea in his imaginary 'Axis of Evil' and ordered the largest joint military exercises to date.

[4] As Jimmy Carter wrote on Nov. 24, 'No one can completely understand the motivations of the North Koreans, but it is entirely possible that their recent revelation of their uranium enrichment centrifuges and Pyongyang's shelling of a South Korean island Tuesday are designed to remind the world that they deserve respect in negotiations that will shape their future. Ultimately, the choice for the United States may be between diplomatic niceties and avoiding a catastrophic confrontation.'

[5] 'The Next Korean War?' by N.Y. Times pundit Leslie Gelb,  
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-11-23/north-koreas-attack-on-south-korea-leslie-h-gelb-on-the-prospects-for-war/>

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[7] N.Y. Times, Dec. 12, 2010