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By Stephen Gowans 2007

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UNDERSTANDING NORTH KOREA

By Stephen Gowans 2007

“Che Guevara visited Pyongyang around (1965) and told the press that North Korea was a model to which revolutionary Cuba should aspire.” [1]

North Korea is a country that is alternately reviled and ridiculed. Its leader, Kim Jong-il, is demonized by the right and — with the exception of Guevara in 1965 and many of his current admirers — mocked by the left. Kim is declared to be insane, though no one can say what evidence backs this diagnosis up. It’s just that everyone says he is, so he must be. If Kim had Che’s smoldering good looks he may have become a leftist icon, leader of “the one remaining, self-proclaimed top-to-bottom alternative to neo-liberalism and globalization,” as Korea expert Bruce Cumings puts it.[2]

Instead, the chubby Kim has become a caricature, a Dr. Evil with a bad haircut and ill-fitting clothes. The country he leads, as befits such a sinister character, is said to be a danger to international peace and security, bent on provoking a nuclear war. And it’s claimed that years of economic mismanagement have reduced north Korea to an economic basket-case and that its citizens, prisoners at best, are starved and repressed by a merciless dictator. While many people can recite the anti-north Korea catechism — garrison state, hermit kingdom, international pariah — they’ll admit that what they know about the country, apart from the comic book caricatures dished up by the media, is fuzzy and vague. But this has always been so. As early as 1949, Anna Louise Strong could write that “there is little public knowledge about the country and most of the headlines distort rather than reveal the facts.” [3] Cumings dismisses US press reports on north Korea as “uninformative, unreliable, often sensationalized” and as deceiving, not educational.” One of the reasons the headlines distort, even today, especially today, can be summed up in a syllogism. World War II, as it was waged in the Pacific, was in large part a struggle between

the dominant economic interests of the United States and the dominant economic interests of Japan for control of the Pacific, including the Korean peninsula. Japan had occupied Korea from 1910 to 1945, until it was driven out by the Korean resistance, one of whose principal figures was north Korea's founder, Kim Il-sung, and the entry of the Soviet Union into the Pacific war. After Tokyo's surrender, the US tried to assert control over Japan's former colonial possessions, including Korea. Kim's guerilla state upset those plans. The corporate rich and hereditary capitalist families that dominate both US foreign policy and the mass media recognize north Korea to be a threat to their interests. The DPRK condones neither free trade, free enterprise nor free entry of US capital. Were it allowed to thrive, it would provide a counter-example to US-enforced neo-liberalism, a model other countries might follow, a model revolutionaries, like Che, have found inspiration in. The headlines deceive, rather than educate, because north Korea is against the interests of those who shape them.

My perspective is not that of the mainstream or of the investors, bankers and wealthy families who, in multifarious ways, define it. I am not for subjugating north Korea, nor for sanctions or war or forcing north Korea to disarm, and I am certainly not for what John Bolton, US ambassador to the UN, once called Washington's policy toward north Korea. Asked by the New York Times to spell out Washington's stance toward the DPRK, Bolton "strode over to a bookshelf, pulled off a volume and slapped it on the table. It was called 'The End of North Korea.'" "That," he said, "is our policy." [4]

I do not believe that Kim Jong-il is insane. The insanity slur is a way of giving some substance to the perfectly ludicrous claim that north Korea is a danger to the world. It is not. The only threat north Korea poses is the threat of a potential self-defense to long-standing US plans to dominate the Korean peninsula from one end to the other.

Pre-WWII roots of conflict

Japan colonized Korea in 1910. For the next 35 years Korea became a source of immense profits for Japanese industrialists and financiers, extracted in the blood and suffering of Koreans. Numberless Koreans were forcibly shipped to Japan as forced laborers or as sexual slaves known as “comfort women.” But Japan could not plunder the peninsula alone. It had the help of wealthy Korean landowners and industrialists, who, just as they had found favor with their Japanese masters, would find favor with the US occupation government and later fill key positions in the south Korean state.

While Pearl Harbor marked the formal beginning of armed hostilities between Japan and the United States, the two countries were locked in conflict well before Pearl Harbor. Both sought to dominate the countries of the Pacific Rim, to secure their riches, on a monopoly basis. Tokyo followed an aggressive and expansionary foreign policy, backed by the gun, to drive other imperialist powers from the region. The US, already with a dominant position in the Philippines, Guam, Hawaii and Samoa, sought an open door for its exporters and investors in China. With both sides seeking a dominant role, it was inevitable they would sooner or later come to blows.

