

Hegemony and Resistance, Compellence and Deterrence

Deconstructing the North Korean ‘Threat’ and Identifying America’s Strategic Alternatives

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북한 ‘위협’ 해체와 미국의 전략적 대안 확인

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Abstract

We are constantly bombarded with articles in the media and statements by officials, generals, and politicians that the US is under threat from countries such as North Korea and Iran. Before that it was Iraq, and before that the Soviet Union. The propaganda trope relies for its potency – and potent it clearly is since so many believe it – on confusion, often deliberately fostered, between key strategic concepts. The problem is compounded by the fact that the instruments of aggression and defence, of compellence and deterrence, are essentially the same. Thinking clearly about the concepts, complemented of course by actually looking at the data (just how many ICBMs and aircraft carriers does North Korea or Iran have?) is essential if we are to blow away the smoke screen and chart a way to a safer future. It is essential to have a rigorous understanding of the concepts – their differences, similarities and overlaps – and place them into context. Wariness of repetitious propaganda, use of common sense and an avoidance of racist stereotypes all help. By analysing the situational dynamics of the confrontation between the US and North Korea we can identify America’s strategic alternatives.¹⁾

There is a constant stream of articles in the media, quoting politicians, officials, generals and assorted pundits that that the United States is under dire, existential threat from North Korea. This has been going on in various forms for decades but it surges from time to time. Sometimes these are occasioned by a North

1) Part of this essay, in particular the section on strategic options, has been utilized in a short article in the American website *Zoom in Korea: Zoom in Korea*, 26 July 2017, "North Korea's Deterrent and Trump's Options."

Korea test of a nuclear weapon, a missile or even the launch of a satellite Sometimes it is a product of events in the American calendar such as the massive biannual invasion exercises or by a change of administration. So we have the spring 2017 war exercises, 300,000 troops, an aircraft carrier fleet, F-22s, F-35s an expression of military power probably unequalled in world history. Operation Barbarossa, in which Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union and the Normandy D-Day landings involved more people but didn't have the destructive capability of modern weapons systems. At the same time we have a change in administration in the United States and President Trump and Secretary Tillerson have to be constantly reminded, in case they did not already know, what danger the United States faces from this small East Asia country.

- Key words: Deterrence, Compellence, Coercive diplomacy, Trump North Korea policy, North Korean defense strategy

초록

우리는 북한이나 이란과 같은 나라들의 위협 속에서 미국 관리, 장군, 정치인들의 말과 미디어 기사들로 웅단폭격을 받고 있다. 그 이전에는 이라크였고, 더 이전에는 소련이었다. 이런 선전은 많은 사람들이 믿기 때문에 명백해 보이는 잠재력이 있어서, 종종 숙고하는 가운데 자라난 주요 전략적 개념들 사이의 혼란에 의존한다. 공격과 방어 수단들, 강제와 억제 수단들이 같다는 사실이 문제를 복잡하게 만든다. 개념을 분명히 하는 것은 근본적인 일이다. 이는 실제 데이터(얼마나 많은 ICBM과 비행기를 북한이나 이란이 갖고 있는가에 대한 데이터)를 통해 보완된다. 연기가 자욱한 스크린을 걷어내고 보다 안전한 미래를 위한 방법을 확정할 수 있다면, 개념들과 그 개념들의 차이와 유사성 및 중복성에 대해 엄격히 이해하고 그것을 컨텍스트 속에 대입하는 것은 근본적이다. 반복되는 선전에 대한 경계, 상식의 사용, 인종주의적 고정관념을 피하는 것은 모두 도움이 된다. 미국과 북한 사이의 대결을 상황적인 다이내믹스 속에서 분석함으로써, 우리는 미국의 전략적 대안들을 확인할 수 있다.

북한으로부터 심각하고 실존적인 위협에 직면해 있는 미국의 정치인, 관리, 장군, 분류된 전문가를 인용하는 미디어의 기사들 속에는 어떤 지속적인 흐름이 있다. 이것은 수십 년 동안 여러 형태로 지속되어 왔고, 때때로 파도처럼 밀려온다. 때로는 북한의 핵실험이나 미사일 혹은 심지어 인공위성 발사에 의해 발생한다. 또 때로는 2년마다 일어나는 거대한 침략이나 정부교체와 같은 미국 칼렌더에서 일어나는 사건들의 결과로 나타난다. 2017년 봄에는 아마도 세계역사상 비견될 수 없는 군사력의 표현인 30만 군대와 F-22, F-35 비행단이 참가한 군사훈련이 있었다. 나치독일이 소련을 침공한 바르바로사 작전과 노르망디 상륙작전 당일에는 더 많은 군대가 있었으나 현대 무기체계와 같은 파괴능력은 없었다. 동시에 미국 행정부에는 변화가 있다. 트럼프 대통령과 Tillerson 국무장관은 아직 모르고 있다면 미국이 이 작은 아시아 국가로부터 어떤 위협에 직면하고 있는지에 대해 계속 되짚어봐야 한다.

- 주제어: 억제, 강제, 강압외교, 트럼프 행정부의 대북한정책, 북한 방어전략

I . Media bombardment

A few examples from this tsunami of headlined angst, just from the top echelon of the US and South Korean mainstream media should suffice, though no doubt there are many more lurid ones lurking in media gutters around the world:

As Rex Tillerson makes his debut in Asia, 'the No. 1 issue' will be North Korea²⁾

Top source: Trump believes North Korea is greatest threat³⁾

Trump may see North Korea as the greatest threat to the US⁴⁾

Trump calls N. Korea 'big, big problem,' vows to deal with it 'very strongly'⁵⁾

Trump says defending S. Korea from N. Korean nuclear, missile threats 'very very high priority'⁶⁾

Ex-U.S. Officials Warn of N. Korean Nuke Threat⁷⁾

In initial Asia visit, Mattis vows joint stance against North Korean nuclear threat⁸⁾

N. Korea biggest threat to US: poll⁹⁾

CIA chief nominee picks N. Korea as one of biggest threats to US¹⁰⁾

What's the Primary Threat?¹¹⁾

Confronting the North Korea Threat: Reassessing Policy Options¹²⁾

North Korea is scarier than ever¹³⁾

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- 2) *Washington Post*, 14 March 2017, "As Rex Tillerson makes his debut in Asia, 'the No. 1 issue' will be North Korea."
 - 3) CNN, 28 February 2017, "Top source: Trump believes North Korea is greatest threat."
 - 4) *Hankyoreh*, 2 March 2017, "Trump may see North Korea as the greatest threat to the US."
 - 5) *Korea Times*, 14 February 2017, "Trump calls N. Korea 'big, big problem!'"
 - 6) *Korea Times*, 11 February 2017, "Trump says defending S. Korea from N. Korean nuclear, missile threats 'very very high priority.'"
 - 7) *Chosun Ilbo*, 3 February 2017, "Ex-U.S. Officials Warn of N.Korean Nuke Threat."
 - 8) *Washington Post*, 2 February 2017, "In initial Asia visit, Mattis vows joint stance against North Korean nuclear threat."
 - 9) *Korea Times*, 17 January 2017, "N. Korea biggest threat to US: poll."
 - 10) *Korea Times*, 13 January 2017, "CIA chief nominee picks N. Korea as one of biggest threats to US."
 - 11) *PacNet Newsletter*, 11 January 2017, "What's the Primary Threat?"
 - 12) Bob Corker, "Opening Statement at Hearing on "Confronting the North Korea Threat: Reassessing Policy Options," *United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations* (2017).
 - 13) *Washington Post*, 13 October 2016, "North Korea is scarier than ever."

60% of Americans Feel Threatened by N.Korean Nukes¹⁴⁾

Why North Korean threat is a more urgent issue for next U.S. President¹⁵⁾

Should America be focusing on ISIS when North Korea poses an existential threat?¹⁶⁾

So here we have it, from the highest in the land, the president himself, through the CIA, the military, Congress, and assembled opinions writers and pundits to the citizen in the street. North Korea is not merely a threat to the United States, but the biggest and indeed an existential one, endangering the very survival of the country and all it holds dear, including apple pie. The curious thing is that the idea, as postulated, is nonsense. Probably no myth has been so unanimously embraced since the days when everyone, from the highest to the lowest, knew the earth was flat.

We can strip away the nonsense and attempt to build a meaningful analysis by examining and teasing apart the basic building blocks of military and strategic concepts relating them to the accessible facts and situating them within the context of North Korea's defiance of US hegemony.

II. The Taxonomy of Threat – Offensive and Retaliatory

Let us start with the word 'threat'. This comes in two main forms. The first relates to offense – to attack and to aggression. Country A attacks country B in order to seize its cattle, its people for slaves, its land or its oil, The reasons are various and extend beyond the economic. The lust for conquest has traditionally been an important motivation, as has been religion – there is no deeper and long-lasting form of conquest than imposing your religion on a defeated people. And then there are personal reasons; Alexander the Great no doubt wanted to show that he was better at conquest than his father, Philip II of Macedon and George

14) *Chosun Ilbo*, 7 October 2016, "60% of Americans Feel Threatened by N.Korean Nukes."

15) CNN, 27 April 2016, "Why North Korean threat is a more urgent issue for next U.S. President."

16) Simon Reich, "Should America be focusing on ISIS when North Korea poses an existential threat?" *The Conversation* (2016).

W. Bush wanted to demonstrate that he had come out from under the shadow of his father by completing the invasion of Iraq that George H. had started in 1990.

The other form of threat relates to retaliation – an attack in response to a preceding attack. Since sequence is the key to differentiating offensive, ‘unprovoked’ attack from retaliation, and since history is a slippery business this can be difficult. Vendettas are usually seen as cycles of attack and counter-attack whose origins may be forgotten by those involved. ‘Unprovoked’ is similarly often difficult to pin down. Islamic terrorism for instance. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was clearly an act of unprovoked aggression – the Republic of Iraq had never attacked the United States of America and was in not in a position to do so even if it wanted to. But Osama bin Laden was a Saudi, as were most of the suicide bombers of 9/11, and they were reacting not to a classic Iraq-type invasion of Saudi Arabia but something more insidious, which they considered sufficiently provocative. That we might consider their actions disproportionate to the perceived injury of infidels defiling their country is irrelevant; they saw their retaliation as justified and indeed holy.

