

# Discussion: Danger of War over Korea

**Richard Greeman**

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North Korea is a powder keg. Why does the U.S. insist on playing chicken with a nuclear-armed Stalinist gerontocracy that, having nothing to lose, is unlikely to blink first? Since November's N. Korean shelling incident, hawkish South Korean military threats and massive US maneuvers in South China Sea waters claimed by China have raised the stakes and alarmed America's biggest creditor and trading partner.

The Korean powder keg is the kind of situation that calls for delicate diplomacy, yet in response to November's North-South artillery duel, 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.<sup>[1]</sup> The Administration and the media chose to focus on the fatal shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in order to portray the N. Koreans as terrorists. Yet 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.

In November 2010, over N. Korean and Chinese protests, the U.S./South Korean Command assembled a huge armada including the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit and the 7th Air Force in the South China Sea under the pretext of 'live-fire' war games. Moreover, U.S. and South Korean marines planned to stage a combined amphibious landing exercise on the west coast of Korea a few miles from Incheon, where, as every Korean school-child knows, Gen. MacArthur pulled off his historic amphibious invasion of in and set out to conquer North Korea in August 1950. 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.

The N. Koreans are painfully aware that that from the official U.S. point of view, the Korean conflict of 1950-1953 was not a "War" but a "Police Action," part of America's post-WWII self-appointed role as policeman of the world and leader of the anti-Communist crusade.<sup>[2]</sup> Washington still considers itself the world's policeman and has declared their Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) a 'terrorist' state, part of the 'Axis of Evil' — placed on the U.S. agenda for 'regime change' (i.e. Iraq-style invasion and occupation). 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?

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Why is Obama playing Teddy Roosevelt-style gunboat diplomacy in the South China Sea, signaling an abrupt rupture in America's peaceful relation with China, the U.S.'s biggest economic partner and its major creditor? Can't Obama see that the rising, nuclear-armed Asian superpower will be harder to intimidate than Panama or Nicaragua? What is the pressing geo-strategic advantage of risking a break with China and involvement in another land war in Asia over the North Koreans, who are basically rattling their cage in order to get the U.S. to talk to them? Why are the Americans, who failed to win the first Korean War, were beaten in Vietnam, and are now quagmired in Muslim West Asia, once again acting out John Wayne at the Alamo, this time with Obama as an unlikely Davy Crockett and N. Korea's Kim Jong-il in the role of the Mexican General Santa Ana?[3]

The short answer is this: after 60 years U.S. imperialism is still unwilling to admit it lost the Korean War, beaten by an Asian people and forced to withdraw because U.S. public opinion would no longer sustain it. The 'Korea syndrome' was the grandfather of the 'Vietnam syndrome,' and U.S. imperialism, like a *macho* who is worried about sexual impotence, keeps trying obsessively to 'prove himself' after each failure. Indeed, 'getting over' the Vietnam syndrome was one of the Bush Administrations avowed aims in invading Iraq. The 'long answer' lies among the roots of the conflict in Korea's unfinished national democratic revolution and the origins of the Cold War.

For an activist of my generation, recent South Korean threats of air strikes against North Korea and the extension of U.S./ South Korean live-fire war games along the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel revive eerie memories of June 1950, when similar provocative skirmishes led to the outbreak of a full-scale military conflagration which, sixty years later, still remains unresolved. I happen to have grown up in a 'progressive' (pro-Soviet) household during the dark days of the bloody Korean conflict, and I first became politically conscious during the hysterical anti-Communist crusade that was its domestic counterpart.

For a full internationalist historical analysis, including my testimony as an activist, please see my Z-Space blogs at <http://www.zcommunications.org/the-korean-powder-keg-by-richard-greeman>

*URGENT APPEAL: Korea remains a tinderbox that could blow up at any minute, exactly as it did (after South Korean military provocations) in June of 1950. We must inform people and raise a protest, beginning with the peace movement and Left who are not up to speed on this burning issue. Please contact <http://www.endthekoreanwar.org/> and please, post and to pass on these bulletins.*

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The following are excerpts from the longer analysis Greeman has published in his Z-Space blogs — Editors

### **Japanese Occupation and Resistance**

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In the 1890s neighboring Japan emerged as a military and industrial capitalist power with imperial ambitions in Manchuria (where the Japanese defeated the Russian Empire in 1905) and Korea, which they formally annexed in 1910. The Japanese conquerors, who considered themselves racially superior, forced the Koreans to change their names to Japanese names, attempted to eradicate their language (like the British in Ireland) and reduced them to colonial semi-slavery (including sex-slavery during WWII). Koreans were also imported to work in Japan, where their descendants remain racial pariahs to this day.

The Korean independence movement emerged in 1919 with demonstrations inspired by Wilson's 'right to self-determination.' It fought the Japanese occupation from exile and through the underground until on Aug. 15, 1945 the Japanese Governor General turned power over to democrat Yuh Woon-Hyung's moderately left Korean Provisional Government. As in France at the time of the Liberation, there was a euphoric unity among straight nationalists, democrats, and Communists, themselves organized into a variety of independent resistance groups.<sup>[4]</sup> On September 6, 1945, a congress of representatives was convened in Seoul, founding a modern, democratic Korean state just three weeks after Japan's capitulation.

