

Mainstream Media Massively Hypes North Korean 'Threat' To America's West Coast

By [Media Lens](#)

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One of the longstanding functions of the 'mainstream' media is to channel government ideology about who are 'the Good Guys' – that's 'us' and our allies – and who are the 'Bad Guys' – 'Putin's Russia', 'Saddam's Iraq', 'Chavez's Venezuela', 'Gaddafi's Libya' (until [rehabilitated](#) for a while by Blair) and North Korea.

Of course, 'we' often help 'Bad Guys' [into power](#), even [give them poison gas](#), [sell them arms](#), and [support them](#) through thick and thin. But let's put all that to one side.

Consider a recent [BBC News at Ten segment](#) on the US, China and North Korea that began with presenter Huw Edwards saying:

'President Trump has said the United States will "solve" the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear programme. In an interview with the Financial Times, the president said the US would act alone if China would not intervene. He made his comments ahead of a visit to the US by the Chinese president later this week. Our North America editor, Jon Sopel, is at the White House.

'And, Jon, what does this tell us then about President Trump's approach to this upcoming visit?'

Jon Sopel: 'Well, Huw, for all the talk of surveillance and phone tapping and wire taps and Russia, this is the major strategic national security issue, at least as far as this White House is concerned. What to do about North Korea and their growing ability, it seems, to launch a nuclear missile that could hit the west coast of America.' (April 3, 2017; kindly captured and uploaded to YouTube for us by [Steve Ennever](#))

As we will see, far from being responsible, 'impartial' journalism, this was blatant propaganda, depicting North Korea as a serious threat to the United States, capable of hitting California with a nuclear missile.

Consider, by contrast, a careful analysis by the US writer Adam Johnson in a [piece](#) for Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting last month.

Johnson noted that:

'Tensions between the United States and North Korea are making their way

back into the news after a series of [missile tests](#) and presidential [Twitter threats](#). Meanwhile, a conservative think tank—previously thought [all but dead](#)—has seen a resurgence in relevancy, thanks to its alignment with Donald Trump. The result is that the Heritage Foundation has provided much of the narrative backbone for North Korean/US relations in the age of Trump, making the rounds in dozens of media articles and television appearances.'

Johnson continued:

'One key feature of reports on North Korea's nuclear weapons program is the Hypothetical Scary Nuke Map that shows an entirely hypothetical, not-yet-proven-to-have-been-built intercontinental ballistic missile hitting the US mainland.'

Two types of missile, known as KN-14 and KN-08, are depicted in media reports as capable of reaching the United States.

Johnson highlighted the crucial fact that:

'These missiles have not been tested by North Korea'.

In other words, the media have been publishing 'misleading' maps that 'buried the fact that the range indicating the US could be nuked had not, in fact, been demonstrated.'

Recall Sopel's words:

'What to do about North Korea and their growing ability, it seems, to launch a nuclear missile that could hit the west coast of America.'



The sole extent of Sopel's journalistic scrutiny was to insert two words, 'it seems', in a report blatantly boosting the US propaganda message of North Korea as a nuclear 'threat' capable of attacking the west coast of the United States.

As for the right-wing Heritage Foundation, Johnson raised questions about its funding ties to the South Korean government and to the US weapons industry:

'In the late '90s, it was [criticized](#) for accepting \$1 million in funding directly from the South Korean government. A 2015 report in The Intercept ([9/15/15](#)) showed the cozy relationship between the foundation and military contractor Lockheed Martin, with Heritage building the requisite marketing collateral to

lobby Congress to expand the F-22 program, urging the purchase of 20 planes for resale to Japan, Australia and “possibly South Korea.”

He also points out that:

‘the Heritage Foundation has been incredibly influential in the Trump administration, having [written](#) many of its [budget-slashing proposals](#) and [shaping policy](#) at a high level.’

On April 4, 2017, we emailed Sopel (jon.sopel@bbc.co.uk):

Dear Jon Sopel,

On last night’s BBC News at Ten you reported that the White House is concerned by ‘North Korea and their growing ability, it seems, to launch a nuclear missile that could hit the west coast of America.’

