



Feature

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Getting North Korea wrong

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Abstract

The 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japan will roll around on August 15, 2015, no doubt eliciting a hailstorm of commentary—and speculation that North Korea will collapse and the two Koreas reunify. But pundits have been saying that these rosy scenarios will occur for many decades (sometimes while simultaneously calling for military action to hurry up that collapse and reunification) and the regime still remains in place. The evidence shows that the bipartisan strategy in Washington founded on the North's coming collapse has been wrong for at least a quarter-century, and it is time to deal with the country as it is instead of dealing with it based upon our own false assumptions.

Keywords

Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un, Korean War, North Korea, preemptive strikes, reunification, South Korea, strategic patience

When will the two Koreas unify? Students have asked me this question for four decades, often asking to write their term papers on this subject. I say “no,” for two reasons: First, we have had nearly 70 years of Korean division, with no history of Korean unity since 1945, so where's the evidence for your paper? Second, I tell them to look carefully at the face of Kim Il-sung on posters on the walls of buildings in North Korea, or posters of his son or grandson: You may well see that face until you are as old as I am. So why are we talking about unification?

This same unwarranted optimism can be seen in the efforts of South Korean President Park Geun-hye—the first woman president in the history of the Korean peninsula—who came into office in February 2013. She has avidly pushed what

she calls “trustpolitik” with the North, and her government has sponsored one event after another that looks forward to a unification that appears to be just around the corner. To date, the result of these efforts is roughly zero. Kim Jong-un has been in power since December 2011, he has consolidated his position, and there is little to suggest anything other than the same effective transition of power that attended his father's succession after Kim Il-sung in 1994. So why do so many people focus on his regime's supposed imminent collapse?

An idea whose time never comes

The notion that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) would persist well into the 21st century would

have surprised most of the scholars, government officials, journalists, and pundits in the United States and South Korea who wrote about it in the 1990s. Most of their commentary alternated between two extreme, fixed ideas that were inherently contradictory: North Korea was on the verge of collapse and might “implode,” or North Korea possessed nuclear weapons and might “lash out” against the South or Japan.

There should be a statute of limitations on predictions of collapse that have proven dead wrong for decades. Logic says that states acquire nuclear weapons primarily for deterrence, since the use of such weapons inherently risks retaliation by other nuclear powers—and in the case of the DPRK, utter annihilation by the United States (turning it into a “charcoal briquette” in Colin Powell’s words).

The “collapsists” have recently been joined by none other than President Obama. In mid-January, he remarked that North Korea is “the most isolated, the most sanctioned, the most cut-off nation on earth . . . The kind of authoritarianism that exists there, you almost can’t duplicate anywhere else. It’s brutal and it’s oppressive and as a consequence, the country can’t really even feed its own people . . . Over time you will see a regime like this collapse” (Foster-Carter, 2015).

Over what time?

To my knowledge, the first time that the scenario for the North’s collapse appeared was on June 25, 1990—the 40th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War—when Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute wrote an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* titled “The Coming Collapse of North Korea.” I cut it out and pasted it on the wall of my

study, since I had been making the opposite argument—no collapse—since the Berlin Wall fell; life would tell us who was right. In 1992, the Economist Intelligence Unit published a book-length special report on Korea’s future. Its thesis was summed up in its title—*Korea’s Coming Reunification: Another East Asian Superpower?* The author, Aidan Foster-Carter, outlined a scenario by which the South would soon absorb the North, German-style. (To his credit, he recently recanted—an exceedingly rare *mea culpa* among collapsists (Foster-Carter, 2015).)

Perhaps more important, “the coming collapse” has been a bipartisan principle of successive administrations; Obama is simply the latest one to fall prey to its charms. Eberstadt expressed the view of the George H. W. Bush administration, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz said it for the George W. Bush administration again in June 2003: “The country [North Korea] is teetering on the edge of economic collapse” (Defense Department, 2003).

In between, we heard Bill Clinton’s CIA director, John Deutch, tell Congress in 1995: “It is no longer a question of whether North Korea would collapse, but when.” Within 48 hours, the commanding general of the (North) Korean People’s Army, Vice Marshal Kim Kwang-jin, retorted: “It is no longer a question of whether there will be another Korean war, but when” (Cumings, 2007: 30).