Analysis is further complicated by the fact that threat and related action are distinct. If you plan to invade another country to seize its resources or land you probably don’t advertise the intention because that allows them to prepare their defences. So Operation Barbarossa was not announced in advance nor was Pearl Harbour. The Japanese attack on the US fleet was yet another form of attack which is difficult to define. It was not intended to be a first step in the conquest of the US, but rather as a warning shot to dissuade the Americans from intervening in Japan’s conquest of China. But it enhanced its (short-term) military efficacy by not being preceded by a threat. By contrast, retaliatory threat is much more about promise than action

III. Compellence, Defence and Deterrence

Whilst aggressive attacks vary in form and motivation if they are preceded by a threat then the objective is not so much to carry out the attack itself but to

compel the other side to do something. This is termed 'compellence' in the strategic literature (as in 'Nuclear Compellence' which dates back at least to an 1984 article by Merrill and Pelig entitled Nuclear Compellence: The Political Use of the Bomb¹⁷⁾). It is also called, in polite society, in the State Department, the US Institute of Peace and places like that, 'coercive diplomacy' while if it happens on the street we call it mugging.¹⁸⁾ By its very nature it tends to be a tactic used by the strong against the weak.

Retaliation is by definition a response to an attack and usually follows after it. The concept of pre-emptive strike somewhat muddies the waters, but as discussed below, context can clarify the issue. Compellence which fails to achieve its objective – the other side is defiant – and which leads to the threatened attack is sub-optimal. Attack will probably impose some costs on the attacker and even if the attack is successful and the adversary vanquished some, perhaps a lot, of the booty, the spoils of war, will have been destroyed. However retaliation is far worse. It means that the policy of deterrence has failed and that the adversary has attacked. Retaliation may produce the satisfaction of revenge, and it may prevent further attacks, but it has failed to prevent the attack it was designed to avert, damage has been done and cannot be undone. Retaliation, and the threat thereof, tends to be the tactic used by the weak against the strong.

If you are under threat from an adversary then defence is far preferable to deterrence based on retaliation. Retaliation means that you have suffered an attack; a strong defence which is recognised as such by the adversary may well save you from attack. In other words defence has a deterrent component. It almost certainly imposes costs on the aggressor and the anticipated range of probable costs would have to be considered tolerable, in the light of foreseeable benefits of conquest, if the attack is to take place. Here we should notice a characteristic of modern warfare. In the past, ever since kings no longer got close to the actual fighting, costs were relatively fungible in terms of men killed, wounded or captured. The

17) John Merrill and Ilan Pelig, "Nuclear Compellence: The Political Use of the Bomb," *Crossroads* (1984).

18) Robert J. Art and Patrick M. Cronin, eds. *The United States and Coercive Diplomacy* (United States Institute of Peace, 2003); Jack S. Levy, "Deterrence and Coercive Diplomacy: The Contributions of Alexander George," *Political Psychology* 29, no.4 (2008).

invention of the dreadnought brought in a new factor, analogous to the kings of old. Dreadnoughts bundled up not merely huge costs, but also considerable prestige and symbolism, so the loss of one would have much more impact than the sum of the components. The modern dreadnought – the aircraft carrier – is both a powerful instrument of war and a vulnerable hostage to fortune. Much has been made of ‘carrier killer’ missiles, mainly Chinese and their potential to destroy relatively cheaply this symbol of imperial sea/air power.¹⁹⁾ This asymmetry has obvious advantages for North Korea so reports of development of a carrier killer come as no surprise.²⁰⁾

In general, even if your defence does not prevent aggression it will probably limit the damage and impose costs on the aggressor. Countries, like people, seldom commit aggression against the well-defended. However, that presumes the two adversaries have comparable military strength.

If we look at the situation on the Korean peninsula, and the balance of military power, it is clear that South Korea is well-defended against the possibility of aggression from North Korea, but the North cannot defend itself from a US/South Korean attack. South Korea on its own has a military budget perhaps 30 times that of the North, has generally speaking much more advanced and modern equipment (it buys more weapons from the US than even Saudi Arabia) and, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) can field two and a half times more troops (standing army plus reservists) than the North.²¹⁾ Bring in the US and its allies, including especially Japan, and the imbalance is astounding; a combined military budget of roughly \$1,000 billion, between 100 and 1,000 times that of North Korea. Since North Korea cannot rely on defence it needs to put the threat of retaliation as the centrepiece of defence, and that is not a good position to be in. The threat of retaliation could be described as the weak country’s defence mechanism. Obviously this is not of North Korea’s choosing – though

19) Franz-Stefan Gady, "China Commissions New ‘Carrier Killer’ Warship," *Diplomat*, 24 January 2017.

20) Ankit Panda, "Is North Korea Working Toward a ‘Carrier-Killer’ Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile?," *Diplomat*, 18 April 2017.

21) *Hankyoreh*, 6 November 2013, "Defense intelligence director says N. Korea would win in a one-on-one war," *Chosun Ilbo*, 2 May 2017, "Korea Biggest Buyer of American Weapons," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, "Military Balance 2017," 13 February 2017.

commentators often overlook that. For the United States its battles are wars of choice; for its adversaries, North Korea being just one of many, they are wars of necessity. The confrontation with the US is imposed upon them; they may attempt to cope with it in various ways but they cannot evade it. Even partial disarmament, as Iraq and Libya demonstrated, does not necessarily provide escape.

Compellence and deterrence can be misleadingly similar in appearance. They both to a large extent revolve around a threat to take action if the adversary does not conform to a desired requirement. However they are actually very different. Compellence attempts to get the adversary to do something to your benefit and his detriment, such as giving up territory, giving privileged access to resources, or taking sides against a third party. In the case of the US and North Korea it is currently primarily a matter of trying to force North Korea unilaterally to abandon its nascent nuclear deterrent. Deterrence is, of course, mainly a threat to retaliate if you are attacked or your interest infringed upon to an intolerable degree.

However, there is a further complication. Compellence incorporates and subsumes deterrence. The relative strength of the would-be compeller is usually sufficient to deter any aggressive action by the target. The mugger has little to fear from his victim and does not need to take any special action to prevent anything except a pre-emptive strike. In the Korean context the overwhelming strength of the US means that it does not need to take any special measures to prevent a North Korean aggressive attack. Although it claims its military presence on the peninsula, and in the region, and the frequent military exercises are 'defensive' and intended to deter North Korea this is not so. They are actions of compellence not deterrence.

Real deterrence does have an element of compellence but that element is essentially different in that it is negative; the objective is to prevent the other side from doing something. In short, US actions are designed to compel North Korea to disarm (and beyond that to collapse and disintegrate in some way) whereas North Korea seeks to deter the US from attacking.

A further difference between compellence and deterrence is that the latter is necessarily focused on military action (and so can be castigated as belligerent) whereas the former has a range of non-military instruments at its disposal. Economic, diplomatic and psywar tools provide the compelling country with pow-

erful means of applying pressure that can be portrayed as 'peaceful' though they are in fact the exercise of force (often in violation of the norms of international law) in an attempt to make the adversary succumb. Sanctions can be seen as a synecdoche for this bundle of instruments. Sanctions are intended to enfeeble the target and although it is the vulnerable – the children, the poor – who suffer the most they are collateral damage. The purpose is to cause economic distress and pressure on key elements in the society to produce collapse and 'regime change', or what is called in the sanctions literature destabilization.²²⁾

1. Pre-emptive and Preventive Action

Retaliation is usually thought of as occurring *after* an attack but it could conceivably happen before, in the form of a pre-emptive strike. 'Pre-emptive' was not the only part of the English language much abused by George W. Bush but his use of it in respect of the invasion of Iraq has clouded its original meaning. Wikipedia's definition seems as good as any:

A preemptive war is a war that is commenced in an attempt to repel or defeat a perceived imminent offensive or invasion, or to gain a strategic advantage in an impending (allegedly unavoidable) war shortly before that attack materializes.²³⁾

Since there was absolutely no likelihood of Iraq attacking the US, let alone invading it, it is clear that the American attack was not pre-emptive. Premeditated and pretext, but not pre-emptive. Pre-emption again is something that tends to be something that the weak might contemplate but not the strong. Since the Treaty of Westphalia in the mid-17th century war, other than in self-defence, has been frowned upon. Wars still happened of course, and the prohibition never really applied to non-Europeans – the peoples of the Americas, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. This meant that offensive war was often draped in the lineaments of defence, a process which was mirrored in the 20th century habit of renaming Ministries

22) Gary Clyde Hufbauer et al., *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered*, 3rd ed. (Washington DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2007).

23) "Preemptive war," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preemptive_war.

of War as Ministries of Defence. Self-defence was most evident when ‘the other side started it’ and there have been occasions when countries have gone to some length to fabricate false flag events to justify aggression; the Gleiwitz incident which served to justify the German invasion of Poland in 1939, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, which precipitated the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, and the Gulf of Tonkin incident which was used by the US against North Vietnam in 1964 are familiar examples.²⁴⁾ Perhaps George W Bush’s greatest contribution to US imperialism was that his misuse of the word ‘preemptive’ made going to the trouble of concocting false flag events redundant. For the US at least; it is still a necessary tactic for jihadists in Syria.²⁵⁾ Now all that the US has to do is to allege and assert that a foreign adversary has the means and intent to attack America, however implausible that may be, and it is seen as justification for war. The point about the invasion of Iraq, so often overlooked, is that the question of Iraq’s possession of a retaliatory capability in the form of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ was irrelevant to the legality of the war. Many countries possess such weapons, with the US in the lead, but the Charter of the United Nations – the modern manifestation of the Westphalian system – does not regard that as justification for attack.

If Iraq had possessed WMD and was poised to attack the US (not just retaliate against a US attack), then arguably the US might have had a case. Even if Iraq still had the WMD it had theoretically disabled under UN pressure, it was clearly not in a position to attack the US. The claim of pre-emption was therefore bogus. The same situation applies, as we shall see, to North Korea.

A variant of pre-emption is preventive war. This in theory is an important distinction because it is usually considered that while a genuine pre-emptive strike is legitimate, a preventive one is either illegal or at the very least controversial, however ‘sensible’ it may be.

Michael Lind argues strongly that preventive war is illegal, adducing as evidence no less than a US Secretary of State:

24) "Gleiwitz incident," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gleiwitz_incident. "Marco Polo Bridge Incident," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marco_Polo_Bridge_Incident. "Gulf of Tonkin incident," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulf_of_Tonkin_incident.

25) *Huffington Post*, 9 April 2017, "Wag The Dog — How Al Qaeda Played Donald Trump And The American Media," *Die Welt*, 25 June 2017, "Trump’s Red Line."

International law distinguishes between preemptive war, which is legal, and preventive war, which is not. In 1842, following an incursion into U.S. territory by British forces against anti-British Canadian rebels, Secretary of State Daniel Webster made the classic observation that a preemptive attack is justified only when a state can “show a necessity of self-defence, instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation”.²⁶⁾

In 1842 the United States was not the global hegemon it is today and so perhaps gave attention, rather than lip service, to international law.

