

Increasing Tensions on the Korean Peninsula

An Interview with Prof. Dr. Peter Kuznick

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The renowned historian Professor Doctor [Peter Kuznick](#) speaks, in the following interview, on the increasing tension on the Korean Peninsula and the risk of a nuclear war between the United States and North Korea.

Edu Montesanti: The Washington Post [reported](#) Thursday: “Cheong Seong-chang, a North Korean leadership expert at the left-leaning Sejong Institute in the South, agreed with Madden that Kim does not want actual conflict with the United States. ‘North Koreans are not taking this [[Trump’s threats](#)] seriously. They’re pointing out that Trump is saying these things because he hasn’t ‘consolidated his power’ yet,’ he said.”

[Professor Chossudovsky](#) says that Americans have to think “who is a real threat to the world? Washington is,” he says as you yourself, Professor Kuznick, [pointed out](#) to me last year that, “what Kennedy and Khrushchev learned during the Cuban Missile Crisis is that once a crisis develops, it quickly spins out of control. Despite the fact that both of them were trying desperately to avoid a nuclear war in 1962, they realized that they had lost control.” In January the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists [set](#) its annual Doomsday Clock at 2.5 minutes to midnight, when President Trump took power: “This year’s Clock deliberations felt more urgent than usual.”

Prof. Paul Tonnesson [sees](#) three scenarios for how the Korean crisis can develop: “War, permanent crisis or a negotiated deal. The first is least likely, the second very likely, and the third more likely than war.” What scenarios do you see for how the US-North Korea increasing tensions can develop in the near future, Professor Kuznick?

Prof. Dr. Peter Kuznick: Professor Tonnesson is correct. There is no military solution. On the other hand, both sides benefit from a protracted conflict.

The North Korean regime needs an external threat to justify its existence and to placate a population that is increasingly aware of how bad off it is. North Koreans’ standard of living is less than 5 percent of South Koreans’. That is astounding. In the 1970s, North Korea’s economy was actually outperforming that of its southern neighbor.

Kim Jong-un is able to assuage the anger and deprivation of the North Korean people by blaming his regime’s isolation and economic desperation on the United States, and the threat it poses to North Korea.

And there is enough truth in that explanation to justify the corrupt North Korean regime’s

continued existence and the loyalty of much of the population.

Trump also needs an external threat to justify his regime's massive increase in military spending and unconscionable cuts to domestic programs and social spending.

The regimes in that sense are quite similar. Both prioritize their own perpetuation and the bolstering of their militaries over the needs of their people. Both have insecure, tyrannical bullies at their helm. Both welcome the state of crisis and think they can bluff their enemies into submission.

The danger is what happens when one of them calls the other's bluff. So prolonged crisis is the most likely scenario. It also serves Trump as a distraction from the scandals surrounding his administration.

A negotiated deal is what almost everyone in the world hopes for, but it is unlikely under present circumstances. We all know what such a deal would entail. China has been pushing such a negotiated settlement for years. So has Russia. North Korea has repeatedly indicated it may be ready to accept such a deal. The United States has refused.

Trump publicly maintains the pipedream that North Korea will abandon its nuclear program. The North did effectively freeze its nuclear and missile programs from 1994 until 2002, when George Bush, after suspending the deal that Clinton had negotiated, accused North Korea of being part of the "axis of evil" along with Iran and Iraq.

Since then, the Kims have understood that the only guarantee that the U.S. would not overthrow the North Korean government has been Pyongyang's ability to strike Seoul, and hit U.S. bases with their 28,500 U.S. troops in addition to being able to decimate South Korea's civilian populations, and the 200,000 Americans living in the South.

Now the North has added its growing nuclear capability, which it will not abandon under any circumstances. When the U.S. invaded Iraq, the North issued a statement saying that the mistake Saddam Hussein made was not having nuclear weapons, which would have stopped the U.S. from invading.

Then the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, after it gave up its Weapons of Mass Destruction, further drove home the point of what would happen to the North Korean government if it let down its guard.

So even though I would love to see a denuclearized Korean Peninsula, it would take years of trustbuilding and friendship before that will become possible. That leaves a prolonged crisis as the most likely scenario but a very dangerous and unstable one, that could suddenly spiral out of control.

U.S. intelligence has recently estimated that the North may have as many as 60 nuclear weapons that it could deploy. I think that number is highly exaggerated. And we know that the U.S. has far more than that - close to 7,000.

The U.S. and South Korea can defeat North Korea without use of nuclear weapons. A desperate North Korea might resort to use of nuclear weapons if defeat was imminent, even knowing that such action might be suicidal.

