

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Nicholas Eberstadt, Author and Chair in Political Economy, AEI

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I: Understanding North Korea (0:15 – 30:52)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by an old friend, Nick Eberstadt. We were just reminiscing off-camera about being teaching assistants for Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the fall of 1976 at Harvard, I guess that was a little time ago.

EBERSTADT: A little while ago.

KRISTOL: That's a different conversation we should have – maybe not on tape, though. Nick is a scholar, researcher at the American Enterprise Institute, very distinguished scholar in several fields, as diverse as demography and economics, social policy. *Men Without Work* – very important book and series of articles you have written. And an expert on North Korea. An odd –

EBERSTADT: If there are any.

KRISTOL: Well, you are as close to one as any, I think. An odd combination of fields; very impressive, though.

Well, let's begin with, you said if there are any. But in your recent article, which is really terrific and everyone should read it; I will even show it here: *Commentary* magazine, February, 2018. You can get it online, "[The Method in North Korea's Madness, a Monstrous Regime's Rational Statecraft](#)." So we'll come back, because that is a very interesting argument, somewhat different, maybe, from the conventional one, as you often are.

But in it you, very unusually for someone in Washington, maybe *unique* for someone in a Washington think tank, you have a little footnote early in the article: "Full disclosure, I am one of those who seriously underestimated North Korea's resilience in the 1990s. You would have thought it unimaginable twenty years ago for the North Korean state to survive. Needless to say, subsequent events have proved otherwise, and studying my own mistakes has led to the analysis underway here."

So "studying my own mistakes" is not a phrase I have ever heard in Washington or probably not in *Commentary* magazine, to be honest, either. But I give you a huge round of credit for that.

So let's begin with that and that is a way of getting into the history of North Korea and of our policy with North Korea and then the character of the regime. So what was the mistake, and what did you learn from it?

EBERSTADT: Back in the 1990s, while the North Korean regime was grappling with a man-made famine – the only famine for an urban, literate, peacetime society in history – I didn't see how they were going to pull this off. I thought they were going to go down. I thought they were going to collapse.

KRISTOL: And this was a famine that was due to government policy?

EBERSTADT: It was due to government policy in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, which had been big financial supporters for this very distorted, warped economy and this awful totalitarian regime.

It looked to me like they weren't going to be able to pull this out. I thought they were going to follow the path that had been started in Berlin and in Central Europe in 1989 and follow the Soviet lead. And my expectations were completely confounded.

I could follow all of the economic trends that you could get from international trade and the international statistics, which are very few, but available on DPRK, but I really underestimated –

KRISTOL: DPRK is the Democratic –

EBERSTADT: Democratic People's Republic of Korea, what they call themselves, North Korea.

KRISTOL: We can call it that from now on, whichever you want, DPRK is good.

EBERSTADT: But they didn't go down. And instead they not only managed to survive as a regime, but here they are today preparing, I think, to confront the USA eventually in a nuclear confrontation that they expect to win. So, obviously I underestimated them. And trying to think about and appreciate how their system worked, how they managed to survive, prompted a great deal of re-examination.

KRISTOL: And what did you learn from that? You were right, I take it – it wasn't that you were wrong about the severity of the economic crisis or something like that.

EBERSTADT: Nobody knows exactly how many people died in that famine. Hundreds of thousands, certainly; some people say millions. The North Korean leadership probably knows, but they haven't, for some reason, had any glasnost on this topic with the outside world.

All of the economic trends, I think, we got pretty well. Not just me, but other people who were looking at this. GDP of approximately zero that they had in this country, with more than a million guys under arms, two-thirds of them on the frontlines ready for offensive action against the South.

The part which I think I was weak on was understanding how the command and control system of the apparatus worked and the ideology animating the machine. If I were to cite myself for a single flaw, it was not understanding that the people in North Korea were, in fact, Koreans, and I know a lot of Koreans. They're smart; they're adaptive. It's just that these Koreans worked for, sort of, like the league of super villains.

KRISTOL: So let's talk about that. I mean, I want to get back to your statement that we are going to have a nuclear confrontation that they expect to win, which is pretty striking. But let's talk about the character of the regime, both – The two points I guess you mentioned: the nature of the ideology and the way in which the actual apparatus of the regime works.

I mean, when we look at it, someone like me who doesn't follow this much, you look at it, it just looks a little bit crazy and wacky. One son takes over from another, father. The son is even wackier than the father. I guess they maintain force by just, maintaining control by just brute force and that's all I kind of know.

EBERSTADT: Sure. Well, the leadership of North Korea, which, as you say, is now on its third Kim, established by grandfather Kim Il-sung, carried on by father, “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il, now with “Dear Respected Leader” Kim Jong-un. And you can be pretty sure that he’s neither “dear” nor “respected” if they call him dear respected – I mean, it’s Orwellian.

They have mastered and perfected the art of totalitarianism in a way that Stalin and Mao strove for, but I don’t think really reached. And of course, the DPRK, the system, was initially a Soviet established Stalin-state set up right after World War II, like some of the satellites in Europe. But unlike the satellites in Europe, this one broke free from Stalin’s reach and established its own independence. And as it established its own independence, it came up with new and inventive techniques of totalitarian control of their own. And they also came up with a new ideology which was less and less dependent upon Marxism and Leninism.