By contrast, Colin S. Gray writing, significantly, for the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, and in the days of US hegemony, takes a more flexible line.

Preemption is not controversial; legally, morally, or strategically. To preempt means to strike first (or attempt to do so) in the face of an attack that is either already underway or is very credibly imminent. The decision for war has been taken by the enemy

By way of the sharpest contrast, a preventive war is a war of discretion. It differs from preemptive war both in its timing and in its motivation. The preemptor has no choice other than to strike back rapidly; it will probably be too late even to surrender. The preventor, however, chooses to wage war, at least to launch military action, because of its fears for the future should it fail to act now. In other words, the preventor strikes in order to prevent a predicted enemy from changing the balance of power or otherwise behaving in a manner that the preventor would judge to be intolerable.

International law, in the form of the United Nations Charter, recognizes the inherent right of self- defense by states, and it does not oblige a victim state to wait passively to be struck by an aggressor, although it appears to do so-it is a matter of interpretation. In short, preventive action by way of anticipatory self-defense is legal, or legal enough. Understandably, this permissive interpretation of the license granted by the right of self-defense is open to criticism. In effect,

26) Michael Lind, "Preventive Wars: The Antithesis of Realpolitik," *National Interest*, 20 July 2015, Daniel Webster, "British-American Diplomacy The Caroline Case," *The Avalon Project*, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, 28 July 1842.

it means that there is no legal constraint on a state's right to resort to force.²⁷⁾

George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq was neither pre-emptive (there was no immediate danger) nor preventative (Iraq would never have the military strength to attack the US). Whilst the word 'pre-emptive' is invariably used in respect of a non-retaliatory attack by the US on North Korea in fact what is really being talked about is preventive war. And the objective is not the prevention of an aggressive attack on the US, which Pyongyang is in no position to contemplate, but the development of a deterrent against American attack.

For instance in an article about the candidates in the May 2017 president election the Korea Times reported:

All presidential candidates said Thursday that they are opposed to a possible **pre-emptive strike** by the United States on North Korea amid escalating tension on the Korean Peninsula.

In their first televised debate, the contenders stated they would actively discourage President Donald Trump's administration from using a **military option to halt the North's nuclear weapons and missile development** [Emphasis added].²⁸⁾

Since there is no suggestion that the American strike would only take place in anticipation of an imminent North Korea attack, but was intended to halt (i.e. prevent) weapons development this is clearly preventive rather than pre-emptive. The problem with preventive war, as Gay acknowledges, is that if it is deemed acceptably lawful then there are no legal constraints on a state's right to use force. That might be good news for superpowers, but not for the rest of use.

However, there is a further problem. Although North Korea's military strength and strike capability is much greater than Iraq's it is essentially retaliatory and not offensive. The United States is not acting in self-defence, but rather to prevent states from being able to retaliate against attack. Daniel Webster would not have approved of that.

27) Colin S. Gray, *The Implications of Preemptive and Preventive War Doctrines: A Reconsideration*(Strategic Studies Institute, [US} Army War College, 2007).

28) *Korea Times*, 13 April 2017, "Candidates oppose pre-emptive strike."

IV. Predator and Prey – the Role of Context and Relative Strength.

It will be noted that although Webster stresses timing – the threat must be ‘instant’ not some time in an indeterminate future – the key phrase is *self-defence*. But here we encounter a slew of analytical problems. How do we tell, before the outbreak of hostilities, who is attacking and who is defending? Which is predator and which is prey? Even after the event, as we have seen, false flags may mislead us, and a pre-emptive strike, if it is really pre-emptive, is an act of self-defence. The problem is compounded by the fact that the instruments of attack and of retaliation are exactly the same; an ICMB, a bomber, or a rifle can be used for either. Even defence is not quite the separate domain that we might at first sight think it is. A shield is defensive but used in combination with a sword it enhances the latter’s performance. They are, in fact, part of the same weapons system and the Roman soldier, with his short stabbing sword needed to be complemented by a shield. So with missile defense. Its name suggests, and its advocates claim that it is inherently defensive and non-threatening. In reality its purpose is to nullify retaliation from small, ‘rogue’ states that have been attacked or, more importantly to mop up any residual missiles from China or Russia after a first strike.

Back in 2006 Lieber and Press, writing in *Foreign Affairs* noted that:

It will probably soon be possible for the United States to destroy the long-range nuclear arsenals of Russia or China with a first strike...

... the sort of missile defenses that the United States might plausibly deploy would be valuable primarily in an offensive context, not a defensive one -- as an adjunct to a U.S. first-strike capability, not as a standalone shield. If the United States launched a nuclear attack against Russia (or China), the targeted country would be left with a tiny surviving arsenal -- if any at all. At that point, even a relatively modest or inefficient missile-defense system might well be enough to protect against any retaliatory strikes, because the devastated enemy would have so few warheads and decoys left.²⁹⁾

29) Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The Rise of U.S. Nuclear Primacy," *Foreign Affairs* (2006).

Ten years later Kristensen, McKinzie, and Postol, in *the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, claimed that the US nuclear modernisation programme, initiated by Obama and continued by Trump, was intended to pursue that goal. Interestingly they concluded their article with some remarks from President Putin 'talking impromptu to a group of journalists during the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2016':

No matter what we said to our American partners [to curb the production of weaponry], they refused to cooperate with us, they rejected our offers, and continue to do their own thing.

... They rejected everything we had to offer.

... the Iranian threat does not exist, but missile defense systems are continuing to be positioned...

That means we were right when we said that they are lying to us.

Their reasons were not genuine, in reference to the "Iranian nuclear threat." Your people [the populations of the Western alliance] ... do not feel a sense of the impending danger—this is what worries me.

A missile defense system is one element of the whole system of offensive military potential.

It works as part of a whole that includes offensive missile launchers.

One complex blocks, the other launches high precision weapons, the third blocks a potential nuclear strike, and the fourth sends out its own nuclear weapon in response.

This is all designed to be part of one system.

I don't know how this is all going to end.

What I do know is that we will need to defend ourselves.³⁰⁾

Although North Korea, unlike Iran, does have a rudimentary nuclear weapons capability (of uncertain efficacy and reach) it is really no more of a threat than Iran. Both Iran and North Korea have served primarily as a pretext for missile defense, rather than a reason, as the deployment of the THAAD component in

30) Hans M. Kristensen, Matthew McKinzie, and Theodore Postol, "How US nuclear force modernization is undermining strategic stability: The burst-height compensating super-fuze," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 1 March 2017.

South Korea, aimed primarily at China, reminds us.³¹⁾

We are presented a picture by the US government, disseminated to a large degree uncritically by the mainstream media and numerous affiliated experts, that North Korea presents an existential threat to its neighbours and to the United States.³²⁾ In view of that threat, that clear and present danger, the United States has every right to take whatever steps are necessary, and we should not be surprised that 'all options are on the table'.³³⁾ Every time North Korea tests a missile the message is repeated that this proves its irrational belligerence. Missile tests by other countries – the US, India and, of special relevance, South Korea are seldom reported and certainly not in such judgmental fashion.³⁴⁾ There are constant rumours of another nuclear test in the offing and, in response, Trump warns North Korea on nuclear test'.³⁵⁾ The warning, to be sure, is characteristically incoherent – "I would not be happy" – but readers are left in no doubt about the serious danger that such a test presents to the world. With over a 1000 nuclear tests under its belt the United States no longer has any real need to conduct physical tests although there is talk of them resuming under the Trump administration.³⁶⁾ Whilst (atmospheric) nuclear tests in the past have been injurious to humans and the environment, North Korea's underground tests seem to have released no radiation.³⁷⁾ Nevertheless US spokespeople put stress on tests. As Admiral Harry Harris, Commander of US forces in the Pacific put it recently 'North Korea stands out as the only nation to have tested nuclear weapons in this century', a statement which in line with best propaganda practice is true but deliberately misleading.³⁸⁾

31) Tim Beal, "The Deployment of THAAD in Korea and the Struggle over US Global Hegemony," *Journal of Political Criticism*, December 2016.

32) Reich, "Should America be focusing on ISIS when North Korea poses an existential threat?"

33) *Washington Post*, 17 March 2017, "Tillerson says 'all options are on the table' when it comes to North Korea."

34) *Xinhua*, 6 May 2017, "DPRK condemns US test launch of ICBM," *Chosun Ilbo*, 7 April 2017, "Seoul Tests Its Own 800-km Ballistic Missile," *Scoop*, 5 July 2017, "Missiles are Acceptable Everywhere – Except North Korea."

35) *Politico*, 29 April 2017, "Trump warns North Korea on nuclear test."

36) *New York Times*, 27 December 2016, "Rick Perry, as Energy Secretary, May Be Pressed to Resume Nuclear Tests."

37) *Chosun Ilbo*, 15 February 2013, "No Radiation Detected from N.Korea's Nuclear Test."

38) Harry Harris, "Address to the Lowy Institute for International Policy," *US Pacific Command*,

Since North Korea is the only country currently conducting physical tests (as opposed to the subcritical testing³⁹⁾ employed by the US, and perhaps Russia and China) this focus is an obvious ploy to divert attention from the fact that it is nuclear weapons and delivery capability which is the real danger, and the US leads the world in nuclear weapons, as well as overall military power, so much so that a recent article bragged that the US could take on Russia, China, and North Korea at the same time.⁴⁰⁾

The balance of military power between the US and its 'allies' (the imperial alliance structure is a major part of American power) scarcely needs elaboration or documentation.⁴¹⁾ As noted above, the military budget of the US alliance system is between 100 and 1000 times that of North Korea.⁴²⁾ The portrayal of North Korea as a threat to the US is not merely wrong; it is preposterously and diametrically at variance with reality. And yet it is widely believed. That is mainly due to omnipresent and repetitive propaganda – and as Harold Pinter pointed out in his Nobel lecture, the 'United States is without doubt the greatest show on the road' in that respect.⁴³⁾ However, the going is made easier for the propaganda by the intrinsic difficulty of distinguishing between the two types of threat – that of attack and that of self-defence. Aggression, defence, and retaliation are conceptually different, but they all use the same repertoire of instruments, and even sequence offers no clear guide since defensive pre-emption can precede unprovoked aggression.

The key, of course, is context but that can be problematic and contested. The discussion above about America's first strike potential is one example of context, history affords another.⁴⁴⁾ However few people have the time or expertise to make

14 December 2016.

39) Frank von Hippel, "Subcritical experiments," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 14 December 2012.

40) Robert Farley, "Could America Win a War Against Russia and China at the Same Time?" *National Interest*, 3 February 2017.

41) Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Once and Future Superpower," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2016.

42) *NK News*, 13 January 2016, "The myth of the North Korean threat," 38 *North*, 18 July 2017, "Pyongyang's Construction Boom: Is North Korea Beating Sanctions?"

43) Harold Pinter, "Art, Truth and Politics," *The Nation*, 7 December 2005.

44) *Counterpunch*, 8 May 2017, "History and Hypocrisy: Why the Korean War Matters in the Age of Trump."

a judgement based on context.

Here William of Ockham, the medieval English philosopher who gave us what is called Occam's razor offers a solution.⁴⁵⁾ This uses the principle of parsimony and says of all possible solutions to a problem the simplest and most testable should be preferred. Extravagant and fanciful explanations should be avoided.

In nature there are basically two types of conflict. One is between peers – the fighting of stags during the rutting season for territory and females, and the far more common one of predator and prey. Carnivores survive by eating other, weaker, animals. It is unwise to get side-tracked by morality here – most predators are prey themselves to the stronger and most prey are predators to the weaker. We may have little difficulty in working out which is predator and which is prey when observing lions and wildebeest, or eagles and rabbits; the relationship between nations is more complicated. Empires are perhaps by definition predators but while being ingested by a python offers no benefit to the victim the arithmetic of colonialization is more complex. Some individuals, classes and groups do well and sometimes even the mass of survivors of imperial conquest may benefit from imposed peace. Nevertheless the relationship of predator to prey remains salient. And using Occam's razor the relative strength of the two sides offers a satisfactory solution to determining which is which.

The First World War took place between two sides of roughly equal strength so this was more of a contest between rutting stags than between predator and prey. However most wars, and certainly all of America's wars since 1945 are not like that. To be sure some of those wars, Korea and Vietnam particularly, took place within the near-peer framework of the Cold War but the location – far from America's shores – and the huge disparity in casualties are quite sufficient reason to label them predator and prey conflicts. For instance, to pluck one statistic out of a huge pile, the last time the US lost a fighter plane in to another plane in aerial combat was in 1991; since then the US has wreaked destruction on Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, and Syria.⁴⁶⁾

45) "William of Ockham," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_of_Ockham.

46) Daniel Soar, "The Most Expensive Weapon Ever Built," *London Review of Books*, 30 March 2017.

Sometimes America's actions are camouflaged as 'humanitarian intervention' – Libya and now Syria spring to mind.⁴⁷⁾ In other cases, notably Iraq and North Korea the pretext is that the US is defending itself (and the world in general) from a 'threat'. The eagle has to keep on hunting rabbits because otherwise those fearsome creatures would leap into the air and tear it limb from limb. It is an incredible achievement of American softpower, and its propaganda component, that a portrayal that is in such stark contrast to observable reality is believed not merely by most Americans but by people around the world. How that is achieved is a topic in its own right.

To a large extent the propagandist's task is eased by the fact, as noted, that the instruments of attack and retaliation are the same. Nevertheless the inequality in power between the US and North Korea would seem to make it obvious which is predator and which is prey. Not so. It is freely admitted that the military inequality is so huge that a North Korean attack on the US would be madness, an irrationally suicidal act of self-destruction. And that is the solution, and a very satisfying one; it explains the foolishness of the prey but it also reassures the American citizen that as long as the military gets an exorbitant share of the budget, safety will be assured.⁴⁸⁾ The Yellow Peril is mad and malevolent and should be crushed, but America will prevail.

How do we know that the North Korean government, and specifically at the moment Kim Jong Un is irrational? Well, we have such luminaries as Nikki Haley ("We are not dealing with a rational person") and John McCain ("this crazy fat kid") to tell us.⁴⁹⁾

It is worth pausing to contemplate the argument for a moment.

Take, for instance, this gem from Roger Baker writing for Stratfor which bills itself as a 'realist' geopolitical intelligence platform:

47) Alan J. Kuperman, "Lessons from Libya: How Not to Intervene," *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs(Policy Brief) in Harvard Kennedy School*, September 2013.

48) "Costs of War," Watson Institute for International Studies in Brown University, William D. Hartung, "The Hidden Costs of "National Security";" *TomDispatch*, 25 July 2017.

49) *Korea Times*, 9 March 2017, "N. Korea leader 'not rational person': US diplomat," *The Hill*, 22 March 2017, "McCain calls North Korean leader a 'crazy, fat kid'."

The government in North Korea, according to Washington's logic, may not use the same cost-benefit analysis in assessing its national security that other nations do. Consequently, its leaders may consider the use of nuclear weapons a viable option, even in a first-strike capacity. If North Korea's leadership is crazy, then it may not realize or care that using nuclear weapons would provoke a much larger response and that the country would lose any war it started. If this is an accurate assessment, then the United States has little recourse to shape Pyongyang's behavior short of removing its leader.⁵⁰⁾

Not merely is no evidence produced that Pyongyang does not 'realize' that the US is immensely more powerful and does not 'care' that it would destroy North Korea in a counter-attack but the writer does not even bother to suggest a reason for this act of unsolicited national suicide. Hitler, it will be recalled, has been called irrational and delusional for attacking the Soviet Union when Britain was still in the war and the US was straining at the leash to get in. But he had reasons – he wanted *lebensraum* in the east and the resources of the Soviet Union. Hitler may have miscalculated out of a delusional inability to analyse the situation but he had purpose and certainly cared about the outcome of the war.

Clearly Baker is casting about rather desperately for an excuse for the US attacking North Korea and 'removing its leader' but surely you would have to be a bit crazy to accept his nonsensical construction as serious. Mind you, a dose of racism no doubt helps as well; General Westmoreland was speaking for many when he claimed that "The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does a Westerner. Life is plentiful. Life is cheap in the Orient".⁵¹⁾

Back in the real world we have the judgement of William Perry, who was US Secretary of Defense before the days when 'mad dog'⁵²⁾ was seen as an acceptable sobriquet for such an office holder:

"They won't use them first because it means they will be annihilated," he said, meaning that with the North the nuclear devices are like they are with any other

50) Rodger Baker, "North Korea: A Problem Without a Solution," *Stratfor*, 10 January 2017.

51) *New York Times*, 22 July 2005, "The Westmoreland mind-set."

52) *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 19 January 2013, "Just don't call him Mad Dog."

nuclear power in that they are bound to be the weapons of last resort.⁵³⁾

During my discussions and negotiations with members of the North Korean government, I have found that they are not irrational, nor do they have the objective of achieving martyrdom. Their goals, in order of priority, are: preserving the Kim dynasty, gaining international respect and improving their economy.⁵⁴⁾

The loaded wording ‘preserving the Kim dynasty, gaining international respect’ might be replaced by the sort of phrasing that would be applied to the US, something like ‘ensuring national security and seeking international relationships that recognise Korean interests’. However, nothing surprising here, merely stating things which are logically obvious, but still in stark contrast to the official narrative of martyrdom-seeking irrationality. Significantly Perry was originally a mathematician, an occupation in which logic is highly valued.

The huge disparity in power between the US, and its allies on the one hand, and North Korea on the other is essentially that of predator and prey. That does not mean that the US will necessarily invade North Korea – eagles probably leave a rabbit alone if they are not hungry, or there is more palatable food available – but it could, and indeed conducts frequent military exercises to practise doing that. It has also conducted economic, diplomatic and psychological warfare against North Korea for decades. North Korea has none of these abilities. It cannot even ultimately defend itself against attack because the US would prevail. The only thing it can do is to threaten retaliation. This policy of deterrence, as noted above, is not a good option but merely the best available in the circumstances. Its nuclear arsenal is, as Perry realised, a ‘weapon of last resort’. The US may envisage a first strike capability against Russia or China, and no doubt has it in respect of North Korea, but this ability is clearly beyond the wildest dreams for the Koreans. A North Korea nuclear retaliation against US attack would be, to use the title of Seymour Hersh’s book about Israel, a ‘Samson option’.⁵⁵⁾ Using it would mean destruction.

53) *Korea Times*, 14 March 2017, "Diplomacy only viable option to prevent nuclear war in Korea."

54) *Washington Post*, 6 January 2017, "To confront North Korea, talk first and get tough later."

55) Seymour M. Hersh, *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Random House, 1991).

Whether this is a really valid description for modern Israel is debatable, but it certainly is for North Korea, and countries in a similar predicament. The US has great offensive power, of which we have plenty of evidence, it has presumably great defensive capabilities, although these have not been tested for generations. It also has immense retaliatory power which it can employ with impunity, except to some degree with Russia or China. Any other country would be destroyed with no, or minimal damage to the US. Not so with North Korea; retaliation means destruction.

The implications of this stark and cruel dilemma facing North Korea require further exploration.

V. Deterrence, Perception and Reality

The practice of deterrence is inherently different from defence or offence in another important aspect. It is based on *perception* rather than reality. An invading country needs to have real military capability. Defence also needs to withstand the test of reality. There may be a discrepancy between perception and reality which is revealed by the actual course of events and this may lead to poor decision making. But reality is paramount. Deterrence is a rather different beast. It exists in the future rather than in the present. Deterrence which is used is deterrence which has failed. If North Korea's deterrence does not deter the United States from attack then the actual damage that North Korea can inflict in retaliation is no longer relevant. The deed, the attack, is done and cannot be undone.

The effect of deterrence revolves around the predator's perception. If a mugger decides, on closer inspection, that an intended victim might fight back, then he is likely to go off to find an easier one. This perception has two components – the *capacity* to retaliate and the *willingness* to do so.

In the North Korean case the capacity to retaliate is demonstrated by nuclear and missile tests. If the tiger is made of paper then retaliation holds no fears. Willingness is another matter, derived from persuasion and rhetoric, and that is discussed below. However even capacity in this context is a function of perception. There are innumerable articles spewed out daily on this issue. What is the range

of North Korea's missiles, can they reach Guam or even the US mainland, have the Koreans mastered reentry and miniaturisation technologies, and so forth.⁵⁶⁾ These are important issues but what is usually lacking is a discussion of risk and cost-benefit analysis.

1. Cost-benefit Analysis

This failure is grounded in the myth that North Korea poses an unprovoked threat to the US. If, with Occam's razor and Perryist realism we realise that it is a question of retaliation then the need for risk and cost-benefit analysis become apparent. If the US does not attack North Korea then there is no retaliation. If the US does contemplate attacking North Korea then the risks and costs involved have to be weighed against benefits. The decision has to be situated within the context.

