

Crazy, Irrational, or Under Pressure? Why War with North Korea is Unlikely

Written by Robert W. Murray and Dan G. Cox

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ROBERT W. MURRAY AND DAN G. COX, APR 21 2013

There is little doubt that when discussing the ongoing tension on the Korean Peninsula, one can easily make the claim that newly elevated North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is playing a dangerous game. Inflammatory rhetoric about annihilating South Korea, Japan, the United States and every other enemy of the notoriously closed North Korean state, the promise of ongoing missile tests, and troop mobilizations have led pundits to argue that war is becoming more and more likely.

There is certainly cause for concern when tensions continue to increase as the tit-for-tat game between the North Korean regime and the United States goes on, but we contend war is still unlikely unless continued misperceptions persist. As a new and young leader, Kim Jong-un is working through a process of trying to appease military hardliners that may question his ability to lead and just how far he will go to stand up to the United States. The cult of personality in North Korea can only be sustained if the divine claims about the abilities of the leader persist, and so it should come as little surprise that promises of world destruction have become louder and louder. Further, the nuclear variable is a constant source of fear for states, as is the case whenever a new member of the nuclear club emerges, particularly one with a reputation of being irrational according to western political standards.

Even so, by looking closely at the situation, it is difficult to genuinely believe that war is imminent. To date, North Korea has not successfully tested a model of delivery that would see a nuclear weapon capable of reaching US territory, including Guam and/or Hawaii. A rocket test is a far cry from an armed nuclear warhead attached to the rocket. Moving beyond the technological limitations, there is no evidence to date that would suggest Kim Jong-un is ready or willing to commit an entirely irrational act of preemptive strikes against the United States or its allies. Obtaining a nuclear weapon does not automatically signal that a state will become an aggressor. In fact, quite the opposite is true, as the logic of Mutual Assured Destruction (or, in this case, assured destruction of North Korea) still applies and though we might question the sanity of a leader or state apparatus, rationality calculations are an entirely different thing. The same causal logic can be applied to Iran, or any other nuclear state. Wanting a bomb, developing a bomb, and having a bomb does not mean the use of a bomb. If it did, it is probable the world would have seen nuclear war well before now.

Unfortunately, narratives matter and since the dominant narrative currently is one of an irrational Kim Jong-un and looming war, the United States and her allies are acting as if war were imminent. It is worth mentioning that much of the escalation over recent weeks is the fault of the United States, and not North Korea which only serves to feed into the dominant narratives. It is not at all unique for the DPRK to espouse ridiculous threats, but staging B-2 fly-overs only served to further embolden North Korea's claims, as the American government signaled to the world they were actually taking the rhetoric seriously.

Besides B-2 fly-overs, the United States has postured itself in a far more war-like stance conducting large military exercises with their South Korean allies near the North Korean border, moving anti-ballistic missile systems to Guam, and moving air and naval assets into the region. United States Admiral Samuel Locklear has added weight to the irrationality argument by declaring that Kim Jong-un consolidated his power over the last year indicating that US military leaders are interpreting the aggressiveness by the North Korean leadership as irrational. The Chinese

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government, too, has signaled it has become annoyed with the rhetoric and actions of the Kim Jong-un administration which may further isolate the regime.

Worse still, everyone seems to have forgotten recent history near the end of the Kim Jong-il administration. Not only did Kim Jong-il saber rattle rhetorically, he actually engaged in several high-profile military acts that the South Korean government could have justifiably interpreted as acts of war. On 26 March 2010, a North Korean submarine launched a torpedo attack against a South Korean Naval military ship killing 46 South Korean sailors. In November 2010, the North Korean military fired artillery shells at a remote military base on the island of Yeonpyeong. This attack killed two South Korean soldiers and wounded 20 others including three civilians. Neither heinous nor unprovoked attack led to war which may have, unfortunately, emboldened the North Korean leadership. As recently as April 2012, North Korea tested a long-range missile. While the missile launch ultimately failed after a short flight, it was justifiably provocative nonetheless.

The difference between these recent events and now is that the same actions which have been conducted by the North Korean regime are being interpreted differently. We can understand that South Korea would be unwilling to suffer another overt military attack but is a belligerent missile test worthy of war? Newly appointed Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel warns that North Korea is nearing a dangerous line they should not cross and both Japan and China have joined the United States in deploying anti-missile defense systems in anticipation of an attack. The new narrative of irrationality is actually adding to perceived immanency of war.

North Korea is not blameless in this situation. In fact, we feel the Kim Jong-un administration bears the brunt of the responsibility for the horrendous current state of affairs. However, all sides need to remember recent history and basic theories of deterrence and brinksmanship in order to properly contextualize the current situation. We see three possible contextual explanations for what the North Korean leadership is doing but we do not see each of these contextual explanations as equally plausible.

First, there is the possibility that Kim Jong-un and his major military confidants are irrational and desire a war they cannot possibly win. In this case, the leadership would have to be delusional believing that the North Korean military can overcome the combined might of South Korea, the United States and its allies, and possibly China. Although this fits neatly into the dominant narrative we have outlined above, we find this to be the least likely contextual reality.

Second, Kim Jong-un has not consolidated power and is being tested by the military leadership to see how he handles intense pressure. Under this scenario, Kim Jong-un should be expected to carry on his father's belligerence and, at the very least, test a missile to help solidify the myth of the great leader. In this case, the United States and her allies should be wary but not fall into a rhetorical escalation trap pinning the young, untested leader into a corner. We find this to be the most likely contextual explanation for the current situation.

Third, there is a remote possibility that the military leadership is attempting to goad Kim Jong-un into a serious misstep in order to justify his removal from power. Under this dangerous scenario, the military confidants would prefer avoiding a war but they might accept a short one in order to topple the current dictator. While we feel this is also a very unlikely contextual explanation, it is intriguing enough that it merits consideration.

Under the dominant narrative encapsulated in the first contextual explanation, everyone will act in an escalating fashion until either Kim Jong-un backs down or war ensues. The problem with this is that while it is a poor explanation of the reasoning behind the North Korean belligerence, at some point it gathers enough steam to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Worse still, it demands an all-out war response with little to no recognition of difference or possible splits in the military or among the populace.

Contextual scenarios two and three allow for a more nuanced approach to the situation and call for a calming of rhetoric, even in the face of a missile test, on the part of America and her allies. Even in the unlikely event of war, the planning would be far more attuned to signals from military leaders and the populace that they want no part in the fighting. A quicker settlement could ensue and the loss of life could be greatly mitigated.

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In the end, we are among those observers that would question the stability of the DPRK's leadership but we tend not to believe they are any less rational than other states in an anarchic international system. Deterrence and survival maximization continue to dictate state behavior in nuclear and military affairs, and there is no evidence to suggest this case is any different. Interpreting the leadership as irrational may lead to an unintended war and massive loss of human life.

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