

**Nicholas Eberstadt**  
**What Happens Next – 04.10.2022**

Nicholas Eberstadt:

Point one: North Korean leadership is not crazy—we condescend and misunderstand when we say that it is.

The DPRK couldn't have outlasted the Soviet Empire by all these decades if it were irrational. Call North Korea a rogue state if you want—ouch!—but that epithet doesn't help us understand its ideology, internal logic, or objectives.

North Korea is a classic revisionist state. It is fundamentally dissatisfied with the geopolitical realities it faces—and wholly committed to changing the offending facts on the ground.

The Kim regime regards the South Korean state as an illegitimate monstrosity that must be destroyed and swept off the Peninsula—full stop. Since Washington guarantees Seoul's security, the US-ROK military alliance must be also destroyed, and American troops must be forced out of Korea, so that Pyongyang can proceed with unconditional reunification on its own terms. Pyongyang spells all this out, again and again, for anyone willing to take their words seriously.

Pyongyang didn't just come up with these ideas. They have informed and animated the North Korea state throughout three generations of Kim family rule. The rationale is integral to the state's basic doctrine, as laid out in *Juche* thought and the "Ten Principles of Monolithic Ideology". Racial reunification is in effect the sacred historical mission of the Kim regime—forswearing that mission would undermine its very claim to authority.

Second: The North Korean state is methodically preparing to fight and win a limited nuclear war against America on the Korean Peninsula. Those preparations have been underway for decades. This is what the never-ending "North Korean nuclear crisis" is all about.

North Korea almost unified the Peninsula unconditionally back in June 1950, remember—but that attempt failed, and the Kim regime has never given up the quest.

For a while, in the late 1950s and 1960s, it actually seemed like the North might be able to overpower the South through economic competition, amazing as that sounds today. But Pyongyang lost the economic race badly, as central planning systems typically do against free markets, even before the end of the Cold War, meaning that success in a conventional military contest—a reprise of 1950—was no longer viable.

Nukes and WMD are the regime's Plan B. There is an entirely logical design to the North's race to become a nuclear weapons state and a manufacturer of ICBMs. These are its key to consummating a Korean unification on its own terms.

By amassing a credible nuclear arsenal and the long-range missiles to train them on the US, the North hopes—I believe—to get Uncle Sam to blink in a future showdown, at a time and place of the Kims' own choosing. If Washington blinks in a nuclear faceoff against the DPRK, the US-South Korean alliance loses its credibility, and collapses. Then the North gets to go *mano a mano* with the South.

Yes: if push really does come to shove—thinking the unthinkable—the Kim regime would be annihilated. But the Kim regime seems confident it can outplay the Americans in this high-stakes game. They believe they are better at brinkmanship than Americans. One might even be tempted to say they have the nukes to prove it, this despite three decades of seemingly forceful US opposition to their nuclear quest.

Finally: notwithstanding the perennial calls for diplomatic engagement with the North, there can be no negotiated settlement, no splitting the difference, no win-win solution to the North Korean nuclear issue.

The reason is as simple as it is unpleasant. Like all Ur-Revisionists, the North will not be satisfied with some meet-in-the-middle compromise over an intolerable grievance—the intolerable grievance in this case being the continuing existence of a separate state on the Southern half of the Korean peninsula—a prosperous flourishing democracy, no less!

To most of us, the notion that tiny impoverished North Korea could beat and eat the South after driving out Uncle Sam (assuming they could) sounds utterly laughable. But not to the North's leadership. They regard South Koreans as defiled, corrupted, pampered and gutless. They think the South has no will to fight on its own. And as long as the Kim regime is in power, they are going to try to prove that they are right.

In sum: expect the North Korean nuclear crisis to continue until Pyongyang gets a better class of dictator.

Larry Bernstein:

Why did North Korea invade South Korea in 1950 and what does that have to do with your thesis?

Nicholas Eberstadt:

That's the start of the whole drama. The North Korean leadership under the Kim family has held from the beginning that they are the repositior of the destiny of the Korean Minjung, which I'd translate as race, sometimes nationality. And the opportunity seemed to arise in 1950, after Dean Acheson's famous speech that omitted the Republic of Korea from our security perimeter.

Larry Bernstein:

At the time of the 1950 invasion, North Korea was wealthier, more technically advanced and had substantial commodity reserves. Despite a very good opening gambit, it ended in a stalemate. Today, South Korea is 100 times wealthier per capita than North Korea, it's mind boggling. Now the North couldn't win when it was bigger, stronger, and wealthier, why does it think it can win when it is substantially weaker and poorer. Does this explain the nuclear option?

Nicholas Eberstadt:

All of the other options have fallen along the wayside in this three generation quest. North Korea's GDP is approximately zero as a first approximation. They're not going to be able to overpower the South on the basis of their economic might. Before South Korea was a democracy, it was a military dictatorship that the North made the argument that they were a more appealing state than the South. In the late '50s and early '60s, 100,000 Koreans in Japan voted with their feet and went to the North. But Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un aren't attractive poster children in our modern era.