### U.S. Occupation

Then, as now, U.S. imperialism acted out its knee-jerk hostility to democracy. On Sept. 8, the day after Korea's declaration of independence, U.S. military forces under General MacArthur's orders placed southern Korea under a U.S. military occupation regime and, lacking troops to enforce it, put the Japanese garrison back in power to maintain order. The Americans refused to meet with Yuh Woon-Hyung's Provisional Government and treated all indigenous attempts at self-government as 'Communist insurgency.' As the population rose up, the U.S. banned strikes and outlawed the Provisional Government. The arrests and massacres of the independence demonstrators were carried out by the collaborationist Korean police, who had served as enforcers for Japanese imperialists and now served the U.S. occupiers.

As a sop to Korean nationalist sentiment, the U.S. set up a puppet state under Syngman Rhee, a right-wing anti-Communist who had spent most of his life in exile in the U.S. Rhee imposed a brutal dictatorship, based on ex-collaborators, in order to crush the democratic effervescence of the Liberation, persecute his political opponents, and carry out military campaigns against strikers, students and left-wing insurgents who were thus forced underground and to take up arms against the government.

While the U.S. Command looked on, Rhee's military police and right-wing [paramilitary](#) (civilian) armies executed thousands of left wing political prisoners at Daejeon Prison and in the [Jeju Uprising](#) (1948-49). Thus, Rhee's ferocious anti-Communist repression pushed the mass of patriots and democrats into the ranks of the Communists, who numbered among the millions, divided about equally between the South and the North.

### **North Korean Communists Consolidate**

Meanwhile, beginning in August 1945 the northern half of the Korean peninsula was being occupied by Soviet troops, who had recently joined the anti-Japanese war at U.S. request and had quickly liberated all of Manchuria through massive broad-front attacks. (Some Leftists believed that Truman dropped the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki as a signal to the Russians, whose rapid land advances in Asia were daily encroaching on U.S. spheres of influence). At a hasty Moscow meeting from which the Koreans were excluded, the newly liberated Korean nation was divided in two, with U.S. and Russia as occupiers according to the existing status of forces.

Unlike the Americans, the Russian occupiers chose to recognize the popular Korean Independence Committees, mostly led by Communist resistance-fighters, and allowed them to proceed to self-government, while centralizing the independent groups and placing Communists in key posts. As in the South, the northern Communists were divided into factions, and although Kim Il Sung, who was eventually to dominate the Party, spent part of the War in Manchuria under the Russians, he was not a Russian stooge (unlike his East German counterparts).

Kim based his popularity on the countryside, where the Party carried out a relatively successful land reform, without excessive violence such as occurred in China. Kim also sent N. Korean volunteer troops to China to help Mao Tse-tung's Red Army defeat the reactionary U.S.-backed regime of Chiang Kai-shek in 1949. The Chinese returned the compliment in 1950 when the U.S. invaded North Korea, but Kim nonetheless prevented the pro-Chinese faction from dominating the Korean Party, and his regime remains independent to this day, probably to China's great chagrin.

### **The Communist Party Degenerates**

In this fluid post-war situation, the multi-tendency Korean Communist Party retained some of the qualities of a genuine revolutionary mass-based socialist movement. Alas, during the civil war the North Korean Party-state became totally bureaucratized, with Kim Il-Sung purging all independent tendencies, fabricating his increasingly outlandish personality cult, and consolidating his own Stalinist-style totalitarian military state, forced to live in impoverished autarchy by sixty years of U.S. war and sanctions.

The brittle gerontocracy that rules the North Korean Party-state today knows its days are numbered, one way or another. With little to lose, those old men would have little hesitation deploying their nukes if they concluded their regime was seriously threatened. The goal of the veteran Party and Army chiefs is to finish their lives still in power, like the victorious North Vietnamese Communist veterans now presiding over a state-controlled capitalist miracle. Obviously, victory is their only chance for survival, and *attack* has always been their military doctrine. What can Obama possibly hope to gain by stirring up this very nasty nuclear hornets nest?

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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] This hypocrisy also served to cheat the unfortunate Korean vets out of G.I. Bill benefits, which left many of them embittered.

[3] As Richard Slotkin points out, in the movie Wayne (as Davy Crockett) tricks his followers into joining him in what he knows will be a suicidal mission, knowing that once inside the Alamo, the sense of honor and group loyalty will keep them fighting to the death. This duplicity duplicates that of Johnson involving the U.S. public in the Vietnam War 'for our own good,' after which withdrawal would be seen as a sign of weakness or betrayal.

[4] The comparison with the U.S. attitude toward the Liberation of France is not fanciful. At the end of WWII, Eisenhower planned to by-pass the provisional government of de Gaulle and the Communists and occupy France directly. Indeed, the U.S.-minted French *francs* of the occupation regime were already printed and brought ashore shortly after D-Day landings.

Source: <http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/articles/discussion-danger-of-war-over-korea-by-richard-greeman/>