



South Korea war games and American militarism w/ KJ Noh - Ep 129

Henri: [00:00:00] Welcome everyone to Fortress On A Hill, a podcast about US foreign policy, anti imperialism skepticism, and the American way of war. I'm Henri. Thank you everyone for joining us today. We are here today to talk with journalist and political analyst KJ Noh. KJ, how are you doing this evening?

KJ Noh: I'm doing great, and I'm delighted to be with you.

Henri: thank you. Thank you again for, for joining us. So, KJ Noh is a journalist, political analyst, writer and educator specializing in the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific region. He writes for dissident voice, black Agenda Report, counter Punch, popular Resistance, Asia Times, [00:01:00] uh, Mr. Online. And Mr. Line. He also does frequent commentary and analysis on the news programs, the Critical Hour by any means necessary Fault lines, political misfits, loud and clear, breakthrough news, and K PFA flashpoints. He's reported extensively on great power competition, geostrategic messaging and propaganda. Media structure and ecology and its effects on communities has also collaborated with various scholars on the geopolitics of global health, indigenous health rights policy, structural violence, and medical care delivery under neoliberal capitalism.

he, uh, recently pioneered a groundbreaking study with, uh, Dr. Claudia Chaufan on the military transmission of infectious diseases and their implications for covid transmission. He believes a functioning and healthy society requires good information. To that end, he [00:02:00] strives to combat weaponization and disin weaponization of disinformation in the current Cold

War climate. He's also a member of Veterans for Peace and a found, founding member of Pivot to Peace.

I was wondering, please give us a little bit of background on, on you, um, where you're from, how you came to study these topics, all that kind of stuff.

KJ Noh: Okay. So, uh, and kj, uh, I'm a South Korean. I grew up, uh, in South Korea and I lived through three military dictatorships and I also served, uh, in the military and combat infantry, uh, during the Chandu one dictatorship. And so I think that gives you a pretty large burden of, um, wanting to figure out, uh, essentially what's wrong and how to fix it. And so I've been a political activist, you know, since my early, early teens [00:03:00] really. Uh, and, uh, I have focused specifically on, uh, geopolitics as a journalist, but in particular the US pivot to Asia starting 2012. So probably done some of the most intensive coverage, uh, of that escalation of, of any journalist that I know.

Uh, and so, uh, what I'm, what I'm noticing right now, And it's no consolation is that the things that I and a few other people have been saying, were really shouting for, for close to a decade. All of this stuff is coming to pass, and we are seeing ourselves inching closer and closer to the precipice of kinetic war in Asia.

And as we know, we're already in kinetic war, uh, with Russia through pro, through a proxy war. Uh, and so, you know, I feel that it's really, really important for us to get the word out, to get the truth [00:04:00] out for people to understand what's happening and really to cut through this fog of propaganda, disinformation misinformation, because we know that, you know, when we go to war, uh, truth is the first casualty, but even before that, uh, it's the information war that sets the ground for the kinetic war.

It's the information war is the pre kinetic dimension of, uh, of kinetic war.

Henri: So, um, so bring us in kind of to where the, where you see, uh, South Korea is at right now in terms of its relationship to the US and, and in terms of the, you know, the new Cold War. That, you know, that the, you know, uh, South Korea has been a US ally for a long, long time. That includes, um, troops, you know, uh, how many [00:05:00] thousands fought with American troops in, in Vietnam.

There's probably other operations that I can, I can't, uh, think of at the moment. Um, but our relationship is, is, is very much a, a war making one. That with the,

with the games, with the, what is it, 28,000 American troops that are in South Korea.

KJ Noh: Yes.

Henri: That is at the dmz that it, it is one that is first and foremost about war footing.

KJ Noh: Absolutely, yes. Well, the US military and the South Korean military are deeply, deeply enmeshed, uh, uh, the South Korean military functions without exaggeration as an arm of the US military. And what I mean by that is the United States still has OpCon operational control of, uh, the South Korean military, all of its facilities, all of its arms, all of its bases.

The [00:06:00] moment that it decides that it wants this South Korea gave OpCon over to the United States in, uh, July of 1950. And it's never gotten OpCon back from the United States. In, uh, in the nineties, the US decided that it was only going to have wartime OpCon rather than full OpCon. But you know, this is like saying that you own the car when it's on the road, and the South Koreans can have it when it's in the garage. It doesn't mean anything. And the US can declare or actually claim OpCon anytime they decide that they declare DEFCON three, then they get to have operational control over South Korea's 600,000 active duty and probably close to another 3 million reserve duties. So that is an extraordinary firepower. It's actually the largest mili military manpower on the planet and the US essentially gets that for free. The South Koreans pay the United States [00:07:00] to have them stationed, uh, on their, uh, territory. Uh, and, uh, one of the things that we see there is this constant military war gaming against North Korea. I mean, these have been literally constant, at least since the 1970s. Team Spirit. And then they were, you know, they keep changing the names.

And now we have, uh, twice a year Ochi Freedom Guardian and, uh, toxicity on. So, you know, these are large war games. The last time before Covid, uh, the larger war game involved about 300,000 troops, uh, conducted for weeks. So these are the probably the largest, most threatening military war games on the planet.

Uh, they're done twice a year. They're momentarily suspended during Covid and during the Trump era when there was a little bit of rapprochement with North Korea, but now the US is doing them right again, doing them in full intensity. And, uh, they just finished the Fall War [00:08:00] games, which are always time to coincide with North Korea's harvest season.

So in North Korea is a very poor country, it's agriculturally hard to sustain itself. Only 15% of the land is arable, and that means all hands on deck when we do harvesting and planting. the US always times its war games to coincide with the planting season and the harvesting season. Uh, and so, you know, North Korea has to divert manpower away, and soldiers do a lot of, you know, the agricultural work as well.

So they have to drop everything, man, the barracks. Uh, and then, you know, North Korea struggles and then they get, uh, dragged through the coals for, uh, for being food insecure. Right. For starving their own people. So there's such a kind of, um, you know, hypocritical and ugly dynamic that's going on. But us conducts war games, uh, uh, at least twice annually.

Although since August they've done [00:09:00] nonstop war games. They've done four sets of war games, either with Korea and South, with South Korea, with Japan in the Philippines and just in the Pacific. They've just been ongoing and nonstop. And the North Koreans have been very, very upset about this. They fired a few missiles.

But the key thing to understand, and I don't think I can emphasize this, uh, enough, is that. I'm assuming that among our audience, we have some Vietnam era veterans.

Henri: Many.

KJ Noh: And those of us who, you know, understand a little bit about the war, we understand that it, you know, the carpet bombing, the napalming, the free fire zones, Operation Phoenix, all of these things that we saw in Vietnam, all of those things were prefigured and uh, and tested in South Korea before they were done in [00:10:00] Vietnam. So I'm really talking about, you know, the genocidal levels of carpet bombing, uh, conservative estimates, uh, estimate that one out of five North Koreans were killed in the war. Uh, if you look at the footage, read the footage at the time, you know, the entire country was turned into a moonscape.

The journalists who traveled through North Korea at the time, they said, uh, traveling across North Korea was like traveling on the surface of the moon. There was nothing left standing, you know, anything higher than one story was pulverized. By January of 1951, the US pilots were complaining that there was nothing left to bomb, and still they continued bombing for another, uh, two years.

And so, you know, we're really talking about this kind of genocidal level of biblical, uh, you know, destruction. [00:11:00] And when you have a country like that that has gone through that, uh, and still they manage to claw themselves out and build, uh, a functioning society without going insane, which, or, or simply collapsing, which is usually what happens when countries like.

Exposed to that level of violence. Uh, and then, uh, and then like every, uh, at least twice a year, they're subjected to, uh, these war exercises that are designed to trigger North Korea's collective PTSD. You know, that, that is being done, uh, over and over and over again. And their demand since 1953 is, come on, let's cut this out.

