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Behind the North Korean Crisis

By Dennis J. Bernstein

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U.S. propagandists and the mainstream media present foreign crises, like the current one with North Korea, as black-and-white morality plays with Official Washington behaving wisely and the adversaries as crazy. But the reality is always more complex, as Christine Hong told Dennis J. Bernstein.

In early March, the U.S. and South Korea launched an expanded set of war games on the Korean Peninsula, prompting concerns in some circles that the military exercises might touch off an escalation of tensions with North Korea.

Christine Hong, a professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz, worried that the U.S. “was lurching towards war” since “the military exercises that the U.S. and South Korea just launched are not defensive exercises” but rather appear to promote a “regime change” strategy.

Those military pressures have, indeed, led to threats of escalation from North Korea’s young leader, Kim Jong Un, and have set the Korean security situation at “hair-trigger dangerous,” Professor Hong said in the following interview with Dennis J. Bernstein.

DB: There’s a lot of disinformation and patriotic reporting coming out of the U.S. Why don’t you tell us what is going on right now. What is the situation and how dangerous is it?

CH: You put your finger on it. All we see is media reporting that singularly ascribes blame to North Korea, which is portrayed as a kind of unquestionable evil, so what the U.S. is doing in response to the supposed provocation seems eminently justified. I think we are in a crisis point. It doesn't feel dissimilar to the kind of media rhetoric that surrounded the run-up to the U.S. invasion in Iraq. During that time also, there was a steady drumbeat to war. ...

If we were to look at the facts, what do those facts tell us? I will give one example of the inverted logic that is operative, coming out of the media and U.S. administration. In a recent Pentagon press conference, [Defense Secretary] Chuck Hagel was asked whether or not the U.S. sending D2 stealth bombers from Missouri to fly and conduct a sortie over South Korea and drop what the DOD calls inert munitions in a simulated run against North Korea could be understood as provocative. He said no, they can't be understood as provocative. And it was dutifully reported as such.

What we have is a huge informational landscape in which the average person who listens to these reports can't make heads or tails of what is happening. What has happened since Kim Jong Un has come into his leadership position in North Korea is that the U.S. has had a policy of regime change.

We tend to think of regime change operations and initiatives as a signature or hallmark policy of the Bush administration. But we have seen under President Barak Obama a persistence of the U.S. policy of getting rid of those powers it finds uncooperative around the world. To clarify what I mean, after Kim Jong Il passed away [in December 2011], the U.S. and South Korea launched the biggest and longest set of war exercises they ever conducted. And for the first time it openly exercised O Plan 5029, which is a U.S. war plan that essentially simulates regime collapse in North Korea. It also envisions U.S. forces occupying North Korea.

What is routine during these war exercises, which are ongoing right now, as we speak, is they simulate nuclear strikes against North Korea. These workings are a combination of simulated computer-assisted activity as well as live fire drills. Last year, the first year of Kim Jong Un's leadership, a South Korean official was asked about the O Plan 5029 and why he was exercising this regime collapse scenario. He said the death of Kim Jong Il makes the situation ripe to exercise precisely this kind of war plan.

It's almost impossible for us in the United States to imagine Mexico and the historic foe of the U.S., Russia, conducting joint exercises that simulate an invasion of the United States and a foreign occupation of the United States. That is precisely what North Korea has been enduring for several decades.

DB: For some time now, the press has been stenographers for the State Department. There is no independent reporting about this. You don't see it in either the conservative or the liberal press. We do not understand the level and intensity of the so-called war games that happen offshore of North Korea. You made a dramatic point about imagining if North Korea wanted to conduct war games off the coast of the United States. The press plays a key role here in fanning the flames of a dangerous situation. How dangerous do you perceive the situation is now?

CH: I think that it's hair-trigger dangerous. There are many reasons for this. Even the commanding general of the U.S. armed forces in Korea, James Thurman, said that even the smallest miscalculation could lead to catastrophic consequences. Even though many blame North Korea, I think everyone realizes this is a very volatile situation that has gone entirely unreported in the U.S. media.

China has stepped up its military presence. You have a situation where China is amassing its forces along the North Korea-China border, sending military vehicles to this area, conducting controlled flights over this area. It's also conducted its own live fire drills in the West Sea. So you have a situation which is eerily reminiscent of the Korean War, in which you can envision alliances like the U.S. and South Korea, with China in some echo that slips into a relationship with North Korea.

I think it's a very dangerous situation we are in right now. The abysmal nature of the reporting is that all you hear is jingoistic. One thing we need to understand is that U.S. and North Korean relations must be premised on peace. For over six decades, the relations have been premised on war. U.S. policy toward North Korea throughout the existence of North Korea has been one of regime change.

