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South Korea

? In South Korea, War Hysteria Is Seen as an American Problem

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Tim Shorrock wrote for *The Nation* on the situation in South Korea explaining “?The big issue here is the May 9 presidential election, which is expected to bring a progressive to power.”

Gwangju, South Koreaâ€”When I arrived at Incheon International Airport near Seoul on April 2 to start a two-month stay in South Korea, I was immediately struck by the sharp contrasts between America and this bustling country of 50 million.

First was the airport itself. Incheon is one of the best-designed and most efficient airports in the world; it's years ahead of the dilapidated structures that US air travelers are forced to endure. The lines for immigration and customs move briskly, and weary travelers are assisted by guides who speak English and politely lead you to the right gate.

Upon entry, the government agents who stamp your passport (and demand your fingerprints on a fancy electronic device) have the same authoritarian air as in most countries. But they're a far cry from the grim and determined Customs and Border Patrol agents who have become notorious under President Trump for their rude and insulting behavior toward foreign visitors and refugees.

Then, as soon as you emerge into the terminal itself, you encounter South Korea's fabulous and mostly public Wi-Fi system. Smartphones and computers are immediately connected to the Internet without charge or registration, making it easy to e-mail or text friends or family upon disembarking. High-speed Wi-Fi is prevalent throughout the country, and makes South Korea the most wired place on earth.

And right across the street from the terminal is the beautiful, futuristic structure for KORAIL, South Korea's high-speed train system, which connects Incheon with every major city in the country. As with Europe, Asia has invested heavily in railâ€”unlike the United States, where such systems are still pipe dreams. My 159-mile trip the next morning to Gwangju, a city of 1.5 million in the southwest that's known as the cradle of Korea's democratic revolution, took less than three hours.

So far, however, my stay here has overlapped with the greatest contrast of all: the sharp difference between American and South Korean coverage of North Korea's nuclear and missile program and the huge perception gap about the situation by US and South Korean citizens.

Shortly before I flew from Washington, DC, to Seoul, a US Navy aircraft-carrier group led by the USS Carl Vinson was ordered to move toward Korean waters. Immediately, the US media started broadcasting dire reports about the possibility of US pre-emptive strikes from these ships on the North's military facilities. With CNN available on most cable systems here, the alarming news spread far and wide.

The reports were fueled by a steady flow of threatening tweets from President Trump and dire predictions and warnings from his cabinet (led by the oafish secretary of state, Rex Tillerson). Their pronouncements were reinforced by the hawkish and frequently unhinged Korea “experts” who dominate cable television.

For the most part, the US media have been split between lurid speculation about what such a war might look like and gleeful guesswork about whether Trump will send SEAL Team 6 assassination squads to take out Kim Jong-un, the North's boyish, 33-year-old dictator.

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Observers with deep understanding of Korean affairs, such as John Delury, a professor at Seoul's Yonsei University who recently mapped out a sensible plan for diplomacy with the North in *The New York Times*, are rarely consulted. And, as is usual with coverage of North Korea, most American reporting lacks any historical context, includes virtually no Korean voices, and is almost universally in favor of the confrontational approach adopted by both Trump and his predecessor, Barack Obama.

As the historian Bruce Cumings pointed out in *The Nation* last month, the American press assiduously avoids any mention of the horror inflicted on the North by US warplanes during the Korean War, as well as the long history of US military provocations on the peninsula. (His article should be required reading for anybody seeking to understand Kim's motives; perhaps Chris Hayes, a *Nation* editor at large, would consider inviting Cumings on his MSNBC show, *All In with Chris Hayes*, to counter the inflammatory, one-sided discussions on his network.)

Sadly, though, NBC has been the source for the most abysmal stories. On April 13, the network, citing "multiple senior US intelligence officials," proclaimed that Trump was "prepared to launch a preemptive strike with conventional weapons against North Korea should officials become convinced that North Korea is about to follow through with a nuclear weapons test."

But the story was widely rebuked as reckless and without foundation. According to South Korea's *Hankyoreh*, "reporters covering the South Korean Ministry of National Defense for other US news outlets unanimously dismissed the report as false. South Korean foreign affairs sources bluntly called the report "a canard." The story was so outlandish that the Trump administration itself was forced to repudiate it, with a National Security Council spokesperson telling ABC the story was "way wrong."

Pyongyang, of course, added its own hyperbole. "North Korea will immediately make its own kind of appropriate super-hardline response according to the kind and the intensity of the American provocation," the Korean People's Army declared in a statement on April 14, *Hankyoreh* reported.

If attacked, the KPA said, it was prepared to strike, including with nuclear weapons, at "all of the bases of evil," including the US military bases "in South Korea such as those at Osan, Gunsan and Pyeongtaek." In a swat at Japan and the US bases there, the KPA reminded Trump "that all American bases throughout the Pacific region, including those on Guam, Okinawa and the Japanese main island, are within the sights of our strategic rocket forces."

The sensational US coverage and the North's statements convinced many Americans that war was imminent. My 93-year-old father in California, who worked as a missionary in Korea for many years, was deeply frightened by the reports. All last week I received e-mails and Facebook messages from family and friends urging me to come home as soon as I could. My response was always: No worries, ordinary South Koreans are not concerned at all.