Once formal war broke out, Washington was faced with a tantalizing prospect. If Japan were defeated, its colonies would pass to the United States, perhaps not as outright colonies, but as territories in which the US would have a dominant voice. In other words, a successful conclusion to the war would present the US with everything it had sought before the war.

Soon after Pearl Harbor, the US State Department began toying with the idea of establishing a post-war trusteeship in Korea. Debate raged over whether a trustee arrangement would give Washington enough influence in post-war Korean affairs. The idea of a multilateral trusteeship of Korea was presented to the British

and French in 1943, but both countries declined, fearing the arrangement would weaken their own empires.

An American-authored division

It wasn't Koreans who bisected the Korean peninsula at the 38th parallel. It was the Americans. On August 10th 1945, with the Soviets having crossed into the Korean peninsula from the north two days earlier, two US Colonels, Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel, were ordered to divide Korea into two occupation zones: one American and one Soviet. They chose the 38th parallel as the dividing line. It would give the US control of the capital, Seoul. The Soviets accepted the division, demanding a Soviet occupation zone in the north of Japan, upon Tokyo's surrender. The US refused.

A government organized by Koreans for Koreans, headquartered at Seoul, was founded within weeks of Japan's surrender. It called itself the Korean People's Republic, born of the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence, and the People's Committees rooted in the countryside. Despite its pretensions to be a champion of democracy, the United States refused to recognize the government and actively worked to repress it. For the Americans, the Korean People's Republic had two strikes against it: (a) it wasn't answerable to Washington; (b) it had strong communist influences.

Instead of allowing the newly created indigenous government to flourish, the United States established what it had been planning from 1943: a US military occupation regime. The government, which lasted until 1948, was overwhelmingly opposed by local residents, who were tired of foreign occupation and wanted an independent, unified Korea, not an artificially bisected one occupied in the south by a foreign power that was going to insist on having a major voice in Korean affairs.

Unwelcome guests

Three months into the occupation, the US military governor, General John Hodge, noted that resentment against the Americans was growing, and that the south Koreans wanted their independence — not later, but now. “Pro-American,” he said, had become a byword for “pro Japanese,” “pro-traitor” and “pro-collaborationist.” While regrettable, the Koreans’ anti American resentment would have to be ignored. The south was fertile ground for communism, Hodge warned. And increasingly, the Koreans were looking to the Soviet Union for inspiration.

Hodge’s views were echoed by Edwin Pauley, a friend of US President Harry Truman. Truman sent Pauley to Korea in 1946 to scout around and report back on what he found. Pauley was alarmed. Communism “could get off to a better start [here] than practically anywhere else in the world,” he told Truman. Unlike the Soviets, who had to go through a painful period of industrialization to transform a runt industrial economy into an industrial colossus, the communist-leaning People’s Committees could expropriate Japanese built factories, railways, public utilities and natural resource industries and run them for the benefit of everyone, from day one. An industrialized economy in the hands of the communists would serve as a potential testament to the merits of socialism, but more importantly, would deprive US investors of access to these same assets. What was the point of routing the Japanese, if you couldn’t enjoy the spoils of war?

Japanese colonialism without the Japanese

The US spent the first year of its occupation suppressing the locally formed People’s Committees. Hodge recruited Koreans who had served in the Japanese Imperial Army to staff an English language officers’ school. By 1948, a south Korean army was in place, comprising six divisions, led, to a man, by officers who served in the Japanese Imperial Army. One of the officers, Kim Sok-won, had been decorated by Hirohito for leading campaigns against Korean guerillas in Manchuria. Hodge also put together a police force, 85

percent of whose personnel were former members of the colonial police, and set them to work in smashing the government of the locally formed Korean People's Republic. After Mussolini was toppled in Italy, the Americans installed a collaborator who carried on many of Mussolini's policies. The Italians called the new, American-installed regime, fascism without Mussolini. Likewise, in the south of the Korean peninsula, the Americans had ushered in Japanese colonialism without the Japanese.

Rebellion in the south

A wide-spread rebellion soon followed, along with a significant guerilla movement. By 1948, most villages in the interior were controlled by the guerillas, who enjoyed wide-spread popular support. In October 1948, the guerillas liberated Yosu, sparking rebellions in other towns. The People's Committee was restored, the north Korean flag was raised, and allegiance was pledged to the north. A rebel newspaper called for land redistribution, the purge of Japanese collaborators from official positions, and a unified Korea. While the US military government nominally allowed membership in left-wing organizations, the police regarded rebels and leftists as traitors who were best imprisoned or shot. In 1948, the draconian National Security Law was used to round up 200,000 Koreans sympathetic to the north and communism. By 1949, 30,000 communists were in jail, and 70,000 were in concentration camps, euphemistically dubbed guidance camps. The south, in its repression of leftists, was beginning to resemble Italy of the 20's and Germany of the 30's. The resemblance would soon grow stronger.

