

# THE REAL REASON WASHINGTON IS WORRIED ABOUT NORTH KOREA'S ICBM TEST

**\_With its ICBM test signaling its capability to retaliate against US aggression, North Korea has made clear that the United States' seven decades long effort to topple its government may never come to fruition—a blow against US despotism, and an advance for peace, and for democracy on a world scale\_**

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***By Stephen Gowans***

A number of countries have recently tested ballistic or cruise missiles and a handful, not least Russia and China, possess nuclear-tipped ICBMs capable of striking the United States. And yet the missiles and nuclear weapons program of only one of these countries, North Korea, arouses consternation in Washington.

What makes tiny North Korea, within its miniscule defense budget, and rudimentary nuclear arsenal and missile capability, a threat so menacing that “worry has spread in Washington and the United Nations”? [\[1\]](#)

[\[2\]](#)“The truth,” it has been said, “is often buried on the front page of *The New York Times*.” [\[2\]](#) This is no less true of the real reason Washington frets about North Korea’s missile tests.

In a July 4, 2017 article titled “What can Trump do about North Korea? His options are few and risky,” reporter David E. Sanger, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the unofficial think-tank of the US State Department, reveals why Washington is alarmed by North Korea’s recent test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile.

“The fear,” writes Sanger, “is not that [North Korean leader] Mr. Kim would launch a pre-emptive attack on the West Coast; that would be suicidal, and if the North’s 33-year-old leader has demonstrated anything in his five years in office, he is all about survival.”

Washington’s alarm, according to Sanger, is that “Mr. Kim [now] has the ability to strike back.” In other words, Pyongyang has acquired the means of an effective self-defense. That, writes Sanger, makes North Korea “a dangerous regime.”

Indeed, to a world hegemon like the United States, any renitent foreign government that refuses to place itself in the role of vassal becomes “a dangerous regime,” which must be eliminated. Accordingly, allowing pro-independence North Korea to develop the means to more effectively defend itself against US imperialist ambitions has no place in Washington’s playbook. The United States has spent the past 70 years trying to integrate the tiny, plucky, country into its undeclared empire. Now, with North Korea’s having acquired the capability to retaliate against US military aggression in a manner that would cause

considerable harm to the US homeland, the prospects of those seven-decades of investment bearing fruit appear dim.

US hostility to North Korean independence has been expressed in multifarious ways over the seven decades of North Korea's existence.

A three-year US-led war of aggression, from 1950 to 1953, exterminated 20 percent of North Korea's population and burned to the ground every town in the country [3], driving the survivors into subterranean shelters, in which they lived and worked. US General Douglas MacArthur said of the destruction the United States visited upon North Korea that "I have never seen such devastation...After I looked at the wreckage and those thousands of women and children and everything, I vomited." [4]

A vicious seven-decades-long campaign of economic warfare, aimed at crippling the country's economy, and engendering attendant miseries among its people, has conferred upon North Korea the unhappy distinction of being the most heavily sanctioned nation on earth. Nestled among the tranches of US sanctions are those that have been imposed because North Korea has chosen "a Marxist-Leninist economy," [5] revealing what lies at the root of US hostility to the country.

For decades, North Koreans have lived under a US nuclear Sword of Damocles, subjected repeatedly to threats of nuclear annihilation, including being turned into "charcoal briquettes" [6] and "completely destroyed," so that they "literally cease to exist" [7]—and this before they had nuclear weapons and the rudimentary means to deliver them. In other words, in threats to vaporize North Koreans, Washington has threatened to make them the successors to aboriginal Americans as objects of US perpetrated genocides.

We should remind ourselves why North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in the first place. As University of Chicago history professor Bruce Cumings writes, for North Korea the nuclear crisis began in late February 1993, when

"General Lee Butler, head of the new U.S. 'Strategic Command,' announced that he was retargeting strategic nuclear weapons (i.e., hydrogen bombs) meant for the old U.S.S.R, on North Korea (among other places.) At the same time, the new CIA chief, James Woolsey, testified that North Korea was 'our most grave current concern.' By mid-March 1993, tens of thousands of [US] soldiers were carrying out war games in Korea...and in came the B1-B bombers, B-52s from Guam, several naval vessels carrying cruise missiles, and the like: whereupon the North pulled out of the NPT." [8]

Two and half decades later the B1-B bombers and several naval vessels carrying cruise missiles—this time, US 'power-projecting' aircraft carriers—are back.

Last month, Washington sent not one, but two aircraft carriers, the USS Carl Vinson and the USS Ronald Reagan, to the waters between Japan and

Korea, to conduct “exercises,” “a show of force not seen there for more than two decades,” reported *The Wall Street Journal*. [9]

At the same time, the Pentagon sent B1-B strategic bombers, not once, but twice last month, to conduct simulated nuclear bombing runs “near the Military Demarcation Line that divides the two Koreas;” in other words, along the North Korean border. [10]

Understandably, North Korea denounced the simulated bombing missions for what they were: grave provocations. If the communist country’s new self-defensive capabilities spurred consternation in Washington, then Washington’s overt display of its offensive might legitimately enkindled alarm in Pyongyang. *The Wall Street Journal* summed up the US provocations this way: the “U.S. military has conducted several flyovers near the Korean Peninsula using B-1B [i.e., nuclear] bombers and directed a Navy aircraft carrier group to the region—all to North Korea’s consternation.” [11]

Robert Litwak, director of international security studies for the Wilson Center, explains the reason for Pyongyang’s consternation, if it’s not already blindingly obvious. US-led war games “[may look] like a defensive maneuver for us, [but] from North Korea’s perspective, they may think we’re preparing an attack when you start bringing B2 fighters.” [12]

