

Korea: Pawn of the Superpowers (a response to Richard Greeman's "Danger of War Over Korea")

Peter Hudis

December 29, 2010

The intensifying tensions between North Korea and the U.S. calls for a historical re-examination of the roots of the present situation, in light of the conflict between the two poles of world capital that dominated the post-World War II era – Editors

“[Danger of War Over Korea](#),” by Richard Greeman, is a welcome contribution to the effort to build opposition to the Obama administration's clumsy and shortsighted saber rattling against North Korea, which can turn into an even greater fiasco than the U.S.'s invasion of Iraq. I fully agree that the U.S. is needlessly sticking its finger into a hornet's nest by responding to North Korea's unprovoked attack on Yeonpyeong Island by holding massive war games with South Korean forces in this highly volatile region.

At the same time, I very much doubt that the North Korean regime thinks it has “nothing to lose” by provoking South Korea and the U.S. The rather mild response to the war games by the North, after initially promising a “punishing war” if they were held, tends to underline this. The North Korean ruling class has a great deal to lose by risking outright war: the collapse of its dictatorial regime over the starving North Korean populace.

The riots that were reported in North Korea several months ago over the horrendous economic conditions highlight a deep crisis that has pervaded the North for at least two decades. One on the one hand, the North's celebrated ideology of “self-reliance” has proven to be such a dismal failure that it desperately needs outside economic assistance, including from South Korea, Japan and the U.S.; yet at the same time, the regime is terrified than any opening to the outside world will jeopardize its totalitarian rule over the North Korean people. Caught in this crisis of their own making, the regime repeatedly assumes an aggressive, militarist posture even as it demands official recognition from the U.S. and economic assistance from South Korea and others. The North's actions in turn mesh with the militarist designs of U.S. imperialism, which is happy to use its acts as a pretext for maintaining its military dominance of the Sea of Japan and surrounding area.

Richard correctly asks: Why is the U.S. risking an abrupt rupture with its friendly relations with China over its response North Korea's actions? But the answer is not that the U.S. is unwilling to admit that it “lost” the Korean War. Nor is that U.S. public opinion forced it to “withdraw” from

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the Korean peninsular (it has maintained tens of thousands of troops there for six decades). The Korean War was a proxy war between the two poles of world capital left standing after World War II—U.S. “free market” imperialism and “Soviet” state-capitalist totalitarianism. The war ended in a stalemate that neither of the two superpowers won or lost; the armistice lines of 1953 were virtually identical to the border between North and South Korea in 1950. The U.S. is risking relations with China over North Korea’s actions as part of a broader strategy to re-assert its imperial hegemony in the region in light of China’s increasing prestige and power.

The real losers of the Korean War were the Korean people. Millions of them died as a result of decisions made in Washington, but also because of decisions made in their stead in Moscow and Beijing. We now know from the historical record that Stalin urged Kim Il Sung to initiate a war on the peninsular by invading the South, in telegrams sent to him in January, 1950 (see Kathryn Weathersby’s *Stalin and the Danger of War With America*). Of course, the crucial determinant is never who casts the first stone in an intra-imperialist war. There is no justification for the U.S.’s murderous attacks on the North during the war, which killed millions of civilians, any more than there is a justification for Mao’s role (he sent hundreds of thousands of Chinese troops to a needless death in a war that changed nothing in terms of the division of the Korean peninsular into two pieces).

The reason we need to prevent the war moves on the Korean peninsular is that the Korean masses are still being treated as mere pawns in a game played by state powers that care more about military might and capital accumulation than real human needs.

Source: <http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/articles/korea-pawn-of-the-superpowers-a-response-to-richard-greemans-danger-of-war-over-korea-%E2%80%93-by-peter-hudis/>