A crackdown on the rebellion was organized by the US, whose formal control over the south Korean military had, by this time, been ceded. However, by secret agreement, command of the south Korean military remained in US hands. Even today, command of the ROK military remains with the US in the event of war.

Korea had been a severely class divided society, with a small landed elite, that collaborated with the Japanese occupation, and a

large population of poor peasants. The United States intervened on behalf of the landed elite and against the majority of the population, perpetuating the elite's privileges.

The CIA noted in a 1948 report that south Korea had become divided by conflict between a “grass-roots independence movement, which found expression in the establishment of the People’s Committees” led by “communists who based their right to rule on the resistance to the Japanese,” and a US-supported right-wing that monopolized the country’s wealth and collaborated with Imperial Japan.

Owing to the right-wing’s unpopularity, it was impossible to put forward its representatives for election. So the US looked to non-communist exiles, whose absence from the country had allowed them to escape the taint of collaboration. The fiercely anti-communist Syngman Rhee was eventually brought to power. Rhee had lived in the US 40 years, earned a Ph D from Princeton and married an American wife, a background very different from that of Kim Il-sung, north Korea’s founder, who was active from the early 30s as a prominent leader of the resistance to Japanese occupation. Cumings notes that “for nearly four decades (south Korea was) run by military officers and bureaucrats who served the same Japanese masters that Kim and his friends spent a decade fighting in the 1930s.” [5]

The maximal guerrilla leader

Kim scorned Korea’s inability to resist foreign domination. The Japanese regarded him as a highly able and dangerous guerrilla leader, going so far as to establish a special anti-Kim insurgency unit to hunt him down. The guerrillas were an independent force, inspired by a desire to reclaim the Korean peninsula for Koreans, and were controlled by neither the Soviets nor Chinese. While they often retreated across the border into the Soviet Union to evade Japanese counter-insurgency forces, they received little material help from the Soviets.

Unlike the US, which imposed a military government and repressed the People's Committees, the Soviets took a fairly hands-off approach to their occupation zone, allowing a coalition of nationalist and communist resistance fighters to run their own show. Within seven months, the first central government was formed, based on an interim People's Committee led by Kim Il-sung.

Contrary to popular mythology, Kim wasn't handpicked by the Soviets. He enjoyed considerable prestige and support as a result of his years as a guerrilla leader and his commitment to national liberation. In fact, the Soviets never completely trusted him.

Eight months into the occupation, a program of land reform was begun, with landlords dispossessed of their land without compensation, but free to migrate to the south or work plots of size equal to those allocated to peasants. After a year, Kim's Workers Party became the dominant political force. Major industries, most owned by the Japanese, were nationalized. Japanese collaborators were purged from official positions.

The DPRK was proclaimed on September 9, 1948, three weeks after the Republic of Korea was founded in the south. By the close of the year, Soviet troops were gone. By comparison, there has been an unbroken US military presence of either advisors or combat troops in the south from 1945. Today, some 30,000 US troops remain on Korean soil.

The Soviet influence on the DPRK was never strong, and was balanced by Chinese influence. It's estimated that the number of Soviet advisors in the north totaled no more than 30 in 1947. And the participation of Korean guerrillas on the side of Mao's peasant army in the Chinese civil war created important links between the north and China.

By contrast, the Republic of Korea was run by Japanese collaborators, a comprador elite, and a president hand-picked by Washington for his ardent anti-communism, whose connections to Korea were 40 years out of date. Rhee's attractions to the US were

two-fold: (1) He was free from collaborationist taint, and therefore more acceptable to the Koreans than the other right-wing candidates it favored; (2) His anti-communist credentials were impeccable. The US had simply picked up from the Japanese as overlord, employing Rhee as their strongman, in the characteristically American imperialist mode of exercising control through a local elite.