Two years later, Gen. Gary Luck, commander of US forces in Korea, said, “North Korea will disintegrate, possibly in very short order,” the only question was whether it would implode or explode (Chong, 1997: 143). That same year, the CIA invited Eberstadt and other outside experts to join a panel of government officials to assess the

DPRK's prospects, which concluded that it was likely to collapse within five years. A declassified CIA report of the discussion noted that the assembled CIA experts thought that North Korea's then-leader, Kim Jong-il, was likely to have just "a brief window of time" to cope with all his difficulties before suffering a probable "hard landing." Without major reform, some "catalyst" would come along "that will lead to collapse." The majority of the group doubted that Kim's regime could persist "beyond five years," yielding a "political implosion." Yet many of them expressed surprise that in spite of the degraded economy and the onset of a famine that would soon grow much worse, somehow the "delusionary" (their word) Kim Jong-il "remained firmly in control" (Wampler, 2006).

The DPRK's stubborn refusal to disintegrate and erase itself has had negligible impact on the collapsists. Within days of Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011—and before it was clear *how* he had died—a knowledgeable Korea scholar who served in the second Bush administration confidently asserted in *The New York Times* that "North Korea as we know it is over." Whether it comes apart "in the next few weeks or over several months," Victor Cha wrote, "the regime will not be able to hold together after the untimely death of its leader, Kim Jong-il." If it somehow managed to persist anyway, it would be because it had become, in effect, "China's newest province" (Cha, 2011). (As an aside, the quality of US intelligence about the inner workings of North Korea was so poor that it took three days before anyone realized that Kim had died and a similar amount of time to verify that he was not assassinated but had died a natural death from a heart attack.)

Here the argument seems to be that the DPRK has survived only because China has been propping it up. Why didn't that important assumption figure into the logic of more than 25 years of predictions of the North's coming collapse? Kim Il-sung began his guerrilla career by teaming up with Chinese comrades in the 1930s. North Korea then contributed tens of thousands of soldiers to the People's Liberation Army in the Chinese Civil War, and of course Mao Zedong bailed Kim's chestnuts out of a very hot fire (the Korean War) in the late fall of 1950. And Kim Il-sung was very close to both Mao and his long-term successor, Deng Xiaoping.

The only assumption that is warranted by the evidence, in my view, is that of North Korean general Kim Kwang-jin: If this regime goes down, it will go down fighting, with catastrophic consequences for Northeast Asia. In my estimation, drawing upon my scholarship on the subject since 1980, what distinguishes this situation from those of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe is that the Korean conflict has essentially been above all else a civil war—one that started in 1945, had its hottest phase in 1950–1953, and has continued (usually simmering but occasionally boiling over) to this day. Octogenarian officers who fought in the worst of that hot era still hold power in the North. They know that if the DPRK collapses and is folded into South Korea, like East Germany into West Germany, then they will have lost this war (the peace is still held only by an armistice). Worse, they will have their own place in history erased. Because Koreans take history so seriously, to become "history"—in the curious American sense of oblivion and irrelevance—is to imagine the disappearance

of one's self and one's connection to one's parents, ancestors, and progeny. This causes a rupture in the "great chain of being" and permanent, irreparable oblivion.

Make them collapse: A genealogy of preemptive threats

Part of the litany of opposition to the recent framework agreement between the United States and Iran is the example of North Korea: It made solemn agreements with the United States and then cheated, resulting in another nuclear weapons state. Iran will do the same, goes this argument.

But Iran never froze its nuclear complexes, as the North did in 1994 in the October framework agreement; it had no access to plutonium for eight years. Iran never agreed to a buy-out of its medium- and long-range missiles, as Pyongyang did in the fall of 2000; the deal was never consummated because George W. Bush let it fall between the cracks (to the astonishment of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright) (Albright, 2005).

Along came the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and soon Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld suggested preemptive nuclear strikes on rogue states (Chinoy, 2009). In September 2002, Bush brought to the table his "doctrine" of preemptive strikes against America's enemies, of which North Korea was clearly one. When it appeared that the invasion of Iraq would move quickly to victory, Rumsfeld demanded revisions in the basic war plan for Korea (called "Operations Plan 5030") and also sought funds for new bunker-busting nukes from Congress. The strategy, according to insiders who read the plan, was "to topple Kim's

regime by destabilizing its military forces" so that they would overthrow him and thus accomplish "regime change." The plan was pushed "by many of the same administration hard-liners who advocated regime change in Iraq." Unnamed senior Bush administration officials considered elements of this new plan "so aggressive that they could provoke a war" (Auster and Whitelaw, 2003).

