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## The Anatomy of a Bogus North Korea Story

By Adam Johnson  
May 11, 2017

Reports involving Official US Enemies, especially North Korea, grow more distorted and scarier with each re-telling in the media. This is a distortion process honed by our media over the decades of US imperial saber-rattling and military build-up since the 1950s.

What begins as a hyper-qualified, even sober analysis, is laundered through initial reports and subsequent reports and more reports and finds its way on the airwaves of Fox News, ultimately morphing into a whole new media creature, rounded up to the scariest interpretation of facts with each link in the media chain and ending with an almost apocalyptic fervor.

One recent such example was so egregious and naked it bears special mention. What started out as an exercise in idle speculation by an obscure geopolitical research firm, within a week, morphed into a major story featured on Fusion, the LA Times, and Fox News.

Small Virginia-based security contractor Strategic Sentinel noticed that on Google Earth some islands had emerged off the coast of North Korea and decided to speculate as to what their purposes was in a May 1st article [3] in The Diplomat—a respected foreign policy magazine focusing on Asia-Pacific affairs. One of those purposes, of course, was military. The piece hedged a lot but effectively ran with the premise that the islands North Korea was building were largely to house missiles and for sinister military application.

There's only one problem: The basis of the whole story was overreaching at best and bunk at worst. Long-time North Korea observer 38North laid out [4], in detail four days later why the story didn't add up:

On May 1, 2017, The Diplomat published an article by Damen Cook based on a report by Strategic Sentinel, which purported to show that the North Koreans had “constructed several military facilities on small islands surrounding the city of Sohae.” The methodology and conclusions in this report, however, demonstrate a lack of understanding of both North Korea's military infrastructure and recent history...

In the Strategic Sentinel analysis, they suggested that a series of islands near Sohae (which is not a city) are being used for ballistic missiles (BM), anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM), or surface-to-air-missiles (SAM); however, there is no credible evidence to support this claim. In fact, there is ample evidence to refute it...

As best as can be determined, it seems [Strategic Sentinel] looked at a few Google Earth satellite images (but forgot to look at the Landsat imagery) and drew conclusions based on pre-existing expectations.

The report would go on, playing down and refuting many of Cook's core claims. The entirety of which should be read.

Ryan Barenklau, Cook's partner at Strategic Sentinel, disagrees with 38North's reading of events, telling AlterNet, he didn't find the debunking by to be “fair”.

“I feel as if the piece has too much emotion from the writer and that the piece was a knee jerk reaction,” Barenklau told AlterNet in an email. “If you read the original article, you will see that we completely agree that these islands may only be for agriculture and never will be used for military purposes.”

This debunking by 38North—regardless of what one thinks of its merits—was too little too late. The Diplomat added a 142-word “update” further qualifying their claims after being contacted by analysts from 38North (but before 38North published their rebuttal three days later). This would have little effect, North Korea's Mysterious Nuke Islands of Doom were too tempting to pass up and the media was off to the races:

To further hype the threat, Fox News turned to reliable North Korea fear-monger Gordon Chang—who's carved out quite a career rounding up to the most dire assessment of North Korea's actions. He fed Fox News the expected red state red meat, complete with a gratuitous book plug:

While their purpose is unknown, suspicions are high that the islands could be used to launch missiles. Those speculations are not far off the mark, according to Gordon Chang, author of “Nuclear Showdown: North Korea Takes on the World.”

“North Korea is never up to any good,” Chang said in an emailed statement to Fox News. “The new facilities, whatever their purpose, will be used for evil deeds, mischief, or troublemaking of some sort.”

“My sense is that the facilities on the new islands will be used for missile launches of some kind, especially because they are near Sohae.”

In less than a week, an analysis that began as qualified speculation—even if overreaching—morphed into a full blown media panic. Grainy, decontextualized Google Earth images were enough to justify bold claims about a sinister Bond Villain-like plot to menace East Asia.



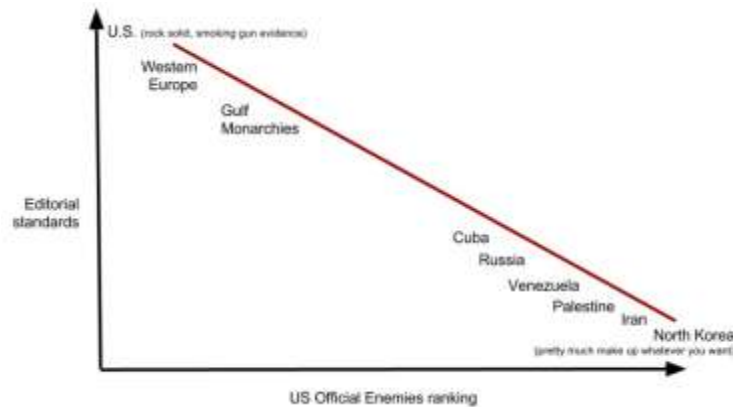
“I do not like the way the media has been reporting this article,” Strategic Sentinel’s Ryan Barenklau told AlterNet. “The original purpose of this article was to examine islands that were being built up by DPRK and theorize if they could be used for military purposes, how would DPRK go about doing that. I definitely disagree with how Fox News has taken the article.”

Strategic Sentinel did, however lend quotes the LA Times article [6] that while more qualified than Fox News, was so only in degree not substance. One problem is that government contractors writing reports and providing quotes for respected publications like The Times is that these analyses often double as marketing efforts. Indeed, the LA Times story is currently Strategic Sentinel’s pinned tweet. [11] And don't let their “.org” url fool you, Strategic Sentinel is a pro-profit defense contractor that—while currently without any—is more than open federal government contracts.

“When it comes to marketing. I would definitely like to think that these articles show potential clients what we are capable of doing,” Strategic Sentinel’s Ryan Barenklau told AlterNet. “Any marketing that we do get from the pieces I am happy with, but I personally make it my mission not to ‘hype’ anything. I do not want my company to be known as partisan or having ulterior agendas.”

Nevertheless, here we are. The average media consumer isn’t going to follow the links and parse all the nuance. 60% of Americans get their news from headlines [12] and “North Korea Building Islands for Bombs” is all they’re going to come away with it. This is consistent with what we’ll

call the “North Korea Law of Journalism”, which states that the editorial standards are inversely proportional to a country's Enemy Status as it relates to the U.S. State Department.



Because North Korea is seen—fairly or not—as the baddies, journalists can always round up to the most speculative, ungenerous reading of their actions and get away with it. There is no pro-North Korean public relations firm that'll call up the editor at The Diplomat or LA Times. No AIPAC like Israel has, no US government PR rep like the CIA does, no Gulf-funded think tank to run spin for the Qataris. Given these conditions, any story about North Korea can spread without challenge, because, frankly who's going to object?

One common rejoinder to this line of criticism is that North Korea, by its very nature, is difficult to report on and so more leaps must be taken. But this begs the question. There is no law of nature saying reporters have to idly speculate on the internal affairs of North Korea, especially given the way in which that speculation will be weaponized by a rightwing media perpetually eager for war. Those operating in the space should factor this in, and do their best not to feed the media beast, lest a bogus North Korea story spread unchecked with their names all over it.