Larry Bernstein:

Seoul is close to the North Korean border. In the North Korean mountains, artillery is pointed directly at Seoul. It would be impossible for the South Koreans to take out the artillery prior to the destruction of Seoul and that's with conventional let alone nuclear weapons. Americans have soldiers on the ground, which indicates that we're willing to sacrifice troops and we'll defend South Korea. How do you think about American ground troops in a future Korean conflict?

Nicholas Eberstadt:

The US troops are a trip wire. An attack on US forces would precipitate our full response to defend the ROK. And this is one of the main reasons that the North Korean strategy seems to be focused upon ending the US-ROK alliance, the exit of American troops from the South and the removal of the American nuclear umbrella.

Larry Bernstein:

What do North Koreans think of the Ukrainian experience?

Nicholas Eberstadt:

The North Korean government has been making the point for years that nuclear weapons are absolutely essential to their security. They point to the Libyan example as what happens when a state does not have nuclear weapons. Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons back in the 1994 agreement.

The North Koreans would never relinquish nuclear weapons.

Larry Bernstein:

If you were advising the South Korean government, would you suggest going nuclear to achieve deterrence and remove the uncertainty of the American nuclear umbrella?

Nicholas Eberstadt:

The South Korean population is strongly in favor of going nuclear according to current public opinion polls. The vagaries of public opinion will depend upon how credible the South Korean population believes the US commitment to be. The less credible America's commitment, the more likely they're going to go nuke.

It's very easy to imagine a chain reaction where a lot of countries including, the ROK, Japan, Australia, Taiwan might be tempted to go nuclear if one more country in the region does. United States policy has attempted to preclude that by assuring its allies that it is absolutely reliable. But these are democracies and their populations have a say in this too.

Larry Bernstein:

Core to your argument is to listen to what your enemies are saying. Putin laid out his arguments for the invasion of Ukraine in a public speech, a rational argument to justify Russia's attack. Here, North Korea has a reasoned argument to invade South Korea. Your position is to listen to what your enemies say.

Nicholas Eberstadt:

We have this condescending, Olympian view that we know best. And they can't possibly mean what they're saying because it doesn't make any sense to us. There was this ridiculous little man from Austria with the mustache, saying filthy things about Jews and Mein Kampf is just ridiculous. We look at people whose point of view are radically different from our own and say, it's impossible, it isn't sensible. It's only not sensible in the world as we'd like it to be.

Larry Bernstein:

The elephant in the region is China. Xi says he loves North Korea and that their friendship is forever. What do the Chinese want?

Nicholas Eberstadt:

From what evidence I see, they detest each other. But they understand power politics. As long as the North Korean state causes more difficulty for the US alliance in Asia than it does for the PRC, they're prepared to live with that.

You've got a divided peninsula, Beijing gets to play them off against each other. I'm not sure that China has had such a favorable position in Northeast Asia since the Qing Dynasty at the time of the Taiping Rebellion. It may serve China to manage this relationship until it stops working.

Larry Bernstein:

Why didn't China discourage North Korea from going nuclear?

Nicholas Eberstadt:

It's not clear that the Chinese government ever thought it was in its overriding interest to prevent the emergence of a nuclear North Korea, as long as it could be relatively confident that the missiles would be trained in one direction.

Larry Bernstein:

During one of my previous book clubs, former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz told us that in negotiations with the Chinese, the United States offered to remove all U.S. troops from the peninsula after a Korean unification, but that did not satisfy the Chinese.

Nicholas Eberstadt:

The alternative to a North Korean state would be a unified, market-oriented state run out of Seoul in alliance with the United States. The last time that China had a foreign power on its border was when Korea was occupied by Japan, and that was the staging ground for the invasion in the 1930s. Much better to have strategic depth even if you've got a troublesome frenemy.

Larry Bernstein:

South Korea's economy has grown by a factor of 100 since 1950. China has grown enormously as well. Why can't China's strategic interests change instead of looking through the lens of the Qing dynasty? Why can't economic opportunity justify a new strategy?

Nicholas Eberstadt:

Oh, yeah. In theory, there's no reason they couldn't. Over the past couple of decades, I've tried to probe that very question, Larry. I've tried to talk with Chinese interlocutors about how much money they'd save, if they had a better dictator in North Korea, it'd be a lot easier to develop the Manchuria area in Northeast China.

Larry Bernstein:

The North Korean government sometimes acts in bizarre ways that is inconsistent with international norms. In the early 1950s, the North Koreans sent a military submarine to kidnap Japanese lovers on the beach and then took them to North Korea to train North Korean troops about Japanese culture and language for a future invasion of Japan.

