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Korea, South and North, at Risk

by Chalmers Johnson

Chalmers Johnson is author of Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire and, forthcoming, The Sorrows of Empire: How the Americans Lost Their Country.

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Next Wednesday, April 23, North Korea, the U.S., and China will meet in Beijing to discuss a possible resolution of a crisis caused by North Korea's determination to defend itself with nuclear weapons against threats of aggression from the Bush administration. North Korea made the first concession. On Saturday, April 12, Pyongyang dropped its demand that it meet the U.S. face-to-face, without any other participants in the talks, including the U.N. Security Council.

Today, April 16, the U.S. made even greater concessions in order to move the talks ahead. It dropped its original demand --typically advanced by the neoconservative war-lover, Undersecretary of State John Bolton -- that North Korea would first have to "immediately and visibly dismantle [its] covert nuclear weapons program" before talks could take place. It also accepted the most obvious fig-leaf in order to make the up-coming talks "multilateral." In addition to Washington and Pyongyang, only China will participate. The U.S. has dropped its demand that South Korea and Japan, the nations most directly threatened by North Korean nuclear weapons, attend, and Russia, which also borders on North Korea, was apparently not even invited. The critical development in all of this is China's statement that it will act as a full participant in the talks rather than just convening them. It is clear that this breakthrough was brought about by Beijing's diplomacy -- last month it briefly cut off oil shipments to North Korea from the Daqing oil field in Manchuria, thereby warning Pyongyang that it held the whip-hand over North Korea's economy. Under Chinese pressure, Pyongyang agreed to accept "multilateral talks" --but as defined by Beijing, not by Washington. David Sanger in the April 16 New York Times, reflecting that paper's sycophantic attempts to justify the George Bush regime to its readers, called these developments "a victory for President Bush" and claimed that "the outlines of the agreement for next week's talks were struck [by] . . . Secretary of State Colin L. Powell." This is the sheerest nonsense. The nation most concerned about Korea and with the greatest influence over the entire peninsula from time immemorial is China. The chickenhawks of the Bush administration have probably forgotten that the main American adversary during the Korean War was China, which fought the American military to a standstill.

The good news is that China has now actively rejoined Korean diplomacy to prevent a new war there. The bad news is that the American envoy assigned to conduct the talks is James A. Kelly, the assistant secretary of state for Asia and the Pacific. The New York Times describes him as "a longtime Asia hand." This is not a characterization that any single leader in East Asia would recognize. He is an unknown Republican Party hack who has repeatedly insulted South Korean leaders by his lack of understanding of the meaning of diplomacy. Unfortunately, the United States is not using any of its experienced Korean hands like Selig Harrison of the Carnegie Foundation, former ambassador to the Republic of Korea Donald Gregg, or Professor Bruce Cumings of the University of Chicago, who could solve this problem fairly easily if unencumbered by the Bush administration's ideological baggage. Given that this delicate situation is still in amateur hands on the American side, another pointless war, this time in Korea, a much more formidable country than Iraq, is still a possibility.

With the fall of Baghdad, the bloody slaughter and "shock and awe" phases of the American "liberation" of Iraq have come to an end. The full American armada of B-1, B-2, and B-52 bombers, five carrier tasks forces in the Persian Gulf, innumerable surface ships and submarines armed with cruise missiles, and the command and control staffs who fought the war from air-conditioned tents in Qatar will be released for redeployment. Flushed with (perhaps crazed by) success, their next target -- if not in the Middle East -- may well be North Korea.

It seems likely that the North Koreans themselves are thinking along these same lines. On April 12, Pyongyang made its first concession after months of stalemate. It said that it would be willing to negotiate over its nuclear capabilities in a multilateral forum, such as the United States has demanded, rather than insisting on direct bilateral talks between Pyongyang and Washington alone. This could prove to be in North Korea's interest. A forum that includes South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan is unlikely in the extreme to endorse American military pressure on the North. It could also mean that the U.N. Security Council will take up the North Korean situation, which might result in a rerun of the standoff between the U.S. and the U.K. on the one hand and France, Germany, and Russia on the other -- with Japan badly torn. Huge majorities in Japan opposed

the American attack on Iraq but Prime Minister Koizumi and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party endorsed it.

