

# **“It’s the Americans, stupid!” Making sense of the latest Korean crisis**

Tim Beal

The media focuses on North Korea on the mistaken assumption that Pyongyang is the sole cause of the current crisis. Things are more complex than that. To paraphrase Bill Clinton, “It’s the Americans, stupid!” Or to be more accurate, we can only understand what is going on if we examine current events within the context of the geopolitical interplay between the main actors. That means the two Koreas, Japan, Russia, China, and the most powerful one of them all, the United States.

Tim Beal’s latest book on Korea, [Crisis in Korea: America, China, and the Risk of War](#), was published by Pluto Press in 2011. Writing in The Listener, Associate Professor Stephen Hoadley of Auckland University called it ‘an eye-opener’ – ‘Tim Beal is New Zealand’s, and probably Australasia’s, leading expert on North Korea. ... America-sceptics will find much to agree with. The America-tolerant will be bemused, even affronted. All will be better informed’.

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# KOREA'S CHALLENGE

- The US division of Korea in 1945 was one of the most calamitous and consequential acts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century
  - Buffer protecting conquered Japan
- Led to Korean War
  - Millions of casualties, devastation of peninsula
  - Resurrection of Japan economy
  - Established Cold War
  - US permanent war economy
  - Etc.

# Division of Korea

- War did not produce reunification but hardened division
- Aid and support >> economic growth
- Benefits exhausted
  - 1990 for NK, now for SK
- Division is increasing burden
  - Most obvious for NK – US hostility, sanctions, threats
  - Also for SK

# Necessity of reunification

- Division>>tension>danger of war
- Military burden – financial, human resources
- Human cost – divided families
- Missed potential
  - Sports – Olympics, football...
  - Science – satellites
  - Economy>>>

# Economic necessities

- SK sandwiched between China and Japan
- Middle income trap?
- Complementarities between N & S
  - Historical/geographical, and post division
- Unified Korea would produce the economic and social mass to compete, divided Korea in constant danger

# Unification

- Unification by force probably catastrophic
  - MB's dreams of collapse
  - >>worst case war between China and US
  - Without war, economic and social consequences dire
- Need for gradual, consensual reunification based on mutual benefit

# Independence

- Removal of foreign involvement (esp US)
- >> unified, neutral Korea
  - Independent of foreign powers
  - On good relations with neighbours
    - China, Japan, US, Russia



# IT'S THE AMERICANS, STUPID!

- Media focusses on North Korea
- Reality is more complex
- Paraphrasing Bill Clinton
  - Look for the prime, underlying driver
- Could add, It's the Chinese, stupid
- Need to position the crisis within the context of the geopolitical interplay between the main actors
  - Two Koreas, US, China, Japan, Russia

# FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

- Three components
  - Location
  - History
  - Contemporary political dynamics

# Location, Location

Korean peninsula is where US, China, Russia, Japan intersect and contend



# Conduit and dagger

Buddhism, writing, Confucianism...invasion both directions



# Strategic location

- Mongols needed Korea for invasion of Japan
- Japan needed Korea for invasion of Asia
- 1945 – US divided Korea to have a buffer against Communist contagion
- Need continues today as containment of China
  - Division of Korea>>tension>>justifies US presence
- China (+ Russia) want NK as buffer against US
  - But also want stability

# Continuities of history

- Park Geun-hye – daughter of Park Chung-hee
  - Served in Japanese army, seized power 1961, architect of SK economic growth, killed by spy chief 1979
- Kim Jong Un – grandson of Kim Il Sung
  - Anti-Japanese guerrilla, founded NK

# POLICIES AND POSITIONS OF THE MAIN ACTORS

- North Korea
- US
- South Korea
- No time now for
  - China
  - Russia
  - Japan

# NORTH KOREA'S PREDICAMENT

- Before collapse of Soviet Union NK economy did very well
- Star of developing world
  - Ahead of SK, and China
    - Until the early to mid 1980s
- Loss of SU meant that it had to cope in US-dominated global economy
  - US sanctions since 1950s



# Economic free-fall

- Economy went into free fall
  - Eg agriculture was industrialised so lack of industrial inputs (oil, fertiliser, spare parts..) was catastrophic
- Rapprochement with US had been policy aim since 1960s but now became imperative
- If NK is to really rehabilitate economy it needs a non-hostile US
  - Limited recovery mainly due to increased Chinese trade and investment

