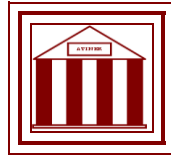


ATINER CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES No: MED2014-1014

Athens Institute for Education and Research

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MED2014-1014

**Nuclear Threat Narratives:
Preconditions to War**

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This paper should be cited as follows:

Collins C. A., (2014) "Nuclear Threat Narratives: Preconditions to War"
Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: **MED2014-1014.**

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URL: www.atiner.gr

URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

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ISSN: **2241-2891**

09/07/2014

Nuclear Threat Narratives: Preconditions to War

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Abstract

March and April 2013 brought an intensification of nuclear threat narratives between North Korea and the United States; a series of YouTube propaganda videos stirred up fear that Korea would send nuclear missiles to Japan or the West Coast of the United States. The propaganda videos were a response to the UN's sanction of North Korea's testing of what was viewed as banned missile technology and were accompanied with an announcement that North Korea would conduct a nuclear test. The first video showed a missile blowing up New York City and the second featured flames superimposed over Obama and American soldiers. Kim Jong Un fanned Cold War fears, and the rhetoric of nuclear attack and labels of madman provocative and reckless became media headlines describing North Korea's leader and his nuclear threats. Anxieties escalated with photographs of US troops stationed in South Korea wearing chemical and biological protective gear. North Korea proclaimed it would initiate 'a pre-emptive nuclear attack and destroy the strongholds of the aggressors' (Dyer, March 7, 2013). These provocative statements, the propaganda videos and mainstream media's coverage of the same constitute a widespread nuclear threat narrative.

Some media critics have concluded that these messages from political leaders and the mainstream media are reintroducing a rhetoric of fear like that employed during the Cold War. This essay explores the polarizing rhetoric that functions as a precondition to potential war by identifying the topoi of nuclear threat narratives established in Cold War rhetoric and reintroduced in the discourse surrounding North Korea's nuclear pronouncements and propaganda videos. The essay draws on recent research on nuclear rhetoric by Taylor (2010, 2007, 2003), Cold War research by Medhurst, Ivie and Wanderer (1997) and the rhetoric of war by Edwards (2011) and Williamson (2010).

Keywords: Nuclear threat, Korea, propaganda videos, war rhetoric

Introduction

The Cold War that dominated political discourse for forty years seemed to come to an end in the late eighties. But paradigms that frame official and vernacular understandings die slowly. While the new enemy – terrorism –, especially following the events of 9/11, changed the players in international disputes, in times of stress Cold War discourse reemerges to organize political speech, media coverage of potential conflict, and public fears for national security. One such emergence gained prominence in March and April 2013 when media reports, in the United States and abroad, discussed the potential conflict between North Korea and the US with overt references to Cold War strategies. In response to speculation about North Korea's nuclear and conventional war threat, author Gordon Change, *Nuclear Showdown: North Korea Takes on the World*, tells CNN:

I think it would have been much better for President Obama to stare into a camera and say, the United States will respond to attacks on South Korea with the immediate use of force. We talked like that during the Cold War, and we kept the peace. We don't talk like that anymore and because of that deterrence is breaking down in Asia. That's why we have all of these problems with North Korea recently. (Burnett, March 25, 2013).

Others avoid the explicit Cold War label, but nonetheless evoke the deterrence rhetoric of that era. London's Financial Times labeled the tensions between the US and North Korea as readying for 'the endgame in North Korea' (Rachman, 3/12/13).

What led to speculation about an endgame and a reminder of Cold War deterrence assumptions? To answer this question I begin with a brief discussion of the events leading up to the March-April 2013 exacerbating tensions in the Korean Peninsula, locate the rhetoric in theories of war discourse generally and Cold War discourse in particular, and then use the Korean propaganda videos and media response as a case study of the reemergence of the Cold War frame inhering in political and media discourse about potential nuclear war. I will argue that despite the simplistic and obvious propaganda techniques, recalling the topoi of nuclear threat succeeds in exacerbating tensions globally about North Korea's progress in nuclear technology and that nation's potential threat to Japan, China and the United States. I conclude that provocative statements, propaganda videos and mainstream media's coverage of the same constitute a widespread nuclear threat narrative.