You know, can we have a peace treaty? Can we stop this belligerence? Or at the very least, you know, can we get some kind of, uh, restraining order against this? Because they cannot tolerate that. And their response, uh, you know, [00:12:00] their demands have fallen on, uh, you know, deaf ears. And so their response has been to, uh, prevent themselves from being destroyed, which is to build their own nuclear weapons.

By the way, North Korea was threatened with nuclear destruction during the Korean War. Starting 1958, there are nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula until 1991. And then after 1991, they were removed, the tactical nukes were removed, and instead the strategic nukes that were focused at the Soviet Union were pointed at North Korea.

And so, you know, the North Korean approach has been, you know, if we can't get peace and we've tried and we can't get normalized relations, we are going to at least try and create deterrence, uh, and create a sense of security through that. But it's extraordinarily, uh, escalatory and extraordinarily dangerous.

And just recently, [00:13:00] uh, Wendy Sherman and, uh, you know, the Biden administration, they've come out and threatened, uh, North Korea with obliteration again, threatened them with complete obliteration, you know, if they, uh, if they, you know, so much dare as to, you know, uh, launch any, do anything really.

Henri: And, and for the American people that much, much in the same way that, um, you know, uh, history with the war in current war in Ukraine did not begin this year. And it did not begin in 2014. But that's one big thing that we do, is we decide when history ends and begins and. You know, Korea being, uh, known and I think correctly labeled, you know, as, as, uh, the forgotten war, that

the, the damage that it caused, that the, the, um, and what the people still have to live through.

And it, it is, it's, it's a, it's a remarkable feat of [00:14:00] spirit on the, on the side of the North Korean people to be able to do that. And I, you know, I, I will continue to, to see that in different ways as far as US hegemony and areas recovering, you know, places, Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, um, you know, uh, and we talked a little bit before we started about your, your study about, about covid transmission among the military.

And I would wonder about, does South Korea ever do any, um, large scale testing of the, like the soil and water, or not what contamination, but like samples that are near US military base in terms of, to see how much of, you know, firefighting foam and what whatever other pfas contamination is actually getting there? I would assume that it's very similar to what we have here, that if it's on the base or it's immediately adjacent to the base, we're you're, the pollution is, is all right there. Uh, and it affects [00:15:00] everybody, even people that aren't affiliated with the military at all.

KJ Noh: You're absolutely correct. You know, anytime you have a military base, a US military outpost with a certain footprint, you're going to get significant amounts of pollution. That's simply the nature of the military beast and the toxic materials that it uses in stores and caries. So just most recently, um, in the middle of, uh, Seoul, the capital city, the US had a huge garrison called Jsan, where the eighth Army was stationed, and it's, uh, a little bit smaller than Central Park, but if you can imagine a major metropolis like Seoul or New York, and if you can imagine that Central Park was, uh, a military base, uh, that gives you a sense of what that is.

Well, recently the US moved, uh, the eighth Army, uh, out of Jsan and they moved [00:16:00] them down to Pong Tech. Uh, which is the idea was to move them out of the range of North Korean artillery, you know, uh, and the South Koreans spent, if I'm not mistaken, close to 10 billion building the us the world's largest overseas base for, uh, the US troops in Pyeongtaek, Camp Casey, uh, and um, and you know, just, just so that we know that, you know, Our troops are being well taken care of.

Pam Casey Ptech has two golf courses, not one, but two golf courses,

Henri: two golf courses,

KJ Noh: but, uh, but the young San Army base, uh, which is in the, in the process of, you know, kind of decontamination is. It's full of toxic. So originally the idea that they were going to turn this into, uh, um, a [00:17:00] public park, uh, but after, you know, testing the soil and after testing, uh, you know, the water, they said, oops, you know, there's, there's too much, uh, contamination, uh, and it's dangerous to be there for longer than a few hours.

So I think there, the Korean government is working on remediation, uh, but, uh, but you know, who knows how long it will take and if it can be done properly. So once again, to come back to the Central Park, uh, analogy, if you can imagine that, you know, uh, there were troops in Central Park and they left, but Central Park was left, you know, tainted with dioxins and all kinds of poisons.

Uh, they were also doing, uh, bio warfare research in South Korea. There was a program called Jupiter, uh, and, uh, it's supposed supposedly for bio warfare detection, but you know, they were sending live anthrax, uh, through regular mail [00:18:00] or, uh, FedEx and you know, so just the level of danger and risk, once again, is extraordinary.

But, you know, if we wanna talk about. Cleaning things up. You know, first I don't think, uh, I think it's a bad idea to have bases anywhere in general, but if a base leaves, you know, I think there should be a, a real cleanup. And, uh, and if a country leaves, uh, uh, you know, a place where there's been war, you know, for God's sake, you know, clean up the minds, you know, the Laos is, uh, you know, is still, uh, I mean, you can make a direct correlation between, uh, the mines in Laos, uh, and the poverty in Laos where there large, uh, where there are still, you know, millions of minds laid.

Those are the poorest areas of the country, and also the places where children don't go to school because their parents have [00:19:00] been blown up or maimed and the children are working in the field. So I think there's so much, uh, reparation and cleanup and, uh, you know, uh, uh, so much work to be done.

Jovanni: KJ, uh, a couple things caught my attention. So, so I was stationed there. I was stationed there in. In Humphrey, and I was there doing that transition when they were actually, um, um, they actually had a plan and actually doing construction. They were acquiring more land around there, more land around. And there was, uh, also there were protests, uh, around that time. But, uh, that's around the time I was leaving when the, the big protests happened where people were being displaced from the area to expand that base in, in Camp Humphrey. And that was the Korean government that paid for it. Correct?

KJ Noh: The Korean government paid for that. And it also pays, if I'm not mistaken, I'll have to check my figures. It pays the US military another billion dollars a year [00:20:00] just for the privilege of being occupied by US troops.

Jovanni: So there's a, there's a book, but I don't know if you, uh, if you've seen it by Michael Hudson, uh, economist. He talk, it's a book called Super Imperialism. He talks about that. He talks about that, that the host countries are usually the ones are, are footing the bill for hosting a military, a US military installation in their, in their own, uh, uh, country. And if you think about it, there's a roughly, uh, there's not really a, a. A concrete number roughly from, from 800 to a thousand military bases around the, around the world, in about 130 countries around the world, right? And if each of those countries are footing the bill, you can imagine, and a lot of those countries are in poor countries, you can imagine, you know, what kind of industry is this, you know?

KJ Noh: Yeah, absolutely. And then the other piece I'll add to that is the Pentagon has never passed an audit in its life, right? Uh, the Pentagon budget has never, never ever been fully audited. They've [00:21:00] never passed, uh, uh, you know, an audit. And so here we have, uh, large amounts of money circulating, large amounts of money going to the military, industrial complex, large amounts of money being paid by the host countries.

Essentially paying a protection racket and then, um, and then, you know, getting polluted and getting their land stripped away. Uh, and, you know, I think it's 170 countries if you talk about countries that have lily pads or operations in them. So it's a huge footprint. It literally is an empire, right? It is, uh, a, it's an empire of bases.

And inside that, as you mentioned earlier with Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, when they were expanding the base, um, that is traditionally farming land. And South Korea's not a big country. It [00:22:00] needs every inch of farming land that it needs. Those were rice patties, and they were farmers who were making their livelihood, you know, through farming, through growing rice.

And the, uh, Korean government, under the prompting of the US military decided that it was going to expand a base, create the largest base, uh, on the planet. Uh, currently, I think it's two 3000 acres. I mean, it's, it's enormous. Uh, and so all of these farmers were being displaced. They fought tooth and nail to retain their land, to retain their livelihood, to retain their dignity.

And of course, they were beaten back and, you know, throttled and taken out. Same thing with the THADD, uh, with the THADD, uh, installation. Uh, same

thing, you know, massive protests against that. Uh, it still happens. Uh, they're still protesting the THADD, uh, [00:23:00] military base, but, you know, uh, once again, they don't have, uh, their own sovereignty.