The Korean War, 1945 to 1953

Conventional histories of the Korean War mark the war's beginning as 1950. But when Hugh Deane wrote his history of the war, he titled it "The Korean War, 1945-1953." "For Americans," wrote Cumings, who Deane quoted at the beginning of his book, "the war began with a thunderclap in 1950. For Koreans, it began in 1945," the year the Americans arrived, and began to smother the nascent local government. [6]

Both sides wanted war, but for different reasons. For the north, war was simply the next step in the struggle for independence and liberation from foreign domination. War had begun in 1945 when the US landed at Inchon and began to repress the newly formed Korean People's Republic. Or, to put it another way, the war had started in 1910 with colonization by the Japanese. 1945 simply marked a change in the occupation regime. For the south, the reason for war was to drive to the north, to rollback the encroachments Kim's Workers' Party had made on the traditional elite, and to bring the whole of the peninsula under US suzerainty (the project that had stretched back to the pre-war years when the US and Japan had locked horns over the question of who would dominate the Pacific.)

Both sides had launched incursions across the artificial dividing line the Americans had drawn, and the Soviets had accepted, at the 38th parallel. But to say these represented violations of an internationally recognized frontier would be absurd. Could Koreans invade Korea?

Richard Stokes, the British Minister of Works, pointed out the absurdity in a letter to Ernest Bevan.

“In the American Civil War the Americans would never have tolerated for a single moment the setting up of an imaginary line between the forces of north and south, and there can be no doubt as to what would have been their reaction if the British had intervened in force on behalf of the south. This parallel is a close one because in America the conflict was not merely between two groups of Americans, but was between two conflicting economic systems as is the case in Korea.”

The conflicting economic systems comprised one, based in the south, which perpetuated the wealth and power of a tiny class of landlords, compradors and Japanese collaborators, and another, based in the north, which launched far-reaching reforms on behalf of the vast majority. To reduce the conflict to one between competing economic systems, however, is to miss part of the story. It was also a conflict between national liberation and neo-colonialism.

As soon as the war reached a new phase in 1950, with the push of the northern forces into the south, Kim Il-sung called for the restoration of the People's Committees. The north's forces met no popular resistance. When Seoul fell, the People's Committee was quickly re-formed, led by residents of the south. People's Committees sprang up everywhere, as they had five years earlier, and began embarking on the project of radical land reform.

The liberation of the south lasted only a short time. With the Soviet Union boycotting the United Nations in protest over the latter's refusal to give China's Security Council seat to the Red Chinese, the US managed to secure UN backing for a “police action.” By 1953, some three million Koreans were dead in fighting, and every structure over one-storey in the north was in pieces, razed by US bombs. The survivors lived in caves.

It's significant, though rarely remarked upon, that the aerial bombing of civilians has been the characteristic mode of warfare employed by imperialist powers, and since the Second World War, by the United States. The first significant use of aerial bombing was by the British Labor government in 1924, against Iraqi villages. [7] The Nazi's bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War ushered in the massive bombing campaigns of Germany, Britain and the United States in World War II. And since World War II, the United States has dropped ton after ton of explosives on civilian areas. During its "police action" in Korea, the US dropped more bombs than all the bombs dropped in Europe during World War II on both sides. And US warplanes dropped more napalm on Koreans than they did later on Vietnamese.

Fighting eventually bogged down around the 38th parallel, and a ceasefire was agreed to, but not before the US razed irrigation dams that provided water to 75 percent of the north's agricultural production, a blatant war crime. A formal end to the conflict was never declared, and the US and the north remain technically at war. Pyongyang has importuned Washington on many occasions to normalize relations, but its overtures of peace have either been rebuffed (then US secretary of state Colin Powell told north Korea in 2003 that "We won't do nonaggression pacts or treaties, things of that nature,"[8]) or have been agreed to, but ignored. Washington left a deal worked out between the two sides in 1994 to gather dust, failing to establish an embassy to the DPRK and declining to end its formal state of war with the country, despite its pledges to do so.

North Korea's economy steams ahead

Laying aside the war years and the three-year period of recovery that followed, north Korea grew at a faster pace than the south from the 1940's to the mid-60s. So impressed was Che Guevera after a visit to Pyongyang, he declared north Korea to be a model to which Cuba should aspire.

Industry in the north grew at 25 percent per annum in the 10 years following the Korean War and at 14 percent from 1965 to 1978. US

officials were greatly concerned about south Korea's economy, which lagged far behind, raising doubts about the merits of Washington's right-wing, pro-capitalist, neo-colonial project in Korea. By 1980, the north Korean capital, Pyongyang, was one of the best run, most efficient cities in Asia. Seoul, on the other hand, was a vast warren "of sweatshops to make Dante or Engels faint," complete with a teeming population of homeless.