So, for instance, in terms of techniques of control, all Marxist-Leninist states have secret police. North Korea has a lot of different secret-police forces and they surveil not only the population, they surveil each other and report to the top. That’s one method of control.

All Marxist-Leninist states have gulags. North Korea has gulags, [unintelligible] but they have adapted theirs, you might say, to Asian family values. So, if you are going to be in trouble in North Korea, it’s not just you who gets sent to the concentration camp; it will be your parents, your wife or husband, your children, your cousins, your uncles, your aunts. They will take it out a couple of generations.

And this helps to explain why there are so few defectors, *inter alia*, and why there’s so little public disturbance in the place.

Then they have one additional means of control, which, if you were just coming from Mars and you were just being very clinical about the human species, you would have to say is really sharp. And this is called *songbun*. Now Marxism-Leninism has this universal claim, this universal reach and ambition – “workers of the world unite.” This is 180 degrees opposite. This is imposing the class system on the captive population of North Korea.

There are over 50 different classifications that you get labeled with, and basically once you have that label, you don’t get out of it. And it’s really hard for your kids to get out of it or your grandkids. So there are some people who are up at the top because they are the descendants of revolutionary martyrs; there are other people who are down at the bottom who are the descendants of collaborators with Japanese “bastards.”

And this control system determines your chances in life; but it also atomizes society in a way that makes it much easier to control people. Now this *songbun* device also speaks to something else which has radically departed from Marxism-Leninism.

Instead of having the universal reach of this claim of global ideology, North Korea has gone narrow. They’ve narrow cast their ideology. They’ve thrown away Marx; they’ve thrown away Lenin; no more Stalin, obviously. Marx and Lenin statues were taken down some time ago. Marx and Lenin have been stricken, expunged from the charter of the Worker’s Party, from the constitution. They talk now about “our own” style of socialism. Who are “our own”? The Korean nation, the Korean race. They have turned to racial socialism. I would say national socialism, but that has a particular tethering in Europe.

KRISTOL: But it seems more like the national socialism in some ways.

EBERSTADT: It’s much more. The hum in their ideology is the Korean word *minjok*, which they would translate for us as “nationality,” but is much closer in the way they use it to race. It’s a racial socialism. And their claim is that they are, the leadership – the Kim family from Pyongyang – they are the

instruments of historical destiny for reuniting the Korean *minjok* – I would say race – for a future where the Korean people will be able to stand up to their historical oppressors and to their historical enemies. And, by implication, also to settle a lot of historical scores.

So this isn't your grandfather's Stalinism. This is much more like the sort of the tribal-blood battle cry which animated people around the world, and civilizations in not so civil settings, for thousands and thousands of years. But I think this has also given the regime legs in a way that a lot of Marxist-Leninist leadership groups wouldn't be able to sustain.

KRISTOL: How important is reunification to them?

EBERSTADT: Reunification, Bill, I think, is absolutely central.

KRISTOL: And that's a contrarian but, I'm sure, correct view. Most people sort of think well, they don't really want to be reunified now because, of course, South Korea is 5,000 times wealthier and bigger, I guess.

EBERSTADT: I would say that from what I can make out of received wisdom, the received idea would be, with a bit of mirror imaging – *what would I do if I were running North Korea?* Besides resign, what would I do? Probably want to hold onto a place and keep it from collapsing, have an insurance policy with nuclear weapons to keep people from attacking me, maintain stability and just keep this unworkable arrangement going on.

It really helps to look at their texts. It really helps to look at what they say. Because sometimes people believe what they say. Not always, but even their lies can be instructive. When you read propaganda, you know something, some way or another, about the Soviet Union and about Maoist China or whatever it is – the texts are important.

And this claim to be the repository of authentic Koreans, of the true Korean future is absolutely central to the modern North Korean myth, let's say.

If the North Korean leadership were all of a sudden to say, "You know, all of that stuff we were saying about reunification, about how we wanted to reunite the Korean people? That's yesterday. We are going to do our thing now in a different sort of way." I suspect that would be profoundly subversive to their own authority at home. I think that could be severely destabilizing and de-legitimizing.

And in fact, the North Korean quest for nuclear weapons, the quest for mating nuclear weapons with long-range missiles that can strike the United States, this is one of the things which may be a source of pride and authority for those who matter in North Korean politics – because, make no mistake, even a place like North Korea has politics at home.

KRISTOL: This is very interesting. So, it really is a regime of its own, it seems to me, is what I am hearing. I mean, people like me, we read about it and say well, it's some kind of weird, bastardized knockoff of the Soviet Union, plus Maoist China, with a few oddball wrinkles thrown in by the Kims. But you are saying it is much more coherent and really unique and in some way – I don't mean impressive. I hate to use that word about such a horrible place, but they really figured this out in some way.

EBERSTADT: Well, Bill, I mean, ask yourself how did they survive when Eastern European socialism went down? When the Soviet Union went down? When China mutated from Mao into whatever sort of kleptocracy, dictatorship is there now? When Vietnam mutated in the way that it has? How did they manage to do this? They had a doctrine, or they evolved a doctrine, which had a certain sort of purchase.

