



US President Barack Obama surveys North Korea across the demilitarised zone; below, a North Korean soldier looks towards South Korea.

# A contrived and avoidable crisis?

Tim Beal's re-visioning of North Korea is an eye-opener. BY STEPHEN HOADLEY

Tim Beal is New Zealand's, and probably Australasia's, leading expert on North Korea. His latest book, *Crisis in Korea: America, China, and the Risk of War*, is a sequel to his 2005 monograph, *North Korea: The Struggle Against American Power*, both of which blame the United States for inter-Korean tensions. America-sceptics will find much to agree with. The America-tolerant will be bemused – some affronted. All will be better informed.

Readers will be intrigued by Beal's conclusions that North Korea was not responsible for the 1950 Korean War, the torpedoing of the South Korean corvette Cheonan in 2011 and the intermittent military incursions across the demilitarised zone in the intervening decades. We are told that the regime of successive members of the Kim family is not brittle or factious, its subjects are not starving and the economy is not on the point of collapse. Slow growth in the North is attributed to Western sanctions and the inopportune disappearance of Soviet aid.

Pyongyang's rejections of South Korean, US and Western overtures to ease the military confrontation, curb the nuclear weapons and long-range missile programmes, and open the economy to foreign aid,

trade and investment, are not paranoid, avers Beal, but understandable policies of self-protection and self-reliance by a beleaguered state surrounded by hostile neighbours.

Beal's wider theme is the assertion of nationalism in the face of imperialism in East Asia, a historic confrontation with its roots in the 19th-century encroachments by Britain, France, Germany, Russia and Japan that left Korea an exploited colony. The 20th-century American hegemony enlisted Japan and South Korea as accomplices, and Washington is now trying to persuade China and Russia to join in the ostracism of North Korea, which defies them all with its *juche* (self-reliant) ideology and robust sovereignty. As other Asian states comply or compromise with Washington and embrace US-led globalisation, North Korea is portrayed as the region's only authentic nationalist survivor.

In this context, Beal sees the Korean crisis as not of the North's making, but contrived and provoked by Washington and its proxies in Seoul and Tokyo. Pyongyang's

nuclear weapons programme is not a cause of the crisis but a consequence, an expression of self-defence under pressure.

Regarding the subtitle, *America, China, and the Risk of War*, Beal argues that as China grows stronger, US leaders will conspire to slow China's emergence as a hegemon. Demonising North Korea, China's only client state, legitimises US military bases in South Korea and Japan, seen by Beijing as encroachment, if not containment.

Washington's agenda, Beal asserts, is regime-change in the North, which would bring reunification of the peninsula under the Republic of Korea Government in Seoul, led by its assertive president, Lee Myung-bak. A crumbling of the Northern regime would provide the pretext for US military intervention, with South Korean and Japanese support, to sequester nuclear weapons, secure borders, restore services, minister to humanitarian needs and introduce liberal economics and governance, thus reducing the North to dependency. This would serve US strategic interests by setting up a unified Korea to counterbalance China's influence in Asia. Here lies the colossal risk Beal identifies: that China would stage a counter-intervention, as it did in 1950, precipitating a war between China and America that nobody wants, and that would devastate the Northeast

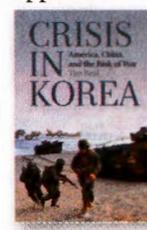
Asian region and the world economy.

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Averting this catastrophe is up to Washington, Beal asserts. It is in Washington's power to lift the sanctions, curb South Korean provocations and facilitate negotiations such as the Six Party Talks. This won't happen as long as corporate media and establishment scholars perpetrate

misinformation blaming North Korea and legitimising US policies.

The deployment of unpopular facts and sympathetic interpretations is Beal's contribution to averting the crisis in Korea. Agree or disagree, but one must acknowledge his books address questions few mainstream analysts ask, and provide unorthodox analyses that those who appreciate robust debate will welcome. ■



**CRISIS IN KOREA: AMERICA, CHINA, AND THE RISK OF WAR**, by Tim Beal (Pluto Press, \$58).

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