In the late 1990s, the Japanese found out about the kidnappings and were outraged, and demanded a North Korean apology and return of the Japanese kidnapped victims. But the North Koreans refused to let them return with their wives and families. The Chinese observed this situation, how it angered and frustrated the Japanese but did not intervene. What do the Chinese think of North Koreans violations of international norms?

Nicholas Eberstadt:

All's fair in love and war. And this is a war. There's no love lost with Japan. And any means that were necessary for purposes to advance reunification on their own terms were fine. And if people in the outside world saw these as heinous violations of norms, the response would be, "It's a heinous violation of norms to have this abhorrent state in the South of our peninsula propped up by imperialists across the ocean."

From the standpoint of Beijing to see why the government that still does the reprises of the rape of Nanjing at the drop of a hat, would all of a sudden say, "I'm shocked, shocked by what these naughty North Koreans are doing to your poor beachgoers." That's a business and pleasure situation from the Chinese standpoint.

Larry Bernstein:

A few years ago, a miniature North Korean submarine attacked a South Korean boat for no apparent reason. People died. What do you make of these isolated raids?

Nicholas Eberstadt:

The North Korean approach is to embrace radical goals, change the map. And to approach them in a way that's cautious and incremental. You keep on moving forward to normalize new behavior and realities. And if you get some serious pushback, you step back and consolidate.

So having miniature subs sink the Cheonan, a South Korean vessel. It's a probe. And if nothing happens, then you probe a little further. And if there's a big blow back, you deal with that, but you establish a new norm. All along the history of the North's confrontation with the US and South Korea, we see episodes that to us would seem bizarre and outrageous but are logical outcomes.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's go back to 1950 before the North's invasion of South Korea. The current dictator Kim's grandfather visited Stalin to discuss the invasion of the South. And Stalin gave his blessing. You mentioned in your six-minute opening remarks that Dean Acheson had not included South Korea as part of the US security guarantee, suggesting that if he had that there would have been no attack.

Nicholas Eberstadt:

If we go back to 1950, the fateful speech omitting South Korea from the security perimeter. But there was plenty of other evidence. Congress had voted down aid for it. If you were a betting man, you probably would've bet that the United States was not terribly interested in this place. And even the Americans didn't learn how interested they were in the place until it was attacked. And all of a sudden those unpredictable Americans are at it once again.

If there were a successful reunification effort led by North Korea, it would look like a moon launch. They'd have to get lucky and have no margin for error. One hypothetical would be after

the exit of US troops and the US nuclear umbrella, some domestic turmoil in the South, would somehow paralyze the society to allow, opportunistically, North Korean elements to walk in and claim a dominion.

I'm not making this entirely up. Back in 1983, the Rangoon bombing, when the then dictator of South Korea was visiting a shrine outside of Rangoon in Myanmar, Burma, North Korean agents missed him but blew up most of his cabinet.

Larry Bernstein:

North Korea is a side show in the region, away from their nukes, I don't think many people in the region even think of them. The elephant in the room is Chinese power. And after Obama pivoted, Americans created a coalition to contain Chinese aggression. The Quad: India, Australia, Japan and the US will likely take the lead, but I suspect that South Korea and Taiwan will join the group.

If the coalition solidifies, this will unite South Korea with its democratic neighbors that will likely help them defend against North Korea, especially Japan. What do you make of the growing coalition against China also undermining North Korea's invasion plans?

Nicholas Eberstadt:

That's a really interesting question, Larry. The North Korean approach has been to focus upon the United States and the ROK, to a much lesser degree Japan. Trying to break the US alliance and move forward on this quixotic quest of unconditional unification has been conditioned by the security architecture of the Pacific. We've got a hub and spoke set of bilateral relationships with the United States because the Japanese question.

If the Japan question is answered to the satisfaction of the neighbors then, as you intimate, a much deeper and perhaps more resilient security network will be possible, and would multiply the complexity of unconditional reunification for the North Koreans.

Larry Bernstein:

American and Western diplomats find North Korean behavior non-sensical. Don't they understand that communism has failed and that their country is an unmitigated disaster. Please come and join the American international order like everybody else. We'll offer help from the IMF and technical assistance. One day you can be as rich as the South Koreans. The Chinese reformed and look at them. No big deal, all is forgiven. And the Americans were shocked when they were not met with open arms but insults and rejection.

Nicholas Eberstadt:

We were confused and puzzled by the response because we've got such a self-referential, ahistorical perspective on human affairs. If you'd gone to the Spartans and say "We're gonna dangle this gold in front of you, can you please just throw away the stupid swords and shields

and make nice with the Athenians," They'd have cut your head off because it's not just preposterous but it's a grave insult to their honor.

There are a lot of things that motivate human beings, and not even the most important ones are pecuniary. People have died for honor, for the defense of their own. North Korean ideology is based upon racial socialism. People sacrifice on claims of nationality and honor and patriotism. And if we don't understand that, it's bad on us.