Context Escalating Nuclear Threat Rhetoric

In 2006 the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1718 proclaimed that North Korea was not allowed to conduct further nuclear tests and needed to suspend their ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs. North Korea ignored the UN mandate and continued nuclear testing, including an underground detonation of a nuclear weapon that their official media claimed took place on February 12, 2013. Before the state announcement, seismic recording sites globally reported activity that reflected detonation from a device between 6 and 15 kilotons (smaller than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki). Further investigation suggested this third North Korean weapons test was not the last detonation that North Korea planned. Sanctions to that date had not deterred North Korea's continuation of their nuclear programs, including testing. The New York Times opined that the only sanctions that might make a difference involved China halting their supplies of oil and other aid, but that was unlikely (Sanger, February 11, 2013). While adding to the discussion of a potential escalation of a nuclear threat, the article also reassured readers that it was unlikely Korea was able to launch an attack at that time, but acknowledged that Korea had made marked progress since 2006. In an interview with Erin Burnett, CNN's Outfront host, Victor Cha, Center of Strategic and International Studies, agrees with this assessment, arguing that while Korea's threat to launch a pre-emptive nuclear attack on the US is not feasible now, 'at the rate at which they're going, it looks like they will get there. . .experts think it's only a matter of years before they could do something along those lines' (Burnett, March 7, 2013). The media reports simultaneously evoke a threat response and reassure the public that the threat of war is not imminent.

Taunting the global community with its development program and exaggerated claims stirred up international media attention to North Korea as a player in the nuclear club, but it served a domestic purpose as well. Spending money on a nuclear program instead of providing much needed resources for its population takes continual official justifications to its citizens. Additionally, North Korea's announced its resolve to refine its nuclear capabilities designed to intimidate South Koreans.

As was the case during the Cold War era, symbolic moves on one side demand a counter response. In this case, the US initiated in its own show of force when it symbolically engaged in training exercises over the Korean Peninsula. On April 9, 2013, CNN correspondent Erin Burnett reports a training exercise where 2 B2 Spirit bombers flew over the peninsula after a 6,500 mile flight from Missouri to South Korea. The training mission reminded North Korea that the United States already has the capacity to send planes with nuclear weapons from the US to the Korean peninsula. Implicitly, any show of force by North Korea would be responded to by a counterforce capable of reaching North Korea and delivering its payload, and the United States already has the nuclear and delivery system capability. Burnett asks Pentagon Press Secretary George Little, whether the US was preparing for war? He responds,

‘No one wants there to be war on the Korean peninsula, let me make that very clear. That being said, let me say North Korea has engaged recently in a string of provocations, overheated rhetoric and none of that is helpful on the stability of the Korean peninsula or the region’ (Burnett, April 9, 2013). This non-denial denial of war only ratchets up the tensions between North Korea and the US.

The threat perceived by both the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War years remained high because the risk of moving from a Cold War to a hot war increased with each flare-up of real and symbolic aggressions. In the case of US-Soviet deterrence, both parties had more than sufficient nuclear capability to demolish the other and make the planet inhabitable. North Korea has the potential for future delivery capabilities of nuclear weapons and hence is cast in a similar adversarial role, despite current incommensurability of the Korean-Soviet substitution in the argument of nuclear war threat.

War and Nuclear Threat Research

The US has a long-term commitment to South Korea. Its military presence and commitment to defense of a free South Korean state has set the precondition for intra-state interventions. Edwards, Valenzano & Stevenson (2011) argue that ‘peacekeeping missions’ characterized by limited scope and multinational involvement have become widespread. Although the expectation is for quick responses to provocations and efficient interventions, military engagement does not necessarily follow the anticipated blueprint for success. The possibility of escalating the conflict from a peacekeeping mission to a full-scale war remains a possibility.

In justifications for war, administrative rhetoric ‘calls for military intervention within a savage-civilization binary. . . .where the “savage” nature of the enemy is rhetorically crafted and is part of the overall paranoid style of American political discourse’ (Edwards et al, 2011, p. 342): in contrast, these same descriptions portray the US as ‘a force for good, justice, and righteousness on a global scale’ (p. 343). Edwards et al have found that generally peacekeeping missions in contrast to war declarations rely on a chaotic scene rather than a depraved villain as the primary source of threat. In the case of Korea the chaotic scene emerges from the extreme lack of basic resources for the North Korean populations. Years of repressive policies have been passed on to the current leader whose inexperience leads him to a continuation of these repressive conditions. South Koreans and neighboring nations fear that nuclear attack might emerge from this uncontrolled scene.

