

NOT WAR/NOT PEACE: THE KOREAN ARMISTICE UNDER A NUCLEAR SHADOW

Bruce Cumings

The inaugural issue of Asia Pacific Peace Studies journal features a selection of publications and public initiatives sponsored by the Asia Pacific Peace Studies Institute (APPSI) since its inception in spring 2013. On February 12, 2013, North Korea tested a nuclear weapon, and two months later announced plans to restart its heavy water reactor at Yongbyon—thereby precipitating another “nuclear crisis.” As U.S. officials and foreign policy pundits called for preemptive attacks, APPSI published a dissenting opinion by Bruce Cumings, a leading progressive scholar of Asia-Pacific history and politics. Now, three years later, tensions are on the rise again with North Korea resuming nuclear tests, and the United States vowing to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system in South Korea. In the face of saber rattling from all sides, we at APPSI believe the time is right to publish an updated version of Professor Cumings’s essay.¹

On July 27, 2013, the Korean War Armistice entered its seventh decade. The armistice is just an agreement for ceasefire—it is not a peace treaty, and never brought a final end to the war. Its primary legacy is therefore not peace, but a continuation of the extraordinary violence of this war through ongoing threats by the United States and North Korea and South Korea to fight all over again. In April 2013, President Barack Obama authorized B-52 and B-2 Stealth bombers to fly over Korea and drop dummy bombs on islands off South Korea, with the Pentagon making sure all knew that these planes were “nuclear capable.” Around the same time, military leaders in Seoul told the press that they possessed cruise missiles that could enter any window in Pyongyang—an implicit threat to decapitate the North Korean leadership.

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As usual, these threats were in response to a wild barrage of heated rhetoric from Pyongyang, threatening among other things to launch nuclear-tipped missiles against the United States. North Korean leaders are admittedly infuriating: they castigate their enemies, thumb their noses at us, and make wild threats; they are impudent, wild—perhaps insane? Partly this is the image they seek to project. Game Theory 101 would tell us that in a standoff where both sides have nuclear weapons—and thus the weapons cannot be used without tempting mutual suicide—the point is to generate fear in the mind of the enemy that you still might be willing to use them anyway. A pose of madness is very useful in such a situation. Partly this is also the image that the American media can be counted on to immediately promote; they always take the North Korean bait and hype the threat, with endless images of goose-stepping soldiers, starving children, manic leaders and gross exaggerations of Pyongyang's military capabilities. Hollywood also now finds it useful to depict the North as a fierce, crazy enemy, as several recent films have done, beginning with the 2012 sequel to *Red Dawn*.²

A different picture emerges from the violence of this terrible war and its aftermath. North Korea, before its first nuclear test in 2006, was the only non-nuclear country in the world to have been consistently threatened and blackmailed by the United States with nuclear weapons. This began during the war in 1951 and has continued down to the present. Discussion of this phenomenon in the American media is so rare as to be virtually nonexistent. The vast majority of Americans and even most well informed people know nothing about it. Yet North Korean leaders have lived for sixty-five years with a recurrent specter of instant nuclear annihilation by the United States. The armistice was forged in the context of American nuclear threats, and sustained ever since by the same methods.

Nuclear Blackmail

In the months leading up to the armistice the U.S. military brandished the biggest weapons in its arsenal. On May 26, 1953, the *New York Times* featured a story on the first atomic shell shot from a cannon, which exploded at French Flat, Nevada, with 10-kiloton force (more than half the Hiroshima yield). A few days later came the “mightiest atom blast” ever exploded at the Nevada test site. Some speculated that it might have been a hydrogen bomb. The Nevada tests were integral to this atomic blackmail, a way of getting a message to the enemy that it had better sign the armistice. Formerly secret documents also illustrate that in May and June 1953 the Eisenhower administration sought to show that it would stop at nothing to bring the war to a close. In mid-May President Eisenhower told the National Security Council (NSC) that using nukes in

Korea would be cheaper than conventional weaponry, and a few days later the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) recommended launching nuclear attacks against China—actually, they gave several scenarios for escalating the war with nuclear attacks, each one differing little from others.

Nonetheless, there is little evidence that Ike's nuclear threats made any difference in the Communist side's decision to end the war, which had come in March before this panoply of threats. The president was actually ambivalent about using nuclear weapons (as opposed to threatening to use them)—certainly more so than Secretary of State Dulles, or various members of the NSC, and outside consultants.³ In May 1953 Ike discussed using nuclear weapons in Korea several times with the NSC, but ended up preferring to bluff—putting out hints and warnings that the United States might use them, but not go all the way.⁴ In the meantime, his generals stepped up the bombing campaign, hitting the North's big dams, as we will see. On May 20, 1953, the JCS and the NSC presented a new war plan involving the use of “hundreds of atomic bombs” against both North Korea and China.⁵ But a few days later, China and North Korea agreed to terms acceptable to the United States, amid no evidence that nuclear blackmail occasioned their decision.