They also were very careful about the evolution of their instruments of repression and control. For a long time, for a very long time, they were very worried about the influence of market forces, what maybe we

would call capitalism. Because their initial diagnosis was that market forces and the allure of the bourgeoisie world was what had killed off the Soviet experiment. They talk a lot about ideological and cultural “poisoning” from outside, not wishing to follow the Soviet path into the dustbin of history.

Now, they’re experimenting with a bit of market forces at home. And in this most innovative, awful, but innovative way, a limited space for profit-making has been allowed. The government, may be more like the Mafia than like Stalin, has decided that it gets a piece of every deal, in every profit. And it looks as if this limited experiment in what we might call capitalism with Kim family regime characteristics, is now helping to fund the missile and the nuke program, the nuclear pistol that they want to point at the White House.

So there’s always innovation going on. Back in the 1990s when I was studying North Korea, spent a lot of time in South Korea because that was sort of like the looking glass or the listening post, people in the South Korean government called North Korea “the land that never changes.” It is 180 degrees wrong. It’s constantly innovating. What never changes is the objective, but the innovations have been constant.

KRISTOL: That’s fascinating. Have you been there, North Korea?

EBERSTADT: I’ve been to North Korea one time, long ago, half a lifetime ago. I was there in 1990. I was doing some population studies, some demographic work on North Korea. If we’ve got time for a digression, I’ll tell you about getting a death threat from the North Korean deputy ambassador to the United Nations.

So short version is, a colleague of mine at the Census Bureau and I had gotten a bootlegged version of some North Korean population statistics that had been sent to the UN as a sort of a good-faith down payment for getting some technical assistance with a population census they wanted to do. It was 100 times less than what we would have from any other country, but it was 1,000 times more than we had from North Korea already. We had slapped that stuff around and did the reconstruction of North Korean population trends, wrote a book on this.

Couldn’t publish the book unless I got permission from North Korean officials to use this stuff. So I had to figure out how to go to North Korea and meet the officials, get permission to use it. It took a while, but I did so. Then sent the copy of this manuscript to our government, South Korean government, North Korean government.

A while later I get a call from the UN, North Korean mission to the UN, my good friend the deputy ambassador there calls me up. And the end of the phone call goes kind of like this – I get it almost correct, maybe a few words off: “Mr. Eberstadt, you must think about your problem” – not my problem – “You must not publish this book. We know where you live. We know about your wife. We know about your children. You must not publish this book.”

Now, admittedly, I am a nerd and don’t get out much, but that made it sound like a death threat to me. And so it was a sort of a fight or flight moment and I, for some reason, thought it was a bluff and I’m here, my wife and children are fine. It was a bluff.

And eventually he calls me back a year later wanting a favor and says, “How is your lovely wife, how are your golden children?” To kind of indicate look pal, I’ll threaten you with death, I’ll flatter you; I’m just a diplomat for this country.

The reason they were so upset with this study was because it used their own statistics to estimate how big the military in North Korea was. The U.S. and South Korea and others had their intelligence services doing different sorts of technical estimates on this from satellites and other things.

Our numbers came out to be almost identical to those, as it happened. With North Korea's – it's a tiny country, remember – with North Korea's non-civilian male population going from 700,000 in the mid-'70s to a one and a quarter million by the late 1980s.

So in short, they thought that I had kind of done something that was a little bit like espionage. And I haven't gotten an invitation to go back since then, and I'm not sure it would be a super great idea for me to go back if I did.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I wouldn't necessarily recommend it, if you are asking for my advice.

You mentioned intelligence – let me just do another digression on that. Generally speaking, I mean, what should one think of our intelligence capabilities and understanding of North Korea?

EBERSTADT: Okay, so I have never had any security clearances, and so there's a lot of things I can't know. And the general aphorism about intelligence work is that people in intelligence can never brag about their successes, and so there may be a lot of successes that I don't know about.

My outside-of-the-inner-circle impression is we do very well on order of battle sort of stuff, on mapping out the conventional military forces that would be a threat against South Korea and against our forces in the alliance in South Korea.

We do, I think, what would be charitably called a mediocre job of understanding North Korean decision making and military decision making. And we do a poor job of understanding the economic power behind the regime or supporting the military threat, in part because we, up until now, really haven't cared about that.

As far as I know, there is not a single full-time PhD trained economist in the U.S. intelligence community who is dedicated to following North Korea. And maybe some people say, well, that's a good thing; but in any case, you can't learn about things – you may make mistakes if you study things, but you can't learn about things that you don't study.

KRISTOL: And I guess, this is partly because they don't take seriously what you talked about earlier, which is that they actually have rebounded economically. They're not just holding it together pathetically with Chinese or Russian aid or whatever. That there is an actual economic agenda here of a kind that has not entirely failed, I guess, over the last 15 years, right?

EBERSTADT: Well, I mean, we have a sort of a freighted history within the U.S. intelligence community of trying to understand planned economies. The whole effort to describe the Soviet economy was probably the biggest social science experiment ever undertaken in history.