Eager to present the south's economic system as superior to the north's, Washington allowed the ROK to pursue a vigorous program of industrial planning behind a wall of tariffs and subsidies, while, at the same time, offering south Korean industry access to the world market. To help matters along, huge dollops of aid were poured into the country. Japan delivered \$800 million in grants and loans as compensation for 35 years of colonial domination, at a time south Korea's exports were only \$200 million. And in return for dispatching 50,000 soldiers to fight on the US-side in Vietnam, Washington handed over \$1 billion in mercenary payments from 1965 to 1970, equal to eight percent of the south's GDP. South Korean engineering firms were given contracts with the US military, and Vietnam soaked up almost all of the south's steel exports (produced by an integrated steel mill built with the \$800 million aid injection from Japan.)

At the same time, the north was hobbled by miscalculations. Pyongyang angered the Soviets in the early 60s by siding with China in the Sino-Soviet split. Moscow cut off aid in retaliation. While Soviet aid had never been as generous as the aid the US and Japan had showered upon the south, it had made a difference, and its interruption (it was later restored) slowed the north's economic growth. Then, in the 70s, Pyongyang ran into debt trouble when it began buying turnkey factories from the West.

As a result of the south's industrial planning, its import-substitution model, its high-tariff barriers, and injections of aid from the US and Japan, the ROK economy was steaming ahead of the north's by the mid-80s. Still, while growth had slowed in the north, the difference in standard of living between the average south Korean and the

average north Korean was never as great as south Korea's backers would have you believe. And the north had its attractions. While consumer goods were scarce, daily necessities were available in abundance at subsidized prices. Cumings points to a CIA report that acknowledges (almost grudgingly, he says) the north's various achievements: "compassionate care for children in general and war orphans in particular; 'radical change' in the position of women; genuinely free housing, free health care, and preventive medicine; and infant mortality and life expectancy rates comparable to the most advanced countries until the recent famine."

South Korea: The strong (fascist?) state

The south had as strong a left-wing, anti-colonial, anti-imperialist movement as the north did. The only difference was that the Soviets allowed it to flourish in their occupation zone, and grow into a state form, while the US, and the puppets it kept in power in Seoul, actively worked to suppress it. In fact, the history of politics in the south through most of the post-war period can be understood as the politics of keeping the left down, by the same methods Mussolini in the 20s and Hitler in the 30s used to roll back challenges from the left in their own countries.

Syngman Rhee was forced to flee after university students and professors rose up in 1960. Following his departure, Western-style elections were held for the first time. By this point, the north's economy was surging far ahead of the south's and Kim Il-sung was calling for a confederal Korea. His proposal commanded considerable popular support in the south and leftism, after Rhee's repressions, was once again on the rise and threatening to topple the collaborationist-tainted, pro-US neocolonial regime.

A year later, Park Chung Hee organized a military coup to put leftism back in its cage, inaugurating a three-decades-long military dictatorship to keep the south safe for the economic system the US backed and the comprador class it doted upon. The elected

government beseeched the US to put down the coup, but its cries for help fell on deaf ears. Rather than intervening, Washington immediately recognized the new military regime, and showered it with aid.

Park banned all political activity, closed the parliament and adopted a truculent official anti-communism. An anti-communist law was promulgated and all socialist countries, the DPRK most especially, were declared to be enemy states. This harkened back to the old anti-Comintern Pact of Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and militarist Japan. So extreme was the regime's anti-communism that censors were ordered to blot out photos of north Korea's leader that appeared in international editions of Time. At the same time, a program of anti-communist indoctrination was begun in the schools, aimed at inoculating future generations against communist and DPRK-sympathies. The north, its leaders, and its political system were demonized. Commented the New York Times in 2005 on south Koreans working with north Koreans at a south Korean owned industrial park at Kaesong: "Some south Koreans say they may have...trouble working with the North Koreans...because South Korea's fiercely anti-Communist education taught them for decades that North Koreans were dangerous and evil.

In North Korea, by contrast, government education programs taught that while South Korea's government was an American puppet, its people were brothers and sisters." [9] In the north, there was emphasis on pro-social solidarity with Korean compatriots of the south, as well as free housing, free health care and equal rights for women; in the south, there was no health insurance, no social safety net, the longest working hours in the industrial world, miserably low wages, and indoctrination into a cult of hatred and fear of Korean compatriots of the north. In the north, the landlords and Korean lieutenants of the Japanese occupation had long been purged from positions of power; in the south, the same class of collaborators that had served the Japanese was still on top. In January 2005, Roh Moo Hyun, the ROK president, could complain of the south being unable

to rid itself “of the historical aberration that the families of those who fought for the independence of the nation were destined to face poverty for three generations, while the families of those who sided with Imperial Japan have enjoyed success after three generations.” [10]

The north’s economic troubles

The collapse of the north’s export markets with the demise of the socialist bloc, a series of natural disasters, Washington’s unremitting economic stranglehold, and the diversion of scarce resources into the military, have severely weakened the DPRK economy since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Under Gorbachev, the Soviets pursued a foreign policy that sought an accommodation with the US. Part of the accommodation involved abandoning old allies. Soviet trade with north Korea was cut in half from 1988 to 1992 and shipments of oil were severely cut back in 1991.

