

Andrew Lichterman,* panel talk at “War or Peace in Korea? A forum on the dangers of war in Korea, options for a peaceful solution, and prospects for a movement leading to that outcome,” Berkeley, California, April 6, 2018.

The flyer for the panel advertised that we would talk not only about the dangers of war and options for a peaceful solution, but also about prospects for a movement that would lead to a peaceful outcome. This last part falls to me, and discerning the prospects for peace movements in this moment is not easy.

So far, most of the movement for a peaceful solution is happening in Northeast Asia, the result of the initiatives pursued by the governments of North and South Korea.

Here in the United States, there is a coalition of organizations and scholars working on the issue, now working under the name of the Korea Peace Network. In the Bay Area, we have a regional section of the broader network.

I also want to note the April 15 mobilization against the wars abroad and at home. People will be gathering at 11am, Lake Merritt Amphitheater, at 12th street and 4th Avenue at Lake Merritt Boulevard. Paul Liem of the Korea Peace Institute will be speaking at the rally about these issues.

We hope that there will be more such initiatives, but so far there is not much of a visible peace or anti-war movement here in the United States. But generally we seem to me moving out of a decades-long period of low political mobilization into one where larger and broader movements may emerge. So its worth thinking about what kinds of themes we want to stress as we try to integrate the peace and disarmament strand with these emerging, still-fragmented, oppositional movements.

In most countries, the interests of populations and their governments are as far apart as they have been in a long time, perhaps since the first part of the last century. This reflects the growing disparities in wealth and power between those who rule and the rest of us, and the erosion of what democracy had been achieved. Extreme nationalist elements are ascendant worldwide, their common characteristic being a politics that redirects the emotions evoked by those developments—fear, resentment, and a pervasive sense of loss—against vulnerable minorities at home and enemies abroad.

Early in the last century the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci, described his time as an “interregnum,” meaning a period in which the old order is dying, but a new one cannot yet be born. In such moments, Gramsci observed, “a great variety of morbid symptoms will appear.”¹

* Andrew Lichterman is a policy analyst and lawyer with the Western States Legal Foundation. He also serves on the boards of the International Association of Lawyers against Nuclear Arms and the Campaign for Peace, Disarmament and Common Security, and is a member of the Coordinating Committee of United for Peace and Justice.

One of the reasons that such transitions are so difficult is that so much power has concentrated at the top that ruling elites have been able to eliminate many of the mechanisms that might rein them in—and that might also provide the means for an orderly and non-violent transition to something else. To the extent that there is a sign post pointing a direction through the chaos, it reads: Try to think the problem from the perspective of ordinary people rather than governments.

A starting point for work focused on nuclear weapons and disarmament is trying talk about them in ways that reflect the realities of power. Even disarmament activists who live in nuclear-armed countries often talk about “our” nuclear weapons, and talk about countries as if they were individuals that speak with a single voice. But the vast majority of people in nuclear armed countries have no role in decisions about “their” nuclear weapons. The decisions by governments to acquire nuclear weapons are in every instance among their least democratic. They have been made by small numbers of powerful people, acting for the most part in secret.

Rulers who are willing to risk war among nuclear-armed countries must have an enormously inflated sense of their own significance. They must consider it worth risking the annihilation of the People to preserve the State, to defend the order of things in which they rule.

The Korea crisis is urgent in itself, but also should impel us to rethink the meaning of nuclear weapons. It is highly significant that South Korea has taken the lead in seeking a diplomatic breakthrough that could end the immediate crisis, and that might lead eventually to a more lasting peace on the peninsula.

It was no accident that the most intense moment of resistance to nuclear weapons during the Cold War was the Euro-missile crisis of the 1980’s. The inhabitants of NATO countries hosting U.S. nuclear missiles faced the possibility that a nuclear war could be fought on their soil without even their own government’s consent. As was the case for Europeans during the Cold War, South Koreans find themselves trapped between nuclear-armed adversaries, one an ally. This raises a question seldom asked by inhabitants of nuclear-armed countries: Whose nuclear weapons are they, really? Whose interests do they protect?