And, in retrospect, that looks like a kind of a poor job, in the sense that our effort seems to have vastly overestimated Soviet economic potential and vastly underestimated the military burden. Which means, you put those two things together, we were also seriously misunderstanding Soviet leadership intentions if they had such a heavy military burden.

After the end of the Soviet project, there was really very little appetite, I think, within our intelligence community to try to go back and look at other planned economies. China was evolving out of a kind of a planned economy circumstance, as was VietNam. North Korea was really the only type like that left. And for just a variety of reasons, I think, there was very little interest in trying to kick Lucy's football again.

KRISTOL: Right. What about – I want to get to the nukes in a minute, if that's okay; that's the reason we're all so interested in it right now.

But Russia and China, one reads different things about how much control either one has, or how close either one is to North Korea. Give a quick – ?

EBERSTADT: Yeah, okay. So, well, Putin, as an old KGB boy, has had a long interest in North Korea. He has famously stated that the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the last century was the collapse of the Soviet Union. Very interested in restoring Russian/Soviet – Russian power in various areas. Korean Peninsula is one of them, but hasn't been a fulltime beat. He took out a lead on the current ruler's father, Kim Jong-il, back in 2001. Came up with this ridiculous idea that Russia could launch North Korean rockets and this would be peaceful and everybody should be happy about it.

But at the same time that he did this, he came up with a joint declaration with the North Korean leader at the time, saying that it was time for U.S. troops to leave the peninsula. That both Moscow and Pyongyang saw this as a problem that was immediate and necessary. That was 2001. That's been, as Putin has become a stronger and more ambitious and unrestrained dictator, this leitmotif has continued.

Putin doesn't have the pocketbook to do what he might with many, many trillions more dollars. Since the annexation of Crimea, he has announced/threatened that he was going to be supporting North Korea's economy a lot more. That seems mainly to have been talk. So, to the extent that he can free-ride and make things more difficult for the Western Alliance through North Korea, fine; but not at the risk of causing any trouble for himself.

China is a different situation. Because the Korean peninsula as a whole used to be a tributary state in the old East Asian order. This means that there's trouble in paradise right from the start. The North Koreans have a phrase that is hilariously translated into English as "flunky-ist." They call people that they don't like "flunkysists." That's a weird translation of a Korean word for serving the Great Power, the Great Power was Imperial China. So they're saying that people who, in a Korean context, are bootlickers to big powers, they're the flunkysist. If this is a term of opprobrium in official North Korean propaganda, you can tell that there's some ambivalence about Beijing from the start.

And on the Chinese side, there's a lot of ambivalence with regard to Pyongyang. I mean, just imagine what it would be like if you were in the apartment next door to Joey Gallo, and he had nuclear weapons. I mean, you'd probably be a little bit afraid of him. And we don't hear about this much, but I think there is good reason to suspect the Chinese leadership is afraid of North Korea, as well as attempting to figure out how to use North Korea to their advantage.

It looks to me, and this is only an interpretation, but it looks to me as if the Chinese leadership has this strange calculus where they conclude that as long as the North Korean regime is causing more trouble for the U.S. and the U.S. alliances – South Korea, Japan and the others – than it's causing for Beijing, that they've got a plus on their hands. But that's a kind of a strange calculation, if I'm correct about that.

What we do know at the moment is that the leadership in Beijing and the leadership in Pyongyang do not have very good things to say about each other. They both seem to compete to show which despises the other one more. But they have a working arrangement which includes a lot of Chinese support, economic support, for North Korea and maybe some military support that we don't hear much about.

KRISTOL: And which is important to North Korea.

EBERSTADT: Absolutely important to North Korea. It's the difference between an absolute collapse of the economic system and the very small increase in economic upswing that they've enjoyed over the recent years under Kim the third.

II: Confronting the Threat (27:11 – 1:04:32)

KRISTOL: So, nukes – that’s why they’re on our mind, I suppose, though they could be on our minds simply for humanitarian and geopolitical reasons. But what’s with the nuclear program, how surprising has that been to us in its progress, what are its implications?

EBERSTADT: Well, the nuclear program goes back at least to the 1980s, when the Soviet Union helped to set up a nuclear reactor in the DPRK. And through an unbelievable comedy of errors, the IAEA – the U.N.’s organization which is supposed to follow non-proliferation questions – forgot to send the paperwork to North Korea. So the North Koreans didn’t send the paperwork back because they hadn’t gotten the right forms. And they’ve been racing to produce nuclear weapons for a generation.

Now, the fact that North Korea only now is claiming that it has tested a thermonuclear device may speak to the poverty and to the technological backwardness of the regime. But this has been a long race that the leadership has been on. They were undeterred during the worst times of the famine. They were undeterred when their economy seemed basically on the precipice of collapse, in the sense of breakdown of the division of labor. This is a very, very central priority for the regime. And this, of course, has people outside of North Korea wondering, *how come is this?*

The received wisdom at the moment, I think, would tend to be the North Korean government is very insecure and wants an insurance policy; it wants a deterrent.

