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AARON MATÉ: It's The Real News. I'm Aaron Maté. Amid rising tensions, the U.S. and North Korea are both making threats. In a visit to South Korea, Vice President Mike Pence said while the U.S. prefers peaceful means, all options are on the table.

MIKE PENCE: And I'm here to express the resolve of the people of the United States, and the President of the United States, to achieve that objective through peaceable means, through negotiations, but all options are on the table.

AARON MATÉ: A top North Korean official says the country's army is on maximum alert, and is prepared to, quote, "launch merciless military strikes against the U.S. aggressors," unquote. It's the latest salvo in a growing nuclear standoff. A recent North Korean missile test led the Trump administration to move a U.S. navy force into the Korean Peninsula.

Last week, North Korea warned of potential nuclear war, and this weekend, North Korea staged an annual military parade that showed off new weaponry. It followed that with another missile test that quickly failed.

So, where is this headed? Well, joining us is Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, retired U.S. army soldier, and former Chief of Staff to Secretary of State, Colin Powell. He's an adjunct professor at the College of William and Mary, where he instructs on U.S. national security.

Colonel Wilkerson, welcome.

LARRY WILKERSON: Thanks for having me.

AARON MATÉ: Vice President Pence saying today that the era of strategic patience is over. That, along with a series of bellicose messages from President Trump's Twitter account, where do you see this going?

LARRY WILKERSON: I really am alarmed when people make statements like that without the diplomatic finesse to deliver them properly. Strategic patience, as it were, has produced no war on the peninsula since 1953. That's a pretty darn good record. Although I don't know what he

means by, "the period of strategic patience is over".

I'm prepared, I think most Americans, and I know most Republic of Korea citizens - that is, South Korea - are prepared to be patient forever, if there's no war in that forever.

AARON MATÉ: I believe it was the National Security Advisor, McMaster, who said this weekend that the status quo is not tenable. You have the situation where North Korea is armed with nuclear weapons and threatening its neighborhoods, so a new course is needed, also pointing to previous agreements with the regime not working out. How do you respond to that?

LARRY WILKERSON: Well, I respond to that by saying the previous agreements with the regime, the agreed framework for example, that Bill Clinton's administration engineered, didn't work out as much, because the United States didn't live up to its obligations under those agreements. As for any other reason, so we can throw rocks at both sides with regard to agreements.

What I'm concerned with is, if people run around this town, Washington, and they talk about people not being deterred by the fact that we have more nuclear weapons than everyone else in the world combined, except for Russia. If Kim Jong-un or any Kim dynasty leader, in fact any leader in Pyongyang with his hand on their button, were to fire a missile at Tokyo, Japan, or South Korea, or Guam, or Okinawa, or any place they might be able to currently hit. Or ultimately if they were to fire one in California, they would cease to exist.

No U.S. president would restrain himself, or herself, from responding. Pyongyang would cease to exist, and I dare say, the entire Kim dynasty. Whose objective, sole objective, is preserving themselves in power, would disappear in the flash of a mushroom cloud. So, I mean, this is ridiculous to think that they're not deterred.

AARON MATÉ: You know, you mentioned the history of U.S.-North Korean agreements, the recent history, and you talked about throwing rocks on both sides. Well, you have an inside take on this because you worked for the Bush administration, which abandoned the Clinton agreements, the key one being North Korea agreeing to freeze plutonium production.

There also was some sort of indirect deal about buying up North Korean missiles. But President Bush abandoned this policy. Can you tell us what happened there and how that helped lead to today?

LARRY WILKERSON: Well, our intelligence community, really I don't think can say whether the

chicken came first, or the egg in this case. What we do know is that the money that we had promised, that the Europeans had promised, for the light water reactors, which were supposed to replace the dangerous plutonium-producing reactor at Yongbyon, actually didn't come across.

Europeans pretty much put up their billions, but our Congress was very reluctant, and in the end didn't put up hardly anything. And in terms of the heavy fuel oil shipments we promised, the Congress was either dilatory in shipping it, or didn't ship it to the amounts that were agreed to, or both.

