

Giving Peace a Chance in Korea

Vice President Mike Pence has declared that “all options are on the table” regarding North Korea and “the era of strategic patience is over.” But peaceful negotiations may be the only option that makes sense, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

As the Trump administration rattles the sabers over North Korea and its nuclear-weapons program, peace advocates are countering with warnings about the grave dangers if war breaks out on the peninsula and expressions of hope if fresh thinking about peace and reconciliation can prevail.

“If we are ever going to build the critical mass of an anti-war movement with a U.S. social movement,” said Christine Ahn, the former executive director of the Korea Policy Institute and currently the International Coordinator of Women Cross DMZ, “we have to fight together now, to put an end to this saber rattling, and potential first strike that the U.S. may conduct on North Korea.”

I spoke recently with Ahn about the critical nature of the situation on the Korean Peninsula. In 2015, her group organized a historic crossing of the demilitarized zone by 30 women from 15 countries, including many countries that had participated and fought in the Korean War. It included Gloria Steinem, two Nobel Peace laureates, renowned peace activists from Guam, from the Philippines and from Okinawa, Japan.

Dennis Bernstein: In a moment I want to talk to you about one of the struggles that has to do with this, the deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system, known as THAAD. But first, I’d like you to speak to what you see as the multiple dangers facing Koreans. Do you think we are at a critical moment? Give us your response there please.

Christine Ahn: Well, Dennis, I do think that we are in a critical moment. First and foremost, my concern is that the only communication that we have with North Korea is one of military posturing and aggression. And we see that on both sides. North Korea is conducting missile tests, nuclear tests. They’re building up their arsenal and their capacity to launch the ICBM with a nuclear warhead that could hit the United States.

I don’t think they’re wanting to do it, to be an aggressor or to truly kill Americans. They’re doing it out of self-defense. And as you mentioned earlier, when President Trump was having dinner with President Xi Jinping from China, and over chocolate cake he explains that the U.S. has bombed, sent 59 Tomahawk

cruise missiles to Syria that he was sending a message to China. That if they don't put pressure on North Korea that the U.S. will unilaterally act.

And they have said that all options are on the table, which includes military action which is absolutely insane, to even use that kind of saber rattling. I mean, even the Obama administration, which had a terrible policy, the so-called "strategic patience," which is ultimately more sanctions, more isolation, more aggressive military exercises, in the hopes of regime collapse in North Korea. Well, that didn't happen. And what you see, actually, is images from North Korea of economic development of their [country]... in fact North Korea's GDP [Gross Domestic Product], it grew by more than the EU [European Union]. I mean, it doesn't say a whole lot, but it just shows that despite the international sanctions, and the kind of pressure and isolation that they experience, that they are doing what they can to survive. And they are.

And I just think that, my hope in this dangerous hour, and why I think it's so dangerous, is that there is a political vacuum in South Korea. As your listeners may or may not know, for weeks, starting in last October, the South Korean people took to the streets, to hold candlelight vigils on a weekly basis. They were holding these candlelight vigils to bring light to a deeply corrupt government ... calling for a different kind of government that respected the rights of labor, of working people, of farmers. [...] For the tragic ... deaths of hundreds of high school students that were killed in a ferry accident, while the president [Park Geun-hye] was, who knows what, like, getting her hair done or something. And the massive corruption of the Tragos, the transnational corporations, the Samsungs, the Hyundais. How it has just completely corrupted the political system. And so, the people took to the streets. And they led ultimately to her impeachment. And so, she's now, actually, in prison because of the extraordinary work of people fighting for democracy.

But what we have right now is a very dangerous political vacuum. And so there is going to be a snap election on May 9th. And by all indications the front runner is a guy named Moon Jae-in. He's a former human rights lawyer. He was the chief of staff under Roh Moo-hyun, who was the last progressive president. And he has since been going to visit Pyongyang before going to Washington, D.C.

DB: So he decided to go to North Korea. So he is inclined to be with that people's' movement that you were just describing?

CA: Absolutely. He says that engagement and diplomacy with North Korea is the best guarantee for our security, in South Korea. That is sensibility. And I think that the people in South Korea... you know, Tim Shorrock, a really fabulous journalist, who writes often for the Nation, who is now in South Korea. He wrote a great piece and he said it's like the complete contrast in what we're seeing

in South Korea as people... I mean here in the United States, so many of us, especially the Korean-American community, is completely on edge. We're thinking, "Oh, my God, is the Trump administration going to want to first strike against North Korea?" Because they are so unpredictable, and we have no sense of what their policy is. They said we've done this review, and it ranges from military aggression or coercive diplomacy, to engagement, so it's so schizophrenic and we have no idea. And what we have seen is them sending cruise missiles to Syria and to Afghanistan. And so ... what can we expect?