In fact, the previous president, w James said that he was opposed to having THADD on South Korean soil. Uh, and at that point there were just plans. And after he became president, the South Korean military brought the sad missiles onto South Korean, onto South Korean soil, installed them anyway. And they did not notify the president, who is the, the head of the army, right?

They did not notify the South Korean military, did not notify the president of South Korea, that they had brought in strategic weapons, and they were asked. They said, well, you know, we discussed this with the US military and we had a non-disclosure agreement with the, with the US [00:24:00] military, and therefore we did not, we did not feel it was necessary to tell our commander in chief.

I think that gives you a sense of, you know, how the system works in South Korea.

Jovanni: I remember I was, um, I was, um, I think I was there when the presidency when, uh, uh, moon was elected around that time. I think it was in 2004. Yes, I believe it was. Uh, and remember he was running on the platform of reducing the, uh, the American military presence in, in South Korea.

It was very popular among, uh, young people and of, of, you know, continuing with the Sunshine policy, I believe it's called.

KJ Noh: Yes.

Jovanni: Um, to, uh, reach out to North Korea and pretty much cause the ultimate goal, my understanding is, you know, reunification. Yes. And I remember I had a, I had a, uh, I was, I was with a, uh, uh, south Korean soldier with which we, with, um, they call Katusa the, [00:25:00] uh, Korean Augmentee for US Army.

We were doing a duty together. Mm-hmm. . And I was just in conversation with him. He was telling me that his dream is that he was, he was a biker. Cause some of his dream was that, that one day he'll be able to ride his motorcycle for one. end of South Korea to the, to the, to the other end of Korea. So the hope. And so that was his dream, you know, uh, pretty much letting me know that he can't do that now because of the political divisions, uh, that there exist there.

Um, so can you, uh, because I remember that, that doing his presidency, he was resisted a lot too. By, by parliament. I remember there was. In parliament, there was like this kind of, uh, fist fights among congressmen or whatnot.

During his sermon, he had to be evacuated and, and barricaded in his office and everything. And since that he kind of changed his, his tone. I mean, he stopped talking about, um, um, reducing American presence in South Korea. And, and he [00:26:00] just pretty much just went along. And I believe he, um, he completed his term and committed suicide shortly after.

Can you tell me a little bit about, about him?

KJ Noh: Yeah. No, this is a really important part of Korean history. It's also a very sad one. Roh Moo-hyun was, um, he was kind of an extraordinary human being. Every, uh, every, you know, few, uh, decades, you know, there's, uh, kind of an extraordinary politician who comes along and no, was a human rights lawyer under the military dictatorship of, uh, Park Chung-hee and, uh, Chun Doo-hwan and that's saying a lot because there were no human rights. So to be a human rights lawyer and to be a labor rights lawyer is, is pretty extraordinary thing. He grew up in a dirt poor family. He was, I think if I'm, if I'm not mistaken, construction lawyer, I don't think he graduated high school.

But he, you know, built a little hut [00:27:00] for himself and studied for the bar exam for seven years, eventually passed it, uh, and then became a lawyer. And he took on some of the most difficult cases, uh, in, uh, in South Korean, uh, human rights history. Uh, and then eventually he was brought under the wing of Kim Dae-jung, who was really the first progressive South Korean president.

Uh, and he succeeded Kim Dae-jung as president. And he was opposed to the US military presence as opposed to the US. South Korea's client status, uh, as a US para colony or neo colony. And he came out of the student activist movement of the 1980s, which, uh, there was a a lot of discussion about, uh, people trying to decide how do we get rid of this [00:28:00] dictatorship? And there were two lines of thought. One is that we struggle for democracy, uh, as best as we can inside our own country. And that there was another line of thought that's that said, the reason why we don't have democracy is because all of these dictators have been put into place by the United States, which is absolutely true, and therefore our struggle for human rights has to become an anti imperial struggle.

And so, uh, Roh Moo-hyun came out of that, uh, field of thinking, you know, the kind of radical activist field and his successor, uh, after he, his, when Roh

Moo-hyun was a human rights lawyer, he had a partner, a junior partner, who also worked with him on human rights cases. The guy's name was Moon Jae-in and, uh, Moon Jae-in was the South Korean president just very [00:29:00] recently and Moon Jae-in became president was after Roh Moo-hyun committed in a very, very suspicious way, a very, very suspicious suicide. And I'll just put it out there. I don't believe that it was a suicide. But after Roh Moo-hyun died, Moon Jae-in decided that, uh, I have to, you know, step back into the political arena. He was quite happy, you know, just to be in the wings. But he was forced back into the political arena. And he organized the funeral and then decided that he had to take on the mantle of progressive politics. And then he, uh, became, uh, the president in 2016. So there's a long kind of history of tradition, of resistance, of progressive struggle.

And on the other hand, uh, you have a long, also an equally powerful counterforce of, uh, fascism, colonialism, uh, quizzing subjugation to imperial design, first to [00:30:00] Japanese colonization. They were the collaborators who worked with the Japanese, uh, colonial, uh, empire. And then these people became the same people who became the US collaborators, who essentially recreated Japanese colonization of the Southern Peninsula for the benefit of the United States. And so we have two trends, this kind of pro Japanese. Pro us pro colonial collaborator, quizzing class. And on the other hand, you have the Patriots, the people who struggled for independence, the progressives who were opposed to imperialism, opposed to us occupation, uh, and uh, and striving, uh, for reunification because North Korea represents that sovereign, uh, determination, that sovereign resistance. The last thing I'll say about this is the 28,500 US troops on the Korean Peninsula, give or take, [00:31:00] uh, but actually the 1953 armistice required that all foreign troops depart and China, which had sent hundreds of thousands of troops, all of those troops are out. You will not find a single Chinese soldier on North Korean soil.

But to this day, not only do you have 28,500 US troops, but the US still has, as I've said, operational control over South Korea's three and a half million, uh, uh, active duty and reserve troops.

Jovanni: Can you elaborate a little bit what that means? Operational control for, uh, uh, most, for people that might not know what that means, uh, politically or on the ground.

KJ Noh: Yeah. Operational control means that there is, uh, the cfc, the Combined Forces Command and the United Nations Command, and the United Forces Korea, uh, and, uh, person [00:32:00] who heads these three forces, uh, is a US general who reports to the US President.

And the moment that the United States decides, uh, or declares DEFCON 3, it means that this general, uh, has control over all forces on the Korean Peninsula, including USFK troops, uh, the cnc, UNC troops and all South Korean troops there, his army, his material, his bases, uh, his capacity to do as he sees fit. Uh, essentially the South Korean military simply becomes, uh, the US military. It's an appendage of the US military. Is this something that was started in 1950 in July during the Korean War and essentially it's never changed. There has been a slight change in the 1990s where the US gave up complete operational control and [00:33:00] decided that it was only going to have war time, operational control. But as I said, that's like saying that, you know, you own the car when it's being driven and, and the other person owns the car when it's in the garage and they can change the oil and maintain it. But the only time that a car matters is when you're driving. And that's the same thing. The only time the military, uh, is under is, is under real control, is during wartime. And the US gets to decide that anytime.

The reason why the US transitioned from, uh, total operational to wartime operational control had to do with an incident in 1980, which is referred to as the Gwangju Massacre. So, Park Chung-hee, the previous dictator was assassinated by his own security chief. Massive protest arose because the South Koreans were glad to be rid of a dictator, and they were hoping the country would open up and finally become [00:34:00] a sane country, not under the boot hill. Uh, under the boot hill of, uh, you know, of the military, a total garrison state under Marshall Law. And, uh, these protests, uh, uh, took on a strong, uh, these protests erupted in a city in the south called Gwangju.

And what the South Korean military did was they sent in paratroopers, first to bludgeon, then to shoot, then to, uh, massacre the protestors. And at the end of the day, you know, there were somewhere in the range of 3000, uh, excess deaths that we assume were, uh, killed by, uh, the South Korean special forces and regular troops.

