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President Trump, North Korea, and Israel's Nuclear Strategy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Although concerns about a Trump confrontation with a nuclear North Korea are widespread, there has been little corollary discussion of crisis implications for other parts of the world. Yet there are important spillover implications to be considered, specifically with reference to the Middle East and Israel's nuclear strategy.

It appears increasingly plausible that President Donald Trump's first major test in strategic crisis management will come from North Korea. The spillover effects of any such test, a complex challenge that may or may not have a nuclear dimension, could rapidly involve other countries, including several powerful states in the Middle East.

Context is vital. All world politics ultimately comprise a single integrated system of states. What happens in any one geographic area, therefore, can quickly affect another.

Israel is a case in point. As a beleaguered state possessing a prospective (and still intentionally opaque) nuclear "equalizer," Israel is no doubt well aware that the use of nuclear weapons anywhere in the world would immediately erase the longstanding nuclear taboo. A *prima facie* erasure of this sort could increase the odds of subsequent nuclear firings in Israel's own volatile neighborhood.

Furthermore, as North Korea already has a documented nuclear assistance history with Syria and Iran (the Syrian nuclear threat was eliminated by Israel's preemptive *Operation Orchard* on September 6, 2007), Jerusalem's concerns over

escalations by Pyongyang would be entirely reasonable. Over time, for example, Iran, with or without any additional direct nuclear assistance from North Korea, could be encouraged to render itself less vulnerable to an Israeli hard-target preemption or Israeli cyber-deterrence. The extent of any such encouragement would depend, at least in part, on Pyongyang's prior success or failure in navigating "escalation dominance" with the Trump-led US.

For now, Israel's nuclear strategy remains deliberately ambiguous. The so-called "bomb-in-the-basement" posture has endured since the 1960s, primarily because Jerusalem has not yet had to worry about confronting any enemy state's nuclear forces. This once reasonable position would need to change, however, if Iran were perceived by Israel to have become nearly nuclear. Israel's strategic posture would need to change even more urgently if Jerusalem should find itself facing a nuclear *fait accompli* in Tehran.

For Israel, however, it's not just about Iran. For entirely sound reasons, the Jewish State could at some point decide to shift to a more credible and persuasive measure of nuclear disclosure once an actual nuclear attack had taken place anywhere on earth. In essence, there would not need to be any direct connection between such an attack and Israel for Jerusalem to acknowledge new national survival obligations.

For example, any belligerent use of nuclear weapons by North Korea might lower Pakistani cost-benefit calculations of a nuclear war with India. While not directed in any way towards Israel, such a destabilizing development in an already nuclear and coup-vulnerable Islamic state would naturally raise red flags in Jerusalem.

For Israel, a key question is this: What scenarios should be considered once Pyongyang has actually fired nuclear weapons at another state (e.g., Japan, or American military targets) or configuration of states (e.g., South Korea, Japan, and/or the in-range US)? The precise manner and extent to which Israel could be affected in any such taboo-breaking circumstances would depend, *inter alia*, on prevailing geopolitical alignments and cleavages, both regional and worldwide.

More precisely, the expected impact on Israel would lie in the particular way President Trump had handled the nuclear crisis with North Korea. In this regard, all players in both Washington and Jerusalem need to remember that there is no scientific way of ascertaining risk in unprecedented circumstances. That is because in any valid scientific calculation, probabilities must be based upon the discoverable frequency of pertinent past events.

Leaving aside the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, which may or may not represent an apt analogue here, there simply are no pertinent past events.

Inevitably, the potential spillover effect on Israel of any nuclear weapons use by North Korea would depend, in part, upon the combatants involved; the expected rationality or irrationality of those combatants; the yield and range of the weapons fired; and of course, the aggregate calculation of civilian and military harm suffered in the affected areas. If, for example, Pyongyang fired nuclear weapons against American targets, military and/or civilian, Jerusalem could reasonably anticipate an overwhelmingly destructive US response. That said, the extent of the American response would depend a great deal on the inherently uncertain "Trump Factor."

It follows that Israel's senior strategic planners should already be preparing their best estimates of this eccentric factor – although again, there can be no scientifically meaningful basis for any such calculations.

For Israel, further complications could affect its decision-making. Israeli planners would have to account not only for singular nuclear weapons operations launched by North Korea, but also for any interactions or synergies that might then be expected. Because world politics is not geometry, the Israelis would need to take into consideration that the whole of inflicted harm can be substantially greater than the sum of attack "parts."

How should Israeli strategic planners cope with such bewildering insights, complications, and expectations? First, they will need to factor into the evolving corpus of national nuclear policy preparation an updated version of Carl von Clausewitz's classic "friction." According to this nuanced conceptual consideration, Israeli analysts will have to base their enhanced adjustments of the country's nuclear doctrine on a widely integrated range of potentially critical factors. This range should involve a calculated loosening of "deliberate ambiguity," including a recognizable Israeli capacity to deny expected enemy nuclear attack objectives with advanced anti-missile defenses.

Among other refinements, Jerusalem will need to assess whether or not the new American president is able to maintain complete rationality during any anticipated process of crisis escalation, and whether he can grasp certain plausible expected benefits of "pretend irrationality." In this connection, Israeli leaders will want to recall Moshe Dayan's advice. Said the Israeli Minister of Defense many years back, "Israel must be seen as a mad dog, too dangerous to bother."

When contemplating a nuclear crisis between Washington and Pyongyang, Jerusalem must bear in mind that several intersecting and overwhelmingly

destructive consequences could extend to other countries, including Israel. To prepare for such a threat, Israel's strategic planners should be gaming various scenarios in which President Trump (1) hews closely to fully rational "plays;" and (2) adheres to other moves in which he might (however unwittingly) act upon Dayan's apt metaphor of feigned madness. In the latter case, Israeli analysts should examine Trump's expected crisis decision-making together with a *pretended irrationality* option.

Strategic planners should be warned. A "mad dog" strategy might work for the US and Israel, but it could also backfire against both countries with potentially egregious human costs. In the case of Israel, which is half the size of America's Lake Michigan, these costs could prove existential.

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