Before the occupation of Iraq dimmed their clairvoyant powers on matters of war and peace, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz & Company imagined that Kim Jong-il was running around like an ant on a frying pan in dread. Kim disappeared from public view for 50 days from mid-February 2003. Once he surfaced again, "a senior Defense Department official" (most likely Rumsfeld or Wolfowitz) told *The New York Times*, "Truly, if I'm Kim Jong-il, I wake up tomorrow morning and I'm thinking, 'Have the Americans arrayed themselves on the peninsula now, post-Iraq, the way they arrayed themselves in Iraq?'" The United States worked out newly configured deployments thus to "use precision targeting much more aggressively and much more quickly." In pursuit of this, during the buildup immediately preceding the invasion of Iraq, the Pentagon moved 24 long-range B-1 and B-52 bombers to Guam and installed several F-117 Stealth fighter-bombers in US bases in South Korea—"designed for quick strikes against targets ringed by heavy air defenses" (Shanker, 2003). (These F-117s were the same strike force that sought to kill Saddam Hussein and thereby decapitate his government on the day the invasion began.) Soon Wolfowitz was in Seoul to announce a redeployment of US combat troops south of South Korea's Han River to get

them out of harm's way, and in passing make his aforementioned statement to the world's press about North Korea's imminent demise.

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's 2003 preemptive strategy sounds adventurous and ill-advised to say the least, and most would think it merely part and parcel of Bush administration adventurism. But threatening war in Korea is bipartisan, and hardly new. On NBC's *Meet the Press* on April 3, 1994, Defense Secretary William Perry said: "We do not want and will not provoke a war," but if US sanctions "provoke the North Koreans into unleashing a war... that is a risk that we're taking" (*New York Times*, 1994). Perry's formulation was careful and precise: He and Ashton Carter had been studying for many months whether a preemptive strike could be carried out against the Yongbyon plutonium facility without starting the next Korean War; they concluded that it couldn't.

By mid-June 1994, the Clinton administration "had devised a plan laying out the first steps the United States should take to prepare for war," which included the addition of 10,000 American troops in Korea, dispatching Apache attack helicopters and various other aircraft, and moving in more Bradley Fighting Vehicles (Rosegrant and Watkins, 1995: 2, 33-35). If Perry and Carter were right and the North attacked the South after a preemptive strike by the United States, then the ultimate consequences of that war cannot be known but it might well have included US counterattacks using nuclear weapons. Think of it: A nuclear war in the name of nonproliferation. But they seemed undaunted by all this, as the Perry/Carter team continued to publish opinion pieces calling for preemptive

strikes against the North during the second Bush administration.

On April 8, 2013, at the height of another recent crisis, the North issued a white paper on US nuclear threats. The war exercises staged by the United States, together with "the puppet army in south Korea," the white paper said, "are a heinous nuclear war rehearsal to bring a nuclear holocaust to the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia and other parts of the world." It said that the United States officially made public to the world in July 1957 that it would introduce "Honest John [rockets] and 280 mm atomic artillery pieces into south Korea to hurl them into Focus Lens, Focus Retina and other north-targeted war drills." Later on, huge Team Spirit war games introduced "F-16 fighter bomber, B-1B long-distance strategic bomber and nuclear submarines." In 1994, the report went on, the United States "rehearsed a nuclear war with the involvement of up-to-date strike means after drawing up such nuclear war scenarios as OPLAN 5026, OPLAN 5027, and the plan for bombing Nyongbyon [sic] that envisaged mounting a preemptive nuclear attack on the DPRK." In September 2002 the United States adopted a new national security strategy "in which it put the DPRK on the list of preemptive nuclear attack." And in 2013 war games, a "B-2A flew into the sky above south Korea from the U.S. mainland for the first time in U.S. history to stage a mock drill for dropping nuclear bombs." Simultaneously, "two nuclear carrier flotillas were deployed in the waters off the Korean Peninsula" (Korean Central News Agency, 2013).