DB: And it's not only what can you expect, in fact, it was stated today by the Vice President that that was actually not a coincidence, that was a message. That was... those were double messages. The big bomb, the attack on Syria.. that Trump will go after the North.

Now, I need to ask you to, just for a moment, I've heard generals bandying this about on the corporate networks that, really, if the U.S. forces decided they could take out Korea without nuclear weapons, the initial thing would take, you know, maybe it would take several months, to do it. But it could be done. What would happen? What might that look like?

CA: Oh, it's just sheer fantasy. It's just sheer fantasy. And successive administrations from the Bush administration, the Clinton administration before it, and the Obama administration, trust me, they have all thought this through. And, on one hand, you have intelligence think tanks that say that, actually, U.S. intelligence is murky at best. We have no idea where all the nuclear sites are. It's all underground. Our intelligence is very murky.

So, and even based on the intelligence we have in the 1990s, when the Clinton administration almost did conduct a first strike on Pyongyang, the nuclear reactors in North Korea. The Defense Department came back and said "You know what?"... and this was even before North Korea possessed nuclear weapons. They said, "If there was a first strike by the United States, we would have a counter reaction not with nuclear weapons but North Korea's conventional weaponry, that would lead ultimately within the first 24 hours to up to a million people killed."

And so, unfortunately, the military option is not really an option for the United States, unless it's some reckless, mad, insane person that wants to kill innocent civilians. And Seoul, South Korea is just like 40 miles away from the DMZ [demilitarized zone]. And so, for a U.S. president to do something so reckless like that would spell the death, basically, of the U.S./South Korea alliance. And I think the U.S. needs to be very careful in this moment, especially when you have a citizenry, in South Korea, that wants more justice. They want greater equality. They want more transparency. They want good

government. And they want a different kind of policy, inter-Korea policy. They don't want to maintain the hard-line, isolationist stance. [...] By all means, I'm not trying to romanticize how South Koreans are viewing North Koreans. They see a tremendous cost in the process of reunification, but they don't want to ultimately lead to their own mutual destruction.

And so, that's my hope, is that on May 9th that we have a progressive president in South Korea, and they can talk some sense into Washington, D.C. And, who knows where the wind will turn, but I do have a sense that we can't continue the way that we have. We can't do it because it's too costly for the U.S. to maintain the massive 800 military bases around the world. You know this economy cannot withstand the amount of pressures, and especially in the Trump budget, where he's advocating for a \$54 billion increase in the already \$600 billion bloated military budget. You know, this is the moment when progressives and... when all of us, women, veterans, the Black Lives Matter, the immigrants rights movement, we have to come together, and especially put our focus... I mean the climate march is happening this weekend. The EPA is going to be cut, and so we have to have a true discussion, in this country, about our security, our human security.

DB: Let me just jump in here. One of the terribly interesting things here is that the United States would not have to declare war because they never ended the Korean War. And that's, of course, something that you all have been working on for a long time. But, I would like you to say a little bit more about the hope. You're talking about a candidate on the ground who will actually represent the people after many years of terrible repression and in a right-wing government that was moving from authoritarian to worse. So, it must be an extraordinarily mixed bag on the one hand, you've got this movement, this grassroots movement, that has been fighting for so long, on the verge of electing somebody that might actually represent them. And it's the brink of their version of World War III.

CA: Ummm, I know, isn't it absolutely nuts? Yes, I mean it is the light at the end of the tunnel, I feel. And I think that you bring up the really good point. People say "Oh, the 'mother of all bombs' that the U.S. unleashed on Afghanistan"...

DB: And I meant to say that you mentioned that all those other presidents you mentioned didn't go to war against the North. Well, all those other presidents also didn't drop "the mother of all bombs" on Afghanistan but this guy came in, and in 100 days he's dropping it.

CA: I know. I know. Well, and that's the point that I make, which is, North Korea doesn't need to see what the brutality that the U.S. military can unleash.

They already have their own experience, and their own history. There's a photo that a Getty Images photographer took in 1951, and I think K.J. Noh sent this really heartbreaking passage of a quote from General MacArthur, who is not a kind-hearted person, who's a brutal military man. Even he said that he almost vomited by seeing the carnage, and the massive destruction that the U.S. military bombing campaign unleashed on both North and South Korea. I mean, 80% of North Korean cities were bombed to bits...

DB: ...80% of the North Korean cities were bombed in this fake Korean, not a fake war, but the way it was conceived...

CA: ...as a police action is how I think Truman sold it to the Congress! And got, you know, this like rogue United Nations command that brought in 20 countries to fight under... it's the first coalition of the willing. And so, the Korean War, I think bringing it back home, and to the cost to our security here at home, is that it was the Korean War that inaugurated the massive military spending. It wasn't Vietnam. It was the Korean War. And I think it would have huge significance if we could formerly end the Korean War.

