

Locked and Loaded: War with North Korea Cannot be Contained but Must be Prevented

“On two occasions, Colin Powell blithely threatened to turn North Korea into charcoal briquette.” An Interview with K.J. Noh

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After Donald Trump threatened the Democratic People’s Republic of [North] Korea with “fire and fury like the world has never seen,” I spoke to K.J. Noh, a peace activist and scholar on the geopolitics of the Asian continent who writes for Counterpunch and Dissident Voice.

Rehearsing Armageddon

Ann Garrison: North Korea is standing up to the US’s 4800 “locked and loaded” nuclear weapons with an estimated 30 to 60 of its own. Do you think it would still be standing without them?

K.J.Noh: It’s hard to imagine so. North Korea has been in a defensive crouch since the inception of its state. It has been under risk of nuclear attack almost continuously since 1950. Starting during the Korean War (1950-1953), the use of nuclear bombs against North Korea was considered; after the cessation of hostilities in 1953, the US refused to enter into further negotiations, letting the 90-day requirement to negotiate a peace treaty expire. It subsequently refused to remove troops and weapons, and not introduce new weapons systems into the peninsula, as required by the [Armistice Agreement](#) (Paragraph 13d).

Starting in 1958, the US placed “Honest John” surface-to-surface nuclear missiles, 280mm atomic cannons, and nuclear cruise missiles on the peninsula, and kept them there until 1991. Then, after the fall of the Soviet Union, ICBM’s pointed at the former Soviet Union were redirected at North Korea.

War Games conducted every year (Key Resolve-Foal Eagle and Ulchi Freedom Guardian) rehearse the attack and occupation of North Korea and decapitation of its leadership. The recent spring war games (Key Resolve-Foal Eagle) have been twice the size of the Normandy Invasion, involving carrier battle group and submarine maneuvers, amphibious landings of mechanized brigades, naval blockade, live fire drills, special forces infiltration, as well as B-1B, B-2, & B-52 nuclear bombing runs. North Korea’s leadership is also well aware of the fact that [Clinton’s 1997 Presidential Decision Directive 60](#) authorizes pre-emptive nuclear war.

“After the fall of the Soviet Union, ICBM’s pointed at the former Soviet Union were redirected at North Korea.”

Let's also not forget the fact that North Korea was literally bombed back into the Stone Age during the Korean war, when between 20-30% of its population was exterminated. The country was turned into a moonscape, scorched with napalm, and flooded. Independent reports allege the use of bioweapons. You have to go back to the Punic Wars and the sack of Carthage to imagine destruction of such scale and violence. Even General Douglas MacArthur, no stranger to bloodshed, said in his congressional testimony: "I have never seen such devastation...you are perpetuating a slaughter such as I have never heard of in the history of mankind."

The current threats by the current president, although a little more off-the-cuff and colorful than usual, are nothing new for the North Koreans. For example, on two occasions, Colin Powell blithely threatened to turn North Korea into charcoal briquette—a chilling statement to a country that for three years had 50,000 gallons of Napalm dropped on it daily.

The North Koreans, having lived through, not merely the threat of Armageddon, but the experience of it, are highly unlikely to let go of nuclear weapons as a deterrent.

Framework of Distrust

There was once a possibility of denuclearizing North Korea, back in the 90s. The North Koreans had agreed to monitoring and dismantling of their nuclear reactor, in exchange for normalization of diplomatic relations, removal of sanctions, fuel oil, and a light breeder reactor, whose byproducts would be more difficult to build a nuclear weapon with. The North Koreans fulfilled the bargain for four years, but the treaty ([the 1994 Agreed Framework](#)) was dead on arrival in Washington two weeks after signing, and none of the conditions were upheld by the US side. After eight years of Waiting for Godot, the North Koreans found themselves branded as part of the "Axis of Evil." The North Koreans read the writing on the wall, withdrew from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, and restarted their nuclear program in 2003.

In 2005, the Chinese negotiated a deal—through the six party talks from 2003-2005—between the US and North Korea, whereby the North Koreans would again dismantle their program, and the US would normalize relations. The very day after the signing, the US charged North Korea with counterfeiting currency and increased sanctions. North Korea withdrew from the deal, and in 2006, tested a nuclear device.

"The North Koreans fulfilled the bargain for four years, but the treaty was dead on arrival in Washington."