Eisenhower and Dulles still tried to maintain in published accounts that nuclear threats delivered through third parties ended the war, but Ike's son John, who drafted his father's memoirs, admitted that “we were conjecturing.” In a recent book, Jean Edward Smith quotes Eisenhower saying that he did not take advice about the use of nuclear weapons from Dulles or the State Department—and told them to “cut out all this fooling around” about their use.⁶ When I interviewed Dean Rusk in 1986 for a Korean War documentary, he told me that when he became Secretary of State in 1961, he had his staff scour the files to see if atomic diplomacy had made a difference in bringing the war to an end, and concluded that it had not. But as we will see, the Eisenhower administration was central to the subsequent introduction of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula.

Before Ike's Threats: MacArthur's Lunacy?

On December 9, 1950, after the People's Republic of China entered the war, General MacArthur requested commander's discretion to use atomic weapons in Korea. Two weeks later he submitted “a list of retardation targets” for which he needed twenty-six atomic bombs. In interviews published posthumously, he said he had a plan that would have won the war in ten days: “I would have dropped between 30 and 50 atomic bombs ... strung across the neck of Manchuria.” He would have then introduced half a million Nationalist troops at the Yalu River, and then, “spread behind [them]—from the Sea of Japan to the Yellow Sea—a belt

of radioactive cobalt ... [with] an active life of between 60 and 120 years. For at least 60 years there could have been no land invasion of Korea from the North.” He expressed certainty that the Russians would have done nothing: “my plan was a cinch.”

If this sounds like lunacy, MacArthur was hardly alone. Before China came into the war, a committee of the JCS had said that atomic bombs might be the “decisive factor” in cutting off a Chinese advance into Korea; initially they could be useful in “a ‘cordon sanitaire’ [that] might be established by the U.N. in a strip in Manchuria immediately north of the Manchurian border.” A few months later Congressman Albert Gore complained “Korea has become a meat grinder of American manhood,” and suggested “something cataclysmic” to end the war: a radiation belt dividing the Korean peninsula. Although General Ridgway said nothing about cobalt bombs, in May 1951 he renewed MacArthur’s request of December 24, this time for thirty-eight atomic bombs. (It was denied.⁷)

In the fall of 1951 the United States carried out Operation Hudson Harbor, a project that sought to establish the capability to use atomic weapons on the battlefield. In pursuit of this goal a lone B-29 bomber lifted off from Okinawa in September and October 1951, flying over North Korea on simulated atomic bombing runs to drop “dummy” A-bombs or heavy TNT bombs. The project called for “actual functioning of all activities which would be involved in an atomic strike, including weapons assembly and testing, leading, ground control of bomb aiming,” and the like. The results indicated that the bombs were probably not useful, for purely technical reasons: “timely identification of large masses of enemy troops was extremely rare.” One can imagine the steel nerves required of leaders in Pyongyang, observing a lone B-29 simulating the attack lines that had resulted in the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki just six years earlier, each time unsure of whether the bomb was real or a dummy.⁸

In early 1951 a young man named Samuel Cohen, on a secret assignment for the U.S. Defense Department, observed the battles for the second recapture of Seoul, and thought there should be a way to destroy the enemy without destroying the city. He became the father of the neutron bomb.⁹ That same year Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the American A-bomb, went to Korea as part of “Project Vista,” designed to gauge the feasibility of tactical use of atomic weapons. After the war South Korea became the primary American proving grounds for the use of tactical nuclear weapons, for the simple reason that, unlike the Central Front in Europe, the other side did not have them—and therefore their use in war games and actual plans for war became standard operating procedure.