They sent in something like 20,000 troops to, uh, to put down this, these, uh, civilian protests. Uh, and, uh, the, the sticky piece of all. [00:35:00] Is that when you have operational control over troops, you also have operational control over where they go and how they're deployed. And so there's no way the US can avoid blame for this massacre of civilians by the South Korean military that became extraordinarily inconvenient.

And the US complains, oh, we didn't know what was going on. You know, they were not under our OpCon at the time. But what we do know, and this is being revealed in, you know, uh, documents that have been released, is that the US

released OpCon to the South Korean military. And here's the thing is like, it's like you have a dangerous pit bull and you release your pit bull, you take it off the leash. That does not release you from responsibility, especially if you know that pit bull is in the [00:36:00] presence of, you know, something that it's raring to go after. And the South Korea, you know, is a very small, um, it's a very small peninsula and it's bristling with arms and bases. There's no way you could allow troops to go from one place to another without reporting exactly on what is happening, where, who's going where, what kind of, you know, material is being deployed, et cetera.

So because of the embarrassment of the Gwangju massacre, the US decided, oops. Uh, you know, this, uh, full time operational control is embarrassing. Let's just say we have, uh, war time operational control, but ultimately boils down to the fact that the US has control over the South Korean military. It uses it as an appendage of US geostrategic force during the Vietnam War.

Do you know how many South Korean troops served in the Vietnam War?

Jovanni: How many?

Henri: I, [00:37:00] I wanna say it was in the millions, wasn't it?

KJ Noh: Uh, it wasn't quite in the millions. It was 320,000, but it was still the second largest deployment after the US military. And after 1972, uh, the numbers of South Korean troops were greater than the US military itself. And so, uh, the South Korean military has always been, uh, you know, the first to go, the last to know, you know, right after the US military, they were right there in Afghanistan.

Immediately, the US sent in troops. South Koreans were there. Anywhere, the US sends troops, the South Koreans are not far behind.

Jovanni: So those are hidden facts that most Americans don't even know. Most military people don't even know. Because that's one of the things that, that really caught me when I got there to Korea. I ended, I was in Korea from uh, 2003 to 2005. And uh, um, one of the first [00:38:00] things that when they picked me up from the airport and I got to Yongsan. That's where the in processing at. One of the first thing that caught my eye was all those, uh, uh, riot control guards right in front of the gate. And they're there 24 7, you know, they're there, you know, rain, snow, sleet, they're there, you know, and they just cover the whole, the whole entrance and what um, and also another thing that caught me is soldiers that have been there and they're kind of blissful of what you just saying

right there. They just don't have a clue. They've been there for a year and they've, the return, like my roommate was there, that was his fourth time in Korea. Cause it's usually is a, is a one year tour. And, and he's been there, been there four time and they're just so blissfully ignorant of what happens outside those gates and, and what the Korean people, uh, goes through.

Another thing that caught my eye is that each, each of those compounds, each of [00:39:00] those bases right, have this thing called avil, which is, uh, uh, bars, restaurants, uh, shops and everything. All cater towards the military, right? Cause the most, most soldiers, right, they don't drive most soldiers. Most lower enlisted, they don't drive. So they have to walk everywhere. It'll catch public transportation. So they just walk right off the base and that's where they have all their amenities for them, right? All the fun and everything. But a lot of, you know, uh, you see a lot of foreign people there. You see a lot of, you see they're Korean owned, but you see a lot of Filipinos, you see a lot of, when I was there, you see a lot of Russians, uh, also working in those bars.

Uh, but you do hardly, you hardly saw Korean civilians around there, Korean public. They seem like, like to stay away from those areas. Um, what is, can you, can you explain to us a little bit what is that, that relationship between, uh, civil society and, you know, seeing and hosting this foreign military and seeing them every day and, and how, what is that re what's that dynamic there?[00:40:00]

KJ Noh: Yeah, that's a really good question. It's one of those things that nobody ever really wants to, you know, look, they don't wanna look under the rug, but it's, um, exploitative situation. You're absolutely correct. Uh, you know, Yongsan,, you know, you know, for a while there it was one of the largest spaces, uh, in Asia, certainly in Korea, and right next to Yongsan, as soon as you go out, say main post or South Post, and you go up the hill, you're in Hooker Hill and Iwan, right? And then you're looking at endless bars and prostitution, et cetera. Why do we have this situation? It was actually created and designed by the military dictatorship of Park Chung-hee and even before then, and literally a continuation of, uh, the comfort women system. The Japanese military would recruit or actually press gang, kidnap young women into becoming sexual [00:41:00] slaves for the Japanese military. After, uh, the Japanese left the South Korean dictatorship continued this system, uh, because they had been Japanese collaborators in the Japanese military.

And then in the 1960s, Park Chung-hee was the dictator, military dictator at the time, decided that this is how we are going to build our country. This is how we are going to make money. And so they literally used young women, uh, as a

kind of. Uh, the, they created like this sex industry, uh, that was a way of gaining foreign capital.

And those areas around military bases, uh, they're a little bit like, um, free trade zones. They're free trade zones for, for sex and entertainment. And it was largely understood that as a South Korean civilian, you were not supposed to be there. [00:42:00] The only civilians you would see would be, uh, you know, uh, early on, young, impoverished, uh, women who, you know, uh, had no other means.

Sometimes were tricked into the, uh, into that, uh, into the trade. And then later, uh, uh, you saw Filipino and Russian and other, uh, women from other, uh, you know, poorer countries that had been trafficked into that, uh, you know, sex trade. Uh, and, and for South Korea, and we can see this as kind of a developmental process, South Korea, it really was a way of, uh, Creating capital, you know, just like you had sweat shops where the South Koreans sold their hair, uh, and, you know, worked for pennies, uh, to build their economy.

Uh, the, this camptown prostitution was considered to be an [00:43:00] integral part of South Korea's economy. At one point, according to, uh, economists, it was about 25% of the South Korean economy, or at least 25% of the foreign income earnings of South Korea, probably from 1960 until the 1970s. And the Korean, uh, uh, government, uh, recently said that somewhere between something like one out of three women, uh, between the ages of 16 and 30 had been prostituted in their lives.

So, you know, it's just, uh, a horrific, uh, you know, kind of, it's a horrific way to develop a country, and it speaks to the, uh, extraordinarily, um, exploitative and violent nature of, uh, a military, uh, economy, a military dictatorship. And when a [00:44:00] country decides to become that kind of a quizzling state.

Henri: It kinda reminds me of the, the, um, I don't wanna call it segregation specifically, but the, the makeup of workers from, uh, non-US and non-local places like in Iraq and Afghanistan that, you know, that there, you would have large portions of Ugandans or guys from Senegal or, you know, uh, but there, but they, they weren't connected to the conflict. They weren't connected to the United States, but they had this, you know, this buffer area there. And we knew that, you know, I know, you know, there pennies certainly comparatively in terms of the workers, but, but you know, I always had those questions is why, why don't you know, why didn't we have more Iraqis doing more of, of those kind of things?

And it was, we didn't wanna see them. We didn't, you know, that, that those people, that the way that they were contracted, they [00:45:00] literally provided that that extra buffer that Americans are need to have to maintain their ignorance bubble. But, and then of course, you know that the, you know, all of talking about all of the, the different advancements moving the base and, and expanding the size much bigger.

That essentially we just take that, that format wherever we go. And it sounds like that over a long period of time that it was refined and, and really dialed down to become what it, what it is today. I wanted to ask about the, you know, they, they, we had the, uh, reading about the recent protests there and the, the American mainstream media, keeping a long, long, long distance from it that how does, how do people in South Korea, you know, their, their level of their under or their understanding of militarism, not so much about the [00:46:00] American involvement there, or even Korea's own military, but just, just in general, that that is it, is it something that's, that people do discuss, or is it, is it something that is not, it's not so much of a, or of a concern or that it becomes so toxic because it, if, you know, like in the us if you talk against the military, then you're unpatriotic, you don't care about your country menu or not, you know, that there's, there's all these different layers to it. I'm, I'm curious about how the Korean people. Deal with, with kind of that, that dichotomy.