A little history might be in order. Back in 1994, the United States discovered that the Pyongyang regime was producing plutonium as a by-product of an old Russian-designed reactor for generating electric power. A crisis over the possibility that North Korea might be able to produce a few atomic bombs was resolved within the year by the oddly titled "Agreed Framework." In return for Pyongyang's pledge to mothball its old reactor and allow inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.S. and its allies promised to build two new reactors that would not produce weapons-grade fissionable material and to open some form of diplomatic and economic relations with the isolated North. The U.S. also agreed to supply the North with fuel oil to replace the energy lost by shutting down the reactor (since the country has no independent sources of energy of any sort). For three years the Clinton administration stalled on implementing the agreement, hoping that the highly militarized North Korean regime, its people suffering from starvation, would simply collapse.

By the end of the decade this standoff had degenerated into stalemate. In June 2000, the president of South Korea, Kim Dae-jung, acting on his own initiative and without consulting the United States, undertook a historic journey of reconciliation to Pyongyang, trying to eradicate the last vestiges of the Cold War on the Korean peninsula. His visit produced a breakthrough, and for his efforts he received the Nobel Peace Prize. Even more important, President Kim's initiative caught the imagination of his own people, much as Richard Nixon's 1971 opening to China captured the imagination of millions of Americans.

South Korea has a population of forty-seven million, more than twice the North's twenty-one million, and is twenty-five to thirty times richer than its desolate neighbor. The South's willingness to help the North reflects a growing democratic and economic self-confidence. It is important to remember that South Korea is one of only three countries in East Asia (the others being the Philippines and Taiwan) to have achieved democracy from below. In South Korea and the Philippines, mass movements fought against oppressive American imposed and supported dictators -- General Chun Doo-hwan in Seoul and Ferdinand Marcos in Manila. (In Japan, democracy was imposed from above by a foreign conqueror and in the person of General Douglas MacArthur.) During 2000, relations between North and South Korea continued to improve, leading to an October visit to Pyongyang by then U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. In the early days of the Bush administration, however, these favorable trends in Korea and in Washington came to a screeching halt. On a visit to Washington in March 2001, Kim was rudely brushed off by Bush, who promptly included North Korea in his increasingly bellicose statements about the world. In his state-of-the-union address of January 2002, Bush identified North Korea as one of three nations belonging to an "Axis of Evil." Needless to say, he did not consult his South Korean allies before making this provocative declaration.

In September 2002, the Bush administration asserted in its "national security strategy" a right to wage "preventive war." This rhetoric gained an almost immediate reality for North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and his associates when by August 2002 the Americans began to mobilize a powerful invasion force on the borders of Iraq, also included in Bush's list of nations targeted for "regime change." Watching Iraq being destroyed by the world's richest and most heavily armed country, North Korea prepared to defend itself in the only way it thought the Americans could understand. It withdrew from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, expelled international inspectors, and restarted its old power reactor.

At first, the Bush administration's response was muted. After all, one war was already looming and another in Korea threatened the deaths of millions in the South Korean capital Seoul, a city of 10.8 million within easy artillery range of the North. Among them, were tens of thousands of American troops stationed for decades near the demilitarized zone between the two Koreas as a "tripwire" against an attack from the North (whose firepower near the border was known to be powerful indeed). This was meant to ensure, among other things, that, as the first casualties came in, the American people would have no choice but to back the war.

On the other hand, the men (and woman) of the Bush administration made no effort to back down from or soften their positions. Kim Jong-il's regime thus reached the almost unavoidable conclusion that it was likely to be the next victim of a bully and began trying to "deter" the Americans. It insisted on a non-aggression treaty with the U.S. in return for shutting down its dangerous reactor and halting its nuclear weapons development program. It also initially offered to allow the expelled inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency to return to monitor its nuclear facilities.

After the U.S. invaded Iraq -- without any form of international legitimacy, with only a couple of Anglophone allies, and with virtually unanimous condemnation from all the democratic countries of the world -- North Korea pulled back from even this offer. On April 6, 2003, it seemed to accept the logic of the Bush administration and announced that only by arming itself with a "tremendous military deterrent" could it guarantee its own security. "The Iraqi war shows that to allow disarming through inspection does not help avert a war but rather sparks it. . . . This suggests that even the signing of a nonaggression treaty with the U.S. would not help avert a war."

Much like a comment attributed to Winston Churchill during the Battle of Britain, North Korea was now telling its citizens, "If you've got to go, take one with you." The places it threatened to take with it were Seoul, the thirty-eight American bases on Okinawa, and as many Japanese cities as it could hit (though in actual fact it may not have the capability of reaching as far as either Okinawa or the Japanese mainland with nuclear-tipped

missiles). At the very least, however, were it to arm itself with nuclear weapons, it would certainly spark a nuclear arms race in East Asia.

