

1950-2017: Why North Korea has every right to hate the US

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North Korea, for the first time, has successfully tested an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), a long-range rocket with nuclear capabilities. This is a major development in the country's weapons program, which includes short-range missiles capable of hitting South Korea and Japan.

Seoul, the capital of South Korea, is only 60 kilometres from the demilitarised zone separating the two countries. If attacked by North Korea, there would be tens of thousands of casualties. But while the Western media largely blame North Korea and president Kim Jong-un for increasing the likelihood of war, the North's provocations are the result – not the cause – of the current crisis.

On 7 July, several days after the ICBM test, the US, South Korea and Japan put on a display of air power meant to threaten president Kim. US and South Korean bombers dropped fake bombs near the demilitarised border between North and South Korea before a squadron of Japanese planes escorted them back to base.

Escalating that pressure, the US announced on 11 July that it had destroyed a simulated ICBM. The US launched a terminal high altitude area defence (THAAD) interceptor from Alaska. This ground missile defence system is the kind of weaponry the US has deployed in South Korea since March and agreed to by then president Park Geun-hye, and which is squarely aimed at the North. The locating of THAAD was unpopular in South Korea and with the jailing of president Park on corruption charges, the new president Moon Jae-in suspended its installation in May.

The US and its alliance with South Korea are by far the biggest threats. There are approximately 80,000 US troops permanently stationed on bases throughout South Korea and Japan. US military exercises focused on North Korea have been getting larger and more complex in recent years. Between January and April alone there were four major military exercises, and in March the US dispatched a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier while the army announced that it would permanently locate an attack drone system in South Korea.

HISTORY OF AGGRESSION

Behind the conflict between the US and North Korea lies more than a century of colonial occupation and imperialist domination. Before the 20th century, rulers of China and Japan had fought for control over the Korean peninsula. After defeating Russia in the 1905 war, Japan made Korea into its colony, which it ruthlessly exploited with help from US investors. After Japan's defeat in the Second World War, the US and the former USSR – previously wartime allies – began their Cold War rivalry, with Korea serving as an early battleground. The peninsula was “temporarily” partitioned.

Communist forces in the North backed by the USSR and China launched an offensive with the aim of reuniting Korea in 1950. The US responded with wholesale slaughter. With the authority of the UN as a cover, the US used napalm to firebomb every Northern city, reducing them to ruins. US strategy was characterised by general Douglas MacArthur, the supreme commander of US forces in the Pacific and Asia, as a “limited war”. But in this “limited war”, US planes dropped more bombs and

napalm on Korea than during the entire Pacific campaign of the Second World War. The war ended in a stalemate and resulted in more than 2 million civilian casualties.

Bruce Cumings, in his book *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*, cites the observations of Hungarian war correspondent Tibor Meray, who said that the "destruction and horrible things committed by the Americans" overshadowed whatever brutality Koreans on both sides may have committed:

"Everything which moved in North Korea was a military target, peasants in the fields were often machine-gunned by pilots who, this was my impression, amused themselves to shoot the targets which moved ... [I saw] a complete devastation between the Yalu River and the capital [Pyongyang] ... [E]very city was a collection of chimneys. I don't know why houses collapsed and chimneys did not, but I went through a city of 200,000 inhabitants and I saw thousands of chimneys and that - that was all."

New York Times correspondent George Barrett described the mass destruction of a village by US bombing:

"The inhabitants throughout the village and in the fields were caught and killed, and kept the exact postures they held when the napalm struck - a man about to get on his bicycle, 50 boys and girls playing in an orphanage, a housewife strangely unmarked, holding in her hand a page torn from a Sears-Roebuck catalogue."

The US has been threatening the North ever since and, despite the signing of the armistice in 1953, it is technically still at war with the country. Following the war, South Korea was run by the military, which was backed up by the US. In 1958, president Eisenhower installed a nuclear arsenal - in violation of the armistice that ended the war - including some that had an explosive yield more powerful than the bomb used on Hiroshima. After more than three decades of dictatorship, the South Korean military regime finally cracked in the face of a mass democracy movement fuelled by workers' struggles.

The nuclear arsenal was removed by George H.W. Bush in 1991. But the US still retains 12 military bases in South Korea - concentrated mostly in the north and close to the border. There are eight US bases spread through Japan's four main islands with an additional 13 on Japan's southernmost island of Okinawa, a US colony until 1970. Guam and Singapore also host a US military presence. The bases in Japan allow the US to project its naval power in the region and are a staging ground for military operations in the event of war with China.

The US political establishment sees North Korea as a challenge to its dominance in the region. Behind North Korea, the US sees China as the real threat to its interests. The US bullies North Korea as a way of sending a signal to Beijing.

North Korea is a heavily militarised Stalinist dictatorship that presides over a decrepit economy and a poor and starving population. According to the South Korean statistics agency, North Korea's per capita income was US\$1,179 - less than 5 percent of that of South Korea. It is one of the least developed countries in East Asia. This was not always the case. Economically, it was ahead of the South until the mid 1970s, but its increasing impoverishment intensified after the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

From the 1990s, North Korea experienced chronic shortages of food, electricity and industrial goods. A famine in the late 1990s killed between 800,000 and 2.4 million people. It reported its worst drought in decades in June 2015 and extensive flooding in September 2016, which seriously

damaged harvests. UN agencies have designated up to 60 percent of the population, 15 million people, as food insecure. It has looked to the West for help in economic reconstruction, but for decades the US has responded by imposing harsh sanctions.

In 1994, president Bill Clinton agreed to lift the embargo on trade and credit, build a civilian nuclear power program and provide shipments of fuel oil in return for North Korea halting its nuclear weapons program. Clinton broke all promises except for the delivery of fuel oil and some food – but his actions only exacerbated the economic crisis. His successor, George W Bush, rejected negotiations with North Korea and labelled it a member of the “axis of evil” targeted for regime change by the White House.

President Obama forced through further sanctions in the UN Security Council in 2013 in response to the North’s launch of a satellite – an unprecedented response to any nation’s space program. Obama also led the drive to tighten sanctions on foreign business relations with North Korean banks and trade with all countries, restricting its access to credit.

These sanctions are an extension of the permanent UN policy of blocking loans to North Korea from major multilateral institutions. The US, with Japan, has repeatedly vetoed the North’s applications to join the Asian Development Bank and US policy has denied North Korea membership in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

Obama’s UN ambassador, Susan Rice, said in 2009 that she wanted to be sure North Korea would “pay a price” for its nuclear tests. His defence secretary, Robert Gates, stated in 2010 that “all options are on the table” in dealing with North Korea. We’ve heard this phrase repeated recently by president Trump. In early April, Trump spelled out his intention during a phone call with Japan’s prime minister Shinzo Abe. “The United States will continue to strengthen its ability to deter and defend itself and its allies with the full range of its military capabilities”, he said.

This is the context, then, for the ramping up of US military pressure on North Korea. The spread of nuclear weapons is not desirable. But the US response to North Korea’s missile tests only increases the likelihood of war. US administrations have continued to squeeze North Korea economically and ratchet up the military threats.

The first step to reducing the risk of an appalling conflict costing potentially millions of lives would be for the US to remove its military and bases from South Korea and Japan and the weapons it has been pointing at North Korea for more than 60 years.

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P.S.

* Red Flag. 20 JULY 2017:
<https://redflag.org.au/node/5921>