Erin Burnett, interviewing Chris Lawrence, CNN Pentagon correspondent, asks about the US decision to respond to provocations by North Korea against South Korea. Lawrence responds, ‘It actually opens the US up to smaller conflicts, but those smaller conflicts are more likely to happen and they happen more frequently’ (Burnett, 25 March 2013). In the same program, Colonel

Cedric Leighton (Retired) National Security analyst responds to reported threats of war between the US and North Korea:

War is an extremely likely possibility. . .the war may not be a full blown war in the sense of a nuclear confrontation or even a major theatre war with massive armies fighting each other across the Korean Peninsula as was the case in the 1950s. But what will happen probably is you'll have response to some very specific actions. (Burnett, March 25, 2013).

The rhetoric of war is further complicated by threats of it becoming a nuclear war. Taylor (2010) argues that historical and scientific data emphasize the threat of nuclear detonation and the potential for full-scale nuclear war. He argues that post Cold War discourse,

Has shifted from depicting nuclear 'danger' posed by the arms race and mutually assured destruction to privileging issues of 'uncertainty' surrounding the reliability of nuclear stockpiles, the status of 'rogue' weapons production infrastructures, the global inventory and circulation of fissile materials, and the behavior of would-be nuclear states and terrorists. (Taylor, 2010, p. 3).

Korea as a nuclear state is problematized by the perceived instability of its political leadership and its public aggressive nuclear discourse.

North Korean Propaganda Videos

One particular manifestation of both post Cold War rhetoric and the rhetoric of nuclear threat comes with North Korea's use of propaganda videos to assert their sense of self. Medhurst (1997) argues, 'While the weapons of hot war are guns, bombs, missiles, and the like, Cold War weapons are words, images symbolic actions. . .' (p. 19). Post Cold War rhetoric has not changed this pattern. Taylor (2003) argues that there is a nuclear iconography in post Cold War culture that evokes the Cold War threat of nuclear conflict. Post 9/11 the images of New Yorkers emerging from the Twin Towers covered in ash 'eerily recalled images from the Japanese atomic bombings – an intertext reinforced by popular appropriation of the term "Ground Zero" to designate that site' (Taylor, 2003, p. 13). Washington D.C. as the target of a North Korean nuclear missile, and the city in flames is unlikely to remain merely a crude propaganda image; more likely it will evoke the fear of nuclear devastation that became part of the visual iconography of the nuclear era. The return to Cold War discourse following 9/11 is well documented (Bostdorff, 2003; Cloud, 2004; Hariman, 2004; Noon, 2004). Taylor (2007) contends 'we should marvel at the intransigence of Cold War rhetoric in normalizing nuclear

weapons as a useful and legitimate means of preserving US national security' (p. 687).

Cold War rhetorical motifs are also evoked with the popular conception of the Korean War generated by a genre of Hollywood war films that highlight the experience of American prisoners of war. Perhaps the most powerful is *The Manchurian Candidate* with its focus on communist brainwashing. Young (1998) argues that the Korean War and the POW films it generated 'reveal that domestic morale for the global crusade was problematic' because of a 'crisis of national confidence during the early Cold War' (p. 51). As the Korean War experience challenged America's self-conception, it also strengthened the perception of the North Korean communists as the kind of villains who would justify American military intervention. A lingering Cold War motif, an earlier image of North Korean proclivities for war and harsh treatment of their enemies is joined by archetypal myths of war held by most Americans.

Larry Williamson's (2010) assessment of the rhetoric of war explains the role of myth in generating a powerful symbolic understanding of the justifications for war, even the use of nuclear weapons:

Myth is part collective dream, part prophecy, and part rhetorical narcotic. No culture is immune to the addictive seductions of this archetypal narrative form that embodies, perhaps more than any other type of discourse, the power of narrative rationality over logic" (p. 215)

to form a synecdoche 'which captures and epitomizes the State's collective ethos through a characteristic reliance on allegorical versions of the sacred and the agonistic" (p. 216). National myths embody the State's values, characterizations, and understanding of scene. Their powerful resonance within the culture need not adhere to traditional rational arguments (Roland & Jones, 2007; Brummett, 2005; Slotkin, 1992; McGuire, 1987). Mythic narratives, Osborn (1990) tells us must 'answer some compelling question, the dramatis personae must seem larger than life, and the story must convey the sense of the sacred time, place, and symbol' (p. 121).