The pattern of distrust is repetitious, going all the way back to the armistice of 1953, which the US announced its intention to abrogate on the day after signing, as it has to the current moment. The current situation, a nuclear armed North Korea, is the result, and it's unlikely that it can be reversed. Given their own history, not to mention the examples of Libya and Iraq, the North Koreans are unlikely to give up their deterrent, and have said so explicitly. That horse has long left the barn.

The Political Economy of Fear

AG: Does the U.S. have an issue with North Korea aside from the fact that it exists and has a few nuclear weapons?

KJN: The current system is a political economy of fear. From a viewpoint of propaganda, it's

the recycling of the Aristotelian devices of Fear and Pity for the political theater of this current historical moment.

But it's also the psychology of the political economy: a culture built on individualism lives always in an existential terror of isolation, and has to dominate its way out of its fear. On a national level, this becomes the bad conscience and projected, karmic terror of a system built on genocide.

In reality, most commentators have assessed North Korea's actual threat as the threat to defend itself in the case of attack by the US. If there is no attack on North Korea, there is little chance of an actual threat to the US. North Korea's nuclear program is, as Tim Beal put it, a suicidal "[Sampson Option](#)," and a deterrent unlikely to be exercised except under the threat—or perceived threat—of its own annihilation.

Like revolutionary Cuba, the example of North Korea must be extinguished because it poses the threat of a counterexample of resistance to global geopolitical design.

Imagined Resistance, Lethal Force

By way of analogy, we can think, for example, of the policing of African American communities. The history of slavery renders the policing of African American bodies subject to a threshold of compliance and submission so immediate, so absolute, so total, that lethal force is routinely exercised at the first sign of imagined resistance, threat, or non-compliance.

US engagement in Asia, Africa, and America involve a similar paranoid "threat" inflation and a similar exercise of lethal "compliance." The Korean War itself was referred to as a "police action."

It's useful to re-examine the history in this light.

US-Korea relations go back to 1866, when the USS General Sherman forced its way up the Taedong River in Korea, attempting to force open the closed, isolationist state through gunboat diplomacy. The last dynasty of Korea, the 500 year old Chosun dynasty, was steadfastly Confucian and isolationist, and refused to trade and interact with US, European, or Japanese colonial powers, believing that these colonial powers were "totally ignorant of any human morality" and utterly alien to them, and "craved only material goods." They sent envoys entreating the Sherman to leave, and to leave Korea alone. The Sherman refused to take "No" for an answer, defied entreaties to leave, took the envoys as hostages, and opened fire. It in turn was attacked and burned to the ground, and its troops killed.

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Five years later, the US returned to settle scores in 1871 with a full scale marine invasion—5 warships and 24 supporting vessels, and obliterated the Korean defenders. After this, Korea (Chosun) surrendered and opened wide its borders and ports to Western trade, and a "friendship" treaty was eventually signed in 1882. Similar to the treaties that the Native American nations signed with the US, the treaty guaranteed "perpetual peace and friendship," "a perfect, permanent and universal peace, and a sincere and cordial amity," and promised to "render assistance and protection" if other powers "deal unjustly or

oppressively” with it. Twenty-three years after the signing of this mutual “friendship treaty,” the US went into secret talks with a rising, imperialist Japan, and pawned Korea over to Japan—green lighting the colonial occupation of Japan—in return for Japan’s non-interference in US colonization of the Philippines. This is the infamous “Taft-Katsura memorandum” of 1905, which is widely viewed in South Korea as an abrogation and betrayal of the 1882 treaty.

The Japanese colonial occupation of Korea from 1910-1945 was brutal. Koreans were conscripted by the millions into slave labor, where they died in untold numbers. One out five people killed in atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were conscripted Korean slave laborers. The Japanese also kidnapped and enslaved hundreds of thousands of Korean women as military sexual slaves, euphemistically called “comfort women,” in the world’s largest and most violent system of sexual slavery and trafficking. This became the prototype for modern transnational sexual trafficking. Between 75-90% of these women would die during their sexual enslavement.

Manchurian Candidates

To understand this current moment, you have to go to Manchuria of the 1930s. Japanese-colonized Manchuria, the puppet state they called Manchukuo, is where these excesses were the worst. Historian Mark Driscoll compares Manchukuo to the Belgian Congo in terms of its wanton brutality and disregard for human life, and coins the term, “Manchurian Passage,” an Asian “Middle Passage,” to characterize the mass enslavement of Chinese and Koreans to fuel forced industrialization of Manchuria. This became the industrial engine that powered the Japanese imperial war machine that went on to conquer and colonize all of Asia.