The War Ends with a Bang

To bring the greatest pressure on the North to reach an armistice, short of using nuclear weapons, the U.S. Air Force originally envisioned hitting twenty of their large dams, thus to destroy 250,000 tons of rice that would soon be harvested. In the event, bombers hit three dams—Toksan, Chasan, and Kuwonga—in mid-May 1953, just as the rice was newly planted. Shortly thereafter two more were attacked, at Namsi and Taechon. These are usually called “irrigation dams” in English-language historical literature, but they were major dams akin to many large dams in the United States. The great Suiho dam on the Yalu River was second in the world only to Hoover Dam, and was first bombed in May 1952 (although never demolished, for fear of provoking Beijing and Moscow). The Pujon River dam was designed to hold 670 million cubic meters of water, it had a pressure gradient of 999m; the dam station generated 200,000 kilowatts from the water.¹⁰ According to the official U.S. Air Force history, when fifty-nine F-84 Thunderjets breached the high containing wall of Toksan on May 13, 1953, the onrushing flood destroyed six miles of railway, five bridges, two miles of highway, and five square miles of rice paddies. The first breach at Toksan “scooped clean” twenty-seven miles of river valley, and sent water rushing even into Pyongyang. After the war it took 200,000 man-days of labor to reconstruct the reservoir.¹¹

These were clearly serious war crimes under international law, but at the time little commentary appeared in “our paper of record” or other prominent sources. On June 20, the *New York Times* announced the execution of accused Soviet spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg at Sing Sing Prison. In the fine print of daily war coverage the U.S. Air Force stated that its planes bombed dams at Kusong and Toksan in North Korea, and in even finer print the North Korean radio acknowledged “great damage” to these large reservoirs (which provided water for 75 percent of the North’s food production). One important book—*Battle Report: The War in Korea*—acknowledged the destruction:

So, we killed civilians, friendly civilians, and bombed their homes; fired whole villages with the occupants—women and children and ten times as many hidden Communist soldiers—under showers of napalm, and the pilots came back to their ships stinking of vomit twisted from their vitals by the shock of what they had to do.

Then the authors asked, was this any worse than “killing thousands of invisible civilians with the blockbusters and atomic bombs...?” Not really, they say, because the enemy’s “savagery toward the people” was even worse than “the Nazis’ campaign of terror in Poland and the

Ukraine.”¹² Apart from this astonishing distortion, note the logic: *they* are savages, so that gives *us* the right to shower napalm on innocents.

The truth of the matter is that white Americans had no respect for their adversaries in Korea. The latter were dismissed as Asians, communists, and “savages,” and a clear racial animosity deeply affected the American conduct of this war. No less than Cold War architect George Kennan called the Chinese “savage and arrogant”; for General Ridgway the communists were “treacherous savages,” and Admiral Ruthven Libby told Truman he spent seven months negotiating with “talking animals.”¹³ Coming from a racially segregated society where no Asian men talked back to white men, the very idea of negotiating with such people was odious, outrageous.

In the 1950s North Korea and China were unrecognized by the United States and the UN. North Korea still is not recognized. So they (and particularly the Koreans) sought to turn the tables by invoking their dignity—in their dress, their looks, their attitude, and their condescension toward the United States; reporters always called the Korean negotiator, Nam Il, “dapper,” “aloof,” “contemptuous.” The Americans never let South Koreans take the lead. General Paek Sun-yop was usually the lone ROK (Republic of Korea) representative, just an adjunct to the UN delegation, always led by the United States for the next fifty years. I think the American side could not realize how this looked. A friend of mine who was an interpreter for the South told me he felt small when the North’s delegation showed up, and dealt directly with the Americans.

By the time this war ended it had become deeply unpopular in the United States. Truman went out of office at 27 percent approval in Gallup polls; in the history of Gallup polling, only George W. Bush hit a lower point—22 percent in 2008. In the popular imagination Americans had never lost a war. As scholar Rosemary Foot put it, “From 1776 until 1950 the United States had been extraordinarily successful in its employment of force and thus had no particular need to develop the art of diplomacy and compromise.”¹⁴ So it fought the war in Korea to a standstill, eschewing any serious diplomacy to achieve a lasting peace.

The nation’s capital, reporters wrote, met the war’s end with “a collective shrug of the shoulders.” It may have been a stalemate on the ground, but it was widely seen by Americans as a defeat. In New York television camera crews showed up at Times Square to find desultory citizens who had to be coaxed into shouting approval of the peace; fewer people were on the streets because subway fares had just gone up to fifteen cents. The next day an Iowa court ruled that there had been no state of war in Korea, since Congress never declared one to exist.