To the best of my knowledge these assertions are true (even if the intent of US and South Korean actions is false or

exaggerated), but this white paper got no attention in the US media. Four days later, historian Jeremi Suri argued in *The New York Times* that President Obama should “bomb North Korea, before it’s too late” (Suri, 2013). After listing various threats from the North, including putting a satellite into space in December 2012 and testing its third nuclear device in February 2013, Suri wrote:

The Korean crisis has now become a strategic threat to America’s core national interests. The best option is to destroy the North Korean missile on the ground before it is launched. The United States should use a precise airstrike to render the missile and its mobile launcher inoperable. President Obama should state clearly and forthrightly that this is an act of self-defense in response to explicit threats from North Korea and clear evidence of a prepared weapon. . . . A war on the Korean Peninsula is unlikely after an American strike, but it is not inconceivable. The North Koreans might continue to escalate, and Mr. Kim might feel obligated to start a war to save face. Under these unfortunate circumstances, the United States and its allies would still be better off fighting a war with North Korea today, when the conflict could still be confined largely to the Korean Peninsula. (Suri, 2013)

Note Suri’s logic: The United States launches a preemptive strike against a sovereign country with which the United States has a truce, to take out a missile without knowing whom it is aimed at, based on the argument that this missile may or may not strike core strategic interests. And if the North reacts, then they will be the ones who “start a war.” And if a *nuclear* war results from this preemptive strike, so be it—and it will be Pyongyang’s fault. This is truly Orwellian logic regarding the nearly 70 years of conflict between the United States and the DPRK that shows no concern for the North Korean point of view and seems callous about

the millions of lives that would be lost in such a war.

If all this sounds quite irrational, that’s because it is. But Suri merely reiterates a preemptive strategy that came within a hairbreadth of being implemented in June 1994. As we know, former President Jimmy Carter interrupted this march to war by meeting directly with Kim Il-sung and getting him to agree to a freeze on the Yongbyon plutonium facility. And George W. Bush deliberately chose to ignore the 2000 missile agreement in favor of putting the North in his “axis of evil” and—as the North Koreans rightly state—making it a target of his preemptive doctrine. Professor Suri wants to revive the preemptive doctrine to take out missiles that diplomacy took care of at the end of Clinton’s term, using the method that Bush used to thwart that diplomacy—and maybe start a war (but don’t worry, it will be their fault).

“Within an inch of war”

Across the American political spectrum, the general view of North Korea is that it is an evil regime; Bush was not alone in that regard. Perhaps it is this view that inhibits serious investigative reporting and debate on North Korea. That deficiency, in turn, means that even the highest officials often know next to nothing about their North Korean adversary.

In his recent memoir, former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta writes about the Korean conflict as if he just discovered it, with a boilerplate description of his visit to Panmunjom that could have been written 40 years ago. In passing, Panetta trots out a venerable shibboleth from the Orientalist playbook: He eyeballs an “inscrutable” North Korean soldier across the demilitarized zone, “just as

inscrutable as the regime behind him.” Therefore Washington doesn’t know much about the North—“it is an exasperatingly difficult culture to observe and understand”—Washington’s “insights into the regime were few and shallow,” and the regime was just “infuriatingly hard to penetrate.” But Panetta is curiously matter-of-fact in saying that “if North Korea moved across the border,” the United States would command the South Korean military and defend the South, “including the use of nuclear weapons—if necessary.” Just like hair-trigger protocols for nuclear weapons, US forces in Korea are ready to “fight tonight,” and during his tenure the chance of war in Korea was “ever present and imminent” (Panetta, 2014: 274–276).

This is a naïve but telling passage. A small Asian country is “inscrutable” and that fact is infuriating: Power needs to know, and why don’t they let us know everything we want to know? Following the failed launch of a North Korean long-range rocket, Panetta gave an interview to CNN in Brussels on April 19, 2012 in which he said that the United States is prepared for “any contingency” when it comes to dealing with North Korea. He told his hosts: “We’re within an inch of war almost every day in that part of the world, and we just have to be very careful about what we say and what we do” (CNN Politics, 2012.)

For American presidents and high officials of both parties to contemplate unprovoked attacks against the North is both a stunning example of American arrogance and an astonishing admission of failure that goes back seven decades—to the failure to remove the risk of war in Korea and to make peace with an adversary determined to wait us out forever if that is what it takes.