Over the last two years, South Korean public opinion has shifted radically on the issue of North Korea. The prosperous and well-informed people of the South know that their fellow Koreans, hungry, desperate, oppressed but exceedingly well armed, are trapped by the ironies of the end of the Cold War and by the harshness of the Kim Jong-il regime, but are also being pushed into an exceedingly dangerous corner by the pride and arrogance of the Americans in their newly proclaimed role as the reigning global military colossus. The South no longer much fears the North -- at least a North not pushed to extreme acts by Washington. They fear instead the enthusiasm for war emanating from Washington and the constant problems generated by American troops based in South Korea over the past fifty years.

Here, too, some history is needed on a peninsula where the past is seldom forgotten. South Korea has been an American dependency since the United States occupied the southern half of the Korean peninsula in 1945 and subsequently created the "Republic of Korea." During 2002, the Department of Defense listed among its properties and personnel in South Korea 101 separate military installations manned by 37,605 American troops, 2,875 U.S. civilians working for the military, and 7,027 resident American dependents.

On June 13, 2002, a 60-ton U.S. Army tracked vehicle rumbled down a narrow, two-lane road through small villages a few miles north of the South Korean capital. The two sergeants manning the vehicle failed to see two thirteen-year-old schoolgirls walking along the road on the way to a friend's birthday party. They were crushed to death. It is not clear whether the two soldiers were operating the vehicle as part of their official duties, whether they failed to see the girls because of equipment faultily mounted on their vehicle, and whether the vehicle's internal communications system malfunctioned or just had not been plugged in properly.

The Korean government demanded that the sergeants be handed over to them to be tried in a Korean court for manslaughter. The U.S. refused, claiming that right under a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) it forced on the country during the Korean War. Instead the men were tried in an American military court for "criminal negligence" and exonerated for the "accidental" deaths. No real prosecution evidence was introduced at the trial, and the men's commanding officer, who was in Korea, was never called to testify on the soldiers' training and supervision. Anti-American riots erupted throughout the South, first calling for the SOFA to be revised, and later demanding that American forces get out of the country altogether.

On December 19, 2002, South Korea elected Roh Moo-hyun, a human rights lawyer, to succeed Kim Dae-jung as president. In his campaign, Roh pledged himself to continue Kim's opening to the North and also asked for changes in South Korea's military relations with the United States. His incoming administration is said to have told Bush that South Korea would rather live with a nuclear North than join the U.S. in another war. On February 12, 2003, no doubt as a way both to pressure the Roh government and punish it for its positions, the Pentagon announced that it was considering withdrawing some of the troops that have been based in South Korea since the Korean War cease-fire agreement of 1953. Rumors began to appear in the American media that the Pentagon was preparing a possible strike against the North's nuclear facilities.

On April 9, the day Baghdad fell, the Pentagon and the Roh government entered into negotiations over the future of U.S. forces in the Republic of Korea, and the U.S. delegation showed extraordinary impatience to move the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division back from the Demilitarized Zone as quickly as possible. One source quoted Adm. Thomas Fargo, head of the U.S. Pacific Command, as saying "I'd like to be out yesterday." As it was meant to do, this threw fear into both the official South and the southern public. The concern among ROK citizens was that such a sudden redeployment of U.S. troops out of harm's way would not only look to the North like part of preparations for a preemptive strike, but might prove to be so. Equally ominous, the U.S. sent B-1 and B-52 strategic bombers to Guam "in case they might be needed in Korea" and later announced that an undisclosed number of F-117 stealth fighter jets and F-15E Strike Eagles deployed to South Korea for recently concluded military exercises would remain in the country. The radar-evading F-117s would be highly suitable for attacking a broad variety of targets in the North, including the nuclear plant at Yongbyon. The last time F-117s were based in South Korea was in 1994, when the Clinton administration was also contemplating a "surgical strike" on the North. That crisis ended peacefully only when former President Jimmy Carter went to Pyongyang and opened direct negotiations with Kim Jong-il.

As might be expected, the Bush administration has taken the view that these developments on the Korean peninsula are further evidence of the need for a ballistic missile defense -- to protect against future nuclear-tipped North Korean Taepodong II missiles. But, in fact, even if such a system succeeded in shooting down a North Korean nuclear warhead, the fallout over South Korea and probably Japan and Okinawa might be hardly less disastrous than a direct hit. The most serious outcome of this American-generated crisis has been to give great impetus to nuclear proliferation around the world. Small nations everywhere now realize that the only way to deter the United States from exercising its imperial will over them might be to acquire a nuclear capability. Iraq's problem, from this perspective, was that it really did not have any weapons of mass destruction.