This question leads naturally to others. As E.P. Thompson, a founder of European Nuclear Disarmament, asked in 1981, “Is nuclear war preferable to being overcome by the enemy? Are the deaths of fifteen or twenty million and the utter destruction of the country preferable to an occupation which might offer the possibility, after some years, of resurgence and recuperation?” and finally, “Are we ourselves prepared to endorse the use of such weapons against the innocent, the children and the aged, of an ‘enemy’?”² The people of every nuclear-armed country should be asking these questions today.

Against this background, South Korea’s diplomatic initiatives are striking, but on reflection, not surprising. It is also noteworthy in this context that the current government there was brought to power by a very large and determined democracy movement—one that rejected the legacy of authoritarian governments closely tied to the United States.

For the Korea crisis—and most other matters of war and peace--we need both a short-term and a long-term approach. The short-term task is getting through the current war crisis into something different, and somewhat less immediately dangerous. The core message near-term here in the U.S. should be that our government should stay out of the way as the governments in the region try to create the conditions for a peaceful outcome.

What there is of a peace movement here doesn't have a lot in the way of numbers, so our main emphasis in the near term perhaps should be trying to reframe the public discourse a bit. Here's a few points of emphasis:

-- People in the region and particularly people on the Korean peninsula are by far the most at risk.

In this regard, it also is essential to fight against the dehumanization of both North Korea's people and its government that is standard fare in both U.S. government rhetoric and in the media.

-- There is virtually no imaginable scenario in which North Korea would strike the United States with its fledgling nuclear arsenal unless attacked first. Meanwhile, John Bolton, who Trump has nominated to be his national security advisor, has talked openly about a preventive war to destroy North Korea's nuclear weapons.

Such a preventive war would clearly be illegal. It would be a war of aggression, contrary both to the United Nations Charter and to long-established international law norms concerning what constitutes permissible self-defense.

And virtually every senior U.S. military official, serving or retired who has spoken publicly on the matter agrees that a war of this kind would be a catastrophe, killing hundreds of thousands or more people even if no nuclear weapons are used.

-- We also should stress the democratic character of the movement that brought Moon to power, and the broad popular support there for his initiatives to resolve the crisis peacefully.

-- Finally, we hear a lot about "denuclearization" of the Korean peninsula. As one mainstream nonproliferation expert recently pointed out, the word "denuclearization" is a kind of diplomatic artifact, dating from a time when the only nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula were American.³

In the early 1990's, the first Bush administration was looking for diplomatic approaches to keeping North Korea from developing nuclear weapons. As part of this effort, in 1991 the U.S. withdrew its nuclear weapons from South Korea. The following year North and South Korea agreed to a declaration on the "denuclearization" of the Korean Peninsula. Both countries agreed not to acquire nuclear weapons or key technologies for their development, nuclear reprocessing or uranium enrichment facilities.

The term "denuclearization" elided the dangers presented by the immense U.S. military presence in the region, always ultimately backed by the U.S. nuclear arsenal, the peninsula's two

nuclear-armed neighbors, and the unresolved security issues in the region, including the lack of a peace treaty truly ending the Korean War. The U.S. government and most of the media still tries to limit discussion of “denuclearization” of the Korean Peninsula to the elimination of North Korea’s nuclear weapons. So another point to stress is that efforts towards a long-term peace in the region must address the nuclear arsenals of the United States and other original nuclear-armed countries, and their obligation under the Nonproliferation Treaty to negotiate for the elimination of their nuclear arsenals.

It is hard to see any near-term outcome that brings with it a lasting resolution, in large part because the Korea crisis is embedded in the unstable, fast-changing web of antagonisms among the world’s leading economic and military powers. A major element of this is the determination of those who rule in the United States to remain major players in Northeast Asia. Casting the United States as the guarantor of South Korea’s security has long played a role in legitimating the large, permanent U.S. military presence in the region. So we have to think about the broader context, and the kind of movement we want to build for the long term—on that will have to address the problem of peace on a global scale.

Framing all of this as a narrative of imperialism and resistance to imperialism (and in which US elites are the only imperialists) doesn’t take us very far towards an understanding of this moment. I also would not label the renewed round of competition and conflict as a “new Cold War,” for the dynamics driving global tensions and war dangers today are not the same.