Three key figures are associated with Manchuria; all three are key influences on the current situation: Park Chung Hee, a Korean collaborator who served in the Japanese imperial forces smashing anti-Japanese resistance; Kishi Nobusuke, the minister of munitions and development, and Kim Il Sung, a guerrilla leader fighting the Japanese colonization. Kishi, rehabilitated by the US, later becomes Prime Minister of Japan. His grandson, the far right militarist, Shinzo Abe, is the current president of Japan. Park Chung Hee later becomes the president/dictator of South Korea. His daughter is the recently impeached quisling president of Korea. Kim Il Sung, the guerrilla leader fighting Japanese colonization, later becomes the Leader of North Korea. His grandson, Kim Jung Un, is the current Leader of North Korea.

“Historian Mark Driscoll compares Manchukuo to the Belgian Congo in terms of its wanton brutality and disregard for human life.”

Fast forward to 1945, the end of the war. Japan surrenders, Korea is liberated. The liberated Koreans create their own state, the Korean People’s Republic, a democratic, populist state comprised of thousands of people’s committees who had fought the Japanese colonization. Its political economy is an indigenous socialism consisting of thousands of labor and farming cooperatives.

US cold war policy cannot countenance an indigenous, grassroots socialism, especially within the possible orbit of a newly arisen China. It divides Korea in two, much like Vietnam, thwarts national elections, creates a capitalist state in the south by force, and installs an American puppet, Syngman Rhee, as dictator. It also puts Japanese collaborators back into power, and the entire structure of Japanese colonial domination back into place: police,

courts, prisons, military, even comfort women. The almost complete reinstallation by the US of this military colonial capitalist system, with the same despotic bloody Japanese collaborators back in power, is the worst nightmare the Koreans can imagine. They fight back, first in mass civil resistance, which is suppressed by mass killings, then guerrilla resistance, which results in scorched earth tactics. The suppression reaches genocidal, atrocity-level proportions in the South: hundreds of thousands are mowed down and murdered by the US-installed Southern dictatorship. Eventually, this crests into a full scale war in 1950.

“Closer than Lips to Teeth”

The Chinese, who fought together with the Koreans against the Japanese in Manchuria, consider the creation of the People’s Republic of China indelibly linked to the efforts of Korean fighters, a blood debt. When the US sends troops into the Korean War, the Chinese, despite being impoverished and weary from their own liberation struggles, send over a million volunteer troops to fight with the North Koreans—just as they had in 1592, when they sent 300,000 troops to repel an earlier Japanese invasion.

“Closer than lips to teeth” is how Chairman Mao characterizes the Korea-China relationship. He sends his own sons to fight in the Korean war; one of them is buried in Korean soil.

The Chinese repel the US and South Korean Army in the early stages of the war. The US reacts with a carpet bombing that takes on the character of a full-blown genocide, a military violence unseen in the annals of warfare. North Korea is razed to the ground, “bombed into the Stone Age” and beyond, napalmed into one long fiery barbecue pit, then flooded as dams are destroyed. Mass slaughter of civilians is routine, and blamed on the North, although later studies indicates that 95% of civilian casualties were caused by the US or the South Korean Army under US control.

In 1953, an armistice is signed, but the key provisions of the armistice are not upheld: to withdraw foreign troops, not to introduce new weapons, and to initiate proceedings to procure a lasting peace within 90 days. No peace treaty is ever signed or pursued; in fact the US announces its intention to let the clock run down on the 90 day provision, covertly introduces new arms the following year, including 166 fighter planes, then dismantles the UN Neutral Nations Inspection Team when they report on these violations. By 1968, there are 950 nuclear weapons on the peninsula threatening North Korea, and the DMZ is routinely punctuated with sporadic raids, border incidents, and firefights.

“By 1968, there are 950 nuclear weapons on the peninsula threatening North Korea.”