Meanwhile, in March 2015, President Obama’s new secretary of defense took office: Ashton Carter, the same person who had looked into the possibility of a preemptive strike against North Korea’s Yongbyon plutonium facility in 1994.

For once, a good prediction

What is missing in all this is a recognition of the true nature of North Korea’s political system—apart from the endlessly reiterated trope that only a draconian totalitarianism keeps this regime in power (which ignores the collapse of most other communist systems). The DPRK has survived in part because it has diverged so fundamentally from Marxism-Leninism. It revived a political tradition that harks back to the ancient neo-Confucian ideology that was the ruling doctrine of Korea’s old Choson Dynasty for centuries (1392–1910). This traditional Asian school of thought said that the state had its model in the family, with the leader serving as father of the people and his main function being to educate and transform his subjects by personal rule and moral example (Bloom, 2009)—thereby standing Marx on his head.

Among other things, neo-Confucian ideology emphasized clearly defined hierarchies, centralized bureaucracy, obedience to the state, and social stability—elements that would prove to be of great use to today’s regime. North Korea has evolved into a modern form of monarchy that, along with the fourth-largest military in the world, provides the glue that has kept the DPRK politically stable while everything else collapsed, including the Soviet Union, Western communism, and the country’s industrial and agricultural economy in the mid-1990s. This regime has run in

well-trodden historical grooves, which accounts for how it withstood a famine in 1997–1998 that killed at least 600,000 people and remained intact despite the deaths of its founding leader, Kim Il-sung, and his successor son, Kim Jong-il. And it withstood a prolonged and dangerous confrontation with the United States over nuclear weapons.

I got a firsthand sense of this during my first visit to North Korea in 1981, when I flew in from Beijing and hoped to go out through the Soviet Union on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Consular officials said I should obtain a visa at the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang. When I duly arrived at its doorstep, a friendly (read KGB) counselor sat me down, offered me cognac, and inquired as to what I might be doing in Pyongyang. More cognac, more discussion, and then he asked what I thought of Kim Jong-il, who had just been officially designated as successor to Kim Il-sung at the Sixth Party Congress in 1980. “Well, he doesn’t have his father’s charisma,” I said. “He’s diminutive, pear-shaped, homely. Looks like his mother in fact.”

“Oh, you Americans,” he said, “always thinking about personality. Don’t you know they have a bureaucratic bloc behind him, they all rise or fall with him—these people really know how to do this here. You should come back in 2020 and see *his* son take power.”

It proved to be the best prediction I’ve ever heard about this hybrid communist state-cum-dynasty, except that Kim Jong-il’s heart attack at the age of 69 merely hastened the succession to Kim Jong-un by a few years. The basis of this prediction, no doubt, was this official’s open-mouthed awe at the way in which the DPRK had diverged from Soviet practice and the degree to which the native, traditional political

culture had overwhelmed the communist system. The North Korean people have known only millennia of monarchy and a century of dictatorship—Japanese from 1910 to 1945, where in the late stages of colonial rule Koreans had to worship the Japanese emperor, and then the hegemony of the Kim family for the past seven decades. When you add to post-colonial nationalism Korea’s centuries of royal succession and neo-Confucian philosophy, it might be possible to understand North Korea as an unusual but predictable combination of monarchy, anti-imperial nationalism, and Korean political culture.

The problem in understanding the North and grasping its behavior is hardly ever at the level of facts or daily events or episodes that come and go—or about which Kim runs the country. It is at the level of scraping our own assumptions to the bone and trying to figure out a place that one may hate and revile—a place that specializes in *difference* from beliefs that we hold dear, that will *not* do what we want them to do, and that *persists* no matter how many times we huff and puff and try to blow their house down.

OK, here’s my pitch: A movie where two American guys assassinate Kim Jong-un

As 2014 came to an end, an unpredictable set of events involving North Korea mingled tragedy and farce in ways that simultaneously reflected both the absurdity and the perils of that country’s place and significance in the world. Hackers who may or may not have been North Korean unloaded huge files of data from Sony Pictures, then wiped its computers clean. The hackers did so in protest to the Sony film *The Interview*,

which climaxed with a hideous, head-exploding assassination of Kim Jong-un. The hackers then threatened to attack any theaters that would show the film. Large theater chains decided not to screen it, and Sony pulled the movie. An outpouring of claims followed: that freedom of speech was under attack, that Sony was knuckling under to foreign pressure, and that a terrible precedent was being set. Sony then relented and released the film over the Internet and to selected theaters (but not the major chains).