So, the North Koreans, as Jim Kelly, our Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific found out October 2002 -- when he visited Pyongyang and talked with Yi Jung and Kang Sak-ju -- found out that they probably did hedge their bets, and had a secret program for enhancing uranium, to back up the plutonium program we had frozen.

Whether they did that because we weren't living up to our end of the deal, or they did that to hedge their bets, is still a question I think. But if either way, let's just look at that.

We had frozen the most dangerous aspect of their program at Yongbyon, reprocessing plutonium, making a plutonium-based bomb. So, we had at least eliminated half of it, and at that point we didn't have any nuclear weapons.

Now we've got ten or twelve nuclear weapons, and we don't have any agreement at all. We're not talking. We're not doing anything. So, the negotiations in the past, even if they only half worked, they worked a whole lot better than the non-negotiations of, say, my administration after October 2002.

AARON MATÉ: SO, let me ask you, I mean, this is speculation, but do you think if President Bush had lived up to Clinton's commitments, and also perhaps not put North Korea on the infamous, 'Axis of Evil', whether you think North Korea would have nuclear weapons today?

LARRY WILKERSON: I'm not sure. That's a hard question to answer. It's a hypothetical; I'm not sure what the situation would be. If I... let me put it this way as a military professional, if I were Kim Jong-il, or Kim Il-sung, or Kim Jong-un, I would want to hedge my bets against a power that arrayed itself in front of me as threateningly as the U.S. does.

If I look out from Pyongyang - now, I'm trying to be empathetic. I'm not condoning the Kim dynasty or anyone in North Korea. I'm simply saying I'm being empathetic -- I'm looking out from Pyongyang into the Pacific. I'm looking out across the inland seas; I'm looking down at the ROK, the Republic of Korea. I see 600,000 highly trained ROK troops. I see B2s on Guam; I see Vincent aircraft carriers steaming towards the Peninsula. I see all this threat to me; I'd want a nuclear weapon, too.

So, if you want the bottom line, there isn't anybody in the world today, after seeing us invade Iraq, after seeing us bomb Syria, after seeing us do - we're at war with seven or eight countries right now in terms of drones. We're flying across their borders and killing people inside their territory.

So, if I were anyone in the world who thought my regime was in trouble, I'd think the trouble came from the United States, and I'd want a nuclear weapon too. That's not at all to say I condone the proliferation of nuclear weapons. I'm simply stating the obvious. I'm stating the rational obvious.

AARON MATÉ: On the subject of U.S. policy influencing North Korea's thinking, there was a piece in the New York Times yesterday analyzing the current crisis. And they made an interesting point near the end, where they pointed to the fact that Libya, under Colonel Gaddafi, they made an agreement with the U.S. about giving up on their nascent nuclear program, in return for some financial relief.

Now, the financial relief never came, and then of course when you had this uprising against Gaddafi years later, the U.S. joined the side of the uprising and actually helped overthrow Gaddafi.

And the Times says that this experience has heavily influenced the leaders in North Korea. That actually, Libya is often talked about in North Korean strategic writing and discussion.

LARRY WILKERSON: Absolutely. Look at Iraq and the invasion in 2003. Many have maintained, and I think with some reason, that it was an illegal war. Look at Libya. Look at the strike on Syria recently. If I were someone out there looking around and considering my threats, and I thought a nuclear weapon would help me, at least in some ways, to keep that threat from coming my way and overthrowing my regime, I'd surely want to build one.

I was there when we did what you just described briefly with Gaddafi. Tony Blair was wined and dined, and Condi Rice, and everyone was all hunky-dory loving Muammar Gaddafi at that particular point. And then suddenly we'd move a few years down the road, and bang, everybody's getting rid of him. And we haven't seen a good analysis of that conflict, yet.