I would say, any good policy step by any government always serves a multiplicity of purposes. So we don’t necessarily see an either/or. It can be a candy and a breath mint at the same time. It can reinforce legitimacy at home; it can help with military extortion internationally; it can be a sort of an insurance policy for the regime; and it can still be a hammer with which the regime hopes to pursue the ambition of reunification of the Korean Peninsula unconditionally under its control.

KRISTOL: And why the tests, and why the bluster, and why the? You mentioned earlier, I think, what did you say, “we are in or could be in a nuclear confrontation with them?”

EBERSTADT: Sure.

KRISTOL: We’re speaking early March in case – in case something happens in the next two weeks.

EBERSTADT: Okay. Well, why the tests? That’s simple enough. That’s just an engineering question; that’s just a physics question. They can’t know if their stuff works unless they test it. They can –

KRISTOL: It does mean they care if it works, which wouldn’t be quite – if they really just needed it as a kind of a vague insurance policy, even having untested weapons might be scary enough.

EBERSTADT: I think they’re serious as a heart attack about making sure the stuff works. And the – Kim III, the latest supreme leader, has declared that the testing part is more or less over now, or at least they are satisfied with the testing part, and they are now moving to mass manufacture of nukes and missiles. Thus he says, and thus he says.

Of course, if you are a North Korean decision-maker, you want to milk everything you can out of every single move you make on the chessboard. So, all of the tests and all of the threats about tests also have their own ways of attempting to probe the U.S. resolve and to probe the strength of the alliance, and to see what the international community may do to push back.

Last year was a wonderful year for North Korean leadership. They tested a lot of things. They seem to indicate that they now have an ICBM that can go as far as where we’re sitting today in Washington, DC. And this year they seem to be trying to consolidate those gains, not to lose them, in the face of international sanctions.

So they're trying to make sure, it seems right now, that they can hold on to what they've got, that they can take the pressure of economic penalties off of them, because they're so vulnerable to those. They've done a lot with very little. They've got a very distorted economy; it's very dependent upon outside resources. It's a poster child for a successful sanctions campaign.

As we're talking now, the winter Olympics in South Korea have just concluded a little while ago. The North Korean government sent delegations to the South during this and athletes to the South – I think judging that the current government in the South would be the weakest link in the international sanctions chain. It's very important for them to break that, or else their whole economy that supports this enormous military missile effort may be in jeopardy.

KRISTOL: And why are they threatening of – I want to get to sanctions in a minute, that's the core of the policy going forward – but I guess why the threatening of us? It would seem like if one, again, had tried to put oneself in a more conventional way in the North Korean leader's shoes, you'd want to intimidate South Korea.

You want have the insurance policy so no one messes with you too much, but they seem to really enjoy almost picking fights with the U.S., taunting the U.S. Isn't it better for them if people, we vaguely thought, well, maybe we're not threatened by them, that we don't really care as much, that South Korea and Japan are threatened. Maybe, in a sense, force the U.S. government almost to be more assertive against North Korea than perhaps we would want to be since it's a tough problem?

EBERSTADT: That's a good question, Bill. I mean, to some degree this may be talismanic. Because we know that North Korea already has huge stockpiles of chemical weapons, and chemical weapons are really scary things. They reminded us of their chemical weapons by assassinating the half-brother of the leader in a public space, in an airport in Malaysia, just to remind us that they've got nerve agents.

But there is something special about nuclear weapons. I mean, in part – part of the talismanic allure of nuclear weapons is that the U.S. used nuclear weapons against their historical enemy, Japan, the colonial power that was subjugating them in 1945 and brought that war to an end.

The U.S. is central, though, for other reasons as well. North Korean leadership thought they were going to reunify the Korean peninsula in 1950. They thought they had a clean shot at a surprise attack against the South that was going to roll the entire place up in June of 1950. The United States unexpectedly, and unexpectedly for many people in the U.S. as well, intervened to protect –

KRISTOL: Was that attack North Korean motivated or Soviet/Chinese motivated? Do we know?

EBERSTADT: If you look at the New Left historiography, it's "just too hard to tell." "Nobody can tell what happened. It was just like too complicated." It was kind of like saying it's too complicated to say what happened in the Holocaust; nobody can know.

The archive opening in Moscow was very unkind to the New Left historiographers, because now we've got the documents about the actual planning for this. T

he plans were North Korean, but approved of and given blessing of Stalin. And Mao was in this kind of awkward position, do I help the North Koreans or do I save my forces to conquer Taiwan and reunify China once and for all? It was planned by North Korea, although once the U.S. responded, all of the plans went out the window and China intervened to preserve the North Korean state and Stalin provided secret help.

In any case, the U.S. preserved the South Korean experiment, which has now become an affluent democracy – I think one of the modern world's great successes – and has maintained a military alliance, a defense military alliance with South Korea since right after the cease fire in '53.

So getting the U.S. out of the Korean Peninsula is a necessary, although obviously not a sufficient step, for the minnow to eat the whale. And that's, I think, where the nuclear hammer comes in right now.

