

Does North Korea Want to Be Attacked?

Written by Francis Grice

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FRANCIS GRICE, JUL 9 2017

North Korea has been particularly antagonistic in recent months, including sharply increasing the number and ambition of its ballistic missile tests. Yet it remains unclear why its government has chosen to behave in such an internationally deviant manner. The conventional wisdom is that the Kim Jong-un regime feels suddenly much more threatened by the United States and its allies, fearing that it is next-in-line for a full-scale military intervention and accompanying regime change. According to this line of thought, Kim and his followers are desperately seeking to build a ballistic missile and nuclear weapons program that is sufficiently large and far-reaching to deter the Americans and their allies from militarily attacking them. At face value, this position appears reasonable – North Korea is a rogue state that is widely reviled by the much of the world. It does not, however, hold up to close scrutiny.

First, there is no reason why North Korea would feel any more threatened now than it has in previous years. The doctrines of pre-emptive invasions and regime change reached their zenith under the George W. Bush administration, but declined under Barack Obama and there is no reason to believe prior to the current crisis that Donald Trump had any real interest going to war with North Korea. Indeed, Trump's comments regarding the Kim Jong-un were generally complimentary during his election campaign and as recently as May 2017, Trump praised Kim as 'a pretty smart cookie' who he would be happy to sit down with for a burger. The claim that the regime has started testing missiles more rapidly than ever before because it has become gripped by a sudden terror that the United States and its allies are going to invade any-day now makes little sense.

Second, there is little strategic desire amongst the United States and its allies for the Kim Jong-un regime to be overthrown and the North Koreans know it. The South Koreans worry about the millions of refugees who would flood across their borders if the Kim Jong-un regime collapsed and the gargantuan financial cost that an ensuing unification could bring. The Japanese are more concerned about the threat posed by China than North Korea and fear that a regime change in the latter could reduce the number of United States forces deployed in the region. It would also reduce the strategic necessity that ties South Korea and Japan together despite the bad blood that exists between the two states over Japan's horrific treatment of the Korean people from 1910 to 1945. Without the menace of North Korea, Japan could find itself abandoned by its two foremost allies and left to face the looming Chinese behemoth alone. For the United States, North Korea supplies a pretext for stationing troops and naval forces in the region, which helps with containing China while 'minimizing the need to make undiplomatic mention of the region's 800-pound gorilla.'

Third, even if the Kim Jong-un did genuinely feel panicked about the Trump administration, it already possesses the most effective deterrent that it can realistically hope to achieve. On the nuclear front, the regime successfully tested an atomic bomb back as long ago as 2006 and has subsequently built a small, but lethal stockpile of nuclear weapons. It has been capable of making nuclear strikes against America's Asian-Pacific partners for many years and could even attack the United States itself using its large submarine force or by placing warheads into cargo containers that could be shipped undetected into American ports and remotely detonated. Moreover, its warheads have been made essentially impervious against an American first strike attack for some time, including through concealment in reinforced underground bunkers. At least some are likely to be loaded into Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles, which North Korea successfully tested in September 2016. This all ensures that North Korea already possesses a second strike nuclear capability. Buttressing its nuclear deterrent, North Korea also possesses the ability to respond to an American invasion or nuclear attack by inflicting appalling destruction upon U.S. allies and

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American personnel based in the Asia-Pacific using non-nuclear means. This includes being able to devastate the South Korean capital of Seoul with massed volleys of chemically tipped artillery shells. Of course, none of this has brought North Korea anywhere near nuclear parity with the United States, but that outcome is infeasible in any circumstances: upgrading from a handful of unreliable intermediate-range missiles to an equally small and undependable number of intercontinental ballistic ones is not going to change the fundamental imbalance between the two states.

Fourth, if North Korea is genuinely seeking to avoid being attacked, then it ought to be maintaining as low a profile as possible. There is no shortage of domestic and other foreign problems vying for the attention of the Trump administration and it would be easy for North Korea to stay safe by simply keeping out of the limelight. Yet, North Korea's actions have been notably provocative, almost as though they were deliberately designed to elicit a hostile response. The killing of Kim Jong-nam in February using an attention-grabbing chemical weapon in broad daylight in a Malaysian airport only makes sense if the goal was to spur foreign actors towards higher levels of hostility. Similarly, the return of the fatally wounded U.S. citizen, Otto Warmbier, in June to the United States, when he had been previously sentenced to a 15 year prison term and had not been seen for over a year, seems intentionally inflammatory. Why not simply keep him concealed while pretending that he was still serving out his sentence?

Even the missile tests themselves have been carried out as confrontationally as possible, with the North Korean regime responding to U.S. criticisms with the proclamation that it will carry out the tests 'weekly, monthly, and yearly', along with the release of new videos of North Korean nuclear strikes against key U.S. cities. The timing of the most recent missile test on America's national holiday of July 4th, in particular, was a deliberate slap in the face. If North Korea was truly afraid of invasion by the United States and its allies, then deliberately and repeatedly drawing negative attention towards itself in this manner would be highly illogical. It might still test the missiles, but would likely try to avoid advertising what it was doing as much as possible.