KJ Noh: That's another really good question. Um, one of the things I will say is, uh, militarism has so deeply soaked into the fiber of Korean society that it's considered, uh, simply part of life, of a life passage. You know, there's this South Korean, uh, K-pop group called [00:47:00] BTS, uh, and they're, you know, kind of supposed to be superstars. Right now, they all have to go into the military, you know, every single one of them has to do their military service and, you know, they're not going to be, you know, doing the Elvis thing. You know, they're going to be in the mud, you know, crawling. And, uh, and in the meantime, you know, the K-Pop fans will be, you know, cooling their heels.

So, uh, there's a, there's an expectation that, um, that. The military is something that everybody has to go through. It is such a deeply embedded part of South Korean culture. South Korean, I would say Korean culture is not inherently militaristic, but in the post Japanese colonial era, it turned into this extraordinarily spartan militaristic society. And so, uh, for example, uh, you know, South Korea has one of the lo it has the largest standing [00:48:00] military in the world, if you include reservists, talking about 3.5 million. Uh, it's, uh, for the longest period, it was a garrison state, uh, up until at least the 1990s. Um, it had until very recently, there was no way to be a conscientious objector.

And so it had the largest number of people who had been imprisoned. I think 99% of people imprisoned for resisting military service. Uh, were South Koreans. Uh, and somewhere in the range of, you know, tens of thousands had been, uh, uh, imprisoned. And once again, you know, because the Korean War has never ended, uh, simply going AWOL was actually considered, uh, desertion.

And so, you know, under certain, uh, circumstances, uh, you could be shot, uh, you know, simply for leaving your post. There's [00:49:00] an interesting, um, set of interesting TV series on Netflix called. Deserter patrol, DP patrol, and it talks about these South Korean, uh, troops, uh, whose job is to, uh, go back and capture deserters. And I think it gives you a good sense of what the South Korean military is like, but it has so deeply pervaded, uh, the Korean psyche and the South Korean culture that I think people don't understand how pernicious and, uh, dangerous it is.

I mean, what that translates to on the ground is, uh, a kind of hyper masculinity, a hyper macho, uh, you know, uh, the kind of authoritarianism, the, uh, this inability to relate, uh, in genuine, authentic terms. Uh, as well as, you know, the typical things like domestic [00:50:00] violence, uh, uh, brutality. There's a Korean, you know, comedy called Attack the gas Station.

It's a bunch of youth who decide they're going to rob a BA gas station. Uh, and it, you know, is a little bit of a cult following, but if you watch, they, uh, try to rob a gas station. The gas station doesn't have money. So they decide they're going to run the gas station for about 10 hours and take all the money from the customers.

And in the meantime, they take all of the employees of the gas station and they torture them. If you watch the torture carefully, you realize that what they're doing to these gas station employees is they're making them do military drills. These are military, you know, essentially it's military torture, but it's so kind of normalized. People see that and they think, oh, isn't that funny how Quentin Tarantino, no. Any Korean who sees that says, oh [00:51:00] shit, they're doing exactly, you know, what I did or what they did, uh, in the military.

Jovanni: So you mentioned that movie. I noticed that recently there's a popularity here in the United States with the Korean, Korean made movies. Um, uh, one of them I think, uh, um, um, the parasite, uh, was one of them that, uh, that I saw and I found it very interesting because of the class differences that was there. Cause when I got to Korea, for example, my, my uncle was in Korea before, before me. He was in Korea in the, in the nineties, in the early nineties.

And he was telling me the way he explained Korea to me, like it was, uh, um, like very impoverished and, and so and so, right. Um, and like I said, my roommate had been Korea four times, and he was telling me this last time when he was there, when I was there, he saw it was like night and day from the other times that he was in Korea. Like, you know how rapidly economically Korea so developed when I got [00:52:00] there, I saw Korea at this big, you know, bustling, you know, high, you know, city. So, you know, high standard living, you know, very, you know, uh, highways, nice cars, you know, very advanced. Very advanced, right. And which had, which is, which is some parallel to where I'm from, and I saw parallels there.

I'm originally from Puerto Rico, and I saw how, and Puerto Rico had a lot of money, lot of money was put in Puerto Rico in the sixties and seventies to kind of counter the, the Cuban influence in, in Latin America. Which, which I, I saw the same way as to counter, you know, North Korea, you know, uh, you know, you put so much money in South Korea to make it more attractive and so forth, right?

So going back to the movie of, of Parasite, you know, that movie showed a lot of inequality within the facade of prosperous South Korea. Um, can you elaborate a little bit on that?

KJ Noh: Yeah, no, these are such great questions. Um, yeah, you're absolutely correct. [00:53:00] I mean, the class contradictions and the class exploitation are the fundamental thing you need to understand about South Korea's development.

It was built on the backs of the blood and the suffering of the vast majority of the working class. And, um, if you, if you look at some of the chronicles of the conditions of the sweat shops during the 1970s, even up to the 1980s, you know, people will say, these were circles. Circles of hell to make angles And Dante faint.

You know, they would have children eight years old, working 24 hour shifts sometimes for days at a time. And if they couldn't keep working, they would, uh, they would shoot them up with methamphetamine to keep them working. Remember, methamphetamine was [00:54:00] invented by the Japanese military to keep their industrial force going and their military, you know, going and soong or methamphetamine, uh, was used to keep the workers going.

People would die from overwork. We have this term kwarosa, which means death from overwork. Uh, and, uh, the entire country was run like a labor

concentration camp, as I said, until the 1960s. Um, you know, South Korea was one of the poorest, it was probably the second poorest country on the planet, uh, after the war.

Uh, and then up until the 1960s and until 1978, it was poorer than North Korea. North Korea was richer, more, uh, you know, more industrialized, more economically advanced, et cetera, although you would never know that. And South Korea, uh, built its wealth [00:55:00] from sweatshop labor. And when I say sweatshop labor, really the kind of you know, the kind of unimaginable, unimaginable, you know, kind of Dickensian, you know, unspeakable human exploitation along with sexual exploitation, which I said, you know, was about 25% of the economy. And then the third piece, the third leg of that economy, uh, was military exploitation.

That is to say from 1965 until 1974, 1975, uh, you had 320,000 Korean troops, uh, work for the US military, and they would send their money back to South Korea. So these were the huge three big stools that allowed, uh, three legs of the stool that allowed South Korea to have this capital accumulation in order to industrialize.

And along with that, South Korea was given. [00:56:00] Lots and lots of aid from the United States up until the sixties. It received as a single country, more a foreign aid than the entire continent of Africa. And then it was given this kind of very protectionist bubble. It was raised in this little hothouse because the US wanted to turn it into a capitalist show pony, that they had to show that this was a system that could beat the communist in the north.

Well, the communists were beating them hands down, at least until 1978. Uh, and, uh, South Korea was struggling. It was this, you know, horrific exploitative, uh, nightmare, uh, of, of worker exploitation. But slowly they crawled themselves out because, you know, they were given, because they were supposed to be this kind of teacher's pet of western capitalism.

And then, uh, starting the eighties, the economy started to turn [00:57:00] around. They exported labor into Iran and Iraq. They were doing a lot of the construction during the Iran and Iraq war. And I, I had a colleague who was working during the Iran Iraq war. He said that they were building derricks and, you know, oil construction platforms, they would be forced to work, uh, you know, while the bombs were coming down.

So that's again, another example of how brutal. This labor regime was, it really was a kind of state, uh, capitalism that was modeled after the Japanese model in

Manchuria. In Manchuria, there was this kind of developmental state that the, uh, Nobusuke Kishi built in Manchuria that was essentially built on slave labor, uh, and South Korea borrowed, uh, that, uh, model and used it to build up its [00:58:00] economy.