I've had students write papers on it, good papers. And this is not a moment of U.S. brilliance, to be sure. Look at what we've got now. We've got, for example one of the biggest arms bazaars in Northern Africa -- if not the world -- to include shoulder-fired missiles. Gaddafi's armed caches going out to the rest of the world, including ISIS, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Al-Qaeda, and other groups like that.

So, Libya is not a success story. Not at all a success story. But it is something that teaches other leaders in the world to beware of the United States.

AARON MATÉ: Since we're talking history, I want to go back even further to the wider historical context for U.S.-North Korea tensions. We often don't hear about the impact of decades of U.S.-North Korean tensions. And specifically the Korean War going back to the 1950s, and I want to read you a quote from Air Force General Curtis LeMay, who headed the Strategic Air Command during the Korean War.

He said, "Over a period of three years or so, we killed off what 20% of the population." And Dean Rusk, who was later Secretary of State, he said the U.S. bombed, quote, "...everything that moved in North Korea, every brick standing on top of another."

Talk to us about this context that we often don't talk about.

LARRY WILKERSON: Well, this was a really bloody war, there's no question about it. The North invaded the South, the South responded by retreating all the way to Pusan. The United States was ill prepared for the war, and so joined them in that retreat, and then held out at Pusan until Douglas MacArthur, of course, conducted the brilliant amphibious invasion at Incheon.

And we cut off the North Koreans, and then we pursued them all the way to Bealu(?), with Douglas MacArthur, saying, no Chinese will enter the war, telling Harry Truman that on Wake Island, when they met. And then the Chinese intervened with some 300,000, quote,

"volunteers", unquote, and then the casualties really mounted, as we fought three years of bloody stalemate. Finally coming to an end at approximately the same point we started. But we had preserved South Korea.

And that was a great deal. It turns out that South Korea is one of the few, if not the only, major country in the world that has gone from being a debtor nation, to a creditor nation, in one generation. And is a flourishing democracy now.

So, in the long run, that turned out all right for South Korea. But for the other millions of Koreans north of the DMZ, it put them in the so-called, Hermit Kingdom. And it gave them, as you said, these memories of the times when the Chinese intervened, the United States was on their territory. Even had Douglas MacArthur recommending that nuclear waste be sowed all across North Korea, in order to make it unpalatable, and to keep the Chinese out, and so forth.

Yeah, the history is a long, bloody history. But the history since that 1953 truce agreement, peace agreement that was not, but truce, ceasefire, and we still have the war condition going on. Look at the DMZ. It spans the country right now at the point where we stopped. We have a lot of bitter feelings on both sides, I think.

Most people probably couldn't tell you what those feelings were really about today, on either side. In the North, the people were kept so poor, and so ill fed and in such conditions of poverty that the regime holds on by essentially keeping them worshipful of Kim, and not eating very much.

In the South, you have this robust, dynamic, successful economy. I think if you were to leave the situation alone, that is to say a great power like the United States, or for that matter, Japan or China, were not making it different every day by their very shadow of their power, you would probably already have North and South having worked out reconciliation.

You'd have unification, and the capital would be Seoul, not Pyongyang. And you'd have a whole bunch of Koreans in the North joining a whole bunch of Koreans in the South, and becoming a very dynamic economy over time, a generation, let's say. And maybe even giving China some competition, which is one reason why I think China likes that buffer zone between it, and that very prosperous, economically vivacious South Korea.

AARON MATÉ: Yeah. On the issue of buffer zone, we often forget that there are 28,500 U.S. troops in South Korea. So, that would seem to be an incentive for China to keep North Korea as its ally, even though it causes it a lot of problems.

LARRY WILKERSON: You put your finger on something there. I would suspect even, let's just hypothetically think for a moment about a collapse scenario, which I've done as a strategist in the army, and we even war-planned one of the war plans off of this.

Let's just say that all of a sudden the Kim dynasty is no more, that this Kim is the last one, for example -- which incidentally a lot of more conservative South Koreans believe -- and say it collapses and the generals take over. Well, the first thing I would think China would do, would probably be to move some of those forces it keeps up there on the border, the Yalu, into North Korea, say 15, 20 kilometers, and establish a buffer zone. And then make that another DMZ, or like a DMZ between what would then become an ultimately reunified Korea, and the Chinese border.

