

Behind rising tensions on the Korean peninsula: A socialist view

Friday 26 January 2024, by [FUENTES Federico](#), [WON Youngsu](#) (Date first published: 21 January 2024).

Tensions have flared once again on the Korean peninsula after North and South Korea carried out artillery drills near a disputed sea border for several days starting January 5. The drills represented the first official violations of the military agreement signed between the two in 2018.



South Korea and North Korea flags and two men's faces. South Korean leader Yoon Suk Yeol (left) and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (right). Graphic: Green Left.

This was followed on January 16 by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's declaration that his country's constitution should be changed to designate South Korea as the "number one hostile state". Kim also reiterated his position that reunification was off the table, arguing the relationship had become one of "two hostile countries and two belligerents at war".

Green Left's Federico Fuentes spoke to Youngsu Won, a socialist and coordinator of the International Forum in South Korea, about these developments and their potential ramifications.

Federico Fuentes - North Korea officially broke the 2018 military agreement by firing artillery shells in the direction of South Korea for several days in early January and has since restated it no longer seeks reunification with what it now calls its "principal enemy". What is behind these dramatic developments?

Youngsu Won - Kim Jong Un's announcement could be seen as a kind of ultimatum or categorical departure from previous policy. But North Korea is simply restating the position it has held ever since talks brokered by former US president Donald Trump collapsed in 2020. Kim's statements therefore seem to demonstrate disappointment in the failure of the aggressive policy he has pursued since then.

Though it should be said that it is impossible to know exactly what Kim is thinking, Policy shifts such as this are usually motivated by external and internal factors.

The external factors seem evident — for example, the lack of progress in terms of relations with the US and dire economic difficulties that are obvious to everyone — though those factors are still open to varying interpretations.

But internal factors are extremely difficult to understand due to the sheer lack of information coming out of North Korea, a common characteristic of closed autocratic regimes.

North Korea's artillery drills were held just days before the first Indo-Pacific Dialogue between South Korea, Japan and the United States. Has US policy contributed to rising tensions? How might the upcoming US presidential elections impact politics on the peninsula, given Trump's previous attempts to reach out to North Korea and broker talks between the two Koreas?

The North Korean regime's unique logic of diplomacy means it insists on pursuing direct talks with the US, rather than its South Korean counterpart. It also sees the military alliance between the US, Japan and South Korea as something that must be urgently broken by any means.

The US government, under President Joe Biden, has shown little interest in North Korea, which is very low on its priority list at the moment. And North Korea does not expect to see any meaningful policy changes under Biden. Therefore, it wants to shake up the status quo — which is what it is attempting through its missile drills and verbal provocations.

From North Korea's perspective, Trump was a comparatively better partner, even though Kim was ultimately used as a pawn by Trump for his political games. Perhaps Kim has some expectations for a new Trump presidency. However, it seems clear that denuclearisation is over and it is difficult to envisage any resumption of US-North Korea talks.

Beyond launching its own artillery drills, how else has the South Korean government responded? How is this issue likely to affect campaigning in the upcoming April parliamentary elections?

Right-wing populist president Yoon Suk Yeol has taken a confrontational approach towards North Korea, which objectively increases the danger of military conflicts, while conservatives and the ultra-right continue to blindly pursue an anti-North Korea policy.

This approach is in large part driven by the fact that they remain extremely upset over the 2017 impeachment of [former conservative president] Park Geun-hye, which not only led them to lose power but also the subsequent election of a liberal Democratic Party (DP) government, which sought a path of dialogue with North Korea.

And extreme-right factions and Christian fundamentalists — as well as the Yoon government — are seeking to use Kim's abrupt turn to legitimise their obsession with blind anti-Communism. Some anti-Communist ultra-conservatives would even welcome a possible confrontation with North Korea — military or otherwise.

But unlike previous elections, where anti-Communist hysteria was frequently used by right-wing parties to try to win over swing voters, North Korea is unlikely to be a big factor this time around.

Yoon's approval rating is currently less than 30%. He is generally unpopular outside his ultra-conservative and quasi-fascist support base. His ruling party, the People Power Party, has been divided ever since Yoon handpicked his close friend as new party leader in December. As a result, polls are indicating a possible defeat for Yoon's party at the April elections.

However, the liberal opposition, under DP's Lee Jae-myung, is not faring much better. Lee's party is also divided and polls indicate it has a similar level of support as the ruling party.

What has been the general response of the population and the peace movement?

Despite the exchange of harsh verbal accusations between governments, public opinion here is rather silent. This indicates that, for the moment, people are not expecting any dramatic change in inter-Korean relations and are more concerned with neighbouring Japan and China.

Many South Koreans are very worried about escalating tensions between mainland China and Taiwan and the possibility this might spill over into a war. They are also worried that worsening relations between Taiwan and China, particularly after the election of [pro-autonomy Democratic Progressive Party candidate] Lai Ching-te as Taiwan's president [on January 14], will affect South Korea's economy.

As for Japan, most Koreans oppose Yoon's policy of reconciliation with Japan, given the country has shown no intentions of changing its policies on issues such as paying compensation for atrocities committed against "comfort women" during World War II or the release of nuclear-contaminated water from the Fukushima power plants.

Unlike in the 1990s, the existing popular movement for national reunification is extremely weak. The same is also true for South Korea's social movements and radical left, which unfortunately means they have not been able to intervene in the current situation in any meaningful way.

What does this mean for prospects of reaching a peace agreement, more than 70 years after the end of the Korean war, let alone reunification?

Among the younger generation — the so-called Generation MZ [Millennials & Generation Z] — there is a strong anti-North Korea sentiment. Many say they do not want to have to deal with the burden of reunification and prefer the status quo. They see North Korea as a different country.

This is in contrast to the older generations who share an almost unanimous desire for national reunification, over and above any possible compromise or peace accord. This aspiration reflects a combination of their own personal experiences and state indoctrination.

For now, more and more people are feeling disappointed and see little possibility for improved relations between North and South Korea, let alone eventual national reunification.

P.S.

- Green Left Issue 1397. January 21, 2024:
<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/behind-rising-tensions-korean-peninsula-socialist-view>