

Korean Crisis Spotlights Trump Agenda - On the present and the future of the Trump regime

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The threat by President Trump to unleash nuclear war against North Korea was not a Trumpian “excess.” That has been made clear by his Secretary of Defense, retired Marine General James Mattis, who backed Trump. What the administration is demanding is that North Korea freeze its nuclear program, including the testing of missiles.

When Secretary of State Rex Tillerson emphasizes diplomacy, that is in no way a contradiction to Mattis’ and Trump’s position. What Tillerson seeks by “diplomacy” is the same demand that the North freeze its program, in return for nothing from the U.S.

Pyongyang cannot agree to this demand. It knows that if it agreed to such a freeze that would just be a first step toward its giving up its nuclear program entirely. If that happened, Trump would invade, and end the Korean War by overthrowing the North. That would directly threaten China.

The situation has become very dangerous.

The crisis bolsters Trump’s claim that the U.S. needs an authoritarian regime headed by him.

To understand better how this state of affairs has come about, it is useful to review Trump’s trajectory.

Donald Trump has been president for over six months. In this period, in addition to calling him out over his lies, abrupt changes of position, racist and sexist comments, etc., the establishment media have complained that he has not acted “presidential” by refusing to accommodate the political establishments of not only the Democrats but also increasingly the Republicans.

An op-ed in the *New York Times* said, “In Donald Trump’s White House, Reince Priebus and Sean Spicer were more than chief of staff and press secretary. They were the president’s connection to the Washington establishment: the donors, flacks and apparatchiks of both parties whose influence over politics and the economy many Trump supporters wish to upend.

“By firing Mr. Priebus and Mr. Spicer ... President Trump has sent a message: after six months of trying to behave like a conventional Republican president, he’s done. His opponents now include not only the Democrats, but the elites of both parties.”

Early in his term Trump fired FBI Director Comey, a Republican who while in the Bush administration backed the use of torture including waterboarding and other reactionary measures Trump backs. He wasn’t fired for those policies but for his disloyalty to Trump.

During the 2016 election campaign Comey took the unusual step for an FBI director of intervening in the election by opening public investigations into the two mainstream candidates, Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump. Apparently he wanted to be in the position of holding something over whichever

candidate won, like the notorious witchhunter and former FBI director J. Edgar Hoover did.

One week before the election Comey publically said the investigation of Clinton was still open. After the election, Clinton charged she lost because of the Russians and Comey. When Trump was sworn in, Comey dropped his threats against Clinton, and continued his investigation into Trump's alleged collusion with Russia to fix the U.S. election. Suddenly Clinton and the Democrats were singing Comey's praises. Trump, however, told him "you're fired" (his favorite phrase from his TV program) for not quashing the investigation.

Trump recently publically humiliated his Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, for recusing himself from the investigation – clear disloyalty. As of now Sessions is hanging on, doing his best to kowtow and grovel before Trump by vigorously carrying out his policies from immigration to promising to put "leakers" of Trumps secret shenanigans in jail.

When the Republicans were unable to overturn Obamacare because of their internal battles, Trump blamed Congress, where the Republicans hold majorities. He also keeps demanding that the Republicans somehow return to the job of overturning Obamacare (which he knows is dead in the water) so he can keep humiliating them for their failure to do so.

Trump's approval ratings are low compared to other presidents at this stage in their term, holding in the 35-40 percent range. But the approval ratings for Clinton are even lower, and for Congress much lower than that, in the single digit range. Blaming the do-nothing dysfunctional Congress does not reduce his popularity.

In spite of his approval ratings, Trump is going full steam ahead. While courts have blocked his sweeping Muslim bans, his Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency is using "extreme vetting" to accomplish most of what he wants. ICE has been unleashed to engage in brutal deportations of Latinos, building upon the quieter but massive policies of Obama — "the deporter in chief" until Trump came along.