The only thing that might preclude that, and the Chinese might withdraw their troops, and not declare a buffer zone, is if once unification occurred, the United States left the peninsula entirely. You may have seen Doug Bandow's article recently where he suggested that we ought to leave the peninsula. I'm not sure Doug is not onto something.

U.S. presence there is no longer required, really, for checking China, as we say, or for doing the kinds of things we say we have to do with proximity. We can fly B2s from Missouri, we can do most of the things we need to do from internal to the United States. So, this \$70 billion a year we're spending on over 800 bases overseas every year has got to stop sometime.

And we might have a situation that is strategically more palatable, more peaceful and more stable, if the United States were not on the peninsula, than what we have now with the United States being on the peninsula. That's something that ought to be looked at, and ought to be analyzed.

AARON MATÉ: I want to play the comments of former Defense Secretary William Perry about North Korea. This is what he said.

WILLIAM PERRY: I think this is a time for us to some creative diplomacy. Paradoxically, the dangerous situation were in right now has created the environment in which now this diplomacy actually might be successful.

AARON MATÉ: Colonel Wilkerson, what do you make of what he said, and what do you make of the prospects for talks? I mean, people often look to the North Korean regime and say; this is the worst government in the world. So, how could we talk to them?

LARRY WILKERSON: Well, Bill Perry's pretty smart. Bill Perry and I were the two characters - huh, if you will - on the U.S. side in the last Pyonghwaa simulation we ran in Seoul. Bill played the U.S. Minister of Defense, and we had ROK Minister of Defense on the other side, and we did sort of a war game together. He knows the peninsula well. He was there when we came very, very close to war in 1994.

And I think he's right. This is not an insane regime. It's a very rational regime. It wants to preserve its own power. So, the very idea that deterrents wouldn't work against them is simply nonsense.

But it's also a high stakes poker regime. They do their brinksmanship, they play their high stakes poker games, they drop artillery rounds on South Korea, they sink a South Korean boat, or some other brinksmanship-like move. And they do it because they want us to come back to the talks.

Well, I say we need to be the kind of power that recognizes it could eliminate them from the face of the earth at any moment that it wanted to, but be magnanimous and deal with this, deal with the situation as you have it. Go back to talks. I don't care if we talk until we're blue in the face, as long as strategic patience continues to work, and prevent a war.

These people who walk around and pontificate about, oh there'll be a war, oh, there'll be a war, oh, they'll shoot Japan, oh, they'll shoot South Korea, oh, they'll shoot Guam, oh, they'll shoot California. That's just what those people's place in life is about: starting wars. I like strategic patience. I like no war. I like stable situations where no one's dying, and no one's dropping bombs on someone else, least of all my own country.

So, I don't see any problem with talking again, and I hope - I hope - I don't have a lot of hope with this administration of amateurs, but I do hope that what Trump is seeking is high ground in the eventual talks that he will conduct. I hope that he revivifies the five-party talks. I hope that we talk to the North Koreans. My goodness, we couldn't even talk directly to the North Koreans during the five-party talks with George W. Bush, because Dick Cheney wouldn't allow it.

So, if we had meaningful talks, and we offered something meaningful to the North Koreans in those talks, we would not get a non-nuclear North Korea. We're beyond that. They're never going to give up their nuclear weapons. But we might get a situation where the North and the South were talking to each other more regularly, dealing with each other more regularly.

We back out of this situation, sort of, and you wind up with an agreement within a generation or two - talk about strategic patience - that brought the peninsula together, and brought it together, as I said, with a capital Seoul and not Pyongyang. Which I think is inevitable.

AARON MATÉ: In this scary situation, we'll leave it there with that hope. Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, former Chief of Staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell, thanks as always for joining us.

LARRY WILKERSON: Thanks for having me.

AARON MATÉ: And thank you for joining us on The Real News.