We were talking off-camera about that strange movie, *Dr. Strangelove*, back in the '60s about, a black comedy about nuclear war. The North Korean regime is not mad – evil, but it's not mad. It wouldn't still be here if it were mad. They plan things very, very, very carefully. They game things hundreds of times before they actually roll them out, which is one of the reasons that they eat our diplomat's lunches at most occasions where they gather.

I don't think there's any intention to have an exchange of nuclear weapons with the U.S. What I can imagine, and this is only my imagination – I can't speak for the North Korean government because they haven't told me about this – but what I would imagine is the following.

When the regime is sufficiently confident, it may think of provoking a crisis at a time and place of its choosing. There are never any spontaneous crises with North Korea: all of the crises we see have been carefully planned in advance. And, whatever this crisis might be – I mean, shooting some artillery shells at a U.S. military base in downtown Seoul; I mean, I don't know; you can make up whatever it is – would get a U.S. president in this sort of a position.

Either you respond and escalate against a nuclear North Korea and risk really catastrophic devastation before winning. Or you decide you are going to go on the off-ramp: de-escalate, de-conflict, wait, hesitate, and do what UN-style leaders are supposed to do.

However, in this situation if you were to do the second, arguably responsible option, the credibility of the U.S.-ROK military alliance would fall apart. The credibility of the U.S. as a defender of South Korea would be shattered. And I don't think it would be too long before people in South Korea would want the Americans out because the Americans are just bullet magnets.

I don't know what the implications of this would be for the U.S. alliance with Japan. I can see it might strengthen it; it might weaken it. But that sort of a showdown would have tremendous implications for South Korea, and could for other American alliances as well.

Now, if this scenario I'm spinning out for you were actually to unfold, that doesn't leave the North Korean regime home free in this quest for racial reunification under the Kims. They have got a much smaller population than the South. Their economy is tiny in comparison to the South. Their form of government is repulsive to anybody who is not captive under it already. So exactly how they would get from there to their destination is not clear to me, but they would be much closer to their destination than they have been since 1953

KRISTOL: And having nukes wouldn't hurt.

EBERSTADT: Exactly.

KRISTOL: The South Koreans don't. And yeah, that's very interesting. What's the North Korean public position right now in terms of the Korean Peninsula and our forces being there and their nuclear weapons?

EBERSTADT: They have always called for U.S. out peace treaty. They want to have a peace treaty with us. They don't want to have a peace treaty with the South, because there is no legitimate government in the South.

KRISTOL: And their stated position is there should be one Korea; there is only one Korea.

EBERSTADT: There should be only one Korea.

KRISTOL: The U.S. should be out of the peninsula.

EBERSTADT: The U.S. should be out of the peninsula. Here's an interesting thing that our North Korea experts don't usually point to. This is a North Korea trivia moment. There is one South Korean organization that has official offices in Pyongyang, and it is called the Anti-Imperialist National Democratic Front. It is an imaginary organization created by the Kim family regime of supposed dissidents from the South, whose only hope is that the Kim family will unify the entire country.

So the Republic of Korea has no representation in the North; only this fake organization which is a front group for the groups that would create a unification on North Korean terms in the South. That should tell us something.

KRISTOL: Yeah, you would think so. So here we are, and the U.S. government – so we have had policies towards North Korea?

EBERSTADT: Sure.

KRISTOL: For ages. I think the conventional view is that they haven't worked very well in the sense that we haven't brought down the regime; we haven't stopped their nuclear program. I guess we have held our own in terms of South Korea, maybe that is a bit of a victory. I mean it's not nothing, right?

EBERSTADT: Oh, sure.

KRISTOL: Held the Japan alliance together. But where are we, do you think, as a sort of policy matter? And then what about this escalation a) of sanctions and b) of rhetoric by the Trump Administration?

EBERSTADT: We have to give the U.S. government tremendous credit for making the space in which the South Korean success story could take place. So our military guarantee, our diplomatic support, our economic assistance and all the rest has at least made the space in which we can have modern South Korea's fantastic economic and democratic success story play out. We did all of this by deterring a conventional attack from the North since 1953. That's a great success.

Our non-proliferation policy against North Korea has been an unrelenting failure under both Democrats and Republicans in the White House and under Democratic and Republican Congresses. We have not taken the North Korean side seriously. They have taken us seriously. They have a game plan and a strategy; we have had none. Which means that in this unfolding crisis over the last 25 plus years, it's always been the North Korean side that has called the tune and it has always been the U.S. side that is caught short-footed, wrong-footed, flat-footed, catching up. We haven't had an objective and a strategy of our own.

Interestingly enough, under the Trump Administration, the United States for the first time since the end of the Cold War has had something like a strategy for making a bigger problem into a smaller problem. And obviously not all of the pieces are in place and government doesn't work like clockwork and the international world is messy.

But with all of those caveats, we see now gathering the sorts of components that could help to press the North Korean state into a smaller box. Not to force the North Korean regime to de-nuclearize because I don't think that anyone in the North Korean regime intends to commit suicide – and this would be tantamount, in their view, to committing suicide – but to reducing the killing force and the killing power of the North Korean government through a concerted economic pressure campaign.

The record of international sanctions is miserably poor if you look over history. The coercive economic diplomacy usually doesn't work. But North Korea isn't a typical economy. As I mentioned earlier, it is just a poster child for an international pressure campaign, for a successful one.

