



PERSPECTIVES

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Trump Diplomacy: Settling North Korea “With Gas and With Bomb”?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As North Korea continues its steadily expanding nuclearization, US President Donald Trump will have to prepare for extremely complex crisis diplomacy. Whether he decides upon a path of military preemption (what his lawyers would then call "anticipatory self-defense") or waits for a first move by Pyongyang, Trump will need to (1) make difficult judgments regarding enemy rationality and capability; and (2) consider a prudent posture of "pretended irrationality" for the US. His core task will be to pursue "escalation dominance" without simultaneously exposing the US or its allies to grievous attack.

*It's farewell to the drawing-room's civilized cry,
The professor's sensible whereto and why,
The frock-coated diplomat's social aplomb,
Now matters are settled with gas and with bomb.*
W.H. Auden, *Danse Macabre*

The poet Auden could never have imagined the unique pitfalls of nuclear-age diplomacy, but his 1937 poem still perfectly captures the looming threat in northeast Asia. Should US President Trump decide to attempt selective military action against North Korea, Pyongyang could respond by striking American military forces in the region and/or other high-value targets in Japan or South Korea. Whatever North Korea's preferred targets of reprisal in such circumstances, Kim Jong-un's military response would likely be intended to avoid massive American counter-retaliation.

This more-or-less "optimistic" narrative would depend, to a considerable degree, upon the Korean dictator's adherence to processes of rational decision-making, and also on certain largely unpredictable interactions or "synergies" between his own level of rationality and that of President Trump. In such a crisis, the conditions of which might plausibly be compared to John F. Kennedy's nuclear predicament in October 1962, Trump would not only be untested. He could also quickly become subject to debilitating forms of analytic or intellectual confusion.

The oft-heard counterargument – that Trump can be relied upon to defer to his highly capable military subordinates – misses two essential points: (1) only the president himself can make the relevant final decisions, and (2) even the most decorated and dedicated flag officers will have had no pertinent nuclear command experience. How many genuine nuclear conflicts have actually been fought? The answer, of course, is zero.

This scenario is a good deal more complex than it first appears. If Trump should unwittingly encourage escalation with a "preemptive" or defensive first strike, the North Korean response, whether rational or irrational, might then be "disproportionate." In that dynamically unstable scenario, any introduction of nuclear weapons into the volatile mix would have to be done with profound seriousness.

It should also be recalled that a calculated nuclear introduction does not have to originate on the American side. After all, North Korea has demonstrated that it has forms of nuclear weapons capability.

It is possible that, in the midst of an escalation, Trump could opt for a "mad dog" strategy vis-à-vis President Kim. In more generic terms, he has already hinted at his preference for exhibiting postures of feigned irrationality.

In such circumstances, Trump would employ a seat-of-the-pants strategy of pretended irrationality, or what I prefer to call the "rationality of pretended irrationality." Any such belligerence, while intuitively sensible to Trump, could backfire, opening up an irreversible path towards settlement "with gas and with bomb."

If, on the other hand, Trump's defensive first strike against North Korea were less than massive, a fully rational adversary in Pyongyang could decide that his reprisal should be similarly limited. But if Trump's attack on North Korea,

however rational and systematically calibrated, were launched against an irrational enemy leadership, the response could be "all-out" retaliation. Such a response, nuclear or otherwise, would likely be directed at some as yet undeterminable combination of US, South Korean, and Japanese targets.

For now, any North Korean missile attack against US interests and personnel, whether a first strike or a reprisal, would almost certainly exclude the American homeland. This limiting prediction cannot, however, be made with reference to South Korean or Japanese targets. On the contrary: any North Korean attack on South Korea or Japan would target primarily those countries' vulnerable military assets, and could also include "soft" civilian populations and corollary infrastructures.

Even if played by rational adversaries, a strategic "game" of this kind played by Washington and Pyongyang would demand that each contestant strive relentlessly for "escalation dominance," raising the prospect of mutual catastrophe. This highly undesirable but conceivable outcome could be produced either through incremental escalation by one or both of the players or by a sudden quantum leap in destructiveness on one or both of their parts.

It would all be stunningly complicated, and, more than likely, bewilderingly fast. In facing off to achieve escalation dominance, even under ideal conditions of joint rationality, Presidents Trump and Kim would have to concern themselves with all possible miscalculations, errors in information, unauthorized uses of strategic weapons, mechanical or computer malfunctions, and the innumerable nuances of cyber-defense and cyber-war.

Nor is that all. They would need to bear in mind that there exists no scientific way to assign mathematical probabilities to unique events. Because any nuclear exchange between North Korea and the US would represent a singular event – i.e., one with utterly unforeseen intersections, interactions, and synergies – no one can predict the probability of such an asymmetrical conflict with any reasonable degree of accuracy. Indeed, should Trump ever decide to strike North Korea preemptively on the erroneously optimistic assumption that his generals have somehow "got everything covered," he would need to be reminded of the classic military warning issued by Carl von Clausewitz.

Long before military planners could even imagine nuclear war, the legendary Prussian general and strategist cautioned leaders about "friction," or "the difference between war on paper and war as it actually is." Any nuclear

brinksmanship between Washington and Pyongyang would necessarily take place in uncharted waters, requiring both presidents to steer a steady course between escalation dominance and national survival. Can we assume Trump and Kim are up to meeting such demanding and untried expectations?

Or would matters more likely be "settled with gas and with bomb?"

Louis René Beres is Emeritus Professor of International Law at Purdue and the author of twelve books and several hundred articles on nuclear strategy and nuclear war. His newest book is Surviving Amid Chaos: Israel's Nuclear Strategy (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

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