

Excerpt from Tim Beal's
*Crisis in Korea: America, China, and the
Risk of War*, (Pluto Press, 2011)

CRISIS IN KOREA

America, China,
and the Risk of War
Tim Beal



The following pages contain an excerpt from Tim Beal's *Crisis in Korea: America, China, and the Risk of War*, (Pluto Press, August 2011). Additionally, a full table of contents are printed, along with information on how to order this title.

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Foreword

Korea is surprisingly important. It was Japan's takeover of Korea which led it to war with Russia, and provided the first victory over a European power by a non-European one for centuries. The colonisation of Korea then led Japan into war with China and ultimately with the United States; that brought us, amongst other things, Hiroshima and the atomic age. The Korean War, which broke out in 1950, ended America's post Second World War demobilization and provided the impetus for the remilitarisation of its society and economy. This local 'forgotten war', as it has often been called, was the opening salvo of the Cold War, a war that despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, continues today in a different form. The Soviet Union has been replaced as the main challenge to American hegemony by the hydra-headed Islamist 'global insurgency', and by China. And America's militarisation has proceeded apace, so that the US now accounts for half the world's military expenditure, is the major international seller of arms, and weapons look set to become its major export. The business of America is no longer business, but war.

Things that happen in Korea have repercussions around the world and this is due, in no small measure, to its strategic location. The Korean peninsula is where Russia, China, Japan, and the United States collide and interact. Significantly, in 1950 Korea sparked the first Sino-American war; there are warning signs that sixty years later it may produce the second.

On 26 March 2010 the South Korean corvette, the *Cheonan*, sank in mysterious circumstances. The ship, named after the South Korean city of the same name, which ironically means 'heavenly peace', took 46 men down with her. The sinking was not a major catastrophe as these things go; in 1999 a North Korean ship was sunk in the same waters with comparable casualties, and trains, planes, ships, let alone tsunamis

and earthquakes, frequently inflict far more damage. What was important in this case was the response of the South Korean government. South Korean President Lee Myung-bak set up a military investigation which included the United States and some allies, and excluded neighbouring China and Russia, and pronounced North Korea guilty. North Korea demanded access to the evidence and was refused. There is widespread scepticism within South Korea, especially among younger and better educated people, about the military's verdict, and both China and Russia have refused to accept it. Despite all this, Lee Myung-bak has used the incident to justify his hard line stance towards the North and to increase tension on the peninsula.

The *Cheonan* is not an isolated incident but rather marks a further stage in the deterioration of relations between South and North since Lee came into power in 2008. The relationship between the two Koreas had been improving over recent decades, and especially under the progressive administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, but under Lee Myung-bak it has plummeted.

Inter-Korean relations assume a particular importance because of the way they impact on global geopolitics. First and foremost is the protracted dispute between North Korea and America. Since the 1960s, and with added urgency since the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korea has been attempting get the US to accept peaceful coexistence, to remove its military threat, and to lift wide-ranging sanctions that condemn the country to penury. The United States for reasons of global strategy and the necessity to keep Japan and South Korea in an alliance against China, has balked at this. Despite all the hyperbole it apparently does not regard the North Korean nuclear weapons programme sufficiently challenging to justify compromising more important objectives. The progressive administrations of Kim Dae-jung – famous for his 'sunshine policy' of engagement with the North – and Roh Moo-hyun tended to ameliorate the US position. Lee Myung-bak puts pressure in the other direction, and with the Obama administration floundering at home and abroad, with no clear idea how to reconcile policy and rhetoric, it seems that Lee has effectively captured Washington's North Korea policy.

All this comes at a time when there is a feeling in some quarters that sanctions have so destabilised North Korea that something like the death or incapacitation of leader Kim Jong Il, will be sufficient to precipitate a crisis of some sort. This is what the military planners call 'contingencies'. This crisis, it is thought, would have two functions; it would justify, or be claimed to justify, an invasion and it would make resistance short-lived and ineffective. A renewed war against North Korea has long been planned for and every year there are a number of joint exercises between the US and South Korean military practising for such an event. Indeed, the *Cheonan* sunk while one of these exercises was being carried out. The difference now is the assumption that the North Korean state is on the verge of collapse.

But invasions, as we well know, often go awry. It might be that the Americans and

South Koreans could launch an overwhelming attack that would swiftly take out the top leadership and military facilities and that resistance would crumble. More likely is that the North Koreans would counterattack, as they have threatened, with all means at their disposal. That includes attacking Seoul, which is within artillery range, and perhaps the use of nuclear weapons against US bases in South Korea and Japan. It is likely that there would also be fierce resistance to an invading force. Some American think tanks estimate that over 400,000 troops would be needed to pacify North Korea.