We have other things that we could also be doing at the same time, of course, shy of bloody nose, shy of military attacks, of preventive military attacks. There's all sorts of work that can be done on defensive measures, not just missile defense, but civil defense in the South.

Human rights: we should be pursuing an international human rights campaign against this most odious government for reasons that have nothing to do with security. We can put much more of a spotlight on China than we've done. We should be preparing for a successful reunification in a world that doesn't know the North Korean regime anymore.

All sorts of things we can do. But we're starting, I think, to cohere more towards thinking about how to make the problem smaller rather than larger, and how to have us move and them respond, rather than the other way around.

KRISTOL: But if we move and we continue to succeed, to some degree, in building more a serious sanctions regime, maybe get the Russians and Chinese to cooperate more than they have, which you think is possible.

EBERSTADT: Sure.

KRISTOL: Difficult, but possible. What about the North Korean response? I mean, they are not going to sit and passively watch this, presumably?

EBERSTADT: No. So there are a couple of things I think we can absolutely count on. One thing we can absolutely count on is another famine in North Korea. The people who died in the last famine in North Korea were – I mean, take a look at Kim Jong-un – he's not at risk of famine. The people who died in North Korea were in these lower classes, the hostile classes, the ones the regime distrusts. They will hold them hostage again. They will threaten to starve them again. And they will do that not only because they distrust and dislike these groups, which is true. They don't feel they would be worse off without them. But also because this opens a possibility for breaking the international blockade, using this as a classic hostage taking mechanism.

We have to be prepared to offer intrusive aid to attempt to feed the victims and not feed the regime. We can't make that happen, but we have to have it ready, let the regime say no, we're going to kill them anyhow, if they are going to do that. But we need to be prepared for this because a humanitarian tragedy is going to be part of their statecraft.

The other thing which is absolutely predictable is a new and very scary round of brinkmanship on the North Korean side. North Korea can do a Smiley Spice or it can do Scary Spice. The Winter Olympics are Smiley, but they are very good at Scary, too.

And if they calculate that an effective pressure campaign is going to undermine their nuclear quest or their missile quest or their defensive military, offensive military quest, they'll pull out all the stops. And they are past masters at gaming through weaknesses and probing, probing potential fissures and divisions. So we just have to be ready for this. Maybe we can't game it through as many times as they can, but we have to at least be ready for it.

KRISTOL: How much of a problem – even if they were contained sort of, and weren't making progress perhaps as much in the nuclear program, or if sanctions bit a little, if we didn't flinch – how much problem is just their being there with nuclear weapons? How much of a problem is that, at least in terms of proliferation?

I mean, it is often you talk to international agents, people, when I do, they may not know that much about North Korea and for them it is just such a weird place; it is kind of sui generis. But they are very well aware, unless I'm wrong, that it's a big proliferation problem for them to have nuclear weapons and nuclear missiles and stuff.

EBERSTADT: Absolutely. As long as they have their current leadership, there will be a proliferation problem and a nuclear threat problem. I don't think we have any evidence that there's ever been anything that they have made that they haven't tried to sell abroad and, of course, they would try to sell this.

KRISTOL: And they were part of what? They were – the Syrian plant that the Israelis destroyed?

EBERSTADT: Yes. And they have a homework club with Iran whose details I can't know because I have no security clearances. I can tell you that about six weeks after the 2012 Tehran-Pyongyang scientific cooperation agreement, the North Korean currency, which had been in freefall, suddenly stabilized. Suggests that the cooperation was money going one way and scientific knowledge going the other way, and I don't think it was life sciences, right? So, of course there will be an international security threat until they are run by a better class of dictator.

KRISTOL: Wow. And the regime itself, I mean, what lessons do you draw more broadly – you're thoughtful about these things – about just the ability, the method and the madness, and the ability of the regime to hang on? More than hang on, to adapt and, as you say, to invent almost this particularly horrifying form of one-nation totalitarianism?

EBERSTADT: Well, it's so much easier for us to mock these strange people in comedy movies, *The Interview* or *Team America* or whatever, than to take them seriously and give them their due, even as a threat to our allies and ourselves.

We need to pay a lot more attention to the logic behind their system. There is a logic there. It is not a very attractive or tasteful one. But they are not mad. There may be some questions about the quality of judgement at different times, but they are certainly not mad. And by their own lights, they have done fantastically well. They have done fantastically well and I don't think we can say the same in our contest with them.

KRISTOL: Wow, that's a chastening and worrisome thought. How optimistic are you, let's assume the administration stays on this path of, let's – It has explicitly repudiated the policies of the last quarter century, which I think most people would agree, haven't worked, whatever their decent intentions. What happens, do you think, over the next year two, three?

I mean, I guess, obviously who knows, but can we just gradually tighten the screws and they complain a little and they go around the sanctions and occasional explosion, and if we are sitting here two or three years from now, it sort of looks the same? Or are we hitting some inflection points where things snap one way or the other?

EBERSTADT: If we've successful, it's probably going to be a very rough and bumpy ride. If we're unsuccessful, it's going to be an even worse ride.