How would the U.S. respond? How would China respond? If a large nuclear exchange occurs, we're all cooked. We know that the latest scientific findings indicate that even a limited nuclear war between India and Pakistan, in which 100 relatively tiny Hiroshima size nuclear weapons were detonated, would cause a partial nuclear winter resulting in plummeting temperatures and the deaths of up to 2 billion people.

I shudder to think of what might happen in a nuclear war between the U.S. and North Korea.

Edu Montesanti: What *The Post* and specialists say is that, "Kim Jong-un wants to stay in power – and that is an argument against nuclear war" (report title), the US politicians have been calling for military action against the North, apparently supported by the mainstream media – as always. Do you agree to *The Post*? From the White House perspective, what should be the Trump administration – which seems to be in disaccord for [contradictory messages](#), day by day – attitude towards Pyongyang, considering that the Obama administration sanctioned the North without any practical result – on the contrary, North Korea has intensively developed its nuclear arsenal?

Prof. Dr. Peter Kuznick: Trump should take immediate steps to defuse the crisis. It's time for that hamburger summit. The North Korean regime may be odious, but the best way for us to help the people of North Korea is to establish diplomatic relations and start providing aid. That is also in the interest of the people in Japan, South Korea, Guam, and the United States.

The U.S. should also adopt a no-first-use policy and begin to follow through on its commitment under Article 6 of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons to do away with its nuclear arsenal. This has been given new impetus under the nuclear ban treaty adopted by UN General Assembly, on July 7.

If the U.S. concludes a treaty to officially end the Korean War, abandons a policy of regime change in North Korea, and stops holding its provocative military exercises in South Korea, it can dramatically ease tensions and begin to build the trust that will hopefully someday lead to peaceful relations and the abandonment of nuclear weapons.

The Kim regime's main priority is self-preservation. It will not initiate a nuclear war, knowing that it would be wiped out. However, the prospect that it might blunder into an unwanted war remains intolerably high as the war of threats and counterthreats between the two fat insecure bullies escalates and even a conventional war could leave more than a million dead.

Perhaps it is time to again move the hands of the *Doomsday Clock* even closer to midnight. Let's also hope that this serves as a wakeup call to alert the international community to the desperate need to put the new UN nuclear ban treaty into effect, before the ultimate unthinkable catastrophe does occur.

As Kennedy and Khrushchev did in 1962 and 1963, let's bring something positive out of the terrifying threat that now confronts us. But those were different times. Imagine what would be left of the world today if that was Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un confronting each other in October 1962, instead of Kennedy and Khrushchev.



Kennedy and Khrushchev in Vienna, 1961. (Source: [Unredacted](#))

Edu Montesanti: Early this month, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [said](#) that “the US government is not seeking a regime change in North Korea,” adding that the US wanted a dialogue at some point; last week, President Trump [stated](#) that the US would react with “fury and fire” against Pyongyang: is the change in positions a way of not showing US weakness? Could the “pacific” message be understood, in a now regretted White House perspective, as a win of a regime in developing nuclear weapons to protect itself?

Prof. Dr. Peter Kuznick: At this point, I don’t think there’s much to be gained by assessing whether the U.S. or North Korea is the bigger threat to the world. North Korea is a regional threat with growing global capabilities. The U.S. is and remains a global threat.

Donald Trump has veto power over the continued existence of our species. Fortunately, Kim Jong-un has not yet achieved that capability. But both the United States and North Korea need to be walked back from the precipice of a confrontation with deadly implications.

Lindsey Graham, the extremely militaristic senator from South Carolina, takes comfort in the fact that in the event of war, most of the killing would take place in Korea. He commented, “If there’s going to be a war to stop [Kim Jong-un], it will be over there. If thousands die, they’re going to die over there. They’re not going to die here. And [Trump] has told me that to my face.”

The Koreans have not forgotten the slaughter of their people – both North and South–during the Korean War. They understand the stakes.

When you have braying fools, however, like Trump and Graham, who don’t seem to value human life, acting like macho clowns, the threat of war becomes real. This is especially the case when North Korea’s leaders make a similar practice of unfurling grandiose and empty threats.

So even though the United States has long been a greater threat to world peace, the fact that we have two unstable, rash, and immature leaders involved in a nuclear-armed pissing

match gives us little room for comfort.

Prof. Dr. Kuznick is Director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University in Washington D.C., and author of several books; the American researcher at the American University co-authored with Oliver Stone [The Untold History of the United States](#).

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