Had the film depicted the decapitation of Barack Obama, or Xi Jinping, or Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, or Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, the uproar would have castigated Sony and its filmmakers for blatant recklessness. But because this was North Korea, with no friends in the world, the US media could say and do anything it wanted and no one protested. Free speech is precious but, as Oliver Wendell Holmes said, no one has the right to shout "Fire!" in a crowded theater. And *The Interview* was just that.

But most interesting (and typical of crises over North Korea) was that whenever Pyongyang makes charges—in this case that the US government backed this film—media commentators laugh, mocking Pyongyang's "paranoia." Then some serious detective work showed that, lo and behold, a kernel of truth lay at the bottom of North Korean claims.

Peter Hayes, an Australian researcher who has for decades sought to shine the light of truth on Korean Peninsula affairs, discovered that during a US Strategic Command telecom symposium on August 14, 2014, Maj. Gen. John MacDonald (who served until recently in the US Forces Command in Korea) advocated the assassination of North Korean

leaders. Hayes noted that the video of this symposium was circulated by the US Strategic Command, "the military command that plans for using nuclear weapons against North Korea," and that presumably Pyongyang tunes in on this periodic symposium every time it airs (Hayes, 2014).

Furthermore, as Hayes pointed out, Sony emails that were divulged by the hackers showed that top executives consulted with the State Department and the CIA about any backlash that might occur from releasing the film. Bruce Bennett, a frequent consultant with the US government and the author in 2013 of a Rand Corporation study, *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse*, told Sony in June 2014 that the only way to get rid of the North Korean regime was to assassinate its leader. Moreover, Sony's chief executive officer, Michael Lynton, asserted that a senior US official agreed with Bennett's views (the State Department declined to clarify what this official said, although it did say that he had not viewed the film). Bennett also told Sony that the imagery of Kim's gruesome head demolition in *The Interview* should be kept so that it could leak into North Korea as a samizdat DVD that would destabilize the country (Hayes, 2014).

In the midst of the Sony imbroglio, Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations and a person always with his ear fastened to the ground in Washington, published a commentary in *The Wall Street Journal* advocating regime change—or as he put it, "ending North Korea's existence as an independent entity and reunifying the Korean Peninsula." Although he noted that Pyongyang has "hundreds" of medium-range missiles capable of

reaching all of Japan, including US bases in Okinawa, somehow the United States and China should gang up on the North and get rid of it (Haass, 2014).

And what would happen if Kim Jong-un were assassinated by Americans? The best guess, once again, would be a second Korean War. And apparently it did not occur to Americans working for Sony that the North Koreans would naturally see the film not just as an American product but as one manufactured in Japan—let’s not forget that Sony is a Japanese firm—and that Japan was the North’s colonial enemy and a subsequent thorn in its flesh for 70 years.

Engaging North Korea?

In recent years, diplomacy in East Asia has been neutered and estrangement has replaced engagement. Often, genealogy rules the day—especially genealogy stretching back to World War II. For example, now sitting in Tokyo as Japan’s prime minister is Abe Shinzo, whose grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke—whom Abe is said to revere—was considered a “Class A” war criminal by the American authorities for his complicity in acts conducted in the Japanese puppet colony of Manchukuo (Manchuria) on the Asian mainland. Meanwhile, Kim Il-sung and his fellow guerrillas fought against Kishi in the 1930s, at roughly the same time that the father of South Korea’s current president was collaborating with the Japanese invaders—going so far as to become an officer in the Imperial Japanese Army. Consequently, whether someone resisted or collaborated with Japan during the colonial period is a sensitive topic in Korea.

All of which calls for caution and delicacy when dealing with 20th-century

history. But Abe is famous for brain-dead insensitivity to his neighbors’ historic grievances against Japan. Abe has endeavored to button his lip, but still managed to remark at a news conference during a visit to Washington that “[m]y grandfather was best friends with her father, president Park Chung-hee. So President Park Chung-hee was someone who was very close with Japan, obviously” (Leussink, 2013). Abe probably thought this was a compliment. Meanwhile, President Park has refused numerous entreaties to have a summit with Mr. Abe.