If, for instance, the US were to attack China, say with a first strike, then the risks and costs would be considerable but the benefits, to some fevered minds, might seem immense. The world would be at America's feet, there would be no competitors of comparable economic strength anymore. With North Korea the situation is very different. The risks and costs to the United States itself of direct North Korean retaliation would be relatively minor. There are some 200,000 US citizens in South Korea who would be endangered, along with 100,000 troops in the immediate region. Guam might be lost and San Francisco devastated but the damage would be far less than what China (or especially Russia) could inflict. An invasion of North Korea would encounter protracted guerrilla resistance and might indeed embroil the US in war with China, and perhaps Russia adds another dimension, which needs to be put to one side here; arguably if the US wants

56) Tamir Eshel, "How Capable are North Korean Scud-Based 'Carrier-Killers'?", *Defense Update*, 30 May 2017; David Wright, "North Korea Appears to Launch Missile with 6,700 km Range," *Union of Concerned Scientists*, 3 July 2017; Theodore A. Postol and Markus Schiller, "The North Korean Ballistic Missile Program," *Korea Observer*, Winter 2016; John Schilling, "What is True and Not True About North Korea's Hwasong-14 ICBM: A Technical Evaluation," *38 North*, 10 July 2017; *Washington Post*, 25 July 2017, "North Korea could cross ICBM threshold next year, U.S. officials warn in new assessment."

to precipitate a war with China the Korean peninsula might be the best place because it would automatically bring the formidable military resources of South Korea and Japan into the equation. Leaving that possibility aside and assuming that the US has conquered North Korea without Chinese intervention, what would have been gained? American power would have been demonstrated, an American general would now walk along the banks of the Yalu and the stigma of the Korea War – the first war that the US did not win – might have been exorcised. But these are really slim pickings. The US would then face the difficulty of justifying its military presence on the Korean peninsula and its continued hold on the Korean government in the absence of a North Korea threat. It would also present problems in justifying US bases in Japan, if not to the Japanese government, keen to push forward with remilitarisation and with its eyes on China, but to the Japanese people. Without the perceived North Korean threat the US posture in Asia – Obama's 'pivot' continued by Trump – would be more clearly revealed as containment of China.

In other words the gains are really so slight that, on rational calculation at least, they would not justify even a light risk. That means that North Korea does not need a certain, demonstrated retaliatory capacity to present an effective deterrent. It merely needs some degree of possibility of inflicting unacceptable damage to make a US attack not worth the risk.

2. Vulnerability Gap

However, apart from the possibility that rationality might not prevail in Washington, there is also the danger that North Korea's 'vulnerability gap' might precipitate an attack. There is a gap between the time when progress towards developing a deterrent suggests that success is within reach and the actual attainment of that deterrent. Whilst deterrence is just a remote possibility there is not a pressing incentive to attack; that decision can be left to tomorrow or the next president. When the deterrent is in place it is too late. As Stratfor put it in 2016 'The window for a military option to stem Pyongyang's nuclear program is closing'.⁵⁷⁾ If it is

57) "Assessing the North Korean Hazard," *Stratfor*, 23 May 2016.

perceived in Washington that there a meaningful possibly that North Korea might be able to retaliate with an attack on the US mainland then we can presume that the danger of this particular war is over. North Korea has been able for some time to retaliate at a local level engulfing Seoul in sea of flames and this has been sufficient to deter.⁵⁸⁾ However there are those, such as Republican hawk Lindsey Graham, who brush that aside:

Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) said this week that he supported striking North Korea to stop it from developing the capability to reach the United States with a missile — even if that came at a huge cost for the region.

“It would be terrible, but **the war would be over [in South Korea], it wouldn’t be here,**” Graham said in an interview with NBC [emphasis added].⁵⁹⁾

It is this vulnerability gap which lies behind N.Korean Missile Development Accelerating at Breakneck Speed, a speed which, according to the article has left the South Korean (and presumably American) military stunned.⁶⁰⁾

The role of perception in deterrence is by no means straightforward. Perceptions can be astute but they can also be completely wrong. One side might see things clearly, the other side might be delusional. One interesting example of the complexity of perception is afforded by a discussion by the US rocket expert John Schilling on the story, first floated by the New York Times, that the US was able to hack North Korean missile tests to make them fail.⁶¹⁾ Schilling, and other experts, tended not to attach much credibility to the claim, but then he developed the idea by discussing the best way of hacking tests if that could be done.⁶²⁾ The

58) KCNA, 27 February 2011, "KPA Mission Statement on US-S. Korea Joint Military Exercises."

59) *Washington Post*, 21 April 2017, "Twenty-five million reasons the U.S. hasn't struck North Korea."

60) *Chosun Ilbo*, 16 May 2017, "N.Korean Missile Development Accelerating at Breakneck Speed."

61) John Schilling, "How to Hack and Not Hack a Missile," *38 North*, 21 April 2017. David E Sanger and William J. Broad, *New York Times*, 4 March 2017, "Trump Inherits a Secret Cyberwar Against North Korean Missiles."

62) Markus Schiller and Peter Hayes, "Could Cyber Attacks defeat North Korean Missile Tests?" *NAPSNet Policy Forum*, 6 March 2017; Jeffery Lewis, "Is the United States Really Blowing Up North Korea's Missiles?" *Foreign Policy*, 19 April 2017.

tests would appear to succeed but would be infected in such a way that they would fail in war.

But the ideal outcome, as alluded to earlier, would be for North Korea to believe that its missiles have passed all tests when they instead harbor some defect that will prove crippling in operation. Such a deception cannot be maintained forever; the North will eventually reach the point of highly realistic operational tests. But, while it lasts, the results will necessarily appear to us as they are made to appear to Pyongyang, as a successful test series.⁶³⁾

Thus both sides are deceived. Both sides have false perceptions.

North Korean ability to retaliate, either with conventional or nuclear weapons is one thing, the willingness to do so is another. We can imagine a range of American attacks, from the shooting down of a test missile, or a satellite carrier rocket, through surgical bombing raids, decapitation commando raids on to all-out invasion. A successful first nuclear strike would leave North Korea unable to retaliate but all the other options leave that open. That, of course, presents Pyongyang with a dreadful dilemma. Retaliation would lead to further American action and ultimately destruction of the country. Failure to retaliate would invalidate deterrence and may well embolden the enemy, again leading to destruction.

For deterrence to work the enemy must perceive that retaliation is pre-determined and irreversible.

3. Rhetoric of Confrontation – Bluff, Bluster, Bellicosity and the Madman Theory

Nixon's Madman theory is often invoked here, but the fit is not a good one. The North Korean connection is derived from an academic article by Denny Roy in 1994, 'North Korea and the 'Madman' Theory'. Roy quotes Nixon's instructions to his aide, H R Haldeman:

63) Schilling, "How to Hack and Not Hack a Missile."

I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, For God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communists. We can't restrain him when he's angry - and he has his hand on the nuclear button.⁶⁴⁾

Nixon's gambit, as we know, didn't work: 'Nixon's bluff was a failure; even when he invaded Cambodia, Moscow never questioned his sanity.'⁶⁵⁾ And the North Vietnamese knew they had his measure. The invasion of Cambodia might have been foolish, fruitless and immoral – half a million victims – but it wasn't irrational and it certainly wasn't dangerous for the US.⁶⁶⁾ It was, in fact, about compellence rather than deterrence, and the difference is crucial. Compellence is a tactic used by the strong against the weak and if it does not work then the would-be compeller can walk away. With a loss of face, to be sure, and probably a diminution in bargaining power against this and other adversaries, but not covered in blood. Deterrence, in the context here of the prey trying to frighten off the predator is quite another matter. There is no easy turning back.

The 'Madman Theory' is often brought up to explain, and sometimes exonerate, Donald Trump's unpredictability, of which he seems inordinately proud, impulsiveness and strategic incoherence.⁶⁷⁾ Strange as it would have seemed just a few years back, the comparison with his predecessor is flattering to Nixon.⁶⁸⁾

64) Denny Roy, "North Korea and the 'Madman' Theory," *Security Dialogue* 25, no.3 (1994).

65) Clinton Ehrlich, "The Kremlin Really Believes That Hillary Wants to Start a War With Russia," *Foreign Policy*, 7 September 2016.

66) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 2017, "Fury in Cambodia as US asks to be paid back hundreds of millions in war debts."

67) *Washington Post*, 15 December 2016, "How might Nixon's 'madman theory' apply to Trump?" *Washington Post*, 23 February 2017, "Trump and the 'madman theory'," *Washington Post*, 6 December 2016, "Trump's one consistent policy: Chaos."

68) Max Boot, "Is Trump's Axis of Adults Beating Down the Cabal of Crazies?," *Foreign Policy*, 18 April 2017.

4. Predictability, Resolve and Ambiguity

But none of this is applicable to North Korea. The notion of North Korean unpredictability, often couched in personalised terms – Kim Jong Un being unpredictable – owes more to American fantasies rather than historical realities. In fact, North Korean deterrence is bedded in predictability and ambiguity.⁶⁹⁾ The predictability relates to willingness and the ambiguity to capability.

By its nature deterrence depends on predictability. Any wavering of resolve is seen as weakness and may lead to attack. For a country confronted by weaker adversaries predictable deterrence poses little problem. The US did have an issue presenting its willingness to take military action against the Soviet Union as credible – hence the Madman Theory – but in general the question doesn't arise. No country dare attack it because retaliation would be both overwhelming and would put the US in no danger. There is no reason to doubt America's willingness to retaliate. For North Korea the situation is very different. Since deterrence would result in destruction the credibility of the willingness to retaliate has to be worked upon. Americans may interpret this resolve as irrational and crazy but it is doubtful if it is seen in this way in Pyongyang. North Korea is faced with two dreadful alternatives – surrender or deterrence (although the *Byungjin* policy, not discussed here, aims to use the lower cost of nuclear deterrence to cut military spending in order to promote economic growth⁷⁰⁾). Surrender, whose likely consequences are seldom addressed, would be widely considered devastating. The top leadership would expect to be executed (think Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gadhafi) and the higher echelons of party, military and the bureaucracy to be imprisoned. Unemployment would surge and even those who kept a job would be demoted under incoming South Koreans. Given the very poor treatment of the small number of North Koreans living in the South it is to be expected that the 25 million Northerners

69) *NK News*, 29 March 2016, "Misconceptions about North Korea's nuclear ambitions."