US troops still occupy South Korea to this day; all of South Korea’s military and facilities still fall under US Operational Control the moment the US president decides—by declaring Defcon 3. Nuclear weapons have been on the ground or in play since the beginning. Every entreaty on the part of North Korea for negotiations for a peace treaty or a non-aggression pact has been rebuffed or conditioned on non-starter demands such as unilateral disarmament. Instead, the US conducts, twice yearly, the largest military exercises on the planet and recurrently threatens North Korea with annihilation. Donald Trump’s “fire and fury like the world has never seen” is just the most recent threat.

A clear eyed assessment of the history and the situation would conclude that it would be irrational for North Korean survival if it gave up nuclear weapons. They also seem to have

been using a calibrated tit-for-tat approach for escalation and de-escalation of threat—the only strategy to prevent war under a situation of deep distrust. However, this capacity for deterrence itself is seen as a threat from the standpoint of the US.

The Chinese Connection

AG: Syria has no nuclear weapons, but they probably wouldn't be standing without Russia, which got some backup from China. China sent its destroyers and aircraft carriers into the Mediterranean, though I didn't hear of them actually engaging. Do you think China and Russia can somehow defuse this?

KJN: China is enmeshed with North Korea through culture, history, geography, proximity, propinquity, and consanguinity. It's also bound to North (and South) Korea through tradition and treaty. There is the 1961 Mutual Defense Treaty between China and North Korea that is still binding, and has never been disavowed: China will come to North Korea's aid if North Korea is attacked. Recent top level statements have reaffirmed and emphasized this; Chinese party officials who have suggested otherwise have been shown the door. In other words, a war with North Korea, will be a war with China.

It's also important to remember that Russia also shares a border with North Korea, and has interests in maintaining the current status quo.

"China will come to North Korea's aid if North Korea is attacked."

China is currently leveraging all its diplomatic forces to de-escalate the possibility of war. It would rather have a nuclear North Korea than war or chaos on its border, but the US seems to be suggesting that the first will inevitably lead to the others. In 2003, China spearheaded the six-party talks which also attempted to stop a similar escalation. China has also backed the North's "double freeze"—freeze nuclear programs in exchange for freezing military exercises—although both the Obama and Trump administrations have ignored these proposals. It has also warned the US that if there is any attempt "to overthrow the North Korean regime and change the political pattern of the Korean peninsula," it will prevent them from doing so. Moreover, it will not do what the US expects it to do: force North Korea to disarm by strong arming it economically or politically. China voted for the recent UN sanctions only in the interest of de-escalation.

China has neither the power nor the inclination to be a subcontractor to US foreign policy; any policy that takes that as a starting point is doomed to fail. However, that may be the point for certain involved parties.

China's goals in the region are significantly, if not diametrically, opposed to those of the US. China is acutely aware that the US has been pursuing a policy of military and economic encirclement/containment, from the 90s onward, but most overtly since 2011, when Hillary Clinton announced the "Pivot to Asia." An explicit war doctrine has been mapped out and elements have been progressively implemented vis-a-vis China. Those factions analyzing or proposing war with China have pointed out that it will be less costly to the US if this happens sooner rather than later.

At the Catastrophic Edge of the Eternal Present

AG: Is conventional warfare even imaginable in this situation?

KJN: War is always a failure of the moral imagination. In the case of Korea, it's also a limit situation of imagination itself. It's hard to conceive of a "limited" attack that would not spiral into something much more catastrophic. The cascading contingencies are just too complex and unpredictable; the historical trauma vortex is simply too overdetermined.

French mathematician René Thom developed a model of "catastrophic" change where, for example, the axes of fear and rage, of threat of war and its cost, slide the situation incrementally and discretely into an unstable, unpredictable, catastrophic attack. Threat signaling of the type we have seen is not cost-free. It will not bring about de-escalation through tit-for-tat actions, or submission, or escape, but rather push parties deeper into the cusp of the catastrophe, fixing an enraged "war trance," setting the stage for unpredictable, catastrophic violence.

The last Korean War was beyond imagination, which is why it has been completely forgotten and repressed in the West. For the North Koreans, it is eternally present. They live in the eternal present of that experience, which they cannot, will not, metabolize or release into memory, until a lasting peace and security is created on the peninsula. That's why all concerned parties have to put their shoulders into negotiations for peace. Otherwise the consequences will be unimaginable. Inside this current crisis, there is a seed of opportunity; the current South Korean president, who is in favor of de-escalation with North Korea, has put forth concrete measures to initiate the process.

Peace is possible on the Korean Peninsula. If the planet is to survive, there is no other choice.

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