With the exception of a tiny minority of fanatical anti-communists, South Koreans have largely been unfazed by the headlines. "I'm much more worried about anything President Trump might do than the threats of war and retaliation from North Korea," a friend of mine who teaches engineering at a local university in Gwangju told me over dinner one night. His sentiment is widely echoed throughout South Korea.

In Seoul, people are going about their regular business. "For many South Koreans, the concerns about the North can feel like a rite of spring, along with the rain showers or the cherry blossoms that crowds flock to see this time of year," two Seoul-based reporters for *The Wall Street Journal* wrote last Friday. On Saturday, James Pearson, the Reuters correspondent in Seoul, took time out from his extensive coverage of North Korea's missile tests to tweet that "South Koreans in general are not interested in the fireworks north of the DMZ."

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As if to make his point, that day thousands of South Koreans turned out nationwide for an emotional issue close to home: observing the third anniversary of the Sewol ferry disaster. In 2014, more than 300 people, most of them high-school students, died when the ferry capsized just over a mile from shore. Many Koreans blame their recently deposed president, Park Geun-hye, for the government's botched rescue of the ship. (She was indicted for bribery, abuse of power, and other corruption charges on Monday.) Park's cold response to the victims—she was reportedly getting her hair done during the disaster and refused to meet with the bereaved families—was a key factor in the movement to impeach her.

In fact, preventing a return to conservative, right-wing rule seems to be the dominant theme for Korean citizens. In Gwangju, which was the scene of a violent South Korean military crackdown and massacre in May 1980, the focus is the country's future after Park's forced resignation and recent arrest. The sentiment was best expressed by a large sign in Gwangju's downtown last week (seen in my photograph at the top of this post). It demanded the immediate imprisonment of Park and the chiefs of Samsung, Lotte, and other conglomerates under investigation for bribing her while she was in office.

To be sure, the escalating rhetoric between the United States and North Korea over the past few weeks, as well as Trump's threats to "do it alone," have greatly alarmed Korean politicians of all stripes.

South Korea will choose its next president on May 9. The two leading candidates, the liberal Moon Jae-in and the more centrist Ahn Cheol-soo, have wide leads over the likely conservative candidate, Hong Jun-pyo. The United States has been closely following the election with growing trepidation. As I reported last year before Park was deposed, US military officials and analysts have expressed alarm that the left opposition could win this year.

Moon was a top adviser to the late former president Roh Moo-hyun, who was a progressive labor lawyer before entering politics. Moon has staked out a position very different from Trump's: He has called for direct dialogue and negotiations with North Korea and a reopening of the economic cooperation with the North championed by Roh and Kim Dae-jung, the beloved opposition leader who was president in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

These ideas are very attractive to Koreans tired of the years-long dispute between Pyongyang and Washington. "We in South Korea can do this on our own initiative," one of my colleagues at the Gwangju City Archives told me over lunch on Monday, referring to Kim's "Sunshine" policies toward the North. A professor of European industrial history at a nearby university told me many Koreans are convinced that the United States wants to maintain the North as an enemy to "help your military industry."

He has a point. Moon has also said the United States should delay deployment of the controversial Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system known as THAAD (built by Lockheed Martin) until the next government is in place, although he has wavered on that in recent days. But the THAAD antimissile batteries were hurriedly dispatched to South Korea last month by the Pentagon despite the concerns of Moon and others that it could destabilize relations with China.

Ahn, who made his name as a software executive, has taken a more hard line, saying he agrees with the immediate deployment of THAAD. But like Moon, he has emphasized the importance of negotiations and China's involvement in the process. Meanwhile, at their first group debate on April 13, both Moon and Ahn expressed strong opposition to a unilateral US pre-emptive strike and emphasized that South Korea must play a lead role in any dealings with North Korea or China. The candidates are now running neck and neck, and either one could win the presidency.

That will likely force a change in Trump's policy, away from confrontation and back to the combination of sanctions and military strength emphasized by the Obama administration. By week's end, the Associated Press was reporting

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that a White House review of North Korean policy had, in fact, settled on “maximum pressure and engagement”â€”a shift away from the hard-line rhetoric of the past few weeks. “In the end, they settled on a policy that appears to represent continuity,” the AP concluded.

And on Sunday, as Vice President Mike Pence was arriving in South Korea to consult with the acting government in Seoul, H.R. McMaster, Trump’s national-security adviser, seemed to confirm the new policy. “It’s time for us to undertake all actions we can, short of a military option, to try to resolve this peacefully,” he said on ABC’s This Week program, according to Reuters.

For the progressive forces here, however, the war talk coming from both Trump and Kim Jong-un is deep cause for concern. In a stinging editorial on Easter Sunday, the Hankyoreh newspaper, which was founded by journalists purged during the authoritarian 1970s and ’80s, blamed both sides for aggravating tensions.

“A military clash on the Korean Peninsula would have disastrous consequences not only for North and South Korea but also for all neighboring countries,” the newspaper said. “That is why we will never agree with hardliners who are willing to go to war and who see war as inevitable. The brinkmanship of the U.S. and North Korea, which appear to be engaged in a battle of nerves, is tantamount to taking hostage the entire populations of North and South Korea.”

Still, the feeling here in Gwangju and elsewhere seems to be that this, too, shall passâ€”until someone comes along with the courage and stamina to buck the United States and try serious engagement for a change. After all, this is their country. That’s a lesson too many Americans, in their obsession with North Korea as a strategic enemy, seem to forget.

Source: [The Nation](#).

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