War existed for Koreans in the North, every day, around the clock, for three years. In the end, the scale of urban destruction caused by U.S. bombing exceeded that in Germany and Japan, according to U.S. Air Force estimates. Jorg Friedrich estimated that the RAF dropped 657,000

tons of bombs on Germany from 1942 to 1945, and the total tonnage dropped by the United Kingdom and the United States at 1.2 million tons. The United States dropped 635,000 tons of bombs in Korea (not counting 32,557 tons of napalm), compared to 503,000 tons in the entire Pacific theater in World War II. Whereas sixty Japanese cities were destroyed to an average of 43 percent, estimates of the destruction of towns and cities in North Korea ranged from 40 to 90 percent; eighteen out of the North's twenty-two major cities were obliterated. A partial table of destruction looks like this:¹⁵

Pyongyang, 75%
Chongjin, 65%
Hamhung, 80%
Hungnam, 85%
Sariwon, 95%
Sinanju, 100%
Wonsan, 80%

A conference to work out peace arrangements in Korea and Vietnam (after Dienbienphu) was scheduled in Geneva in 1954, but Secretary of State Dulles had no intention of signing a peace treaty with North Korea and China. In 1986 I interviewed U. Alexis Johnson, who was a top American negotiator at the Geneva Conference, for a Thames Television documentary on the Korean War. Johnson told me that Geneva, designed to replace the Korean armistice with a durable peace, was to the American delegation merely an empty exercise to be gotten through. I asked: "How does one prepare for a conference ... when you have no hope that negotiations are going to change anything?" Johnson replied, "Oh, you make your speeches and you also try to make sure that Korean foreign minister P'yon is well established and knows what he's supposed to do and ... don't let Syngman Rhee, er, sabotage it."

Nuclearizing the Korean Peninsula

Four years after the war ended, the Eisenhower administration decided to introduce nuclear weapons to the Korean peninsula. Dulles worried about the legal implications of breaking section 13d of the armistice, but decided to do it anyway because of his worries about the volatility of the South Korean president, Syngman Rhee. Dulles was the man, it will be remembered, who famously eyeballed Kim Il Sung across the 38th parallel a week before the war started. He appears to have spent the rest of his life with unsettling whispers from that Sunday, as if Banquo's ghost were shaking his gory locks.

At an NSC meeting in 1954 he worried that the North might start the war up again—and in a rather creative fashion:

[Dulles] thought it quite possible that the Communists would launch their attack by infiltrating ROK units and staging an attack on the Communist lines in order to make it appear as though hostilities had been started on ROK initiative.¹⁶

At several other high-level meetings Dulles worried aloud that the United States would not know how a new war might start in Korea, and that Rhee might well start it. At the 168th Meeting of the NSC in October 1953, Dulles warned that “all our efforts” must be to forestall a resumption of war by Rhee. In July 1957 at the 332nd Meeting he still worried that Rhee might “start a war.” Two weeks later, he repeated: “If war were to start in Korea... it was going to be very hard indeed to determine which side had begun the war.”¹⁷

It was in this specific context that Dulles lent his agreement to the JCS desire to place nuclear weapons in Korea. Pursuing the civil war deterrent that Dean Acheson had applied to Korea before the war, he wanted to restrain both sides. Hotheads like Rhee and Kim Il Sung would think twice before starting a war that would rain nuclear destruction on the peninsula. Rhee had not shrunk from advocating the use of the H-bomb to have his way; he shocked even his Republican supporters by calling for its use in a joint address to Congress in 1954. But Dulles’ nukes would be kept under exclusive American control and presumably would only be used in the event of a massive and uncontrollable North Korean invasion.

In January 1958 the United States positioned 280mm nuclear cannons and Honest John nuclear-tipped missiles in South Korea, and a year later the Air Force “permanently stationed a squadron of nuclear-tipped Matador cruise missiles in Korea.” With a range of 1,100 kilometers, the Matadors were aimed at China and the USSR as well as North Korea. By the mid-1960s Korean defense strategy was pinned on routine plans to use nuclear weapons very early in any new war. As a 1967 Pentagon war game script put it, “The twelve ROKA and two U.S. divisions in South Korea had ... keyed their defense plans almost entirely to the early use of nuclear weapons.” The American assumption was that these things could not be used on the Central Front in Europe, because the other side had nukes, too—but they could in Korea, because neither the USSR nor China would retaliate with nukes.¹⁸

In January 1968 the North Koreans seized the U.S. spy ship *Pueblo*, capturing the crew and keeping them imprisoned for eleven months. The initial reaction of American decision-makers was to drop a nuclear weapon on Pyongyang. The fact that all the U.S. F-4 fighter planes held

on constant alert on Korean airfields were loaded only with nuclear weapons did not help the leaders to think clearly.¹⁹