He has used executive orders (a tool to strengthen the executive at the expense of the legislative that has been steadily built up for many decades) to give the go-ahead to the fossil fuel energy giants, while his Environmental Protection Agency is being dismantled under the leadership of a climate change denier.

Voter suppression in Republican controlled states in recent years have been given a boost by Trump's efforts to "investigate" how "three million undocumented" workers managed to vote last November, which "explains" his loss of the popular vote.

Public education from kindergarten through high school has been under attack by both Democrats and Republicans, with progressive cuts to funds, attacks on the teachers' unions, etc. Trump's new education department head, billionaire Betsy DeVos, is carrying the attack further. She is well known for attempts to divert funds from public schools to private (especially religious) ones.

Trump's refusal to "act presidential" and stop his incessant tweets attacking the media, the establishment and anyone in his administration who is not 100 percent personally loyal to him, etc. leaves many media talkingheads and progressives puzzled. Some have expressed hope that Trump's replacement for Priebus, General John Kelly, as his White House chief of staff will tame Trump.

General Kelly was Trump's head of the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees ICE and the unleashing of the agency against not only the undocumented but the Latino community as a whole. This fact should give progressives some pause, but hope springs eternal in the breast of naïve believers in progressive capitalism.

While Kelly will likely bring some military discipline to the White House staff of self-interested advisors jockeying for favor, the idea that he will discipline Trump is laughable. Any move on his part that smacks of a lack of 100 percent loyalty to the Commander in Chief will bring down "you're fired!" on his head.

What Trump is doing is not crazy or stupid on his part, but coldly calculated. Every tweet, every act, is being used to consolidate his hard base.

Trump, as well as Sanders, knew that 80 percent of the population whose real incomes have stagnated or fallen since 2005 (according to the *Financial Times*), and whose overall situation has gotten even much worse since the financial crash, Great Recession and its aftermath, were fed up with the establishment.

Sanders proposed pro-worker reforms, while Trump took the opposite path. The Democratic Party establishment smashed Sanders, while Trump smashed the Republican establishment, a task he is again turning to with relish.

Trump's answer was to appeal to white racism, and to blame immigrants, foreigners, Blacks and other non-whites as the cause of the suffering of those whites in the lower 80 percent. He won the hardest racists of all classes into becoming his undying loyalists. This group is smaller than the majority of whites who voted for him, but is significant, and numbers in the tens of millions. These people were seen at his rallies, cheering on the manhandling of Black protesters among others.

This group applauds, is not appalled, by his attacks on the media and the rest of the establishment.

He demagogically appealed to white workers and small businesspeople with his "America First" economic nationalism, which dovetailed with his white nationalism.

In spite of, or rather because of, his belligerence against the establishment, his appeal remains strong among those who voted for him. While all polls should be taken with a large grain of salt, around 90 percent who voted for Trump say they would do so again. His support among Republicans in general remains strong.

The Congressional establishment did score one victory over Trump. That was the bipartisan lopsided vote to impose new sanctions on Russia, supposedly for its "meddling" in the U.S. elections. Trump wants to better relations with Russia, and didn't like this bill. He was especially incensed by a clause which says he can't change these or other sanctions, which he says is an unconstitutional invasion of presidential powers.

Germany was vehemently opposed to part of the proposed sanctions which would have stopped its project with Russia of piping natural gas to Germany. The leadership body of the European Union (controlled by Germany) even threatened retaliation if those sanctions were passed. The bill was rewritten to remove any sanctions against American firms doing business with Russia on energy, and this perhaps covered German firms as well, or perhaps Trump gave them assurances behind the scenes. It is not clear how or even if Trump will carry out these sanctions.

Following Trump's signing of the bill, the Russian government needled him, charging that he ignominiously capitulated to "the establishment" and is weak.

In his election campaign, besides his white and economic nationalist proposals, Trump presented himself as the strongman who could cut through the disarray in the political establishment. Both parties are riven with deep internal contradictions and neither has come up with realistic proposals of how to deal with the suffering of the 80 percent. Trump, with his demagogic "solutions," promised

he would do so – just trust him.