70) Georgiy D. Toloraya, "Byungjin vs the Sanctions Regime: Which Works Better?," *38 North*, 20 October 2016; *NK Pro*, 30 November 2016, "Experts agree: North Korea will continue to develop its economy, nuclear capability."; Alexander Mercouris, "The truth about North Korea: it's booming," *The Duran*, 4 July 2017; Feron, "Pyongyang's Construction Boom: Is North Korea Beating Sanctions?"

in a peninsula unified under Seoul would face a distressing fate. The unwillingness of South Korea to allow ‘defectors’ to return to the North, and the publicity given in the North to those that manage it is suggestive.⁷¹⁾ Despite recent unconvincing articles imagining how large segments of the North Korean elite might be bribed or subverted into surrender it seems likely that the consequences of a takeover would be dire for most North Koreans, at least for a considerable period (east German living standards are still way below those in the west nearly three decades later), and that this is recognised in North Korea.⁷²⁾ If surrender is not an option that leaves deterrence.

As for ambiguity, there are three types that concern us here— that inherent in weapons systems, and those emanating from the US and from North Korea. All technology is vulnerable to failure and weapons systems used in combat, especially for the first time, are fraught with uncertainty. What works in tests might not work in operational conditions for a variety of reasons including human error, inclement weather (remember the debacle of Jimmy Carter’s rescue attempt in Iran⁷³⁾), and of course enemy action. The Patriot missile, for instance, was extensively tested but it was later revealed that when it was used in the Gulf War that only 9% of engagements with Scud missiles were definitely successful.⁷⁴⁾ The efficacy of North Korea’s deterrent is inherently uncertain. However, as noted earlier, North Korea in itself is a low-value, high-risk target which lowers the probability threshold for rational assessment; the chances of a North Korean ICBM taking out an American city can be quite low for it still to be an effective deterrent.

71) *Hankyoreh*, 14 June 2017, "North Korean defector desperately wants to go home, but is facing possible arrest."; *New York Times*, 18 July 2017, "Defector to South Korea Who Became a Celebrity Resurfaces in the North."; *Korea Times*, 26 July 2017, "N. Koreans seeking to return home pin hopes on Moon government."

72) *Mail Online*, 12 May 2017, "Could \$175bn pay for the removal of Kim Jong-un? Huge bribes of \$30m may be enough to convince North Korea's top officials to abandon their dictator, says expert."; Tom Malinowski, "How to Take Down Kim Jong Un," *Politico*, 24 July 2017.

73) Mark Bowden, "The Desert One Debacle," *The Atlantic*, May 2006.

74) "mim-104 patriot," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/weapons/patriot.html>.

5. Rhetoric of Deterrence, Rhetoric of Compellence

Beyond this mechanical realm we have the public rhetoric of the participants. Here we come to a curiosity. Although we can expect North Korea to exaggerate its military capacity in order to deter there was one intriguing incident in April 2017 when a missile test failed, deliberately so it was suggested to take the winds out of Trump's threatening 'armada'.⁷⁵⁾ Whether that was so, in general North Korea will naturally emphasize its retaliatory capability. However there are two rather contradictory messages from America. There are those who, for reasons of imperial geopolitics argue that an invasion of North Korea is desirable and feasible. They claim that North Korea is relatively easily defeatable, that China would not intervene and that the pacification that has not been achieved in Afghanistan for example would be successful in Korea.⁷⁶⁾ At the same time the far louder voice is that of the military-industrial complex, broadly defined to include not merely arms manufactures and generals, but politicians seeking military investment in their electorates, the security industry think tanks, and the journalists and experts who make a living warning American taxpayers what dire threats they face from the most unlikely quarters, including often at the top of the list, North Korea.⁷⁷⁾

6. Conditionality, and the Mischief of Messengers

North Korea rhetoric is often misconstrued, deliberately or through lack of attention, as belligerent and bellicose.⁷⁸⁾ The rhetoric of deterrence and belligerence sounds very much the same, though the motivation is different. Deterrence (and compellence for that matter) has the crucial element of *conditionality*. North Korea will retaliate if it is attacked, or pre-emptively if an attack is considered imminent. This conditionality is a common feature of North Korean statements, such as this one.

75) *Korea Times*, 17 April 2017, "North Korea's failed missile launch premeditated?"

76) Bruce W. Bennett and Jennifer Lind, "The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements," *International Security* 36, no.2 (2011).

77) Yoon and Cho, "60% of Americans Feel Threatened by N.Korean Nukes."

78) *Independent*, 24 April 2017, "Donald Trump attacks North Korea's 'belligerence'," *Chosun Ilbo*, 5 April 2013, "N.Korea Keeps Up the Bellicose Rhetoric."

If the U.S. ignites a war of aggression against the DPRK by conventional forces, it will fight it by conventional forces of its style, if the former unleashes a nuclear war against the latter, it will counter it through its own nuclear strikes, and if the former tries to bring down the latter through a cyber warfare, it will react to it with its own preeminent cyber warfare and will thus bring earlier the final ruin of the U.S. This is a decisive option of the DPRK [Emphasis added].⁷⁹⁾

This could no doubt be phrased better, and the claim that the North Korean counterattack will bring about ‘final ruin of the U.S.’ is hyperbolic, but the meaning is clear. The intention is to deter and the motivation is to preserve peace and avoid war. Nothing surprising in that given North Korea’s weakness; peace with the United States has the highest priority. But not peace at the price of surrender which would be pointless. The Latin phrase *Si vis pacem, para bellum*, ‘If you want peace, prepare for war’ is often inappropriately quoted, for instance by Mitt Romney, as camouflage for compellence and enriching the military-industrial complex.⁸⁰⁾ However, for prey attempting to deter a predator the quotation is apt. North Korea has frequently proposed a peace treaty with the US but it has been rebuffed, it has engaged in negotiations and they have not borne fruit. In the circumstances the best way to keep the US at bay is to threaten retaliation.⁸¹⁾

Leaving aside North Korea’s poor communications ability (due to a large degree to lack of resources⁸²⁾) conditionality itself offers plenty of scope for obfuscation in the foreign media. ‘If’ may be a word pregnant with meaning, transforming a sentence from saying one thing into something diametrically different, but it is a very small word, easily overlooked, and easily hidden. Frequently the conditionality is correctly quoted in an article, upholding the standards of journalism schools, but the heading will lead the unwary reader to overlook the ‘if’ lurking further down, buried in some indigestible North Korean prose. Sometimes there

79) KCNA, 4 February 2015, "U.S. Imperialists Will Face Final Doom: DPRK NDC."

80) *Wall Street Journal*, 10 November 2011, "I Won't Let Iran Get Nukes."

81) KCNA, 11 January 2011, "Rodong Sinmun Calls for Confidence-building between DPRK and US," Gregory Elich, "The Struggle for a Korean Peace Treaty," *Counterpunch*, 19 August 2013.

82) Martin Weiser, "Translation in Isolation: The Rare, the Bad, and the Weird " *Sino NK*, 6 July 2017.

is little attempt even at burying. For instance, here is the heading of a story from CBS, with its accompanying photograph of a military parade in Pyongyang to re-inforce the message of North Korean threatening belligerence⁸³):



North Korea threatens nuclear war ahead of Trump meeting with U.N. Security Council

And here is the very first line:

North Korea declared in a series of statements Saturday that “U.S. muscle-flexing can never browbeat DPRK,” threatening “a nuclear war” against the U.S. **if** it is attacked [Emphasis added].

This device works well because most Americans, when they read print media, seldom get beyond the headlines.⁸⁴)

83) CBS, 22 April 2017, "North Korea threatens nuclear war ahead of Trump meeting with U.N. Security Council."

84) *Washington Post*, 19 March 2014, "Americans read headlines. And not much else."

Rhetoric in this context may be considered to be not merely words but actions that carry meaning. Thus we have, on the one side, the US-led military exercises practising war, in various forms from amphibious assaults to Special Forces raids and on the other North Korea's nuclear and missile tests. These activities have other, practical functions as well of course. The military exercises provide practice and training, profit for the military-industrial complex, raise tension on the peninsula, which is useful for the US containment of China, and force the North Korea government to divert resources from the economy and social services to defence. The North's missile and nuclear tests are a necessary part of the development programme, a point often overlooked by commentators focused on the message.

One problem, especially for North Korea, is that the sender's intended message may be interpreted differently by the receiver. Or to expand, since the American public gets its messages from North Korea not directly (who reads KCNA?) but mediated through the media with guidance from officials if that be needed then the intended message can be distorted or even inverted. Missiles and nuclear tests which are intended to deter war are portrayed as threatening war.

7. Posturing and Sabre-rattling

These North Korean messaging actions are often characterised, deprecatingly, as posturing or sabre-rattling.

It is bad tactics to threaten a showdown over something which is far more important, even existential to the adversary than to you. The Trump administration made this mistake in its first weeks in respect of China. Firstly Tillerson threatened military action if China sent vessels to its islands in the South China Sea, then Trump took a phone call, on whose initiative is unclear, from the Taiwan leader Tsai Ing-wen and subsequently said that he was reconsidering the 'One China Policy' that had governed US-China relations since the 1970s.⁸⁵ The South China Sea is vitally important to China, being a choke point where much of its foreign

85) *Reuters*, 14 January 2017, "Trump team struggles for cohesion on tougher China policy," *Washington Post*, 3 December 2016, "Trump speaks with Taiwanese president, a major break with decades of U.S. policy on China," *Washington Post*, 12 December 2016, "Trump draws rebukes after saying U.S. isn't bound by One China policy."

trade can be interdicted, and its submarine's access to the deep waters of the Pacific blocked by the US in a conflict.⁸⁶⁾ The issue of Taiwan is central to the issue of Chinese sovereignty and no government in Beijing, of whatever complexion would relinquish its claim that Taiwan is legally an integral part of China (ironically Japan was forced to return Taiwan to China after the war precisely because the US government considered it Chinese territory). Trump backed down. As Hugh White, the Australian strategist scathingly put it these 'rookie blunders' left the US looking weak.⁸⁷⁾

The same has happened in respect of North Korea because what the US was demanding – the unilateral nuclear disarmament of the DPRK – had both specific and more general geopolitical reasons – but they were not of pressing, immediate importance to Washington. Disarmament on the terms demanded would probably lead to the destruction of the North Korean state. The *Guardian*, as is its wont, got things quite the wrong way round in its headline Trump's North Korea sabre-rattling has a flaw: Kim Jong-un has nothing to lose. In fact, whilst Trump had not much to gain, Kim Jong Un (and North Korea) had everything to lose.⁸⁸⁾

Here again we can come back to the distinction between compellence and deterrence. Threats in compellence have to be carefully calibrated to take cognisance not merely of the relative strength of the two adversaries but, crucially, the importance of the particular issue to them. If the US makes compellence threats which are rebuffed by the adversary it has the choice between backing down and taking action. If the other side cannot retaliate then military action, however ultimately unproductive or counterproductive at least avoids the loss of face. However if the adversary can retaliate – and military action is not merely a matter of presidential diktat but also requires the agreement, however grudging, of the military elite – then pride will probably have to be swallowed. Trump has climbed down so often, both in foreign affairs and domestic politics, that he has been labelled the Backdown President.⁸⁹⁾

86) *Zoom in Korea*, 16 August 2016, "Shenanigans in the South China Sea – Implications for Korea."