So, if the rapidly increasing series of missile tests are not being done primarily to prevent a U.S. attack against North Korea, then why has the regime been acting so belligerently of late? Some of the possible reasons are well known. One is that the regime may be using the new tests to publicize the regime's strength and technical achievements to its own population, in order to distract them and reduce discontent against the regime. Another is that Kim Jong-un may believe that numerous tests will allow them to twist the arms of the U.S. into returning to negotiations and making new concessions in exchange for North Korea agreeing to stall its weapons program.

There is also, however, another potential reason that has received little consideration in policy and scholarly circles: that North Korea is intentionally goading the United States into launching small-scale punitive strikes against it. This may seem counterintuitive – why would a government want to be attacked by outside powers? – but the gains in popularity would quite likely outweigh the material losses incurred by the strikes themselves, especially as history has shown that such American missile strikes rarely have any meaningful military effect.

History has also shown that a government under attack from an international enemy will often experience a massive popularity boost as a result of increased patriotism, a heightened desire for cooperation against an aggressor, and a higher willingness to tolerate domestic hardships as part of the war effort (the so-called 'Rally Around the Flag Effect'). This happened, for example, at the start of the NATO bombing campaign of Belgrade during the Kosovo War, which led to a popularity boom for the previously domestically detested Slobodan Milosevic and allowed him to stay in power longer than he otherwise might (his popularity only waned once it became clear that the bombings would be sustained, something that long-standing North Korean deterrence, as well as Chinese and Russian protections, would make suicidal for the United States to attempt). The North Korean regime has been working to accrue the benefits of popularity through being in a state of enmity with the United States for decades, yet the reality of the essentially illusory conflict that it describes to its people suffers from one major flaw – the absence of tangible enemy attacks that the population can see, hear, and even feel. An actual attack by the United States would fill that void nicely. Moreover, one of the weaknesses of Kim Jong-un's position as leader is his absence of concrete military credentials. Having the opportunity to act as the leader who valiantly stands up against the might of the world's foremost superpower and survives would help him plug this gap most handily as well.

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Kim Jong-un has a clear reason for wishing for a domestic boost in popularity. The fortress state over which he reigns is being assailed by a multitude of factors that have the potential to undermine the grip of his regime over the population, including widespread food shortages, inadequate healthcare provision, extreme power shortages, and increasing access by the population to information from the outside world through illegal means. While the regime is likely to be secure from the risk of domestic rebellion or military coup for the foreseeable future, it only maintains this position because of round-the-clock work by the regime and its security forces to maintain the status quo. Cultivating a patriotic rallying around the Kim regime in the face of overt American attacks, as well as elevating Kim himself into a military hero, could be seen as sufficiently beneficial to be worth suffering the physical damage that a limited missile or drone attack might cause.

Of course, Kim Jong-un would recoil from the idea of an American nuclear attack or full-scale invasion – that would spell the end of his regime. The difficulty for his government, therefore, must lie in getting the response just right. If it acts too belligerently, by firing a nuclear warhead at Tokyo or Seoul for example, it would likely generate a response of major intervention or nuclear eradication. Instead, it must seek to annoy and offend the United States at a level that is sufficient to incite a small-scale strike but not so great as to incur something worse.

The actions that the regime has taken in recent months, including testing new missiles but not actually attacking anyone with them, killing very small rather than large numbers of foreign civilians, and levelling threats that are filled with hyperbole but bear little substance would align exactly with this strategy. It is highly unlikely that the United States would risk North Korea firing nuclear weapons at its allies, detonating a nuclear cargo container in San Francisco, or eliciting a fuller nuclear retaliation from China by launching a full-scale invasion of North Korea over a single citizen killed and some illegal missile tests. But it is not at all unlikely that it might respond with the kind of token military strikes that Trump used against Syria in 2017 after the Assad government used chemical weapons against its own population, Bill Clinton used against Afghanistan and Somalia following the U.S. embassy attacks in 1998 and against Iraq that same year for failing to cooperate with United Nations weapons inspectors, and Ronald Reagan used against Libya in 1986 following the Berlin discotheque bombing and against Beirut in 1983 for the bombing of a multinational military barracks.

Consequently, while the Trump administration considers its responses to North Korea's recent surge of belligerence, it should bear in mind that launching limited strikes might, in fact, be exactly what the Kim Jong-un regime wants. There are many other reasons why it should tread with extreme caution before pursuing such a path, but this one should not be overlooked. Doing exactly what a despicable totalitarian dictator wants you to do is generally a bad idea.

About the author:

Francis Grice is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Studies at McDaniel College in Maryland, where he has worked since 2014. Prior to this posting, he worked as a Teaching Fellow at King's College London. He has a PhD in Defence Studies from King's College London (2014). His thesis critically examined the originality and transnational influence of the teachings of Mao Zedong on insurgent warfare.