And North Korea’s relations with China may also be at their worst ever, now that the People’s Republic of China works hand in glove with the United States to develop new sanctions against it. China is apoplectic because the North’s missiles and A-bombs are just the thing to push Japan and South Korea to go nuclear and are sure to cause a quick American response—which they did in mid-March 2013 when President Obama decided on a \$1 billion acceleration of the US ballistic missile interceptor program, adding 14 new batteries in California and Alaska. (Calling them interceptors is a bit of a misnomer. In 15 tests of these systems under ideal conditions, only eight have worked.) As luck would have it, such antimissile forces are also useful against China’s antiquated intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Later that month, Obama upped the ante by sending B-52 and B-2 Stealth strategic bombers soaring over South Korea to drop dummy bombs. It was a needless and provocative reenactment of “the empire strikes back”; more than 60 years ago, Washington initiated a similar nuclear blackmail of the North when it launched B-29s on simulated Hiroshima-Nagasaki bombing missions in September

1951. Known as Operation Hudson Harbor, the missions sought to establish the capability to use atomic weapons on the battlefield; in pursuit of this goal, lone B-29s from Okinawa were sent over North Korea on practice atomic runs, dropping “dummy” A-bombs or heavy TNT bombs (Cumings, 1990). Ever since, nuclear weapons have been part of our war plans against the North; they were not used during the Korean War only because the US Air Force was able to raze every city in the North with conventional incendiaries. Hardly any Americans know about this horrific experience but every North Korean does; no wonder they have built some 15,000 underground facilities related to their national security. However provocative the North appears, we are the ones reaping the whirlwind of our past nuclear bullying.

President Obama’s injudicious “strategic patience” toward the DPRK and Seoul’s “trustpolitik” has gotten nothing from the North but the ever-growing reliability of its A-bombs and missiles. They really have no choice but to talk to the North Koreans—most likely along the lines of former Los Alamos head Siegfried Hecker’s suggestion that the current programs be capped through the “Three no’s: No more nukes, No better nukes, No proliferation” (Lankov, 2014: 253). Particularly important is to prevent the miniaturization of nukes such that they fit on missile warheads. (Expert opinion is mixed on whether they have already done this or not.) Given the North’s labyrinthine subterranean complexes, spies can never be sure to have pinpointed every bomb, and a handful of nukes will provide security and deterrence for an insecure leadership with much to be insecure about. Otherwise they are useless.

In a recent interview, President Obama finally declared an “Obama doctrine.” As he put it: “We will engage [in diplomacy], but we preserve all our [military] capabilities.” Put another way, engagement while “meeting core strategic needs,” he said, would serve American interests in new relations with Iran, Burma, and Cuba (Friedman, 2015). Left out was North Korea; indeed, if Obama succeeds in successfully engaging Iran and Cuba, Pyongyang will be left out in the cold as the last pariah state save Syria, which clings precariously to statehood. Yet North Korea is arguably more dangerous than the other pariahs, given its nuclear arsenal, and yet has a track record of responding favorably to presidential diplomacy regarding its nuclear and missile programs.

When William Perry led Bill Clinton’s effort to engage with the DPRK in 1999–2000, he remarked that because the North had not disappeared in the post-Berlin Wall world, we needed to deal with it “not as we would like it to be, but as it is” (Perry, 1999). *As it is* means that the only path toward opening up the North is through diplomacy and people-to-people contact. *As it is* means dealing with the Kim monarchy, because it isn’t going anywhere.

Eason Jordon, former president of CNN International, who had made nine visits to Pyongyang, told a Harvard audience that:

when you hear about starvation in North Korea, a lot of very level-headed people think, ‘There is no way a country like that can survive.’ Well, I can guarantee you this: I’m here to tell you with absolute certainty those guys will tough it out for centuries just the way they are. Neither the United States nor any other country is going to be able to force a collapse of that government. (Harrison, 2002: 3)

Kim Jong-un is barely past 30, but if my Soviet interlocutor was right (and he has been for more than three decades) we are going to see his face plastered on the walls of North Korea for a long, long time.

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