And then starting the eighties and nineties it became more affluent. And then 1997 the United States decided that, okay, this show Pony has served its purpose and we don't have to raise it in the hot house anymore. And so then they pulled the plug on it and they forced, uh, IMF structural reforms, and the fatten cow was pulled over the table and slaughtered. And uh, and that again was a huge, uh, kind of economic devastation to South Korea at the time.

Jovanni: You mentioned, uh, uh, you mentioned North Korea. Uh, or the, yeah, no, Korea being, uh, uh, more prosperous and more industrious than South Korea until, until recently, right. Until the, uh,

KJ Noh: 1978, it was richer.

Jovanni: So then you have [00:59:00] 1991, you have the, the dissolution of, of the Soviet Union. Breaks up into like 15 countries. Uh, then you start having these, uh, these color revolutions in Eastern Europe, you know, where there, where one by one, each socialist government is overthrown by a neoliberal government. You know, uh, the last, uh, soc prosperous or the last, you know, industrial, prosperous socialist country in Europe, uh, was overthrown by war, which is Yugoslavia and was broken into six more countries.

Um, then you have, uh, Cuba started having it special period, because no longer Cuba had socialist trading partners, um, and Russia and the other former socialist countries, you know, Czechoslovakia and all that. And they just pretty much, you know, went the western way and they just pulled a plug outta Cuba and they just stopped trading with Cuba.

Um, Korea stopped plunging that, [01:00:00] that, that plunging as well in 1990s because of this geographic geopolitical, uh, shift that was happening at the time. Enter Clinton. Bill Clinton comes in and he tries and he has some type of rep man or he try, he has some type of a relationship with, with North Korea. Uh, can you tell us how that goes? How that, how that went?

KJ Noh: Yes. Um, so once again, really, really great questions. The first thing I'll say is that, um, and just to kind of, you know, pull back and look at the large historical perspective. South Korea was colonized from 1905 until 1910 until 1945 by the Japanese as colonizations go, you know, it's, you know, it's

probably. As bad as they get. Um, they enslaved millions of Koreans, uh, sent them to [01:01:00] war, sent them to mine, sent them to Manchuria.

Uh, there's a, we historians sometimes talk of the term, the Manchurian passage, similar to the, uh, middle passage where millions of Koreans and Chinese were taken to Manchuria and worked to death in the Japanese industrial, uh, uh, project to militarize to create an industrial base for its war across the Pacific.

But after 1945, South Korea was liberated. When it was liberated, the Korean population, which had been resisting the Japanese occupation, had thousands of workers committees. And these workers committees came together, work together, and they decided that they were going to create a socialist state in South Korea.

This was called the Korean People's Republic, and it was declared in the fall of [01:02:00] 1945. So Korea was defacto independent and it was defacto socialist, and it was a kind of indigenous socialism created by the Patriots and the independence fighters, the resistance fighters against Japanese colonization. Two American soldiers, you know, cut the Korean peninsula into half, decided the US was going to occupy the southern half.

Russia was going to occupy the northern half. This became the 38th parallel. In the North, they continued this indigenous socialism. In the south, the US military government decided that it was going to, that no way could they allow, uh, socialism, uh, to happen on the Korean peninsula, that it would have a head start over any other place in the world.

So they decided they were going to wipe out the Korean People's Republic. They made it illegal. They arrested all of its leaders. They banned the Korean workers committees. They banned all [01:03:00] the unions. Pretty soon, the South Koreans started to protest. You started to see protests in the thousands, the tens of thousands, the hundreds of thousands.

And these were all brutally repressed. Through mass shootings. So you started to see the beginnings of, uh, what is essentially a genocide, not unlike what we saw in, uh, Indonesia, uh, the Jakarta method. So essentially it's a policy of politicide, a genocide killing off all the progressives and the socialists in order to establish a capitalist client state.

Um, just prior to the breakout of the Korean War, uh, the government declared an amnesty and it said to everybody who was in the south, anybody who is uh, you know, has progressive or pro North or pro communist tendencies, just

[01:04:00] come in, admit that you are, we'll put you through some re-education, uh, and then we'll, and then we'll let you go and we'll give you a general amnesty.

And so they press ganged 300,000 people into signing up for what was called these, uh, education and guidance leagues, the Porto young men. And then when the war broke up, every single one of these people was rounded up and shot to death in mass graves. So we think somewhere in the range of 300,000, perhaps more, uh, going into the millions were shot to death by the South Korean Quizling military government.

So, uh, why is this important? Because, you know, once again, if we think of this kind of north, south socialist capitalist divide, you can see that. Those tectonics, those plates, that clash were set up in [01:05:00] probably the most violent and brutal way on the Korean peninsula. And we still have the reverberations of that, you know, of those plates colliding up until the current moment echoing through Vietnam, through Indonesia, and then all the way up to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Specifically relating to the collapse of the Soviet Union, as I said before, North Korea is 85% mountains. It has only 15% of its land is arable. You can only grow crops on 15% of that land, and that land has to be fertilized with fossil fertilizer, petrochemical fertilizers. Without the use of petrochemical fertilizers, you cannot grow enough food. There's simply, the land is too barren, and so when the Soviet Union collapsed [01:06:00] North Korea, which has a border with the Soviet Union, Stopped receiving fertilizer, and it stopped receiving, uh, oil, which was what, which was what was necessary to power its, uh, industry and to grow its food.

And as a result of that, North Korea started to go into a deep economic spiral and collapse. And under most circumstances, most countries would've simply given up. They would've simply collapsed. North Koreans didn't. Uh, what they started to do was they said, since we don't have, uh, fossil fuels, we are going to build a nuclear reactor and use that to cover some of our energy needs. When North Korea started to do that, the US started to panic and they said, oh, you know, they're building the bomb. And so Bill Clinton started negotiations with North Korea in what is now referred to as the agreed framework. And the idea was that, uh, the [01:07:00] United States would build North Korea a light water reactor where the fissile materials couldn't be turned into, uh, weapons grade material. Uh, they would build two of them, and in the meantime, they would supply North Korea with fuel oil, uh, until some such time as the, uh, nuclear reactors came online after signing this agreement with the North Korean government within weeks, the agreement was dead on arrival. The US Congress, the Republicans refused to endorse it, and so they essentially did not

give North Korea its reactors. It spent, I think it waited eight years before it even broke ground on the first reactor. And the delivery of fuel oil was almost nonexistent. It was spotty, nonexistent. And after waiting, uh, you know, for almost a decade, north Korean said, we give up. You know, clearly [01:08:00] you guys are not playing. You guys are just, you know, fooling with us. And that was actually admitted later. The idea was that, uh, you know, the Clinton administration's approach what they call. Which is now referred to as strategic patients. It was a collapses doctrine. The idea is that if we starve North Korea at the same time that we throw out this little, you know, throw some breadcrumbs at them, eventually they will collapse.

Well, the North Koreans didn't collapse. I mean, they went through what they call the arduous march as horrific times. If you can imagine. I mean, Cuba, you know, has rich soil and it's, you know, in the Caribbean, you know, so it has a capacity to at least do its own a certain level of self-sufficiency with organic farming. North Korea didn't have that. It's Barron mountain of soil in a cold climate. And so the West was expecting North Korea to collapse. Uh, but the North Koreans didn't [01:09:00] fold. They didn't collapse. They decided they were simply going to continue the way, started their own process of building, uh, weapons and, and tighten their belts until they couldn't tighten anymore. And now they're still here, uh, kicking and screaming, but still around. North Korea is the longest existing socialist state on the planet. It has outlasted the Soviet Union. It has outlasted China, it's still around, uh, and under normal circumstances, if it hadn't been, if it hadn't been threatened with existential annihilation and forced to struggle for every inch or for every breath, I think that it would actually be a, a, a rich and prosperous country. Certainly that was the case until 1978. You know, the British economist, Joan Robinson, talked about the Korean miracle, and she was talking about North Korea, [01:10:00] not South Korea. So I think it would've been very prosperous and wealthy, and without the interference of the United States, I think North and South Korea would have been unified a long time ago, and they would become, you know, their own prosperous, uh, you know, uh, confederation.

