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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY SIMONE CHUN

09.03.2021

Biden's Hawkish Cabinet Portends Renewed US Militarism in Northeast Asia



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Although the Biden administration has yet to present its North Korea policy, the new president's cabinet includes many career diplomats and business lobbyists advocating the Cold War policy toward Asia and personnel from hawkish think tanks financed by the military industrial complex, leading many Korea experts to predict that an aggressive militaristic policy with respect to the Korean Peninsula is on the horizon.

In practical terms, this would translate into the projection of US military power over the Korean Peninsula through a de facto trilateral military alliance between the US, Japan and South Korea as part of the enlarged "Indo-Pacific plan."

It would also mean returning to the doomed pressure policies of Obama's "strategic patience" approach toward North Korea, which emphasized containment via sanctions and deterrence while demanding substantial concessions from Pyongyang up front.

Moreover, it would entail using ongoing tension on the Korean Peninsula to justify massive military spending in order to advance the interests of the military-industrial complex: As Sara Lazar notes, "One-third of Biden's Pentagon transition team alone lists as their most recent employment think tanks, organizations or companies that are either funded by the weapons industry or are directly part of this industry." Meanwhile, in his latest op-ed, John Bolton—former national security advisor and saboteur of past US-DPRK agreements—exhorted Biden to include a military option as part of US policy on North Korea.

The renewal of a hawkish stance against the North will surely be met by a hardline response from Pyongyang, which has vowed to strengthen its nuclear deterrent capabilities as a guarantee against US "hostile policies" and military intervention.

North Korea's fears are not unwarranted. Having lost over 20 percent of its population to indiscriminate US carpet bombing during the Korean War, it has lived under the shadow of the US nuclear threat since 1958, when Washington first introduced nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula. This existential threat against the North continues through the present day: according to Bob Woodward, the Trump Administration earmarked some 80 nuclear weapons for deployment against North Korea should hostilities erupt.

The clash of hardline policies on both sides may result in a dangerous standoff scenario, pushing the Korean peninsula to the brink of a nuclear conflict of unimaginable magnitude. To prevent such a catastrophe, a growing chorus of experts, including numerous former US officials, emphasize a pragmatic approach toward arms control that would aim to limit or reduce the North's arsenal while working toward the eventual goal of complete denuclearization. Even Secretary of State Antony Blinken—a noted hawk—has in the past called for such an interim agreement, arguing in a 2018 New York Times editorial that Trump should use the Iran nuclear deal as a model for negotiating with Pyongyang.

For their part, international peace organizations in South Korea and US are increasingly advocating a "peace-first policy" which would entail normalization of relations between the US and North Korea, the lifting of crippling economic sanctions against the North's civilian population, and the institution of a treaty formally ending the Korean War.

In formulating his administration's North Korea policy, Biden should embrace an approach conducive to achieving arms control without abandoning the eventual goal of complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula through diplomacy and bilateral concessions. In order to do so, he could take the following steps:

First, Biden should suspend the costly and provocative annual US-South Korea combined military drills that are scheduled to start on March 8. While the proponents of the drills claim they are necessary in order to maintain readiness in the event of a North Korean attack, the overwhelming practical military capability fielded by the US undermines this claim. General Vincent Brooks— former USFK commander— noted that these drills are "not just a show like the parades in Pyongyang", they are in fact provocative shows of force with the potential to trigger open war on the Korean Peninsula.

The continuation of these exercises is a contentious topic in South Korea: In his New Year press conference, President Moon suggested the possibility of scaling down the drills through a joint inter-Korean military committee, and just last week, a group of 35 South Korean lawmakers called for the postponement of the drills. Both of these options were flatly rejected by the US.

Second, Biden should openly support those provisions of 2018 Singapore Declaration calling for the complete bilateral denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, a formal end to the Korean War, and the return of the remains of US troops killed during the conflict. Thus far, while North Korea has yet to launch an ICBM or conduct a nuclear test since it announced a self-imposed moratorium at the onset of the 2018 peace process, the US, rather than taking even symbolic steps toward implementing the Singapore Declaration, imposed over 200 new sanctions on the North. On January 1, North Korea responded to the new US sanctions and the continuation of joint military drills on its border by terminating its moratorium on nuclear tests ICBM launches. According to a report this week by the International Atomic Energy Agency, North Korea may have begun reprocessing nuclear fuel in preparation for a nuclear weapon test. The clock is ticking for Biden to make the first diplomatic move.

In summary, Biden should reject calls to renew a hawkish policy toward the North, and choose instead the path of diplomacy and peace. In practical terms, this would entail suspending the provocative annual US-South Korea military drills, supporting key provisions of the Singapore Declaration and embracing a peace-first policy on the Korean Peninsula. Continuing the vicious cycle of escalation can only end in a renewed military conflict on the Korean Peninsula, which would almost certainly trigger a full-scale war.

More than 300,000 South Korean and U.S. military casualties, and hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, would occur within the first 90 days of a Second Korean War. Should the conflict widen to a regional war, as it very likely would, the death toll would quickly climb to the millions.

The new president has a moral duty to engage North Korea via diplomacy and dialog and avoid taking steps that only increase the likelihood of plunging the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia into the abyss of yet another bloody war.

CounterPunch 08.03.2021