For Korea the myth is embodied in a short propaganda video that was uploaded to YouTube in February 2013. In the video, Korea, regarded globally as a nation without much power, is capable of defeating the United States because it is a player in the nuclear field. Korean technology will soon be capable of sending a nuclear warhead to Washington D.C. which is depicted in flames. The fact that this is a dream sequence only reinforces the mythic conception of North Korea's self perception – a nation more powerful than the world recognizes it to be. In its own way, North Korea adopts the US's discourse of reluctant aggression (Ivie, 2005) wherein they must develop nuclear capability and fire on the US because they regard the US as an aggressive nation. Cherowitz and Zagacki (1986) argue this rationale for aggression is part of what they identify as justificatory war rhetoric – discourse that conforms with the Nation's military strategy as opposed to consummatory

war rhetoric which seems to merely respond to an imminent military crisis. The US would argue their military flyover of the Korean Peninsula is merely a response to a crisis initiated by North Korea's decision to test nuclear weapons and to taunt the US with their propaganda videos. The US casts North Korea in the role of causative agent. Thus, even though the videos are ineffective and obviously propagandistic discourse, they reflect an ongoing policy of North Korean military aggression that threatens the stability of the region (invoking a protective response from the United States) and potentially in the future the security of the United States directly.

The Videos that Exacerbated North Korean-US Tensions

Understanding why the videos exacerbated international tensions and re-evoked the Cold War nuclear threat rests in part on an awareness of the assumptions that underlie North Korean narratives, whether cinematic, literature or fine or popular art. Edwards (2013) contends that throughout its history, North Korea has 'used movies to define itself and to reflect back to its people what North Korea was and what it "should" be' (p. 119). From its ideological seed to its theme, character development, plot, images, and music, North Korea believes that film should make the correct ideological argument. From director to audience, film in North Korea is assumed to be propaganda. In like vein shorter video narratives also serve a propagandistic end. In an interview with NPR, Brian Patrick, author of *The Ten Commandments of Propaganda*, suggests the videos 'keep the tension going and I think the Korean government very much depends on that' (Neuman, 2013, 3) even if they are viewed as unsophisticated propaganda because 'this constant hyper state of mobilization' facilitates control. You need not be able to follow through on a threat, if you lack global power just getting the major power brokers to pay attention to your threats is in itself an exercise of power.

Using propaganda messages bolsters the potential of North Korea's technology, their resolve to defeat an identified scapegoat for social problems, and their hope for a regenerated and improved nation, all of which are hallmarks of their film and video propaganda messages. It is not surprising that North Korea has chosen video messages to escalate the tensions between the US and itself. Kim Jong-Il, long time leader of North Korea, is also the author of *On the Art of Cinema* in which he argues that art, cinema and literature should be designed to feature people who 'take responsibility for solving their own problems without being subjugated to others or depending on the aid of others' (location 247-280); thus characterized and plotted narratives in various forms educate the audience to true communism. The artist's task is to discover the essential core – an ideological seed, 'Only a seed which has a clear and vivid ideological essence can give rise to a clear and vivid picture of the elements of the image' (location 640-652). The artist must choose revolutionary seeds in all of his or her work, and that necessarily centers on the 'victory of socialism and communism' (location 688-703). He also argues that

a theme, even from a proper seed, must be treated appropriately to create the vivid image and emotional tone that is needed to be successful.

The video dream sequence follows the pattern of cinematic development Kim Jong-Il articulated. A young man dreams he is aboard a space shuttle that flies over a unified Korea – its people smiling and celebrating their reunification – on its way to New York City; a screen message tells the viewer that his dream will come true. Uploaded to YouTube by North Korea’s official website, Uriminzokkiri, *On Board Unha-9*, is a 3:35 minute dream sequence depicting a successful attack by a North Korean missile that drops its payload on New York City. The city burns to an instrumental version of *We Are the World* while the message appears ‘I see black smoke billowing somewhere in America. It appears that the headquarters of evil, which has a habit of using force and unilateralism and committing wars of aggression is going up in flames it itself has ignited’ (Choe Sang-Hun, 2013). One caption warns that despite its best effort the imperialists will not be able to stop North Korea from being victorious (Hawkins, 2013). Part of a series of propaganda messages aimed at showing North Korean victory over the United States, the video was uploaded shortly before North Korea’s nuclear test, but was pulled from YouTube because Activision raised a copyright objection; the destroyed and burning NYC was overlaid on an image from the videogame *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*. The video remains posted on Live Leak. Consensus suggests that Korea is not soon likely to be able to deliver a rocket to the United States, but it remains a possibility with several years of technological development.