We are now half the duration of the Cold War past the Cold War. Whatever view one had of the struggle between the Communist states and the capitalist West, we now are facing a very different world. The ruling elements in the rising or resurgent global and regional powers give little indication that they will pursue development paths any more egalitarian, peaceful, or ecologically sustainable than did the elites of the countries that now occupy the commanding heights of the global economic and political system.

As Walden Bello wrote in connection to the BRICS countries (Brazil Russia India China South Africa),

“While there might be healthy discussion on whether all of these regimes might be called neoliberal, there can be no doubt that they are capitalist regimes, prioritising profits over welfare goals, loosening prior restraints on market forces, spearheading the integration of the domestic to the global economy, following conservative fiscal and monetary policies, exhibiting a close cooperation between the state elite and dominant forces in the economy, and, most importantly, relying on the super-exploitation of their working classes as the engine of rapid growth.”⁴

It is true that the primary responsibility of we who live in the United States is to rein in our own ruthless and violent elites, and ultimately to change the nature of our economic and political institutions so that they no longer are organized around economic exploitation underwritten by high-tech state violence. It is also true that the U.S. elites are holding hard to their role as the hegemonic power in a global order of things that is ecologically unsustainable and that systematically generates inequality and violent conflict. But the confrontations we are

seeing today are not conflicts between forces pushing for a real alternative to the system currently dominated by those who rule the United States, but rather a struggle for power within it.

The old blocs are gone, but the vast apparatuses of war and repression are not. They have instead metastasized over a half century into military--industrial- surveillance --homeland security complexes. They are, if anything, even more dangerous at home and abroad in combination with resurgent nationalisms in the service of competing constellations of capital.

If resistance to the renewed militarism of the most powerful governments is to be effective, it must be aligned with none. E.P.Thompson's words on this point at the height of the Cold War still resonate.

“...only the regeneration of internationalism can possibly summon up a force sufficient to the need. This internationalism must be consciously anti-extermunist... it must embody, in its thought, in its exchanges, in its gestures, and in its symbolic expressions, the imperatives of human ecological survival.”⁵

¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp.274-275.

² E.P. Thompson, “A Letter to America,” in E.P. Thompson and Dan Smith, eds, *Protest and Survive* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981) pp. 3, 38-39.

³ Jeffrey Lewis, “The Word That Could Help the World Avoid Nuclear War,” Op Ed, *The New York Times*, April 4, 2018.

⁴ Walden Bello, “The BRICs and Global Capitalism,” in *Shifting Power: Critical Perspectives on Emerging Economies*, (Amsterdam: Trans-National Institute, September, 2014), pp.178-179.

The behavior of the” BRICS” states and their own corporations and investors both at home and abroad has sparked a debate over whether these governments and economies constitute a genuine alternative to the incumbent great powers of the global capitalist system. In this view, these states constitute a layer of “sub-imperialist” constellations of capitalist power pursuing their own national strategies of accumulation and competition within a system which they benefit from, and in which they hope to rise and eventually dominate like their predecessors on both sides of the North Atlantic. Patrick Bond described this in the African context:

“Just as the political carving of Africa in Berlin at the 1884-85 conference hosted by Bismarck drew boundaries mainly benefiting extractive enterprises – mining houses and plantations as well as construction firms associated with capital accumulation in England, France, Portugal, Belgium and Germany – BRICS appears to follow colonial and neo-colonial tracks. Identifying port, bridge, road, hydropower and other infrastructure projects in the same image, the BRICS 2013 Durban summit had as its aim the continent's economic carve-up, unburdened – now as then – by what would be derided as ‘Western’ concerns about democracy and human rights, with more than a dozen African heads of state present as collaborators.” Patrick Bond, “BRICS and the tendency to sub-imperialism,” *Pambazuka News*, Issue 673, 4-10-2014, <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/91303>

⁵ E.P. Thompson, “Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization,” in E.P. Thompson et. al, *Exterminism and Cold War* (London, New Left Review and Verso, 1982), p.29.