I fear that, sooner or later, once the heavy military deployments in Iraq are somewhat reduced, the Pentagon may indeed turn its full attention to North Korea, with the probable mission (since the Bush administration has

made it clear that it will not negotiate directly with Kim Jong-il) of a "surgical strike" against Yongbyon. Its true intention, as in Iraq, will be to produce a "regime change" in North Korea and consolidate its imperial position on the Korean peninsula. In the meantime, the administration has been insisting on multilateral negotiations in which neighboring China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea would all pressure the North into some kind of surrender. And in recent weeks, those allies have begun to put on the pressure. The Chinese, for instance, reportedly briefly suspended shipments which provide crucial oil to the energy-starved North.

The suggestion that the U.S. is willing to leave the situation to the nations in the region, however, is on a par with its completely disingenuous efforts to leave the Iraqi situation in the hands of the U.N. Security Council. It's likely that the U.S. is merely playing for time, and when it deems that time ripe will surely act alone, without consulting China, Japan, Russia, or South Korea. This is why Defense Secretary Rumsfeld is reportedly so eager to consider moving U.S. troops away from the demilitarized zone. He has no wish to leave them as sitting ducks, should the North respond militarily, as they have threatened to do.

Unfortunately, the real sitting ducks would be the almost eleven million South Koreans who live in Seoul and its environs. Even if Yongbyon is destroyed, Kim Jong-il has enough conventional weaponry (and perhaps even a nuclear bomb that could be launched from a secret locale) to destroy Seoul, which is less than 50 miles from the demilitarized zone. To ease these insecurities President Roh, like President Kim Dae-jung before him, continues to stress a "sunshine policy" of greater openness toward the North.

I believe that in order for this policy to work, President Roh must do more to separate himself from the Americans and their intransigent, warlike posture -- and quickly. In recent weeks, however, the new government in the South has rushed to mollify Washington, reassuring the Bush administration that it wants American troops stationed near the border and even sending about 700 noncombatant troops to Iraq as part of the "coalition" effort to wage war.

If President Roh were to ask American troops to leave South Korea altogether, with perhaps only a treaty promising an American "nuclear umbrella" in case the North ever did use nuclear weapons, I believe a reconciliation between the two Koreas might come very speedily, nor do I think the South risks very much by trying this strategy, since its own armed forces are fully capable of matching any northern threat short of a nuclear attack.

On the other hand, if it sticks with the Americans, it risks everything. I believe the bellicosity of North Korea has been greatly exaggerated. It is, today, a failed Communist regime and much of its population hovers on the edge of starvation. In the "black-versus-white" worldview of the Bush administration, it has become commonplace to characterize leaders such as Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong-il as simply "evil doers," which lifts them out of history. In addition, Kim Jong-il is sometimes portrayed as being mentally deranged or, alternatively, as a gangster. It is interesting that Bush and Kim Jong-il have at least one thing in common -- both owe their current jobs to their daddies. Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward reports one White House interview with the President as follows: "'I loathe Kim Jong-il!' Bush shouted, waving his finger in the air. 'I've got a visceral reaction to this guy, because he is starving his people. . . . Maybe it's my religion, maybe it's my-but I feel passionate about this. . . . They tell me, we don't need to move too fast, because financial burdens on people will be so immense if we try to-if this guy were to topple. Who would take care of-I just don't buy that. Either you believe in freedom, and want to-and worry about the human condition, or you don't'." (Bush at War, 2002, p. 340)

Unfortunately, such fundamentalist and apolitical beliefs not only seriously underestimate Kim Jong-il and his advisers, but also short-circuit all historical understanding of why such a leader may be revered as well as feared and hated by his countrymen, and why even a disaffected or poorly fed population might be willing to fight for them. In the case of North Korea, it is simply ahistorical and culturally ignorant to suppose that its people, especially its highly disciplined, heavily regimented armed forces, will not fight back -- and fight hard -- to retain control over their homeland. No one knows this better than the South Koreans, who feel exactly the same way about their half of the peninsula.

Time, unfortunately, may be running out for the South Koreans to save themselves. They may well waste the next few months negotiating with and trying to appease Washington, hoping fruitlessly to explain that this crisis can best be handled by astute diplomacy and confidence-building measures. North Korea has been attempting, fitfully and with great trepidation, to come in from the cold in somewhat the same way China did so successfully over the past twenty years. As Kim Dae-jung understood, the U.S. and South Korea should be magnanimous winners instead of megalomaniacal warmongers. No surrounding nation -- not the Republic of Korea, nor Japan, nor China, nor Russia -- wants or sees the need for a renewed civil war on the Korean peninsula.