# North Korea's survival objectives

- Small, vulnerable, threatened country with few options
- Prime foreign policy objective is to force US into peaceful coexistence (regime survival)
  - Lifting of sanctions (physical, financial)
  - Removal of military threat
  - Normal state-to-state relations (no 'hostility')
  - Aid

# Doing nothing is not an option

- NK criticised for nuclear weapons programme but it appears that it is the only thing that gets the US talking
- US sanctions/hostility long pre-dated nuclear programme
- Obama's policy of 'strategic patience'
  - i.e. no negotiations
- Test>>>flurry of calls to negotiate

## US diplomatic experts speak on need for dialogue with North Korea

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### Stephen Bosworth argues for engagement on a broader basis than simple denuclearization

By Park Hyun, Washington correspondent

In a hearing on North Korean policy held in the US Senate Foreign Affairs Committee on Mar. 7 (EST), current and former representatives at the six-party talks spoke of the necessity of dialogue with North Korea.

Glyn T. Davies, the US State Department's special representative for North Korea, was among those testifying at



# Will it work?

- NK strategy of prodding US into negotiations may not work
- Is there an alternative?
- Aspirations
  - Friendly relations with US to counterbalance China
  - Aspirations of any other modern country
    - Security, prosperity
      - Soccer + IT

# UNITED STATES – MAKING SENSE OF FOREIGN POLICY

- Others are relatively straightforward – not the US
- America's foreign policy – what is it, and why is it?
- Difficulty to be expected
  - Largest economy
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> latest population
  - Runs a global empire
  - Foreign policy apparatus greater than population of NZ

# Big, unasked question

- NK wants peace with US
  - Trade, investment, ...basketball competitions





# What is wrong with that?

- Why cannot the US have peace with NK?
- Parallels with China 40 years ago
  - US resisted coming to terms with PRC for 25 years

# Six possible reasons

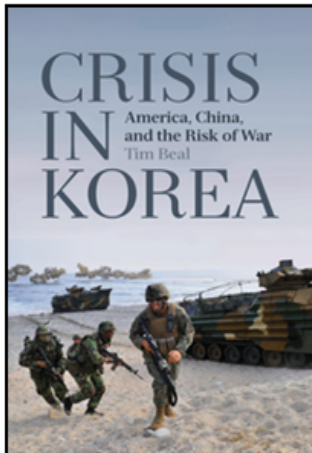
- Military industrial complex needs a threat
- Psychological effect 60 years of anti-NK propaganda
- Privileging the domestic in foreign policy
- Fear of example
- Missile defense
- **Containment of China**

# SOUTH KOREA – CHANGE AGENT

- Lee Myung-bak NK policy a failure
- Thought increasing tension could precipitate crisis
  - Collapse of NK
  - Reunification under Seoul
- Inherently dangerous policy
  - Risked 2<sup>nd</sup> Korean War involving US and China
  - Covered in my book

# Read all about it

## Crisis in Korea: America, China, and the Risk of War Tim Beal



- [Description](#)
- [Foreword and table of contents](#)

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- [Direct from Pluto](#)
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- [North Korea: The Struggle against American Power](#)  
Pluto Press, 2005

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# Lee's failure

- NK did not collapse
  - Even after death of Kim Jong Il
- SK business suffered
- Drive NK into hands of China
- New policy inevitable whoever won Dec 2012 presidential election

# Park Geun-Hye

- She is the daughter of her father, but..
- Times have changed
- She has record on engagement with the North

# 2002 meeting with Kim Jong Il



# Park's Northern policy

- If engages then has Nixon advantage
- Has talked of engagement, building trust, but also confrontation



# SPRING CRISIS

- Northern Spring 2013
    - February >>end April
- Crisis and talk of war

# The picture the media painted



"North Korea threatens war." NZ Herald, 12 March 2013. [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=2&objectid=10870654](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=10870654)

# What really happened, and why?

- UN Security Council resolutions
- US/SK joint military exercises and the Playbook

# Timeline

- 12 December 2012 NK satellite launch
- 22 January US-sponsored UN resolution 2087
- 30 January SK satellite launch
- 12 February NK 3<sup>rd</sup> nuclear test
  - (US 1000+)
- 7 March US-sponsored UN resolution 2094

# UNSC resolutions

- This particular crisis started with US-initiated UNSC sanctions against NK for satellite launch
- Only satellite launch condemned by UNSC
- Donald Gregg
  - CIA, Bush snr ambassador to SK, Chairman of Korea Society

# Gregg sees satellite sanctions as pre-emptive strike against Park

- Gregg said the UN's decision to place expanded sanctions on North Korea just before **Park Geun-hye took office as South Korean president** and John Kerry as US secretary of state **put a barrier** to either of them **initiating dialogue with Pyongyang**. In short, he said, the sanctions were very poorly timed.