In January, North Korea offered to “sit with the U.S. anytime” to discuss US war games and its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. Pyongyang proposed that the United States “contribute to easing tension on the Korean peninsula by temporarily suspending joint military exercises in south Korea and its vicinity this year, and said that in this case the DPRK is ready to take such responsive steps as temporarily suspending the nuclear test over which the U.S. is concerned.” [13]

The North Korean proposal was seconded by China and Russia [14] and recently by South Korea’s new president Moon Jae-in. [15] But Washington peremptorily rejected the proposal, refusing to acknowledge any equivalency between US-led war games, which US officials deem ‘legitimate’ and North Korea’s missile and nuclear tests, which they label ‘illegitimate.’ [16]

US rejection of the China-Russia-South Korea-backed North Korean proposal, however, is only rhetorically related to notions of legitimacy, and the question of legitimacy fails to stand up under even the most cursory examination. How are US ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons legitimate and those of North Korea not?

The real reason Washington rejects the North Korean proposal is explained by Sanger: an agreed freeze “essentially acknowledges that the North’s modest arsenal is here to stay;” which means that Pyongyang has achieved “the ability to strike back,” to stay the US hand, and deter Washington from launching a regime change aggression in the manner of wars it perpetrated against Saddam and Gaddafi, leaders who led pro-independence governments which, like North Korea, refused to

be integrated into the informal US empire, but which, unlike North Korea, relinquished their means of self-defense, and once defenseless, were toppled by US-instigated aggressions.

“That is what Mr. Kim believes his nuclear program will prevent,” writes the Council on Foreign Relations member, referring to the US effort to bring the United States’ seven-decades-long campaign of regime change against Pyongyang to a head. And he may, Sanger concedes, “be right.”

Anyone concerned with democracy should take heart that North Korea, unlike Gaddafi’s Libya and Saddam’s Iraq, has successfully resisted US predations. The United States exercises an international dictatorship, arrogating onto itself the right to intervene in any part of the globe, in order to dictate to others how they should organize their political and economic affairs, to the point, in North Korea, of explicitly waging economic warfare against the country because it has a Marxist-Leninist economy at variance with the economic interests of the upper stratum of US society whose opportunities for profit-making through exports to and investments in North Korea have been accordingly eclipsed.

Those countries which resist despotism are the real champions of democracy, not those which exercise it (the United States) or facilitate it (their allies.) North Korea is calumniated as a bellicose dictatorship, human rights violator and practitioner of cruel and unusual punishment of political dissidents, a description to a tee of Washington’s principal Arab ally, Saudi Arabia, a recipient of almost illimitable military, diplomatic and other favors from the United States, showered on the Arabian tyranny despite its total aversion to democracy, reduction of women to the status of chattel, dissemination of a viciously sectarian Wahhabi ideology, an unprovoked war on Yemen, and the beheading and crucifixion of its political dissidents.

If we are concerned about democracy, we should, as Italian philosopher Domenico Losurdo argues, also be concerned about democracy on a global scale. The worry that has spread in Washington and the United Nations is a worry that democracy on a global scale has just been given a boost. And that should not be a worry for the rest of us, but a warm caress.

1. Foster Klug and Hyung-Jin Kim, “North Korea’s nukes are not on negotiation table: Kim Jong-un,” Reuters, July 5, 2017.

2. This may be attributable to Peter Kuznick, co-writer with Oliver Stone of *The Untold History of the United States*.

3. According to US Air Force General Curtis LeMay, head of Strategic Air Command during the Korean War, cited in Medi Hasan, “Why do North Koreans hate us? One reason—They remember the Korean War,” *The Intercept*, May 3, 2017. LeMay said, we “killed off...20 percent of the population...We went over there and fought the war and eventually burned down every town in North Korea.”

4. Glen Frieden, “NPR can’t help hyping North Korea threat,” *FAIR*,

May 9, 2017.

5. "North Korea: Economic Sanctions," Congressional Research Service, 2016.

6. Colin Powell warned North Korea that the United States could turn it into a "charcoal briquette." Bruce Cumings, "Latest North Korean provocations stem from missed US opportunities for demilitarization," Democracy Now!, May 29, 2009.

7. US General Wesley Clark, quoted in Domenico Losurdo, *NON-VIOLENCE: A HISTORY BEYOND THE MYTH*, Lexington Books, 2015, Clark said, "The leaders of North Korea use bellicose language, but they know very well that they do not have a military option available...Were they to attack South Korea, their nation would be completely destroyed. It would literally cease to exist."

8. Bruce Cumings, *KOREA'S PLACE IN THE SUN: A MODERN HISTORY*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2005. p. 488-489.

9. Gordon Lubold, "North Korea, South China Sea to dominate Defense Secretary's Asia Trip," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 2017.

10. Jonathan Cheng, "U.S. bombers fly near North Korean border after missile launch," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2017.

11. Jonathan Cheng, "North Korea compares Donald Trump to Adolph Hitler," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 27, 2017.

12. "US experts argue in favor of scaling down S. Korea-US military exercises," *The Hankyoreh*, June 20, 2017.

13. Korean Central News Agency, January 10, 2015.

14. Jonathan Cheng and Alastair Gale, "North Korea missile launch threatens U.S. strategy in Asia," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 4, 2017.

15. David E. Sanger, "What can Trump do about North Korea? His options are few and risky," *The New York Times*, July 4, 2017.

16. Jonathan Cheng and Alastair Gale, "North Korea missile launch threatens U.S. strategy in Asia," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 4, 2017.