Indeed, U.S. nuclear weapons in Korea presented numerous risks. The atomic demolition mine (ADM) was a defensive weapons designed to be used in South Korea, “to contaminate an advance area and to stop an armored attack,” as one ADM engineer put it. ADMs weighed only 60 pounds and yet had a 20-kiloton explosive force; “you could get two weeks worth of contamination out of it so that an area was impassable.”²⁰ ADMs were placed by special team members who carried them in backpacks. In *Weapons and Hope* Freeman Dyson called these “the most dangerous of all tactical weapons,” because they can be moved around in Jeeps, making it impossible to assure their physical security. (In other words, the enemy might grab them.) Meanwhile U.S. helicopters, as the *Washington Post* pointed out in 1974, routinely flew nuclear weapons near the DMZ. That one of them might stray across the DMZ during a training exercise (as a small reconnaissance helicopter did in December 1994) and give Pyongyang an atomic bomb was a constant possibility. Forward deployment of nuclear weapons also bred a mentality of “use ‘em or lose ‘em.” Even a small-scale North Korean attack might be cause enough to use them, lest they fall into enemy hands. In 1975 Richard “Dixie” Walker, later the American ambassador to Korea during the Chun Doo Hwan regime, wrote the following:

The presence of American conventional and even tactical nuclear forces in Korea helps to confirm strategic guarantees for Tokyo and to discourage any Japanese thoughts about a French solution: a *force de frappe* of their own. This is a fact well understood by leaders of many political persuasions in Tokyo and also appreciated in Peking.

In other words Korean lives were hostage to a risky American policy of dual containment: deterring the communist enemy and constraining the Tokyo ally.²¹

The commander most enamored of nuclear weapons for both defensive and offensive use was General Richard Stilwell, who originated the Team Spirit war games that began in the late 1970s and continued into the 1990s. Team Spirit exercises were the largest in the world, often including 200,000 troops of which about 70,000 would be Americans—those already in Korea, and others flown in for the games. In Stilwell’s strategy, the games were “a dry run for a retaliatory attack on the north and a precursor of the AirLand Battle doctrine” of the 1980s, emphasizing offensive strikes behind enemy lines.²²

A famous August 1976 incident illustrated the extraordinary tripwire nature of the DMZ confrontation, where a new war could occur on almost any day. American and Korean soldiers had entered a forbidden

zone of the DMZ near Panmunjom to “trim a poplar tree” which the U.S. side claimed was obstructing its vision northward. (The poplar stood alone by itself. Anyone who has been to Panmunjom knows that the surroundings are largely denuded of trees, since the area took such a pounding in the war.) A North Korean team confronted the trimming team, and in the fight that ensued a North Korean grabbed an axe from one of the Americans and then killed two American soldiers with it. This was an unfortunate incident, but a completely predictable one given the ratcheted-up tension of this insanely militarized “de-militarized zone.”

General Stilwell put US-ROK forces on high alert (for the first time since 1953) during this confrontation, and festooned the Korean theater with American force. An aircraft carrier task force came to Korean waters, and a phalanx of nuclear-capable B-52 bombers lifted off from Guam and flew up the peninsula toward the DMZ, “veering off at the last moment.” According to one analyst, Stilwell asked permission from the Pentagon (and received it) to delegate to his subordinates the authority to initiate artillery and rocket fire, should they lose communications with him and be unable to consult, yielding the possibility that tactical nuclear weapons might be used without central command and control. A US-ROK task force entered the Joint Security Area, with seven helicopter gunships escorting another twenty helicopters carrying a full rifle company protecting them. They proceeded finally to chop down the offending limbs on the poplar tree.²³

In 1991 I heard a retired former commander of U.S. forces in Korea give an off-the-record presentation of U.S. strategy as it had developed by the 1980s:

(1) The United States planned to use tactical nuclear weapons in the very early stages of a new Korean conflict, at “H + 1,” or within one hour of the outbreak of war, if large masses of North Korean troops were attacking south of the DMZ. This he contrasted with the established strategy in Europe, which was to delay invaders with conventional weapons, and use nuclear weapons only if necessary to stop the assault. The logic was that we dared not use nuclear weapons in Europe except in the greatest extremity (because the other side had them), but we can use them in Korea (because it doesn’t). South Korean commanders, he said, had gotten used to the idea that the United States would use nuclear weapons at an early point in a war with North Korea.

(2) The AirLand Battle strategy developed in the mid-1970s called for early, quick, deep strikes into enemy territory, again with the likely use of nuclear weapons, especially against hardened underground facilities (of which there are many in North Korea). In other words the strategy itself implies “rollback” rather than simple containment of a North Korean invasion.

(3) Neutron bombs—or so-called “enhanced radiation” weapons—might well be used if North Korean forces were to occupy Seoul, thus to kill the enemy but save the buildings.