Bush's junta of chicken hawks will try to soothe the South Koreans' fears about a preventive war with talk of America's "precision-guided missiles," its commitment to avoiding civilian casualties, its superbly trained fighting forces (the South Koreans probably know more about the "collateral damage" they can cause even in peace time than the denizens of Washington), and how the North Koreans who survive our bombers will hail the Americans and South Koreans as liberators. But the South Koreans know better, and if they value their lives and the rich society they have built, they should not at this point believe a thing the Americans say. One

certain legacy of the war in Iraq is that American political and military leaders can no longer be believed or trusted.

As evidence of America's willingness to lie to its own people, its allies, and the "international community," let me offer just one example. On February 5, 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell went before the Security Council to present what he called definitive secret intelligence proving the existence of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons in Iraq. The Secretary of State even went out of his way to try to emulate the famous moment, on October 23, 1962, when Ambassador Adlai Stevenson introduced photographs taken by a low-flying U-2 spy plane showing Russian missiles in Cuba. Powell came with his own blowups of satellite reconnaissance photos. Apparently to add to the credibility of his presentation, Powell placed behind him the Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet, who appeared in virtually all television pictures of Powell's speaking. Tenet made no comment, but his presence seemed to imply that what Powell had to say came with the full backing of the CIA.

In his presentation, Secretary Powell claimed, "It took years for Iraq to finally admit that it had produced four tons of the deadly nerve agent VX. A single drop on the skin will kill in minutes. Four tons. The admission only came out after inspectors collected documentation as a result of the defection of Hussein Kamel, Saddam Hussein's late son-in-law." Similar statements were made by President Bush in an October 7, 2002 speech and by Vice President Cheney in an August 27, 2002 speech. What all three knew when they spoke was that Hussein Kamel also said that "after the Gulf War, Iraq destroyed all its chemical and biological weapons stocks and the missiles to deliver them" and that a military aide who defected with him backed his assertions. Kamel was debriefed in Jordan by the CIA, British intelligence (MI6), and the then head of the U.N. inspection teams, Rolf Ekeus. These three groups conspired to keep Kamel's statements secret, allegedly in order to prevent Saddam Hussein from finding out how much they had learned. On February 26, 2003, a complete copy of the transcript of Kamel's statements was obtained from UN sources by Glen Rangwala, a Cambridge university specialist in Middle Eastern affairs. In the transcript, Kamel says bluntly, "All weapons-biological, chemical, missile, nuclear-were destroyed." This is, of course, what Scott Ritter, a senior American member of the team of UN weapons inspectors in Iraq during the 1990s, has said all along.

Hussein Kamel, who defected from Iraq in August 1995, was easily the single most important source of intelligence on Iraq since the first Gulf War. In a January 25, 1999, letter to the U.N. Security Council, the chief weapons inspector reported that the entire eight years of disarmament work "must be divided into two parts, separated by the events following the departure . . . of Lt. Gen. Hussein Kamel." Kamel was a son-in-law of Saddam Hussein and for ten years the man in charge of Iraq's nuclear, chemical, biological, and missile programs. He defected to Jordan taking with him crates of secret documents in the apparent belief that his revelations would lead to Saddam's overthrow and that he would then replace him. After six months, he concluded that his plan was not working and returned to Baghdad to try to reconcile with his father-in-law. Instead, Saddam had him executed. Since 1995, any number of American officials have cited information Kamel gave to Western intelligence without ever admitting that he offered equally compelling evidence Saddam's weapons no longer existed. This official American mendacity will not only ruin the distinguished career of Colin Powell; it has discredited the only shred of legitimacy the U.S. could find for its invasion of Iraq. On April 5, 2003, British Home Secretary David Blunkett admitted that no significant stocks of weapons of mass destruction were likely to be found in Iraq because they undoubtedly did not exist. Presumably he was in on the deception.

Now that the generation that fought the Korean War in the South, the North, and the United States is passing from the scene, the time is ripe for younger people with more flexible approaches to resolve this last remaining Cold War legacy -- a hostile peninsula divided at the DMZ. It is only in the U.S. that the departure of this generation seems to have created such a case of historical amnesia that a new generation is preparing to start a war there all over again. All I can say to young South Koreans is, "Don't let that happen; take your future into your own hands." As Graham Greene wrote of his American CIA officer in his classic novel The Quiet American, "He was impregnably armored by his good intentions and his ignorance." Such people are very dangerous to others as well as themselves.