KRISTOL: Explain, give me those two bad scenarios. It is a good, cheerful thing to conclude on.

EBERSTADT: The happy scenario is that we are threatened with something like nuclear war before the North Korean government is actually prepared to follow through on that, as we try to, let's say, suffocate their defense industries. And one thing we are not doing, but we sorely should be doing, is attempting to prepare with our allies in South Korea and with others all around the world to try to envision what would

be necessary for a successful, free and democratic reunification of all of the Korean people. It may be a whole lot more difficult than it was with East Germany for reasons we can imagine.

That's the one bumpy ride. The other bumpy ride is what happens if the North Korean government gets to a point where it thinks it really can call the shots on a crisis in the Korean Peninsula, where it faces down the U.S. government with nuclear threats and breaks the U.S.-ROK alliance through that.

We can't even begin right now to feel the reverberations that would come from something like that. We can imagine them if we care to, but we have this problem where we tend to think that the future is going to be like today plus 2 percent or plus 5 percent. North Korea does disruption. North Korea is a fundamentally revisionist actor on the world stage. It doesn't believe in win-win. Win-win is bad, not least because you leave a penny on the table for your enemy and that makes the enemy stronger. North Korea does win-lose. And the sooner we appreciate that, the sooner we may be able to protect ourselves a little bit better.

KRISTOL: That sounds as if you are saying, though, that if we pull back from the confrontational rhetoric and policies – I don't know if that is the right word, but whatever the word would be of the current administration – that's no better either because that just invites more of what has been invited.

EBERSTADT: Of course. Well, so there's a whole dispute right now about what is being called "bloody nose": a punch at North Korea and this way of talking about it that the regime will find itself out-escalated on and won't respond to. I'm not actually – I'm not aware of anybody in the administration who has actually used bloody nose, although this idea has taken on something of a life of its own.

The problems with a preventive attack against North Korea at this point are, number one, there are an awful lot of people living in South Korea right up near the border and we have a defensive alliance with them. And there are an awful lot of people who would be in harm's way if North Korea cared to respond in one sort of a way and not in another. There are – I'm not at all clear that we have thought through what our moves and steps B, C through Z-prime would be. The North Korean side already has thought those through.

There are things we could do that mystify me that we haven't done them yet that would not provoke the same sort of global crisis, I think. For example, I mean, North Korea has submarines and some of those submarines they would like to have sidle up right near Los Angeles with things on them. I don't see why we ever let North Korean submarines go back to port. I mean, we should be playing subtract the North Korean submarines every day until they run out of them because we can subtract them faster than they can make them.

Wouldn't have to be a diplomatic incident, we would never have to talk about it, just something that the two sides know about and send signals. It actually would send, I think, kind of stabilizing signals because up until now the North Korean government, on the surface conflicts on the peninsula, has always learned that it can push as hard as it wants and we'll eventually want to go to the exit ramp.

There's a lot of things that the North Korean government has to unlearn if we are going to have a safe world, and subtracting their submarines might be one way of going about it, but a surface preventive attack is something quite different from that.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and what is so interesting about this, stepping back from North Korea as a particular place, it seems to be a model of how to, you presented a model of how to think about it as a serious international challenge. And the simple, let's call it, hawkish alternative – preventive military action – is very, very dicey for reasons you have just said.

And the simple dovish, well, let's not provoke them, you know – it's very dicey because their nuclear program just trucks ahead and you do end up with this regime having a sort of blackmail ability, right, over the U.S.

EBERSTADT: As long as the North Korean project is there, it intends to be – they wouldn't put it this way – but they intend to be a threat for us. To make the world safe for North Korea, they have to make the world a threat for the U.S. and her allies.

It's nothing personal. There are personal layers on top of that, but at heart, there is nothing personal about that. We just have to have the stomach and the fortitude to recognize that and to recognize that the situation isn't going to be over until the DPRK is no longer a player in world politics in the world.

And that does not mean that we can immediately go in and execute regime change, but we should be under no illusions that there's any win-win solution for us as long as there's a DPRK in the game.

KRISTOL: On that chastening but helpful note, I think for policymakers and for all of us as citizens, thank you really, Nick, for this very interesting discussion – a topic I know very little about. And I think I've learned a lot, and I hope policymakers listen to you. And I hope we can come back in a couple of years and report progress, or at least not the opposite of progress. I guess in that case, maybe things not getting worse might be as good as we can do in the short run, I suppose.

But in the long run, it would be – they deserve to be free, and there's no reason in principle, right, why North Korea couldn't follow the path that – they averted the path of East Germany and other places. But there's no reason in principle that couldn't happen?

EBERSTADT: No reason in principle. And if you look at just the humanitarian side of the story, Bill, there are no people on Earth who suffer the nightmare of humanitarian abuse and human-rights abuse that the population in North Korea does. It would be a blessing to have an open and stable society there for the subjects who are suffering.

KRISTOL: That's well-said, and let's hope for that. Nick Eberstadt, thank you so much for joining me on CONVERSATIONS.

EBERSTADT: Thank you Bill; it was a lot of fun.

KRISTOL: And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]