87) *South China Morning Post*, 17 January 2017, "With their threats to China, Trump and Tillerson are making rookie blunders that will only hurt US credibility."

88) *Guardian*, 16 April 2017, "Trump's North Korea sabre-rattling has a flaw: Kim Jong-un has nothing to lose."

89) *Washington Post*, 25 April 2017, "Dealmaker in Chief? More like the Backdown President."

Deterrence takes place in another universe. Here posturing does not have to be put into action unless the deterrence has failed, in which case the question of credibility has been overtaken by events and is no longer relevant. Kim Jong Un must necessarily rattle his sabre as vigorously as possible. The smaller the sabre the more it has to be rattled; speaking softly and carrying a big stick as Theodore Roosevelt put it, explicitly contrasting it with bluster, is the prerogative of the major power bullying its weaker neighbours.

Many commentators make the mistake of false equivalence, of equating Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un in terms of bluster, belligerence, and unpredictability but this is missing the point. Strong and weak, predator and prey, global empire and small nation state in a divided land, compellence and deterrence, all have their specific logic, drivers and constraints. Personality of the protagonists plays a part – and even though we surely know much more about Trump than Kim he is still a mystery – but it is essential to understand the situational and strategic factors. After all, despite all the hullabaloo Trump's foreign policy is pretty much the same as Obama's, not least in respect of Korea, and Kim Jong Un follows in the footsteps of his father and grandfather.⁹⁰⁾ Both the US and North Korea use threat and bluster, posturing and brinkmanship. We might attempt to judge the effectiveness of the tactics, but any assessment must be based on a recognition that the strategic drivers for the two parties are very different. US threats are part of a compellence strategy, while North Korea's are for deterrence. North Korea can act with more resolve because the issues are existential and the choices may seem to be either submission or defiance, whereas for the US the confrontation with North Korea is not merely but part of a wider strategy for preserving global hegemony but is of no great *immediate* consequence. The US has many options but all of them have wider ramifications; North Korea has very limited options but they don't carry with them the complexities of global empire. Many commentators, both journalist and academic, fail to grasp these fundamental differences. For instance Martin Weiser, in a discussion of Van Johnson's strangely titled book *Rival Reputations: Coercion and Credibility in U.S.-North Korea Relations* argues, apparently seriously and with the dissociation from observable reality that requires many years of academic study, that:

90) *Washington Post*, 29 April 2017, "Trump's North Korea policy sounds a lot like Obama's 'strategic patience'."

Several books have already covered the violent history of US-North Korean relations, with some recent works arguing for a certain rationality to how North Korea applies military force. Van Jackson follows the same line of logic, which is not surprising for someone who served as senior country director for Korea under the US Secretary of Defense. Jackson's core argument is that deterrence has not worked. The US, he argues, has continuously backed down and never retaliated, thus inviting future violence by North Korea.⁹¹⁾

Now it is true that the US government has long claimed that its actions on the Korean peninsula are to deter aggression, and purely defensive – as they are elsewhere in the world, for example the shooting down of a Syrian jet over Syria as an act of ‘collective self-defense’ – but to accept this in defiance of the obvious explanation requires considerable willing suspension of critical thought.⁹²⁾ Occam's razor and context makes it clear that these are measures of compellence, rather than defense

VI. The diplomacy Illusion

Military action is often contrasted with something called ‘diplomacy’. Sometimes this is part of the official narrative. US Secretary of State Tillerson claims that diplomatic dialogue is his preference: “Obviously, that [dialogue] would be the way we would like to solve this”.⁹³⁾ Unless he has shares in Lockheed Martin that preference makes absolute sense and there is no reason to disbelieve him. Objectives are achieved without imperilling US lives. For many people however the call for diplomacy and ‘engagement’ is an expression of a probably well-intentioned but

91) *Sino NK*, 19 June 2017, "A Roundtable Review of Van Jackson's Rival Reputations: Coercion and Credibility in U.S.-North Korea Relations," Van Jackson, *Rival Reputations: Coercion and Credibility in US-North Korea Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

92) *Korea Times*, 7 March 2016, "Largest ever Korea-US military drill kicks off today.," *NK News*, 15 September 2016, "War Games: who is responsible for tension on the Korean peninsula?," *Washington Post*, 18 June 2017, "U.S. aircraft shoots down a Syrian government jet over northern Syria, Pentagon says."

93) *Hankyoreh*, 29 April 2017, "US Secretary of State alludes to direct dialogue with North Korea."

mistaken belief that this is a matter of war and peace; Selig Harrison ‘Proponent of Engagement and Peace’ was a prominent advocate.⁹⁴⁾ But ‘diplomacy’ may not mean peace; it may be war by another means. The Tillersons see this as a matter winning war without fighting – ‘The greatest victory is that which requires no battle’- which is after all one of Sun Zi’s most famous ideas.⁹⁵⁾

Diplomatic negotiations come in a variety of forms. They may entail discussions between friendly countries of roughly equal status (Australia and New Zealand) or very unequal power (US and South Korea) and the outcomes will probably reflect relative power but remain amicable. The Brexit negotiations may not be particularly amicable but no one expects them to result in war. Then there are negotiations between near-peer adversaries – say the US and Russia or US and China. However what is under examination here are negotiations between adversaries of hugely disproportionate power, the US and North Korea, and this example of diplomacy is usually labelled ‘coercive diplomacy’. All negotiations involve some degree of coercion and resistance, of compromise, of give and take but that between predator and prey – the US and North Korea, or Iran, or pre-invasion Iraq – have a special quality. These are part of a strategy of compellence, and that as we have seen entails not merely the threat of war but other forms of force and compulsion such as sanctions.

This is not to say that negotiations between the US and North Korea have to be coercive, although they always have been, or that the US always gets its way, since it clearly doesn’t. But these negotiations are inherently different from the Brexit type. This is not so much because of the relative strength of the two parties – though that is important – but that the US is demanding concessions without offering any in return. The Strategic Arms Limitations Treaties (START) between the US and the Soviet Union, and then with the Russian Federation, involved concessions on both sides. The negotiations that the US has had with North Korea in the past, and what it envisages might happen in the future if pre-conditions are met, involves, in American eyes at least, concessions only on the North Korean side – unilateral nuclear disarmament. The subject of US-NK nego-

94) *Zoom in Korea*, 4 January 2017, "Selig Harrison, Proponent of Engagement and Peace, Dies at Age 89."

95) Eric Jackson, "Sun Tzu's 31 Best Pieces Of Leadership Advice," *Forbes*, 23 May 2014.

tiations and a possible resolution (or more likely quasi-resolution) is a complex issue, of which most articles do not scratch the surface, but a brief quotation from an official, though confusingly written or translated, DPRK statement makes evident how far apart the sides are:

[The DPRK] will not use nuclear weapons first, unless the hostile forces violate our sovereignty with their own nuclear weapons, and it will faithfully observe its commitments to nuclear non-proliferation, which it has made before the international community, and strive for global denuclearization.....

The denuclearization being called for by the DPRK is the denuclearization of the whole Korean peninsula and this includes the dismantlement of nukes in south Korea and its vicinity.....

Firstly, all the nuclear weapons should be opened to public, first of all, which the U.S. has neither acknowledged nor denied after bringing them to south Korea. Secondly, all the nukes and their bases should be dismantled and verified in the eyes of the world public.

Thirdly, the U.S. should ensure that it would never bring again the nuclear strike means to south Korea, which the U.S. has frequently deployed on the Korean peninsula and in its vicinity.

Fourthly, it should commit itself to neither intimidating the DPRK with nukes or through an act of nuclear war nor using nukes against the DPRK in any case.

Fifthly, the withdrawal of the U.S. troops holding the right to use nukes from south Korea should be declared.⁹⁶⁾

Sadly, the best recent statement of the US position was given by South Korean President Moon Jae-on his way to his June 2017 summit with President Trump. The South Korean president not merely sees with American eyes, but is more lucid than his famously incoherent hegemon:

"I believe (the North) must at least promise to a nuclear freeze for us to start taking serious (discussions) for its denuclearization. In that sense, its nuclear freeze will be the entrance and nuclear dismantlement the exit," Moon told reporters

96) *KCNA*, 6 July 2016, "DPRK Government Denounces U.S., S. Korea's Sophism about "Denuclearization of North"."

aboard his official aircraft en route to Washington:

"Each step in the process must be completely verified before we will be able to move onto the next," he added. "South Korea and the U.S. should discuss whether we should provide something in accordance with the freeze and what we can provide if we do; and if Pyongyang takes the next steps, then what else we can provide; and if it carries out the final stage of denuclearization such as destroying its nuclear weapons and these are all verified, what we can do finally."⁹⁷⁾

In the US-ROK Joint Statement it was declared that:

They affirmed their commitment to fully implement existing sanctions and impose new measures designed to apply maximum pressure on North Korea to compel Pyongyang to cease its provocative actions and return to sincere and constructive talks.⁹⁸⁾

Clearly this is not diplomacy *a la Brexit*, but a policy of compellence –using force (sanctions) and threatening further force (military action) to attempt to pressure the other side to accede to exorbitant demands. In the Korean case the demand is unilateral nuclear disarmament which would probably lead (though not necessarily since this again is a complex issue) to the destruction of the North Korean state.

VII. Hegemony and Its Hysterias

Why the hysteria and hyperbole about North Korea? Why is its deterrent against American attack recast as an existential threat to the US as if North Korea were some sort of national suicide bomber? If there is no attack there is no retaliation. If the US adopted a peaceful, non-threatening policy towards North Korea the danger of war would wither away. North Korea's nuclear disarmament is irrelevant. A number of countries could, in theory, attack the US with nuclear missiles; Russia

97) *Chosun Ilbo*, 30 June 2017, "Moon Says Talks with N.Korea Depend on Nuclear Freeze."

98) *Korea Times*, 30 June 2017, "Joint statement of Presidents of South Korea and the United States ."

and China certainly, India perhaps. And Britain which is, after all, the only country to have mounted an attack on the United States with the burning of Washington in 1812.⁹⁹⁾ But no one for a moment thinks that Britain would do such a thing. Partly this is because of their shared history but also because of two reasons that are common to Britain and North Korea (and every other country for that matter). No advantage would be gained and the retribution would be terrible. If Britain destroyed New York, or Washington (again), or if in a few years' time North Korea laid waste to San Francisco, what then? What would be achieved? The idea is preposterous. Why, then, is the myth of a North Korean threat so constantly and assiduously cultivated? An explanation can be located at three levels – the bilateral, the regional, and the global.