With Gorbachev’s wrecking-ball policies disrupting the economies of the socialist states, the socialist bloc was plunged into chaos, and eventually, oblivion. The north’s export markets dried up, depriving Pyongyang of the foreign exchange it needed to import coal and petroleum. With insufficient petroleum, farm machinery was idled and the country’s chemical industry suffered. With the chemical industry on the skids, fertilizer production suffered. Agriculture was hit hard and food scarcity became a problem, worsening when a series of floods and droughts hit in the mid-90s.

Cut-off from export markets — a problem exacerbated today by UN Security Council sanctions and maneuvering by Washington to isolate north Korea from the world’s financial system — the DPRK became a major exporter of ballistic missiles, to earn foreign exchange to pay for essential imports.

With farm machinery idled and factories running below capacity, Pyongyang struggled to meet the demands of mounting a credible defense against unremitting threats from the US. The Pentagon had introduced nuclear weapons into the south after 1953, stockpiling them for use in the event the Korean conflict heated up. Tens of thousands of US combat troops remained on the Korean peninsula and tens of thousands more were stationed in nearby Japan, readily deployable to the Korean peninsula if needed to wage war against the north. American warships patrolled the waters outside the DPRK's territorial limits, nuclear bombers practiced simulated bombing runs and spy planes menaced north Korea's airspace.

With the end of the Cold War, the threats increased. Colin Powell, then the United States' top soldier, complained that he was running out of demons. He was down to Castro and Kim Il-sung, he said. Under the weight of incessant US threats, Pyongyang was channeling a crushing 30 percent of its budget into defense.

The nuclear crisis of 1993

In 1987, the north built a 30 megawatt nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. The idea was to substitute nuclear power for coal and imported oil, relying on the north's substantial uranium deposits. The south and Japan were building nuclear reactors too, and were also seeking to reduce dependency on oil imports. For half a decade no one in Washington expressed concern — until the Soviet Union exited the stage as the chief US demon, leaving north Korea and Cuba to be promoted to Powell's rogues' gallery. Both countries were now to provide the pretext needed to keep the US military bulked up and on an unflagging war footing.

“For Americans,” observes Cumings, “the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula came in March, 1993, when Pyongyang announced it was withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But for the North Koreans, it came in February 1993, when Lee Butler, head of the US Strategic Command, announced he was



retargeting weapons meant for the old Soviet Union on North Korea. ” Pyongyang’s alarm heightened when James Woolsey, head of the CIA, declared north Korea to be Washington’s gravest concern. Matters weren’t helped when, in March, tens of thousands of US combat troops took part in war games along the north’s borders, complete with B-1 bombers, B-52s and warships carrying cruise missiles. It was then that Pyongyang decided that if it was going to be Washington’s new foreign policy bete noir, it had better pull out of the non-proliferation treaty, and think about how it was going to deter the United States from launching a nuclear strike.

Washington immediately set to work to undermine Pyongyang’s plans. Just as Israel had launched a bombing raid to destroy the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq in 1981 to prevent Saddam Hussein’s government from developing nuclear weapons, the United States would dispatch bombers or launch cruise missiles to take out the Yongbyon facility. Not only would the north be prevented from acquiring the spent fuel it needed to make a nuclear device, Pyongyang’s plans to redress its vulnerabilities in energy production by operating a civilian nuclear energy capability would be scuttled. One strike would achieve two goals: (1) north Korea would be weakened economically; (2) Pyongyang would be deprived of an effective means of self-defense.

The trouble was it was unlikely that the destruction of the north’s nuclear facilities would be met by north Korean quiescence. The north would inevitably strike back. With its extensive deployment of heavy artillery along the 38th parallel, not only would Seoul be devastated, the casualty rate among the 40,000 US combat troops stationed in the south would be intolerably high.