(4) North Korean forces both expanded and redeployed in the late 1970s as a response to the AirLand Battle doctrine. The redeployment led to the stationing of nearly 80 per cent of their ground forces near the DMZ. American and South Korean sources routinely cite this expansion and redeployment as evidence of North Korean aggressive intent, as we have seen. In fact it was done so that as many soldiers as possible could get into the South (regardless of how a war started), to mingle with ROK Army forces and civilians before nuclear weapons would be used, thus making their use less likely.

This harrowing scenario became standard operating procedure in the 1980s, the kind written into military field manuals. The annual Team Spirit military exercises played out AirLand Battle games. These implied an initial containment of a North Korean attack, followed by thrusts into the North, ultimately to seize and hold Pyongyang and topple the regime. Such war games were also conducted in Korea because in the early 1980s NATO governments and strong peace movements would not allow similar exercises in Europe.²⁴

However, the Gulf War (again according to the above source) caused a reevaluation of the role of nuclear weapons. With “smart bombs” that reliably reach their targets, high-yield conventional weapons were more useful than the messy and uncontrollable effects of using nuclear warheads. The Army, he said, wanted out of battlefield nuclear weapons as soon as possible. Thus American policy reached a point where its own interests dictated withdrawal of obsolescent nuclear weapons from Korea in the fall of 1991. The weapons removed included forty 203mm and thirty 155mm nuclear artillery shells, plus large numbers of ADMs. Official spokesmen were silent, however, about some sixty nuclear gravity bombs for F-4 and F-16 bombers, reported in 1985 to be stored at an American air base at Kunsan.²⁵

The perceived success in deploying large masses of troops halfway around the world for the Gulf War also would make it much easier, the general thought, to respond to pressures (mainly from cost-cutting Congressmen) to withdraw American ground forces from Korea. But 28,000 American troops remain in Korea today, and any day of the week a Trident sub or a B-2 Stealth bomber can be deployed to the Korean theater—as President Obama did during the 2013 crisis. Meanwhile, the U.S. media almost always choose to ignore this long history, and focus instead on how provocative, dangerous, and even insane the North Koreans are. With a now-nuclear-capable North Korea, Americans are

reaping the whirlwind of our own nuclear threats and blackmail going back to 1950.

From the Korean War onward, North Korea responded to American nuclear policies by building enormous facilities underground or in mountain redoubts—ranging from troop and matériel depots to munitions factories, and even subterranean warplane hangars. In the mid-1970s Pyongyang faced more threats as the Park Chung Hee government in the South sought to develop nuclear capabilities, ceasing the activity only under enormous American pressure, while retaining formidable potentialities. The ROK went ahead with its clandestine program to develop “indigenous ability to build ballistic missiles” capable of carrying nuclear warheads. South Korea also garnered a reputation as a “renegade” arms supplier to pariah countries like South Africa, and to Iran and Iraq during their war. Much of this reads as if it were written about North Korea, not South Korea, and puts Pyongyang’s activity into perspective: much of it was responsive to U.S. pressure and ROK initiatives.²⁶

The Armistice After 60 Years

Let me bring this paper to a close with two more examples from 2013 that illustrate the fragility of the armistice given the abject failure of all the major parties to bring a true and lasting peace to the Korean peninsula. One is from a source always assumed to be lying through its teeth, the Korean Central News Agency; the second is from an editorial published in our “paper of record,” the *New York Times*. The reader is asked to determine which party is telling the truth, and which is rational and which is irrational.

On April 8, 2013, at the height of the nuclear crisis, the North issued a “White Paper” on American nuclear threats against them, noting that the United States and South Korea had “waged more than 18,000 north-targeted war drills and military trainings in south Korea since the ceasefire.” The war exercises staged by U.S. forces together with “the puppet army in south Korea,” the paper argued, constitute “a heinous nuclear war rehearsal to bring a nuclear holocaust to the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia and other parts of the world.” It said that the United States officially made public to the world in July 1957 that it would “introduce Honest John [rockets] and 280 mm atomic artillery pieces into south Korea to hurl them into Focus Lens, Focus Retina and other north-targeted war drills.” Later on, huge Team Spirit war games introduced “F-16 fighter bomber, B-1B long-distance strategic bomber and nuclear submarines.” In 1994, the report continued, U.S. forces “rehearsed a nuclear war with the involvement of up-to-date strike means after drawing up such nuclear war scenarios as OPLAN 5026, OPLAN

5027, and the plan for bombing Nyongbyon that envisaged mounting a preemptive nuclear attack on the DPRK.”²⁷ To the best of my knowledge these facts are true (even if the intentions placed upon the United States and the ROK are false or exaggerated). This White Paper got no attention in the American media.