- Park, Hyun. "Donald Gregg says it's time to enter dialogue with North Korea." *Hankyoreh*, 5 February 2013.[http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_northkorea/572838.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/572838.html)

# Lee's capture of US policy

- President Park's hard-line predecessor, Lee Myung-bak, bequeathed a tense situation to his successor. Near the end of his presidency, he pushed hard for additional U.N. sanctions, the passage of which last month precipitated North Korea's third nuclear test. The latest sanctions were in response to that test, and North Korea's new threats have come in immediate retaliation.

– Gregg, Donald P. "Reach Out to North Korea." *New York Times*, 11 March 2013. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/12/opinion/donald-gregg-reach-out-to-north-korea.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/12/opinion/donald-gregg-reach-out-to-north-korea.html?_r=1&)

# Joint US/SK military exercises

- Two main sets a year
- Various forms over decades
- Main purpose is to produce tension, threaten NK
  - Claim to defend SK, but ....



# Overwhelming US superiority



# This year more threatening than usual

- B-52s
- B-2s
- F-22s

# Brute American power

- A B-52 bomber took part in training exercises over South Korean airspace on Tuesday **simulating bombing raids on North Korea.**
- The symbol of brute American power during the Cold War ...

• "B-52 Practices Bombing Raids on N.Korea." *Chosun Ilbo*, 20 March 2013. [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2013/03/20/2013032001034.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/03/20/2013032001034.html)



# Why? Wall Street Journal explains

- Article 3 April

- Entous, Adam, and Julian E. Barnes. "U.S. Dials Back on Korean Show of Force." *Wall Street Journal*, 3 April 2013. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324100904578400833997420280.html>

- a step-by-step plan the Obama administration approved earlier this year, dubbed "**the playbook**," that laid out the sequence and publicity plans for U.S. shows of force during annual war games with South Korea. The playbook included well-publicized flights in recent weeks near North Korea by nuclear-capable B-52 and stealth B-2 bombers, as well as advanced F-22 warplanes.

# The playbook

- The U.S. military's Pacific Command began devising the playbook plan amid a series of provocations by the North, including the **launch of a long-range rocket in December**, in preparation for the annual military exercise with the South.

# Smoke and mirrors

- U.S. intelligence agencies assessed the risks associated with the playbook and concluded there was a low probability of a North Korean military response because the regime's top priority has been self-preservation. U.S. officials believe the North understands that taking military action could prompt a devastating U.S. and South Korean counter-strike that could destabilize the regime.

# NK reaction

- Professor David Kang, Korean American
- For all the hype about the last few months of chest-thumping and muscle-flexing, it's important to remember two things: **First, if you read the North Korean statements in full, they are all saying “IF the U.S./ROK attack us first, we will fight back,” (not “we will attack you first,” which is often how they are interpreted), and second, we believe them. That’s why there are no preemptive strikes on North Korea.**
- Kang, David, and Christina Larson (interviewer). "North Korean Nukes: How Worried Should We Be, and What Is Kim Jong Un Thinking? ." *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 3 April 2013.<http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-04-03/north-korean-nukes-how-worried-should-we-be-and-what-is-kim-jong-un-thinking>

# The constructed crisis

- US decided to make military exercises more provocative and threatening than usual
- Knew there was no danger of NK physically responding to provocations, but could count on rhetoric, and got it
- Knew that if it attacked, NK would retaliate
- Triggered by Dec satellite launch but main purpose to prevent Park engaging NK



# What now?

- Park Geun-hye's dilemma
- Talks of *trustpolitik* and dialogue, but cooperates with US threats and sanctions
- Stalemate – but bridges not burnt

# China to the rescue?

- Kim Jong Un has sent envoy with letter to Xi Jinping
- Park Geun-hye has meeting with Xi late June
- Will the Six Party Talks be resurrected?