1. The Bilateral Dimension

The Korea War was the first war that the United States did not win. Objectively it was not a defeat such as in Vietnam where the Vietnamese, principally on their own, evicted the US from the whole of the country. In Korea the US basically held on to the status quo – the southern part of the country inherited from the Japanese – despite massive Chinese intervention. But it was the first such setback, and North Korea's resilient defiance ever since, despite generations of US sanctions and threats, surely rankles. To destroy North Korea would be sweet revenge, both for the US and large swathes of the South Korean military and civilian elite.

2. The Regional Dimension

On a broader scale the 'North Korean threat' provides the capstone for the US military and political architecture in East Asia whose primary function is now the containment of China. The original division of the Korean peninsula in 1945 was driven by the strategy of containing the Soviet Union, but since then Russia has become the minor, though still important player in this theatre. The continued political subservience of Japan plays an important role though there is a latent con-

99) Jesse Greenspan, "The British Burn Washington, D.C., 200 Years Ago," *History.com*, 22 August 2014.

tradition between that and the US encouragement of Japanese remilitarisation. 'Containment', although a much used word, is inadequate because the ultimate strategic objective is the enfeeblement, probably through fragmentation or a first (nuclear) strike. The deployment of THAAD in South Korea, and X-band radar on its own in Japan, is a component of a first strike capability. In the meantime the need for a North Korean threat poses a dilemma for the US. Removal of that 'threat', either through military action or through a genuine peace process, would make it difficult to justify the US military presence, and its concomitant political dominance, in South Korea and to a lesser extent in Japan. South Korea has no particular animus against China, which is why the THAAD deployment had to be disguised as a protection against North Korea. Japan is different because China is seen as the only rival in Asia and the conservative elite needs no persuasion to join an anti-China coalition even if, at the moment, in a subordinate position.

3. The Global Dimension

Finally there is the purely global dimension. North Korea poses no direct military threat to the US no matter how many nuclear ICBMs it is able to build. The military preponderance of the US, and its geographical protection, will always put any North Korean attack out of the question. Even the growing deterrent capability of North Korea is not really much of a problem because apart from the emotional driver of the bilateral history the regional strategic considerations militate against an attack. Apart from the costs of conventional and possible nuclear retaliation, the burden of pacification (the war in Afghanistan has been going on for 16 years now) the military advantages of taking US power up to the borders of China (and Russia) would be nugatory and the erosion of political leverage in the absence of the North Korea threat would be considerable. The real danger to the US is the *example* that North Korea might give to other countries around the world. If North Korea, by developing a nuclear deterrent, can force the US into peaceful coexistence then others might follow that path. As Gregory Elich has pointed out:

The reason why stopping North Korea's nuclear and long-range missile program is a priority for the Trump administration is not because it truly believes North

Korea will launch an ICBM at the United States. Rather, it's that if North Korea succeeds in establishing an effective nuclear deterrent, then this could have serious geopolitical implications for U.S. policy, as other targeted nations may follow North Korea's example to ensure their survival.¹⁰⁰⁾

This is what the concern over 'proliferation' is really about. Although the US has been very successful in portraying non-proliferation as a disinterested strategy to preserve global peace it is essentially designed to preserve nuclear monopoly and to deny deterrence to independent states and those that might wish to join them. As Waltz amongst others has pointed out the acquisition of nuclear weapons by small states in confrontation with powerful (nuclear) states is peace-enhancing.¹⁰¹⁾ Whether the North Korean example would really spread and erode America's global military dominance is unclear but it is indubitably a concern. There is a deep irony at play here given the number of UN Security Council resolutions condemning North Korea and imposing sanctions the US has been able to orchestrate, clearly in violation of the UN Charter.¹⁰²⁾ North Korea is no revolutionary state, such as the early Soviet Union or Maoist China. On the contrary, it is actually the embodiment of the UN Charter with its commitment to the equal sovereignty of independent states, however weak or strong.¹⁰³⁾ Despite the verbiage about the UN and international law this is not an idea with which the United States has much sympathy.

These three levels of American angst about North Korea, and the strategic concerns and imperatives that are generated, are both inter-related and somewhat at variance with each other. At this stage, with the successful test of North Korea's threshold ICBM Hwasong-14 it could be argued that the US faces three strategic alternatives.¹⁰⁴⁾

100) *Zoom in Korea*, 29 June 2017, "North Korea's Fast Track Missile Development: How Far It's Come and Why it Has the U.S. on Edge."

101) Kenneth N. Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb," *Foreign Affairs* (2012).

102) Tim Beal, "The United Nations and the North Korean missile and nuclear tests " *NZ Journal of Asian Studies* 9, no.2 (2007).

103) KCNA, 25 November 2004, "Respect for Sovereignty, Basic Requisite to Building New World."

104) *Washington Post*, 4 July 2017, "North Korea missile launch marks a direct challenge to Trump administration."

VIII. America's Three Strategic Options

The first is war, or rather war with China. The dangers of an invasion of North Korea, and the political problems that would ensue are such that it only makes sense in the context of deciding that now is the time to take out China. American military and civilian think tanks have been mulling over conflict with China for some time so the groundwork is laid.¹⁰⁵⁾ The consequences of a US war against China would be dreadful, and need no elaboration here. Fortunately it is unlikely that the Trump administration has the strategic fortitude to embark on that.

The second alternative is peace. That would involve accepting North Korea's nuclear deterrent, though negotiations might put constraints on that.¹⁰⁶⁾ But that leaves the problem of the damage to America's non-proliferation strategy. The smart solution would be 'if you can't beat 'em, get them to join you.' In this strategy the US would accept North Korea's deterrent but also *reverse* its hostility policy, moving quickly to lift sanctions and the military threat and to open up trade, investment and social links, for instance by providing scholarships for North Korean students to study in the US, or in allied countries. There are a large number of measures which could be employed so that North Korea, in Lyndon Baines Johnson's phrase, would be inside the tent pissing out rather than outside pissing in.¹⁰⁷⁾ After

105) David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, and Cristina L. Garafola, "War with China: Thinking through the Unthinkable," *RAND*, 28 July 2016, Peter Navarro, *The Coming China Wars: Where They Will Be Fought and How They Can Be Won*, 2 ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ FT Press, 2008); James Dobbins et al. *Conflict with China: prospects, consequences, and strategies for deterrence*, RAND (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2011); Harry Kazianis, "Hell Cometh to Earth: Is a U.S.-China War Really Possible?," *National Interest*, 4 March 2016; Robert Farley, "Asia's Greatest Fear: A U.S.-China War," *National Interest*, 9 June 2014; ———, "Could America Win a War Against Russia and China at the Same Time?"

106) Joe Cirincione, "How to stop North Korea's bomb," *PolicyForum.net*, 26 January 2016; *Hankyoreh*, 11 January 2017, "Former US Secretary of Defense calls for Plan B on N. Korean nukes and missiles"; *New York Times*, 12 January 2017, "The U.S. Must Talk to North Korea"; Richard N. Haass, "Out of Time in North Korea," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 17 March 2017.

107) *New York Times*, 31 October 1971, "The Vantage Point Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969. By Lyndon Baines Johnson. 636 pp. Illustrated. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. \$15."

all North Korea has, as noted above, made 'commitments to nuclear non-proliferation before the international community'.¹⁰⁸⁾ The whole business could be fairly easily presented to the world as a great triumph of American diplomacy, generosity, and wisdom. However it is difficult to envisage any American government, especially the Trump administration, contemplating such an imaginative strategy let alone being able to drive it through the dysfunctional US governance system where the immediate monetary and political profits of war tend to overshadow the strategic benefits of peace.

So the United States will probably opt for the third alternative, just muddling along, for some time at least, not accepting the legitimacy of North Korea and its nuclear deterrent and the failure of its compellence strategy.

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- ▶ Accepted : 2017. August. 28.

108) "DPRK Government Denounces U.S., S. Korea's Sophism about "Denuclearization of North"."

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CONTENTS

Articles

- | Max Weber and World War I
..... Gianfranco Poggi | 1
- | Raymond Aron and Political Criticism
..... Joël Mouric | 27
- | Hegemony and Resistance, Compellence and Deterrence : Deconstructing the
North Korean ‘Threat’ and Identifying America’s Strategic Alternatives
..... Tim Beal | 57
- | The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Restorative
Justice
..... Chang Won Seok | 115
- | The Origins, Use, and Abuse of Omenology in Early China
..... David Pankenier | 145
- | The Role of Higher Education in Asia’s New Order and Cooperative
Leadership
..... Vo Van Sen · Tran Cao Boi Ngoc | 165

Translation

- | Max Weber et Le Politique : Retour sur L’œuvre de Wolfgang J. Mommsen
..... Hinnerk Bruhns | 193
- | The Crisis of North Korea and the Task of Japan’s Peaceful Diplomacy
..... Wada Haruki | 217

Criticism

- | The Korean Tragedy- The Mess America Started
..... Michael Pembroke | 231
- | Understanding the Korean Crisis Requires a Knowledge of History
..... James O’Neill | 245

Book Review

- | Studying the Social, through Social Policies and Public Action
..... Vando Borghi | 255

논문

- | 막스 베버와 1차 세계대전
..... 지안프란코 쏫지 | 1
- | 레이몽 아롱과 정치비평
..... 조엘 무릭 | 27
- | 패권과 저항, 강제와 억지: 북한 ‘위협’ 해체와 미국의 전략적 대안 확인
..... 팀 빌 | 57
- | 남아프리카공화국 진실화해위원회와 회복적 정의론
..... 장원석 | 115
- | 고대 중국에서 점술학(Omenology)의 기원, 활용, 그리고 남용
..... 데이빗 팬케니어 | 145
- | 아시아의 새 질서와 협력적 리더십에서 고등교육이 수행할 역할
..... 보 반 쎬·짠 까오 버이 응옥 | 165

번역

- | 막스 베버와 정치가: 볼프강 J. 몸젠 저작에 대한 재고찰
..... 히네르크 브룬스 | 193
- | 북한 위기와 평화국가 일본의 평화외교
..... 와다 하루키(和田春樹) | 217

평론

- | 한국의 비극 - 미국에서 시작된 정치적 파국
..... 마이클 켈브로크 | 231
- | 한반도 위기를 이해하려면 먼저 역사적 과정을 이해해야 한다
..... 제임스 오닐 | 245

서평

- | 사회정책과 공공행위를 통한 사회질서 연구
..... 반도 보르기 | 255