Four days the *New York Times* published an editorial arguing that President Obama should “Bomb North Korea, Before It’s Too Late.”²⁸ After listing various threats from the North, including putting a satellite into space last December and testing its third nuclear device in February, the author wrote:

The Korean crisis has now become a strategic threat to America’s core national interests. The best option is to destroy the North Korean missile on the ground before it is launched. The United States should use a precise airstrike to render the missile and its mobile launcher inoperable. President Obama should state clearly and forthrightly that this is an act of self-defense in response to explicit threats from North Korea and clear evidence of a prepared weapon.... A war on the Korean Peninsula is unlikely after an American strike, but it is not inconceivable. The North Koreans might continue to escalate, and Mr. Kim might feel obligated to start a war to save face. Under these unfortunate circumstances, the United States and its allies would still be better off fighting a war with North Korea today, when the conflict could still be confined largely to the Korean Peninsula.

Note the twisted logic. The United States must launch a preemptive strike against a sovereign country with which it is still at war, to take out a missile without knowing who it is aimed at, on the argument that this missile may strike core strategic interests (or may not). Then, if the North reacts they will be the ones who “start a war.” If a *nuclear* war results from this preemptive strike, so be it—and it will be Pyongyang’s fault. The author makes no mention of Obama’s highly provocative drops of dummy nuclear weapons from B-52 and B-2 Stealth bombers. This Orwellian logic can only come from a person who has no knowledge of the nearly 70 years of conflict between the United States and the DPRK, who finds no North Korean interest that is worthy of his respect, and who seems utterly callous to the millions of lives that would be lost in a new war.²⁹

If all this sounds quite irrational, that’s because it is. The *New York Times* editorial merely reiterates a preemptive strategy that came within a hairbreadth of being implemented in June 1994, when President Clinton was about to launch missiles against the Yongbyon plutonium facility, on the advice of Defense Secretary William Perry and his aide, Ashton

Carter, who thought that the United States could not tolerate a nuclear North, and if the preemptive strike might lead to the second Korean War, that was a risk they were willing to take. (Carter is now the Secretary Defense.) As we know, former President Jimmy Carter interrupted this march to war by meeting directly with Kim Il Sung, and getting him to agree to a freeze on the Yongbyon facility. And as we know, President Clinton met with General Jo Myong Rok at the White House in October 2000, to work out an agreement to get rid of the North's medium and long-range missiles. George W. Bush chose to ignore that agreement in favor of putting the North in his "axis of evil" and—as the North Koreans rightly state—made it a target of his preemptive doctrine. Now, many foreign policy pundits and officials in the Obama administration wish to revive that doctrine to take out missiles that diplomacy took care of at the end of Clinton's term, using the method that Bush used to thwart that diplomacy—and maybe start a war (but don't worry, it will be their fault).

For U.S. presidents of both parties to contemplate unprovoked attacks against the North is both a stunning example of American arrogance, and an astonishing admission of failure going back almost seven decades—the failure to remove the risk of war in Korea, and to make peace with an adversary determined to wait us out forever, if that is what it takes. "If I ever had a passion in the field of politics," the late Chris Marker wrote, "it's a passion for understanding... which immediately put me on the side of the people who seek and make mistakes, as opposed to those who seek nothing, except to conserve, defend themselves, and deny all the rest." So we end with an epitaph for ourselves: North Koreans still recalcitrant and hostile, still thumbing their nose at us, still defying every American expectation and desire that they erase themselves; and Americans refusing to seek an understanding with their very old adversary, always defensive about their own actions and responsibilities, always denying any hostile intent toward the North, and still with no "passion for understanding." So we remain steeped in denial about a war that is both more than sixty years old, and always "within an inch" of breaking out again.³⁰

NOTES

¹ This article was originally published by APPSI's sister institute, Japan Policy Research Institute, as "JPRI Working Paper No. 120 (September 2013)." The working paper was based on a presentation delivered in Seoul on August 28, 2013, at the "Conference on Locating the Korean War in the Context of East Asia: From the Ceasefire to Regional Peace System."

² In some cases China was the original enemy in early screenplays, but because Hollywood sells so many movie tickets in China, North Korea became the designated substitute, however preposterous the idea of the North invading the United States might be.

³ As one more indication why academics should not consult secretly with the government, at an NSC meeting in late March 1953, Cornell University President Deane Malott recommended using “a couple of atomic weapons in Korea” to end the war, in spite of the “public hysteria” over the bomb. Quoted in Evan Thomas, *Ike’s Bluff: President Eisenhower’s Secret Battle to Save the World* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), p. 72.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-6.

