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*Opinion*

## US media must lay groundwork for peace offensive on Korean peninsula



- The American media was wrong on the Iraq war, and today continues to perpetuate wishful thinking on the Korean peninsula and the US military
- With sanctions on North Korea and shows of military might being largely ineffective, it's time for a reboot of US policy and a more nuanced media narrative

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A media system can filter your world-view not unlike the narrowest religion claiming to know what's best about everything. Truly professional media platforms, especially if print-based, will aim to do right by you. By contrast, the powerful media institutions or systems that have the effect of shielding you from reality are an enemy. Their errors can cause serious damage. We're not talking about miscues in the crossword puzzle but life-and-death stuff – nuclear war versus peace, for example.

For decades, I was a full-time card-carrying member of the US news media. This was a period of my life that today would have to be labelled as my professional youth. Then, in the mid-90s, I began writing columns on Asia, while teaching media and politics at university.

Next week will see the start at Loyola Marymount University of my semester-long Introduction to the Media and Politics of Asia. This is my trademark course, birthed a quarter of a century ago at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). At that time, it was the only course devoted to the political news media of Asia in the University of California higher education system.

A major theme of this course is that all media systems, in one way or the other, nurture political bias – some far more than others. This unhappy generalisation applies to the US media, of course, as well as others. This is not new: what is new is that on the major current issues of war and peace, the US media's overall performance may be more deficient than ever.

One notorious recent example was the near-unanimous American media endorsement of the March 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Recall that this unbelievable blunder was launched without UN Security Council authorization and opposed by some of our savvier European allies. This rally-around-the-president moment was a disgrace.

The weapons-of-mass-destruction capability attributed to then Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was fictitious – but very extensively reported by the media. Even today, who knows how many Iraqis died or suffered horribly as the US and its allies went hunting for weapons they couldn't find precisely because they never existed?

The subsequent American media soul-searching was commendable, but in the end may well prove more bromidic and narcissistic than ameliorative. No, our world is not best reported in stark black and white. Yes, there may be some good even in the “bad guys” and some bad in the “good guys”.

We need to keep in mind that the ever-tense Korean peninsula offers a geopolitical diorama as potentially explosive as any worldwide. The North, we are told over and over, is nothing more than a perfectly putrid communist culture. Down South, the idea being sold is of a democracy with near-model elections and an electorate largely euphoric about the US military commitment to South Korean freedom and pursuit of happiness.

Consider the enormous stakes involved for the peninsula. North Korea is building up its nuclear capability presumably as fast as a cash-strapped nation can, and in response South Korea sticks with the severe US economic sanctions campaign. Sold as a way of pressuring Pyongyang to begin shrinking its nuclear arsenal, its effect is to render the already poor people of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea even more deprived.

Poorer North Korea may well be, but less nuclear it is not. One definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Yet the US leads enforcement of the harsh sanctions campaign year after year against all reason.

Joint military exercises between the US and South Korea that extend through this week are framed as entirely defensive. But Pyongyang feels existentially challenged. And nearby Beijing is concerned too. Back when Russia, which shares a sliver of a border with North Korea, was the Soviet Union, it kept North Koreans going with very substantial aid. However, Russian aid is much diminished these days.

Japan, a former colonizer of Korea, would be content if the peninsula remained divided forever, and mainly worries about the China threat. So these US-South Korean exercises, justified as peacekeeping, have the opposite effect of maintaining a miserable status quo. Regional rival China has navigated a different course. It has comparatively decent diplomatic relations with both Koreas, whereas the US doesn’t even have a RadioShack in Pyongyang, much less a formal embassy. This is not smart, but American political culture views the peninsula in black and white.

The South Korean people are more sophisticated and diverse than this. Some – especially the elderly who well recall the horror of war – are not uncomfortable with the American military presence; others, especially workers and students, demonstrably want American troops to go home.

They’re right. The centrepieces of US policy – sanctions, shows of military muscle – have not been working. It’s past time for a revolutionary reboot of US policy. The media, for starters, urgently needs to tamp down the demonisation, open closed minds, help broaden diplomatic perspectives and prepare the groundwork for a well-thought-out American peace offensive.

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