On top of this there is the question of the Chinese response. The centre point of China's foreign policy is not to give the United States provocation, or pretext, for war during its 'peaceful rise'. But it is likely that, as in 1950, an American army pushing up to the Yalu, the river dividing Korea from China, would be considered intolerable.

An invasion of North Korea would be catastrophic for the peninsula, and might well have a devastating impact on Japan. A second Sino-American war would have incalculable, but surely fearsome consequences. Even if it were limited, as was the first one, the economic impact alone would be disastrous, the American and Chinese economies being now so inter-connected. China is much weaker than the United States militarily, but might prove more resilient. The British historian Niall Ferguson has called America the 'fragile empire' and for the United States, this might be one war too many.

Possible consequences of such magnitude would seem to make war unlikely, but we should not discount the risk of accident or miscalculation sparking conflict in a tense and inflamed situation. We should also bear in mind the continued deterioration in Sino-American relations; the rivalry between the two nations, though it may take various forms, looks set to be the major issue of the coming decades.

Voices prophesying war have gained in number and strength over recent years, and especially since the sinking of the *Cheonan*. In both North and South Korea, and amongst foreign observers, there has been increasing discussion of the danger. However, even if there is no war, the anticipation of the collapse of North Korea has diminished the motive for negotiating peace. The Obama administration, which never had negotiations with North Korea high in its priorities, now seems to have turned its back on them, both bilaterally and in the Chinese-hosted Six Party Talks. No doubt there will be protestations of a desire to reach a peaceful resolution but examination of the small print, especially concerning pre-conditions, will mean there will be no substance and no real desire. So there may not be war, but neither will there be peace; the crisis will rumble on.

This book attempts to set the *Cheonan* incident within the wider historical and geopolitical context. It is that context which makes the sinking of the *Cheonan* so ominous. A second Korean War is not pre-ordained, but the warning signs are there. Moreover,

under prevailing policies, the absence of war does not mean movement towards peace. Sanctions will continue, as will the suffering of the North Korean people; estimates in South Korea based on the 2008 census gave a calculation of 340,000 'excess' deaths since 1993. If the North Korean economy is to recover – and up to the 1980s it was one the most successful developing economies, and for some decades ahead of South Korea, then peace is imperative. But not peace at any price. Tension on the Korean peninsula will continue to be an irritant in US-China relations, as well as providing an incentive and excuse for Japanese remilitarisation and the deepening militarisation of South Korea.

Whatever happens, unless there is peace, the prospects for peace and prosperity for the Korean peninsula, for the region and the wider world are much diminished. In these circumstances an informed, and critical, analysis is vital. If a second war in Korea breaks out we need to understand why, and to be in a position to cut through the lies which will abound. If a second war is averted we need to know how close we were to it, and to understand and identify the drivers behind the situation. What happens in Korea has implications, and lessons, for all of us.

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Table of Contents

Foreword

PART A: KOREA BETWEEN THE DECLINE OF AMERICA AND THE RISE OF CHINA

Preface

Chapter 1: Imperialism, nationalism, the division and reunification of Korea

Chapter 2: Korea and the postcolonial world

Chapter 3: The collapse of the Soviet Union and North Korea's Arduous March

Chapter 4: The rise of China and the American dilemma

Chapter 5: The Decline of American hegemony

Chapter 6: Militarisation and the response to decline

Chapter 7: Obama's strategic paralysis

PART B: BUILDUP TO CRISIS: THE *CHEONAN* AND YEONPYEONG INCIDENTS

Preface

Chapter 8: The mysterious sinking of the *Cheonan*, and the official investigation

Chapter 9: *Cheonan* incident: Dissection reveals fabrication

Chapter 10: Korean brinkmanship: firefight at Yeonpyeong

PART C: COLLAPSE AND TAKEOVER

Chapter 11: Scenario building: Failed succession and collapse

Chapter 12: The Northern Limit Line: Keeping the war alive

Chapter 13: Military exercises: Precipitating collapse, preparing for invasion

Chapter 14: The Siege: Sanctions, their role and effect

Chapter 15: The Costs and Consequences of Invasion

Chapter 16: The China Factor – into the abyss?

APPENDICES

Statistical appendix

Reports on the sinking of the Cheonan

Timeline

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