In the end, the crisis was averted when former US president Jimmy Carter flew to Pyongyang to work out a deal with Kim Il-sung. The deal, called the Agreed Framework, would see the north re-enter the non-proliferation treaty and shut down Yongbyon, in return for the US pledging to normalize relations, build two proliferation-safe light

water reactors, and, in the interim, provide shipments of fuel oil to tide the north's energy requirements over. While this seemed like a workable basis for a long-term peace, the agreement offered a respite only. Washington had no interest in a modus vivendi with north Korea. US officials believed it was only a matter of a few years before the accumulated effects of its economic sanctions, Pyongyang's crippling defense expenditures, and the collapse of the north's export markets, would bring the Korean experiment in anti-imperialist self-sufficiency crashing down. According to the CIA's projections, north Korea would be toast by 2002. [11] If the US could drag its feet, it wouldn't have to honor its side of the pact.

Washington's machinations were revealed in the New York Times. "The belief that the North Korean economy was collapsing helped shape White House thinking in 1994 when it promised to deliver light-water reactors to North Korea by 2003 in exchange for Pyongyang" signing back onto the non-proliferation treaty. "Senior Clinton administration officials said privately at the time that they did not expect Mr. Kim's government to be in power by the time the United States had to make good on its pledge." [12] But with the clock ticking down on the agreed completion date for the reactors, Kim's Workers' Party was, against all expectations, still in power, and there were no signs of an imminent collapse. Recognizing an implosion in the north wasn't about happen, Washington simply invented an out. Pyongyang, US officials charged, was secretly operating a nuclear weapons program in violation of the pact, and the deal would have to be called off. Delivery of fuel oil, practically the only part of the agreement the US had lived up to, was terminated, plunging north Korea into another energy crisis, and making the re-opening of the reactor at Pyongyang necessary if the north was to deal with its energy woes.

US policy remains the same

With no collapse forthcoming, Washington turned up the heat, borrowing a page from its Cold War playbook. Robert McNamara,

president of Ford Motor Company, and later Kennedy's and Johnson's secretary of defense, explained that Washington's analysis of the Soviet options in the years following WWII envisaged Moscow pursuing three goals, in order of most to least important: (1) to rebuild its war-shattered economy; (2) to rebuild its greatly weakened military, to protect itself from a stalking capitalist world; and (3) to make friends in Eastern Europe and the Third World. If Washington could force the Soviets to elevate the second goal, such that it took precedence over the first, the Soviet march to communism would be blocked. Economic development would be slowed, the Soviet people would become disillusioned, and attachment to Marxism-Leninism would be weakened in the Kremlin itself. The key was to ratchet up the military threat, forcing the Soviets into an escalating arms race that, at the very least, would create major distortions in the Soviet economy, and possibly bring the whole Soviet experiment crashing to the ground. [13]

Following 9/11, Washington declared war on an "axis of evil," Iraq, Iran, and the DPRK. North Korea had been included as part of the axis at the last minute, said Bush speechwriter, David Frum, because the Bush administration wanted Pyongyang to "feel a stronger hand." [14] To ensure the pressure was felt intensely, the Pentagon prepared a new nuclear strategy, which endorsed the targeting of non-nuclear states, and reserved the right to launch preventive attacks. North Korea was singled out. Next, John Bolton, at the time undersecretary of state for arms control, used the occasion of the US invasion of Iraq to issue a warning that north Korea (and Syria and Iran, too) should "draw the appropriate lesson." [15] The US was exercising a renewed, unabashed, military imperialism and the DPRK should either capitulate or watch out. Felix Greene pointed out that the publicly pronounced policy of the US has always been to destroy revolutionary governments. The US has sought to do this by imposing embargoes, and pressuring other countries to abide by them. It arms and finances the enemies of communist states, harasses their borders, threatens them with nuclear war, and blares anti-socialist and pro-capitalist propaganda at their populations. Having spared no effort to disrupt these countries' efforts to build

non-exploitative, prosperous and independent societies; having blocked essential goods from reaching them; and having imposed upon them the necessity of shouldering crippling defense expenditures, they present the inevitable economic difficulties as proof of mismanagement and the inherent inadequacies of revolutionary socialism. [16]

A product of its history

North Korea is the product of its history, of its colonization by the Japanese, the guerilla wars of the 30s, its attempts to unify the country and drive the post-WWII occupation regime out the south, the holocaust the United States delivered upon it under a UN flag in the early 50s, and its daily struggle with the United States for survival, now intensified in the wake of the dismantling of the Soviet Union and Washington's quest for world domination.