And so, that's the point that I've been trying to teach, is in 1953, three years into the war, after 4 million people were killed, including up to 40,000 U.S. soldiers, we signed an armistice agreement. It's not something "over there." This is our problem, here, because it was our U.S. military commander, [Gen. William] Harrison, that signed the armistice, the cease fire, with the North Korean commander. And they promised on July 27, 1953, that within 90 days, this is article 4, paragraph 6, of this armistice agreement, where they said "We will return to negotiate a peace settlement."

That was a promise, and it's been 64 years now. And it's not just North Korea that is calling for a peace treaty. I was just on a webinar with one of the leading South Korean women peace activist, Ahn Shin Shanya, she said "We see the massive militarization of South Korea, and the ongoing... the longest foreign military occupation by the United States in Korea's entire history, as a result of this armistice, the cease fire, that has maintained the Korean peninsula in a state of war."

So, I think it's crucial that Americans understand that we... it's not about them, it's about us. It's about our responsibility, because we have 30,000 U.S. troops in South Korea. It is our aggressive posturing, our military exercises, where we simulate an invasion of North Korea, the decapitation of its leader. And it's odd that we're the signatories of that cease fire, with a commitment to signing a peace treaty.

If we could just get that straight I think we could set a lot in motion

[because] ultimately there is no other option. The only option that the Trump administration, and the United States, has with North Korea is diplomatic. Which is a resolution of this conflict. We can freeze North Korea's nuclear program, we can sign a non-aggression pact that begins a mutual peace building process. It is possible. We did it with Iran, we did it with Cuba.

It's going to take political will, and I think for the listeners in the [San Francisco] Bay Area, [U.S. Representative] Barbara Lee, she must be a champion. And I think one thing that I found so significant about Barbara Lee, not only was she one of the only lone and sane voices in trying to stop the war in Iraq, there was a radio interview that she did with somebody, where she said that she actually had a long conversation with her father who was a veteran of the Korean War, before she made that courageous vote in Congress, the vote against the U.S. invasion of Iraq. And he explained to her, "that war was a brutal war, we cannot afford to go to war."

And so, I think Barbara Lee, in her own personal connection to Korea, by way of her father, who is a veteran of the war... We have to call on Barbara Lee, she should try to push Trump about this War Powers Act. She's been a big champion on challenging the U.S. military aggression in Syria, and Afghanistan. We have to call on her to do the same for North Korea.

I really hope that listeners in the Bay Area will pick up the phone and call Barbara Lee's office, and say, "We need you to be a champion. We're here on the West Coast and if North Korea conducts a strike as a counter-strike to our first strike, you know, there is a possibility it could hit the coast of California." We don't need to go there.

DB: Yeah, and speaking of that, we must mention in the final minutes that we have that standing against this hope that you're outlining, is the fact that we've got this deployment, this speeded up deployment, of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system, THAAD. And this is a forward fighting tool that makes everybody in the freaking region nervous. And China is on the edge on this one, as well.

CA: Absolutely. Well, first of all, it's a missile defense system that everybody is questioning its feasibility. And so, this is a Lockheed Martin product that I think costs \$15 million to produce. And that's our tax dollars, yours and mine and everybody else listening. And so many experts, from South Korea to MIT here in the United States, have said, "This will do nothing to deter low-range North Korean missiles." And that's what South Korea would need some kind of defense from. And so it's just been sold, and forced down the throat of the South Korean people. And [former South Korean president] Park Geun-hye, at the time last summer, she just agreed to it without any public debate, without any

presidential approval. And so the leading contenders in the South Korean presidential race have said “Let’s wait for the next president, to try to determine whether this is beneficial for the people of South Korea.”

But instead, in this political vacuum, the U.S... when General Mattis went to South Korea, that was like top on his list, “We’re deploying THAAD.” And so, the South Korean people, unfortunately, have been caught in this growing stand-off between the U.S. and China.

And so, China has basically punished South Korea through a number of economic boycotts. They have not allowed K-pop stars to go to concerts. And they have really boycotted the Lotte department stores, as has the South Korean groups that are living in this area, this Seongju, which is a farm land, which is where they are going to put this missile defense site, next to schools where children will be exposed to all kinds of radiation, and other damaging impacts, of having this high radar.

And it’s just putting Korea, you know, we interviewed a bunch of South Korean women who have been organizing against this THAAD missile defense system. And they say “They are taking us so far away from building trust, and rapport, and reconciliation with North Korea. We don’t want this.” And, unfortunately, who’s benefitting? And it’s the military contractors. And so, we have to push back. We want a genuine alliance, I think, for the people. We can do that. It doesn’t have to be a military alliance that just sends its military contractors. We have to think a different way. And, unfortunately, we have our big fight here against the Trump administration, but hopefully the silver lining is there is a progressive president in South Korea that’s going to have to shift.

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