If you understand the basis of the relations of war, you realize that war doesn't just get conducted on the level of battles or simulated battles. It gets conducted on terrain of information. So when you think about it that way, it's easy to understand why misinformation and disinformation prevails with the reporting of U.S. and North Korean relations.

DB: Secretary of State John Kerry called North Korea's actions dangerous and reckless and he continues to be part of a policy to send the most advanced stealth fighting weaponry, as if they could name enough weapons that would back down the North Koreans.

You can't document this, but what is your take on the many countries in the world who are cheering, maybe not in the foreground, that somebody finally said, "no, you can't make believe that we are an aggressor. You can't turn us into an enemy when you are having exercises with 60,000 troops. You can't plan to invade us and expect us to just stand by." I'm sure there are many countries and leaders, many revolutionaries in this world, who are taking note.

CH: Of course. That is the other inverted reality. There is the reality of those of us who are in the U.S. and locked into the limitations of our positions here, and the rest of the world. This is classic U.S. Cold War foreign policy. ... So much of what goes on in our name in U.S. foreign policy is far from pretty. It is a blood-soaked history.

If you pause to think about the lived reality of those people who are unfortunate enough to be on the receiving end of U.S. foreign policy, then you realize that George Bush had that plaintive cry, "Why do they hate us?" It was a kind of soul-searching incapacity to understand the causes of anti-Americanism around the world. But as you say, if we are going to have a sensible approach to procuring any kind of common future with the rest of the world, we are going to have to reckon with our foreign policy. And that is something that has yet to be done.

DB: I do get the feeling that the U.S. foreign policy is at least in part predicated on keeping a divide between the North and the South.

CH: Let's go back to history. You nailed it. Since the inception of something called North Korea and South Korea, the U.S. has been instrumental throughout. If you go back to 1945, you see that scarcely three days after the bombing of Nagasaki, two junior U.S. army officers, Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel retired to a small room armed with nothing more than a National Geographic map of the Korean peninsula, through which, in a 30-minute session, with absolutely no consultation of any Korean, divided the Korean peninsula. This division of the Korean peninsula at the 38th parallel into north and south, and the creation of a southern government, had no popular legitimacy.

North Korea had a very long anti-colonial history relative to the Japanese. What was created is a divided system in which one in three Korean families at that time were separated. So a kind of state is visited on the Koreans who were colonized by the Japanese and were not a war aggressor during WW II. What this eventually assured is that there would be a civil war of national unification that would be fought by both sides, the North and South.

That tension has hurt U.S. purposes. The U.S. claims that it is doing all these very provocation actions, the stealth bombers, etc, because it needs to give a show of support to its South Korean ally. But of course, this fundamentally misunderstands history and the fact that the U.S., from the beginning, has exploited the division for its own geopolitical advantage.

DB: What do we know about what is happening in the South? Is there a grassroots movement that includes unity and shows concern for this kind of U.S. hegemony in the region?

CH: Absolutely. The specter of a nuclear war and a U.S. nuclear strike against North Korea would not just impact those people who live above the 38th parallel. It would inevitably impact the rest of the peninsula, environmentally, and in every way. These are two countries that are very much tied through families, communities, etc. This is an unimaginable outcome.

When the South Korean people have been polled as to which country they think is the greater threat, the United States or North Korea, they point to the United States. In the South, as well as in the North, 60 years represents a full lifetime. ...

South Korean progressive activists have said "We had 60 years of a war system." 2013 will be the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Korean War armistice that brought the Korean War to a temporary halt, but did not end the Korean War. After six decades of a war system, they have said 2013 is the first year of Korean peace. We've had 60 years of war, and we are inaugurating a new era of peace.

Heaven forbid the U.S. continues its strategy for de-nuclearizing North Korea. North Korea believes that nuclear power is the basis of its sovereignty. Heaven forbid that the U.S., rather than finding a way of co-existing with North Korea, actually deploys nuclear power to stop nuclearization. That would be the greatest irony of all.

DB: Amazing. If you had ten minutes to advise Barak Obama about what U.S. foreign policy might be helpful, what would you say?

CH: I would say that the U.S. would secure so many gains were it seriously to consider peace. Both Donald Gregg, the head of CIA in South Korea for many years and also the former U.S. ambassador to South Korea, and Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, and someone who actually runs a humanitarian aid organization that provides food relief in North Korea, both said, after Dennis Rodman returned from North Korea, that the message he was conveying to Obama was “Call me. We don’t want war.” They both stated that however irregular the form of the message, it could not be ignored.

Most U.S. presidents get a vision in their second term. In regard to North Korea, even G.W. Bush said engagement and diplomacy was the only way forward. I would only hope that Barack Obama would come to his senses about North Korea as well.