North Korea has fought for, indeed, has formalized, what those on the left profess to hold dear: economic justice, equality, rights for women, freedom from domination by outside powers. But it has, every inch of the way, had to face the determined resistance of the United States, and has often done so without the support, indeed, frequently in the face of the open hostility, of the greater part of the left in the advanced capitalist countries.

To many on the left, north Korea is disreputable and repugnant, its failings, both real and imagined, misunderstood to be immanent features of the country's economic and political system, without connection to surrounding events. Slurs hurled at the country seem to mesh neatly with longstanding prejudices. Pyongyang's recently being accused of drug smuggling and counterfeiting fit expectations that follow from the reprobate status handed the country by the Western media. But it's unclear whether these charges are true. They may be, but they are often considered free from context and are invested with an instant credibility their source (the US government) does not warrant.

Consider context. If you block a person from earning a living legitimately, he will have no choice but to turn to illegitimate

means to survive. US efforts to cut north Korea off from legitimate trade with the rest of the world may, indeed, have forced Pyongyang into drug smuggling and counterfeiting as a means of survival. On the other hand, it's strikingly easy to alienate a country of outside support by hurling false accusations at it. Damning charges made by the White House are guaranteed to be trumpeted instantaneously throughout the world by the mass media. Given an undeserved instant credibility, they will, in short order, become received truths. Washington could make perfectly absurd claims about Iraq possessing caches of undeclared weapons of mass destruction, despite a decades-long inspection regime, and have those claims treated as beyond doubt by commentators on both the right and left in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. That they were later acknowledged to be untrue was too little, too late. Turning north Korea into an ugly, disreputable house of horrors, which no sane person would ever think of uttering a kind word about, is firmly within the competence of Washington's masters of propaganda. Failing to recognize that any government that seriously challenges capitalism or imperialism will be subjected to an unrelenting campaign of vilification by "reputable" sources and "serious" commentators, leaves one vulnerable to manipulation.

Common interests

It's clear why north Korea's fight for sovereignty and economic rights is opposed by the ruling class-dominated foreign policy of the United States. The interests of the two clash. But there is no comparable clash of interests between north Korea and the bulk of people who live in the advanced capitalist countries. The coolness, if not outright hostility, of the greater part of the left in these countries, requires explanation. Patriotic intoxication and lack of class consciousness — the idea that we have more in common with the ruling class that dominates foreign policy in our own country than with Koreans, of the south and north, who fight for sovereignty and economic justice — is part of it. So too is the regular, law-like propensity of the leaders of the soft left to barter away principle for votes and respectability, to sacrifice

fundamental goals for immediate gains, a reason for self-defeating coolness toward the DPRK.

Ignorance is a part of the explanation too, both of the history and of the government in the north, but also of the distorting, unpleasant and dystopian effects of the policies of war, intimidation, and economic strangulation the United States has pursued to bring an end to north Korea. It's not pleasant to have too little to eat, to be conscripted into the army for an extended period of your life and to be forced to live your whole life under a nuclear sword of Damocles, but these are not conditions north Koreans have freely chosen for themselves. They have been imposed from the outside as punishment for striving for something better than what is offered by colonialism, capitalism and imperialism.

Those striving for the same elsewhere, at the very least, owe north Korea some understanding. It's clear why Che Guevara, and other revolutionaries, considered north Korea of the 60's, 70's and even early 80's, to be an inspiration. Emerging from the womb of the guerrilla wars of the 30s, the north had fought two imperialisms. It had won against the Japanese and held the US to a standstill. It was building, in the face of unremitting US hostility, a socialist society that was progressing toward communism. The country offered free health care, free education, virtually free housing, radical land reform and equal rights for women, and its industry was steaming ahead of that of the south. By contrast, the neo-colony Washington had hived off for itself below the 38th parallel was a vast warren of sweatshops reminiscent of England's industrial revolution. People lived harsh, miserable, uncertain lives, in incessant struggle with a military dictatorship backed by the US, bearing an uncomfortable resemblance to Europe's pre-war fascist regimes.

Would Che be inspired by the north Korea of today, an impoverished country that struggles with food scarcity? Probably. What have changed are the circumstances, not the reasons to be inspired. The projects north Korea has set for itself — sovereignty, equality, socialism — have become vastly more difficult, more

painful, more daunting to achieve in the face of the void left by the counter-revolution that swept the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and China's breakneck sprint down the capitalist road. Would Che have soured on north Korea, because the adversity it faces has grown tenfold? I doubt it. A revolutionary, it's said, recognizes it is better to die on your feet than live on your knees. North Korea has never lived on its knees. I think Che would have liked that.

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