⁵ *Foreign Relations of the United States (1952-54)*, 15: 1059-68.

⁶ Rosemary Foot, *A Substitute for Victory: The Politics of Peacemaking at the Korean Armistice Talks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 99; and Thomas (2012), pp. 80-81.

⁷ U.S. National Archives, G-3 Operations file, box 34A, Bolte memo of Nov. 16, 1950, with attached memo of conclusions; Gore quoted in mid-April 1951 in Barton Bernstein, “The Korean War and Containment,” paper prepared for a Woodrow Wilson Center conference on the Truman period, September 1984); on Ridgway’s request see G-3 file, *ibid.*, box 38-A, “Actions Necessary.”

⁸ G-3 Operations file, *ibid.*, box 38-A, “Actions Necessary;” memo by S.V. Hasbrouck, Nov. 7, 1951; memo for the Chief of Staff, Army, Nov. 20, 1951; also Schnabel and Watson, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, “The Korean War,” part 1, p. v; also part 2, p. 614; U.S. National Archives, RG349, FEC G-2 Theater Intelligence, box 752, Sept 30, 1951, CINCFE to CG SAC (“Requests SAC to execute simulated atomic strikes on tgts. vic. CT402453 and CT576484”); Oct 1, 1951, CG FEAF to 98th Bomb Wing commander, Okinawa; Oct 13, 1951, resume of operation (“need for a clear-cut definition of what is meant by tactical use of atomic weapons *in support of ground operations.*” [sic]) Many of the documents on Hudson Harbor are still classified.

⁹ Samuel Cohen was a childhood friend of Herman Kahn; see Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 220.

¹⁰ Lautensach, Hermann. *Korea: A Geography Based on the Author’s Travels and Literature*. Trans. Katherine and Eckart Dege (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1945, 1988), p. 202.

¹¹ Conrad C. Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950-1953* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), pp. 160-64.

¹² Walter Karig, Malcolm W. Cagle, and Frank A. Manson, *Battle Report: the War in Korea*. (New York: Rinehart 1952), pp. 111-12.

¹³ Foot (1990), p. 11.

¹⁴ Foot (1990), p. 232.

¹⁵ Jörg Friedrich, *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945*, trans. by Allison Brown (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 75, 89; Foot (1990), 208; Crane (2000), pp. 126, 168-71.

¹⁶ Eisenhower Library, Anne Whitman file, NSC, 179th Meeting, box 5, Jan. 8, 1954.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, boxes 4 and 9.

¹⁸ Peter Hayes, *Pacific Powderkeg: American Nuclear Dilemmas in Korea* (Lexington, MA.: Lexington Books, 1991), p. 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

²⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 58, 59 (quotation).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²³ Meanwhile another Washington informant, whom I cannot name, told me that it was actually Stilwell who exercised “restraint” in this episode. He was fearful that back in Washington Henry Kissinger might want to start a war to enhance lame-duck Gerald Ford’s chances in the upcoming elections.

²⁴ Hayes (1991), p. 91.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

²⁶ Janne E. Nolan, *Trappings of Power: Ballistic Missiles in the Third World* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1991), pp. 48-52.

²⁷ Korean Central News Agency, Tokyo, April 8, 2013. The White Paper furthermore stated that in September 2002 the United States adopted a new national security strategy “in which it put the DPRK on the list of preemptive nuclear attack.” And in the most recent 2013 war games, a “B-2A flew into the sky above south Korea from the U.S. mainland for the first time in U.S. history to stage a mock drill for dropping nuclear bombs.” Simultaneously two nuclear carrier flotillas were deployed in the waters off the Korean Peninsula.”

²⁸ Jeremy Suri, “Bomb North Korea, Before It’s Too Late,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2013.

²⁹ When the editorial was published, there was no evidence that the North constituted a “strategic threat” to core American interests, any more that it has been since 1953. Levelheaded experts like David Albright say no current North Korean missile can reach the United States (and if it did, the DPRK would be obliterated). Moreover, in spite of two decades of claims to the contrary, we have no “clear evidence of a prepared weapon.” As of 2013, the North had exploded three plutonium devices—one dud, one in the 4-6 kiloton range, and the last perhaps a maximum of 10 kilotons (the payload of the nuclear cannon 60 years ago, and half the force of an ADM). There was no evidence that these devices are deliverable weapons, and no evidence of a capability to miniaturize them to fit on a missile warhead.

³⁰ For example, in 2012, then Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta asserted that war in Korea was “within an inch” of commencing again.