But surely responsible journalism should include scrutiny of government claims, rather than channelling them uncritically to your audience? Indeed, [BBC editorial guidelines](#) say that journalists must show ‘appropriate scrutiny... to those who are in government, or hold power and responsibility’. You have not done so here.

By contrast, US media analyst Adam Johnson has [examined](#) the claims surrounding the supposed threat posed by North Korea’s missile programme. Many of the lurid claims and ‘scary nuke maps’ originate with the right-wing Heritage Foundation which has (or had) funding links to South Korea and US military contractor Lockheed Martin.

Crucially, Johnson notes of the missiles that are depicted as being able to hit the west coast of America:

‘These missiles have not been tested by North Korea’.

Even a [BBC News article](#) concludes of the claim for long-range nuclear missiles:

‘experts have cast doubts on this given the lack of evidence.’

Why did your report not include these balancing facts and concerns?

Best wishes

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Sopel did not reply.

Current news coverage about North Korea omits significant history. The fact that the United States devastated the Korean peninsula in the 1950s is regularly buried. US General Douglas MacArthur testified to Congress in 1951 that:

‘The war in Korea has already destroyed that nation of 20,000,000 people. I have never seen such devastation. I have seen, I guess, as much blood and

disaster as any living man, and it just curdled my stomach, the last time I was there. After I looked at that wreckage and those thousands of women and children and everything, I vomited.’ (‘Napalm – An American Biography’ by Robert Neer, Belknap Press, 2013, [p. 100](#))

US Air Force General Curtis LeMay wrote:

‘We burned down just about every city in North Korea and South Korea both...we killed off over a million civilians and drove several million more from their homes, with the inevitable additional tragedies bound to ensue.’ (Ibid., [p. 100](#))

All this is regularly forgotten in news reports about North and South Korea today. Instead, BBC News and other outlets dutifully [report](#), without blinking, that:

‘US Vice-President Mike Pence has said his country’s “era of strategic patience” with North Korea is over.’

One BBC News article [stated](#):

‘North Korea has long been seen to use provocation and brinkmanship to raise tension for its own strategic advantage.’



That this sentence applies to the United States in global affairs, where it goes *beyond* brinkmanship into actual full-scale invasion and war, is an irony that will not be lost on many readers.

As if on cue, the US Navy has just provoked North Korea by deploying a strike force, including a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, in its direction. The Guardian [said](#) this was ‘to provide a presence near the Korean peninsula’. Why the US should provide ‘a presence’ is not questioned; it is simply taken for granted that Washington is the world’s policeman. The Guardian also [noted](#) casually that the recent:

‘US strike against a Syrian base is also being seen as a warning to North Korea’.

Again, it is just a given that the US is entitled to make such threats.

In an [interview](#) with *Democracy Now!*, Noam Chomsky sketched the more recent history of US – North Korea relations that is also routinely missing from ‘mainstream’ media reporting:

‘1994, [Bill] Clinton made—established what was called the Framework Agreement with North Korea. North Korea would terminate its efforts to develop nuclear weapons. The U.S. would reduce hostile acts. It more or less worked, and neither side lived up to it totally, but, by 2000, North Korea had not proceeded with its nuclear weapons programs. George W. Bush came in and immediately launched an assault on North Korea—you know, “axis of evil,” sanctions and so on. North Korea turned to producing nuclear weapons. In 2005, there was an agreement between North Korea and the United States, a pretty sensible agreement. North Korea agreed to terminate its development of nuclear weapons. In return, it called for a nonaggression pact. So, stop making hostile threats, relief from harsh sanctions, and provision of a system to provide North Korea with low-enriched uranium for medical and other purposes—that was the proposal. George Bush instantly tore it to shreds. Within days, the U.S. was imposing—trying to disrupt North Korean financial transactions with other countries through Macau and elsewhere. North Korea backed off, started building nuclear weapons again. I mean, maybe you can say it’s the worst regime in history, whatever you like, but they have been following a pretty rational tit-for-tat policy.’

Thus, despite standard media misrepresentations to the contrary, North Korea has been following ‘a pretty rational policy’ in the face of ‘hostile acts’ and ‘harsh sanctions’ from, in particular, the US. You would never know that if you relied solely on ‘mainstream’ media such as BBC News.

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