



## Let's not be so eager for war in Korea

By: Gene Healy – April 8, 2013

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"Welcome to 'This Week' -- on the edge!"-- ABC's George Stephanopolous practically lunged through my TV screen Sunday morning.

He cut to a clip of Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel warning of a "real and clear danger" from North Korea, and returned with "is their puzzling young leader spoiling for war? Can President Obama do anything to stop him?"

Then I picked up the Washington Post Outlook section and read "South Korea has already won." Max Fisher reports that amid the hermit kingdom's threat to launch a "do-or-die final battle" with the U.S. and South Korea, young South Koreans are more concerned with reality shows, pop girl groups and "bourgeois lifestyle commentary," including a "month-old debate on regional differences on how to eat sweet and sour pork."

What gives? Is North Korea a threat or not? It's easy to get confused. But despite Kim Jong Un's bluster, the regime is only a threat to the U.S. to the extent that we've put ourselves in harm's way.

After six decades of U.S. forces serving as a "tripwire" designed to deter the DPRK, it's past time to start bringing our 28,500 troops home.

Two weeks ago, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea published photos of its pudgy young dictator approving a "U.S. Mainland Strike Plan" whose targets included Washington, D.C., San Diego, and, bizarrely, Austin, Texas.

"Thanks, Kim Jong Un, for helping to keep Austin weird," said the editor of the Austin Business Journal. We "need to treat it as a very real threat," insisted Texas Gov. Rick Perry.

Easy, cowboy. Victor Cha, holder of the Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, explains that the "No-Dong missile system" (really) "can reach U.S. troops in Korea and Japan" but "the DPRK does not currently possess a deployed missile system that can reach the United States."

Nor does the regime have miniaturized nukes required to arm its missiles.

On Fox News last week, John Bolton, the former U.N. ambassador turned professional uber-hawk, told Greta Van Susteren, "the solution lies in eliminating the regime, which we could try and do through reunifying the peninsula." After his role in the Iraq debacle, Bolton should really try to think these things through.

In a recent article in the Journal of International Security, "The Collapse of North Korea," two defense analysts estimate that 260,000 to 400,000 ground force personnel would be needed -- based on "optimistic assumptions."

They write "even in the relatively benign scenario that we describe, the requirements for stabilizing a collapsed North Korea would outpace the combined U.S. troop commitments to Iraq and Afghanistan."

Let's try not to be around for that.

I don't begrudge South Korean youth their sense of normalcy, except to the extent that its underwritten by American soldiers and the U.S. taxpayer. The Republic of Korea's military is slated to shrink below the level needed to deal even with a "rosy scenario" regime collapse, and despite its crazy neighbor to the north, South Korea spends a smaller portion of its gross domestic product on defense than we do (2.6 percent to our 4.7).

The good news is, as my colleague Doug Bandow explains, "the Republic of Korea has 40 times the GDP and twice the population of the North" -- it has "both the means and incentive to handle the DPRK" -- if we'll only take them off the dole.

The joint U.S.-ROK approach toward the DPRK's erratic behavior has been described as "strategic patience." Given the costs of confrontation, that's a sound strategy. But we can be just as patient from home.