But up until the present moment, starting with the moment that the US took a National Geographic map and drew a line across the 38th parallel, until the current moment, the US has been the greatest obstacle to peace and reunification on the Korean Peninsula and the United States needs North Korean, it needs that escalation, escalated tension, not simply for Cold War reasons, but North Korea is being used as a stalking horse for the containment and the escalation of war against China.

Jovanni: Absolutely. And what you said there, like, I parallels with the, uh, with [01:11:00] what happened with the Cuba, with the, Helms and Burn Act, uh, where after the, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, uh, the Soviet Union, then, you know, the Russians on the, on the first go shop and the Yellowstone, then this, this approach to the United States pretty much subordinates themselves to the west.

Um, and broke ties with Cuba, then Cuba at the same time, the Clinton administration, right, pushed for the call the, the Helms and Act, the Helms and Burn Act, um, which was, uh, making sanctions against Cuba kind of permanent is legal now. You know, you have to, it takes an act of Congress to, to abolish the, the, the sanctions you know, and the ideas the same.

The idea was to to to strengthen the screws on San, on Cuba. So, you know, given that Cuba does, you know, have the, the socialist block anymore to, to, to trade with and just see it's, it's collapsed and like [01:12:00] North Korea, it haven't, it hasn't happened on Cuba either. Um, I wanna move to something else. Uh, um, with, I was watching a video by, have you seen the podcast Left lens with, uh,

With, uh, Danny Haiphong?

Yes. And he was in, yes. Yes. He was interviewing, uh, this young woman named Janice Gin, and she is from the, uh, uh, the as Salem Seeker Advocacy Project. And she mentioned they were talking about, uh, this, this popular North Korean woman here in the West United States named, uh, um, Yomi Park. And she gets a lot of interviews and a lot of, um, you know, you know, a lot of interviews and how horrible conditions are in North Korea.

You know, people have to push trains and, and all kinds of stuff. Right. But she said something, um, uh, Janice said something that really caught my eye is [01:13:00] that she talked about the, the, the asylum seeking industry or. Complex, you know, the asylum industry complex. I think that's the way she, she worded it.

KJ Noh: Yeah. So this is really important. Um, and, um, South Korea considers everybody on the Korean peninsula to be their citizens. So if somebody from North Korea comes to South Korea, uh, they are considered to be a South Korean citizen. Um, and then they're given benefits and they're integrated into society, et cetera. That's the idea. And originally the idea was really a kind of a propaganda project, right? So from time to time, somebody from North Korea would defect to South Korea, and then they would trot them out and in, in

exchange for denouncing North Korea and spinning stories of about how horrendous it was, [01:14:00] then they would be given benefits and all kinds of privileges.

And then during the Arduous march, uh, a lot of North Koreans did leave North Korea and North Korea's very porous borders with China. Uh, essentially you just walk, uh, you know, you either cross the river or you just walk across the border. And so a lot of Chinese would go into, a lot of Koreans would go into China. Some of them eventually found their way into South Korea. And the key thing to understand is that the majority of them were economic refugees. They were not political refugees. They were not particularly seeking asylum. Uh, they were like people coming from any impoverished country to a richer country.

You know, as, as you know, as is the case with many, many borders, the North Korea was going through this extraordinary difficult period. [01:15:00] Uh, many North Koreans left the country and they were trying to send remittances back to North Korea, and some of them ended up in South Korea. And then eventually this turned into an industry. It's an industry of lies and confabulation, telling stories about North Korea. So the more extraordinary and the more far-fetched and the more exaggerated, uh, your story is, the more money and the more fame and the more, uh, rewards you receive. And if you really kind of reach the top tier, like Pat Yumi, or there was another guy who wrote this book about escape from Camp 14, then you even hit the American speech, you know, the lecture circuit and you get a Ted Talk and you get to talk about how awful it is in North Korea.

And so there's all these incentives for people to make up stories. And you know, [01:16:00] Peggy on me is probably one of the worst because every single thing that comes out of her mouth is a lie. Even her mother has said that My daughter doesn't know what she's talking about. She said that on South Korean television, you know, she said that, you know, I was raped, my mother was raped.

You know, you know, we saw people in the streets dying. Uh, we pushing trains. Just things that are so absurd that anybody, you know, with two neurons, you know, would think that, you know, that's not right. But Pagan me is going around, you know, telling these lies. This guy, who wrote the book, escape from Camp 14. It all turned out to be lies about this labor camp . Uh, he, he, he's now gone silent and his American co-author has gone dead silent because everything that he's said, or a large part of it, has turned out to be lies. And there's no way of confirming any of the rest of [01:17:00] it, but it is part of an ongoing. Um, you have to understand the Korean War has never ended, uh, both legally and in a kind of defacto sense. The war is not over. And because of that, as we we said

earlier in the show, there is a constant battle for the moral high ground. There is a constant ethic, there is a constant information war. And because South Korea has always been such a poor performer in terms of human rights and social justice, what it has done instead is always tried to create this incredibly demonizing portrait of North Korea.

And this, uh, asylum industrial complex is one of the key ways that it maintains this. Now, from time to time, you will have people who break with that. If you [01:18:00] look at the surveys, uh, you know, something like the majority of North Korean, uh, asylees in South Korea say they wanna get out of. They say their lives are miserable. A good chunk of them say they want to go back to North Korea. Some of them have asked to be repatriated and they've been denied. Sometimes you get South Koreans who try and escape to North Korea, uh, and you don't hear about that, but usually they're shot to death on the border by South Korean troops. So, you know, a few years back there was, there were some people having medical issues.

They wanted to go to North Korea to get medical treatment. They were shot dead on the border. Recent South Korean fisheries official, we think that he may have been trying to defect to North Korea. It's unclear. And so there's an entire industry of deception where up is down and, uh, black is white. [01:19:00] And, uh, and it's part of this ongoing information warfare, which simply attests to the fact that North Korea and South Korea still at war because they are still a proxy.

Uh, war South Korea is a proxy warrior for s geopolitical interests.

Jovanni: One last thing. Um, so. So given this, you know, we were talking about Korea in a geopolitical sense right now. We're seeing huge risks, huge changes in the, uh, uh, in the geopolitics. You know, we're seeing with this war in Ukraine, uh, which is a proxy war, native proxy work in Russia. Um, there's a lot of shifts going on. Um, things, things are kind of shaky, Tet plates moving.

How do you see the situation in Korea going on, um, you know, that Korea has been a united peninsula, not a society for so [01:20:00] much longer than it has been separated. Do you see anything in the future of this coming to a close, this chapter, coming to a close end, and how this shift, this tectonic shift going on around the world, how, how this affect, how would this affect, uh, uh, politics in South Korea in the Korean peninsula?

KJ Noh: Um, in the short term, uh, it's going to be very, very risky. It's gonna be very, very dangerous. As you point out. The world is shifting from, uh, unipolarity, that is to say U.S. hegemony, to Multipolarity. And those shifts are

happening on the Asian continent, uh, because traditionally the global imperial colonial powers controlled the seas. They were naval powers. And in the 20th and 21st century, the power is shifting to land-based powers and in particular to the powers that are centered in the [01:21:00] Eurasian continent and talking Russia and uh, China. And so the center of gravity is moving from the Atlantic West to the global south, as centered in, uh, Eurasia US has been aware of this, starting from the fall of the Soviet Union in, uh, starting 1991 onwards, the US had a plan to to maintain control of the planet. And they wrote this up in the 1991 defense plan and guidance document, which became the project for a new American century. And this project for New American century was, you know, we are the globe's, uh, sole power. We, uh, give ourselves the right to exercise our unipolar power wherever and whenever we see fit.

