



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The North Korean Threat: Rationality, Intentionality, and Nuclear War

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** To deal with the growing nuclear threat from North Korea, US policy will need to be drawn from theoretical decision models. Four such models should be constructed along the axes of rationality and intentionality. With these models in hand, President Trump and his senior strategists would be better prepared to assess and counter the threats posed by Kim Jung-un to the US and its allies. In the latter regard, the North Korean leader maintains ties to some of Israel's core enemies in the Middle East, including Syria, Hezbollah, and Iran.

To best prepare for any impending nuclear crisis with North Korea, the US must approach the problem in a systematic and intellectually disciplined manner. This means factoring into any assessment (a) the expected *rationality or irrationality* of principal decision-makers in Pyongyang and Washington; and (b) the *intentional or unintentional* intra-war behaviors of those same decision-makers.

If a distinction is made regarding the rationality and intentionality variables, four logically possible and analytically useful scenarios will result. These scenarios should be considered by Trump's senior military planners and strategists. All four can subsequently be nuanced by the introduction of additional factors.

The four scenarios are as follows:

### (1) Rational/Intentional

Both Donald Trump and Kim Jung-un are fully *rational* (i.e., each values national survival more highly than any other preference or combination of preferences). Any nuclear exchange between them would be the result of *deliberate* decisions by one or both of them.

## **(2) Rational/Unintentional**

Both Donald Trump and Kim Jung-un are fully *rational*, and any nuclear exchange between them would be the result of *unintended* decisions made by one or both of them.

## **(3) Irrational/Intentional**

Either Donald Trump or Kim Jung-un is *irrational*, or both are. Any nuclear exchange between them would be the result of *deliberate* decisions by one or both of them.

## **(4) Irrational/Unintentional**

Either Donald Trump or Kim Jung-un is *irrational*, or both are. Any nuclear exchange between them would be the result of *unintended* decisions made by one or both of them.

Such comprehensive policy models can help guide President Trump and his counselors beyond otherwise vague or "seat-of-the-pants" appraisals of North Korean nuclear conflict possibilities.

The complex security issues facing the US should never be dealt with as mere matters of bombast (e.g., non-specific threats of "fire and fury") or "common sense." At the same time, although the proposed pattern of more systematic inquiry suggests a promising American approach to any North Korean nuclear crisis, nothing strictly scientific can ever be said about the probabilities of war.

The reason is simple. Science-based probabilities must always be drawn from the frequency of past events. Here, clearly, there are no pertinent past events. Any nuclear crisis between these asymmetrical enemy states would be unprecedented. It follows that President Trump and his advisors ought never to become too confident about either their own expectations of the likely outcome of any North Korean crisis or their own expertise. No one at the Pentagon or the White House is an expert on nuclear war.

Furthermore, the evident nuclear superiority of the US over North Korea suggests little of consequence about America's overall capacity to protect its national security in the event of a clash. North Korea, inferior though its capacities may be, can nevertheless lay waste to vulnerable US allies in northeast Asia, to US military forces in the region, and perhaps even to American cities.

US strategic analysts must identify a core distinction between *intentional or deliberate nuclear war* and *unintentional or inadvertent nuclear war*. The derivative risks ensuing from these two very different types of conflict are apt to vary

considerably. Analysts who remain too focused on a deliberate nuclear war scenario could vastly underestimate the cumulative nuclear threat North Korea can pose to the US and its allies.

Much of the nuclear threat could result from miscalculation or inadvertence, whether by Pyongyang, by Washington, or by both.

American strategists who remain too focused on *comparative nuclear weaponry*, alternatively, could overlook other hazards. For example, one often hears the allegedly "common sense" argument that Kim Jung-un would never consider striking first because he appreciates that any such aggression would elicit an immediate and overwhelming US nuclear reprisal. This argument only makes sense if it is first assumed that Kim is rational.

Pyongyang's growing nuclear threat will depend significantly on the *rationality* or *irrationality* of both the North Korean leader and President Trump. Whether we like it or not, this issue must be considered as two-sided in any American assessment of US nuclear posture. Furthermore, in any such inquiry, scientific assessments must take account not only of conspicuous and inconspicuous facts, but also of almost every imaginable synergy between Trump and Kim Jung-un.

There is one more conceptual distinction that should be included in the American analytic mix: *inadvertent* versus *accidental* nuclear war. By definition, any accidental nuclear war would have to be inadvertent. Conversely, however, inadvertent nuclear war need not necessarily be accidental. False warnings, for example, which could be generated by mechanical, electrical, or computer malfunction or sparked by adversarial or third-party hacking, would not fit on the list of causes of unintentional or inadvertent nuclear war. Instead, they would represent narratives of accidental nuclear war.

Most critical among causes of inadvertent nuclear war are errors in calculation by one or both sides. The most blatant example, perhaps, would be misjudgments of either enemy intent or enemy capacity that might emerge as the crisis escalates. Such misjudgments would likely stem from the understandable desire of each party to achieve "escalation dominance."

Still other causes of inadvertent nuclear war with North Korea could include flawed interpretations of computer-generated attack warnings; an unequal willingness to risk catastrophic war; an overconfidence in deterrence and/or defense capabilities on either or both sides; an adversarial regime change, including outright revolution or a *coup d'état* in Pyongyang; and poorly conceived pre-delegations of nuclear launch authority.

Pre-delegations of launch authority are made to ensure that any threats of nuclear reprisal can actually be executed. In part, such pre-delegations are designed to enhance a country's nuclear deterrence posture – but this works only to the extent that they are sufficiently apparent and recognizable.

Problems of overconfidence could be exacerbated by "successful" tests of a missile interception system by either side (notably THAAD, on the US side) that overstate operational efficiencies. They could also be encouraged by too-optimistic assessments of alliance guarantees. An example would be the intra-crisis judgment by Pyongyang that Beijing stands firmly behind its every move vis-à-vis the US. It is reciprocally conceivable that Washington's decisions could be affected by its own perceptions of the Chinese commitment to North Korea.

For a start, American analysts need to pinpoint and conceptualize all vital similarities and differences between *deliberate nuclear war*, *inadvertent nuclear war*, and *accidental nuclear war*. As explained above, there will need to be related judgments concerning expectations of *rationality* and *irrationality* within each affected country's core decision-making structure.

Correspondingly, a potential source of inadvertent nuclear war could be a backfiring strategy of "feigned irrationality." A rational Kim Jung-un who has managed to convince his American counterparts of his own irrationality could spark an otherwise avoidable US military preemption. Conversely, a North Korean leadership that begins to take seriously President Trump's self-aggrandizing unpredictability could be frightened into striking first.

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