A second video released several weeks later (February 19, 2013), remains posted on YouTube. One-minute-thirty-two-seconds in length, the video shows Obama and U.S. troops engulfed in flames brought on by a nuclear explosion. The theme song for *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* offer a more militaristic audio component. The video ends with the camera taking the viewer down to an underground chamber accompanied by music to create suspense. The scene ends with the detonation of a nuclear device. Captions throughout the video justify the nuclear test arguing, ‘The North’s high-level nuclear test aimed at US invaders, is the nuclear deterrent to safeguard our sovereignty’; ‘The US practically guided the North towards conducting the nuclear test’; and ‘The whole world is now watching. The US must answer now’ (“N. Korea,” 2013). Like *On board Unha-9*, this video is also simplistic, but the Secretary of Defense is reported as having said,

It’s easy to snigger at North Korean propaganda. It’s easy to discard Kim Jong Un as a chubby, narcissistic, (bizarrely) Dennis Rodman-pandering deluded funster in a land of the oppressed and the hungry. But nuclear proliferation isn’t a joke. And though a war-wary US President may be unenthused to have to check his rules of engagement, there are only so many taunts and tests that will keep the US public satisfied with sanctions, and South Korea or Japan from really getting serious’ (Tame, 2013).

In addition to the rhetoric of these propaganda videos, ingrained perceptions of North Korean aggressiveness, and the evocation of Cold War and nuclear threat fears, North Korea's leader is considered by many to be untested and hence unpredictable. Peter Hayes of the Nautilus Institute believes that because of the escalated nuclear tensions it is 'more dangerous than it has been at any time since 1976' (Atlas, 2013). It is, in this contest, not surprising that the Western media responded to these messages as preludes to war. These videos are part of a larger propaganda campaign to assert the future of Korean power and the defeat of the United States and other countries that North Korea regards as imperialistic.

Conclusion

In March and April 2013 the rhetoric of the Cold War and its nuclear threat reemerged thirty years after we thought it had been put to rest. Medhurst reminds us that 'Cold War weapons are words, images symbolic actions' (1997, p. 19) that have the potential to move small scale hostilities from a cold to a hot war. Instead of a clash between two superpowers with nuclear arsenals large enough to destroy the planet, the new threat surfaced with North Korea's propaganda imagining and thereby threatening nuclear attacks on the US. This essay references two videos uploaded to YouTube by North Korea's official website, Uriminzokkiri. Despite the obvious propaganda intent and simplistic film techniques, the videos nonetheless glorify North Korea's nuclear technology and bolster the taunts aimed at the US as they envision the capitol in flames, a nuclear explosion, and a reunified Korea. These visual narratives combined with North Korea's blatant disregard of UN prohibitions on nuclear testing, and the United States' uncertainty about Kim Jong Un's leadership abilities become the words, images and symbolic actions that temporarily reengaged the Cold War nuclear threat narrative.

The persistence of the Cold War metaphor with its implicit nuclear threat narrative demonstrates how engrained this terministic screen has become. Kenneth Burke (1968) argues that when symbols create a scheme of classification that 'necessarily directs the attention [of audiences] into some channels rather than others' (p. 45), and when the metaphoric nature of the symbols is forgotten, these terministic screens ultimately construct a reality for audiences from which to view the world. 'Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must also function as a deflection of reality' (Burke, 1968, p. 45). Nearly every news account that quoted a military or political spokesperson commenting on the threat North Korea's nuclear program presented also included an assurance that the technology was not yet capable of delivering a nuclear device to the United States. But even these reassurances are undercut by mention of North Korea's technological capability of reaching targets in South Korea, China or Japan. Like the post WWII Cold War nuclear threat, it is the fear of being drawn into a hot war and

the fear of an untested and irrational leader with access to nuclear technology that evokes the threat response.

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