We want full spectrum dominance of the planet, and we give ourselves the right to wage preemptive war [01:22:00] against any country. And more than anything else, we have to prevent the rise of a regional power that would challenge our supremacy. That was written into doctrine, and it came down through Paul Wolfowitz into the project for the New American century, became the Bush Doctrine, which became the Obama Doctrine. In the Obama doctrine, became the pivot to Asia, which was an explicit plan to contain and roll back China. And this became the Trump doctrine, and it is now the Biden Doctrine. So there is this plan to encircle, contain rollback, take down China, prevent it from developing, prevent it from challenging the United States superiority, uh, economic superiority, and essentially to put it back into its place as a part of the global.

Capitalist structure as an extractive, [01:23:00] uh, subordinate inside that structure. When the US says that China is a threat, that's what they mean. They're saying it's a threat. The way that Cuba is a threat, the way that Haiti is a threat, it's a threat because it will not stay in its subordinate position. And that is a threat to our notion or our worldview, our, the way that we want hegemony.

It's as if you have, uh, a parasite, uh, uh, and a host. And when the host tries to detach the parasite from its skin, the parasite will see that as an existential threat. The global West is parasitic on the global south. Uh, the capitalist at the capitalist apex. It has sucked out according to certain estimates from 1960, what?

150 trillion, uh, you know, from the global south. Anytime you [01:24:00] look at the, uh, economic exchanges, you see that there's this constant extraction of wealth, of resources, of energy from the global south, including human energy,

uh, fossil energy, etcetera. Only a half dozen countries have broken out of this colonial extractive relat.

To become developed after 1945. Uh, they are South Korea and, uh, Taiwan, but they don't really come because they're capitalists cho ponies raised in a hot house. You have Singapore, which is sui er, a city state. Uh, you have a few, uh, tax havens, and then you have a few petro states. Those are the only countries that have shifted from absolute colonial poverty into a developed world status in the global south.

The one exception that to that is China. China has developed on its own terms and originally the [01:25:00] US engagement with China was actually a regime change plan. They believed that if they engaged with China and made it liberalized, eventually they could do what they did to the Soviet Union, essentially dismember it, turn it into a capitalist, uh, neo-liberal state that they could plug and utilize and exploit as well.

The Chinese didn't let that happen, and they pushed back. They prevented that, and therefore now they're being labeled. Authoritarian authoritarian is simply a code code word for not submitting to us hegemony. And because they've developed on their own terms, they've become a center of gravity for the rest of the global south to develop as well.

And they've created the belt and road building relations with all the other countries, the Shanghai Cooperative Organization, uh, our ep, et cetera. All of these kind of global, uh, international [01:26:00] structures, multilateral structures are being built by China in the Uras continent and all around, and this is continuing all the way into Africa and even Europe And the US sees itself existentially threatened by the rise of a alternate poll of power, which says to the world, you don't have to be capitalist.

You can be socialist or you can be market socialist, or you can develop on your own terms. You don't have to be sub a subaltern subordinate partner to the imperial machine, and its extractive exploitation. And you can have peace and you can relate to other countries as equals. And this is what the Chinese model is showing.

And the ruling class, uh, in the imperial North in the United States, they would rather see the end of the planet. Then the end of their privilege, which is why we see this acceleration to [01:27:00] war everywhere, both on the western front with Russia and on the eastern front all around China. South Korea's very important in this because there are several vulnerabilities.

It's like a face, the nose, the bridge of the nose is South Korea. The chin is Taiwan, the jaw is Hong Kong. The back of the head, the ox is, uh, Shang and Tibet. And uh, the choke point or the throat is the South China Sea. So the US has war gained out all these different vulnerabilities. If you think of China as a face or a body, these are the vulnerabilities around the Chinese, uh, continent and they're escalating to war.

And South Korea is a really, really, really important part of this escalation because as we've said before, the US has OpCon over 3.5 million troops. It has a massive military capacity and also, uh, simply [01:28:00] geo strategically in terms of position. It's one of the nodes along this first island chain of Encirclement going from the Philippines to Taiwan Island, to Okinawa, to Teju Island, to the Korean peninsula, and to Japan.

This is how this encirclement and rollback is set up. So in the short term, it's very, very dangerous. North Korea could be a trigger point. But, uh, over the long term, the Chinese approach is simply, let's keep our balance. Let's not react. Let's continue to work for win-win, mutual development, mutual cooperation, uh, and mutual security.

And I think over the long run, if, uh, if the US does not provoke China into war over the long run, I think the other countries will see the value, uh, of, uh, creating and going along with this multilateral [01:29:00] multipolar world. And if that happens, then we have a chance. If it doesn't happen, I think we're looking at world war and potentially nuclear war.

And I think what we can do in the Imperial North, in the United States, in the belly of the beast, is to give the chance for other countries in the global south to develop their own way and to stop our own military and our own, the US government from trying to press gang escalate, create war, provoke war and subjugate, and, and do color revolutions and constantly interfere, uh, and, and, uh, abuse the global south.

If we back off and give the rest of the world a chance, I think we have a possibility for peace and development and, you know, even sustainable development.

Henri: [01:30:00] Well, I, uh, I think that's a good place for us to, uh, to wrap it up for the, for this evening. Um, kj, thank you so much for coming and sharing your time with us. It's been invaluable. I've learned so many different things that I didn't know, uh, previously. Um, will you, uh, share with listeners where they can find and, uh, read your work?

KJ Noh: Um, they can go to Counter Punch Monthly review online, Asia Times, um, uh, dissident Voice Counter Punch, uh, LA Progressive. I write in, you know, black agenda report. I write for a lot of progressive magazines, uh, websites. Um, they can also see some of my work on Pivot to piece, which is a website dedicated to improving relations between the US and China, and telling the truth about, uh, you know, uh, this escalation to war.

Uh, and then I'm also, [01:31:00] uh, quite often I'm on the shows such as Critical Hour, uh, and any means necessary, uh, on the, on podcasts and on the Sputnik, uh, network.

Jovanni: Hey, it's been great talking to you. I mean, I can conversate what you like for, for hours, for many more hours. Like I said, we've, we exchanged emails. We're part of the same, uh, Korean piece piece initiative. And so I, I get to read, you know, what, you know, everybody's trafficking, but it's the first time I actually sat down and have a conversation with you. And like I said, you know, it's been, it's been great. And, uh, uh, you did, uh, clear up a lot of, uh, questions I had while my experience in Korea, you know, that, you know, that, that you, you know, you pretty much explained them to me.

Uh, but yeah, great. I mean, it's been been a great honor to be here with you and, uh, uh, and I'm sure that you know, your [01:32:00] listeners, our listeners, you know, we're, come out, you know, with a better perspective of, of what's going on outside of the American borders, you know, and, and geopolitical and, and see that we are part of a larger world, you know, and there are a lot of things moving.

And here, like you say, we're in the building the beast. Here, we're where we're supposed to be, and here is where we can make the change that, you know, to, to shift this, you know, to navigate this, this, this, uh, terrain that we're in, right.

KJ Noh: Absolutely. Yes. And it's a real pleasure to be with you. Uh, really appreciated your questions, the dialogue, the richness of our co uh, uh, co thinking around these issues.

And once again, I just wanna say it's so important for us right now, it's critical moment. We all have to work for peace. Uh, we have to prevent our, uh, empire [01:33:00] from, uh, escalating. And I think the best thing for us right now is to try and, uh, prevent, uh, this escalation. So let's all work for peace and despair is not an option.

Henri: Absolutely, absolutely. Great, great closing words. Um, so thank you again, KJ. I hope that you will, uh, come on the podcast again. You sound like someone that would be a great person for our episode zero series, like you and I talked about before we started. And, uh, thank you, uh, thank you everyone for joining us today, listening or watching however you are. And, uh, we hope you take care. See you next time.