He would take personal charge of the government and lead the way out of the “swamp” the establishment has gotten the country into. In other words, a strongman authoritarian presidency, with the trappings of bourgeois democracy and a tamed and supportive Congress.

It will take him some struggle to reach this goal. All the investigations into his Russian connections and his finances are the establishment’s best current hope of stopping him.

By concentrating now on shoring up his base, Trump is preparing his troops for the battles down the line. He is still in the first year of his term, the beginning of his authoritarian drive.

Part of shoring up his base is his courting of right wing groups outside of Congress. He schmoozes with Sean Hannity of Fox News and leaders of groups like the Heritage Fund and the Family Research Council, whose head, Tony Perkins, was behind Trump’s recent ruling that transgender people would not be allowed into the armed forces anymore.

Trump and members of his administration have been using his first six months to solidify the support of these and other groups in the conservative movement, “including small-government tea Party followers; abortion opponents; evangelical Christians and other culturally traditional voters,” in the words of an article in the *New York Times* about his “warm embrace of the right.”

Trump has taken a new step in his anti-immigrant drive by his new policy of restricting legal immigration to those applicants who already speak fluent English, have college degrees, already have top-paying job offers in the U.S. etc.

When Stephen Miller, one of Trump’s policy advisors, gave a press briefing defending the new restrictions, a reporter raised that they were unfair. Miller ripped into the reporter, charging he had revealed his “cosmopolitan bias.” “Cosmopolitan” has long been known as a dog-whistle for “Jew,” and is so used by the Alt-right, where anti-Semitism runs deep.

Another group he is cultivating is the police. At a recent police ceremony, he urged the cops to rough up suspects and not to care too much about their rights, to the cheers of the assembled. Police chiefs later disassociated from his remarks, but not the leaders of the police “benevolent” societies.

He is appealing to officers of the Army, Navy, Marines and such by appointing generals and admirals to high posts in his administration. He has also given the generals full rein in deciding military policy in Washington’s wars in the Middle East and elsewhere. The support of at least a major section of the armed forces would be necessary for Trump to make a real move to establish his vision of an authoritarian presidency.

Most leaders of socialist groups in the U.S. see no danger that Trump could establish an authoritarian regime. In contrast to them, the activist and writer Naomi Klein, while certainly not a Marxist, is sensitive to this possibility. On a recent Democracy Now! interview, she raised the concern that in the event of a major shock, like a terrorist attack on the scale seen in Britain and France this past year, or even a major economic downturn, or some other comparable event, Trump could declare a state of emergency that could usher in an authoritarian regime.

An intensification of the crisis in Korea could also be such an event. There is nothing like a war threat to rally the population around the flag and the leader.

Another aspect of the present and future situation of the Trump regime is the attitude of the decisive (wealthiest) sections of the capitalist ruling class. It is important to keep in mind that when talking

about the “establishment” we are not talking about the heights of the capitalist class.

Trump, himself a billionaire, is not part of those heights, which are dominated by established large ruling class families, with their wealth spread across family members, in foundations, and hidden in other ways. But he is not opposed to them and does not include them in the “establishment.”

On the contrary, he looks to them for support, and indicates this in his appointment of multi-millionaires and billionaires to his administration, as well as generals.

Right now, the big capitalists like what they see in this administration, and that is reflected in the galloping stock market (leaving aside more fundamental economic factors). They like Trump’s deregulation and other pro-business policies. They would like to see more of his promises put in place, like a big infrastructure program and tax reform in their favor. They know the stumbling block is in fact the political establishment in Washington which can’t agree on whether or how to do all this.

If the big capitalists conclude that Trump is an obstacle in the future, they will clip his wings. Or, if they grow impatient with the disarray in Washington, they could throw their support to a Trump authoritarian presidency, or that of another figure, to establish stability.

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