

An Escalating North Korea Crisis

With President Trump demeaning North Korea's leader as "Rocket Man" and threatening to "totally destroy" North Korea, tensions over Kim Jong Un's nuclear missile program grow worse, as Dennis J Bernstein reports.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The United Nations Security Council voted last week to unanimously back the U.S.-drafted sanctions resolution banning exports of coal, lead and seafood to North Korea, in response to its recent testing of a hydrogen bomb.

I spoke about the volatile situation with Flashpoints Special Correspondent and Korea expert Kay Jay Noh – recently back from the region – and with Christine Ahn, a policy analyst with expertise in Korea, globalization, militarism, women's rights and philanthropy. She is co-founder of the Korea Policy Institute (KPI), National Campaign to End the Korean War, and Women Cross DMZ.

Dennis Bernstein: Let's begin with you Christine Ahn. Your response to the sanctions? They could have been a lot tougher?

Christine Ahn: Nikki Haley had announced after North Korea's hydrogen bomb test that they were going to further tighten the noose on North Korea and propose some very ambitious sanctions. The good news is that, probably because of pushback from China and Russia, these sanctions have been significantly watered down.

However, as we know from sanctions on Cuba and Iraq, these sanctions tend to harm everyday people. Diplomacy seems to have become equated with more sanctions, which we know further aggravate North Korea and incite them to rapidly pursue their missile and nuclear capability.

Kay Jay Noh: It is useful to look back at the last weeks and months leading up to this situation. On July 14 and July 28, North Korea tested a new ICBM. The US response was to say that North Korea would be met with "fire and fury, the likes of which had never been seen before on the earth." Hours later the North Koreans responded with a very careful, detailed threat of their own, saying that they would envelope Guam with fire.

On August 21, the joint US/South Korean war games took place, but they were scaled down a little bit. So, instead of the usual 25,000 US troops, there were 17,500 US troops. That is not an insignificant de-escalation. In response to the war games, the North Koreans fired three short-range missiles.

A little while later the US conducted new war games with Japan; And North Korea, to express its displeasure, fired an ICBM, which flew over Hokkaido and landed in the ocean. The US retaliated by bringing in B-1 bombers that were doing decapitation runs. This is exactly the kind of strategic asset deployment that the North Koreans consider to be a red line.

In response to that, they detonated what they claim is an H-bomb on September 3. Later reports said that it was 6.3 on the Richter scale, somewhere between 100 and 150 kilotons, making it ten to fifteen times the power of the Hiroshima bomb. They claimed that this was the perfect test, that it was adjustable and that they were also capable of launching an electromagnetic pulse.

So, if we look back, we can see a tit-for-tat process. In game theory, this is the only procedure that has been shown to result in de-escalation between two parties who are in conflict and who do not have accurate information.

DB: So what do we do now, knowing that North Korea is clearly a nuclear power to be reckoned with?

CA: North Korea is the most sanctioned country in the world. The largest war games in the world are conducted to simulate an invasion of their country and a decapitation of its government. Obama's "strategic patience" policy included cyber warfare, these massive military games, and more sanctions on North Korea's financial system. All of this helps explain why North Korea feels that they must pursue the survival of their regime and their country.

Yes, it is a new day now that North Korea does possess nuclear weapons. With every missile test they conduct, they are improving their capability of striking the US mainland. But it is not North Korea's plan to conduct a preemptive strike against the United States. At their Workers' Party Congress last year, they stated specifically that they would not conduct a first strike, that their program has always been for self defense.

DB: It is a bargaining chip toward being taken seriously. They saw what happened to Iraq, to Libya.

CA: Clearly, we must seek the abolition of nuclear weapons. We are in a very dangerous game of political reality, when all five permanent members of the Security Council are unwilling to sign the Nuclear Ban Treaty.

I would like to point out that, even though North Korea has said on numerous occasions that they are unwilling to give up their nuclear weapons program, they have said that they would consider abandoning their nuclear weapons program if the hostility from the US were to no longer exist. We have to dialogue with the North Koreans.

The first step might be “the freeze for the freeze,” currently backed by China and Russia, which calls for the US and South Korea halting their war games in exchange for North Korea freezing its nuclear and missile tests. The next step would be the gradual lifting of the sanctions against North Korea. Unless we begin to talk, there is going to be no move toward eventual denuclearization.

But we have to realize that that process of denuclearization may have to be tied to the reunification of Korea. The division of Korea has created an untenable situation where both sides are continuing the massive militarization. Reunification could resolve the nuclear crisis that is facing Northeast Asia.

KJN: We have to remember that South Korea was created by the United States as an artificial proxy state after World War II to prevent the creation of a unified Korea.

During the Korean War, the North faced nuclear annihilation at least seven times. From 1958 until 1991 there were tactical nuclear weapons on the peninsula. All 950 of them were removed in 1991, but then ICBMs, which were pointed at the Soviet Union, were redirected at North Korea.

Colin Powell threatened to turn North Korea into a charcoal briquette; Recently Secretary of Defense Mattis spoke of “annihilation”; John McCain has spoken of the “extinction” of North Korea. It makes sense that North Korea would be seeking a deterrent.

Fundamentally, the only way out of this is through negotiations and diplomacy. “Freeze for freeze” is a good place to start but we have to see whether there is political will on the part of the United States.

CA: That is going to require a peace movement in the United States which doesn't just buy the corporate media narrative that North Korea is out to destroy the United States. Being the most sanctioned country in the world and being the enemy of the most powerful country in the world, the North Koreans have figured out how to get around sanctions.

We have seen their GDP improve. In fact, by many indicators, North Korea is somewhere in the middle of Asian countries. We have to stop believing that regime change is possible.

KJN: North Korea's GDP grew four percent last year, despite sanctions. This is twice that of South Korea. North Korea's GDP is 205th in the world, which means it is extremely poor. But you can say that it is the poorest advanced nation in the world. The people of North Korea live 15 years longer than their GDP counterparts. The life expectancy in South Berkeley is 68, while the life expectancy in North Korea is 71.

CA: And they have a hundred percent literacy rate.

KJN: The first set of UN sanctions were on coal, iron ore and seafood. The second set of sanctions involves textiles, a cap on oil imports, and the withholding of work permits for the 93,000 North Korean guest workers around the world.

CA: I am hopeful that the US peace movement will launch a campaign to get our members of Congress to act to restrain the Trump administration from doing anything reckless.

I think we need to challenge the US travel ban to North Korea. I know that there is some discussion about organizing a peace delegation of Americans to engage in talks. When our government is not willing to talk to the North Korean government, the people must take the initiative.

As Kay Jay said, we need the peace movement to create the political will for some kind of peace agreement with North Korea that will avert a nuclear disaster.

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