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How Unwanted Wars Begin

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North Korea has all but completed its quest for nuclear weapons. It has demonstrated its ability to produce boosted-fission bombs and may be able to make fusion ones, as well. It can likely miniaturize them to fit atop a missile. And it will soon be able to deliver this payload to the continental United States. North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Un, has declared his country's nuclear deterrent complete and, despite his willingness to meet with U.S. President Donald Trump, is unlikely to give it up. Yet Washington continues to demand that Pyongyang relinquish the nuclear weapons it already has, and the Trump administration has pledged that the North Korean regime will never acquire a nuclear missile that can hit the United States. The result is a new, more dangerous phase in the U.S.–North Korean relationship: a high-stakes nuclear standoff.

In March, U.S. and South Korean officials announced the possibility of a Kim-Trump meeting. But regardless of whether diplomacy proceeds or the United States turns its focus to other tools—sanctions, deterrence, even military force—the same underlying challenge will remain: the outcome of this standoff will be determined by whether and how each country can influence the other. That, in turn, will depend on the beliefs and perceptions each holds about the other. The problems of perception and misperception afflict all policymakers that

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deal with foreign adversaries. But when it comes to relations between Washington and Pyongyang, those problems are especially profound, and the consequences of a miscalculation are uniquely grave.

Any U.S. strategy toward North Korea involves using a combination of threats and promises to persuade Pyongyang to bend to Washington's will. But whether the United States can actually persuade Pyongyang depends not just on which tools it chooses to use but also, more fundamentally, on how it is viewed by North Korea. How do North Korean leaders interpret the signals Washington sends? Do they see Washington's threats and promises as credible? And how do U.S. policymakers perceive their counterparts in Pyongyang? How do they differentiate plausible threats from mere bluster? The American debate about whether Kim is "rational"—that is, capable of making means-ends calculations and providing for his own survival—barely scratches the surface of necessary considerations.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of any threat or promise is in the eye of the target; the adversary has the final say in whether a particular approach succeeds. Analysts often compare international politics to chess, a bilateral contest in which players view the entire board and know all the possible moves. In this case especially, a more apt analogy is *Rashomon*—the Japanese film that depicts the same story from several vantage points, each character viewing what happened differently.

If any U.S. strategy toward North Korea is to have a chance of succeeding (or even of just averting catastrophe), it must be guided by an accurate sense of how Kim's regime thinks, what it values, and how it judges its options. Washington must understand not just North Korean objectives but also how North Korean officials understand U.S. objectives and whether they consider U.S. statements credible. If it fails to do so, perceptual pitfalls could all too easily provoke a downward spiral in relations and lead to the worst conflict since World War II.

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT

It has long been clear what the United States wants from North Korea. For years, Washington has sought to denuclearize the country—that is, to achieve the complete, verifiable, and irreversible disassembly of its nuclear arsenal—and to deter major military action on its part. More recently, Trump has added that North Korea cannot be allowed to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile, or ICBM, capable of reaching the continental United States. Washington has also long called for,



Seeing like a state: Kim watching a military drill, Pyongyang, November 2014

but never actively pursued, the reunification of the Korean Peninsula under the democratic control of the South. Yet as North Korea has moved toward a complete nuclear and ICBM capability, such goals have become harder to achieve. They no longer require simply preventing North Korea from taking certain steps. Now, they require persuading it to reverse course and give up capabilities it has already developed, even in the face of significant opposition, a much bigger concession.

Accordingly, the more urgent question today is less what the United States wants than what it can reasonably live with—that is, what it needs. As North Korea nears the end of its nuclear quest, concessions that would have once looked attractive, such as a freeze in further development, no longer look as desirable. What, then, would it take for the United States to live with a nuclear North Korea? If Washington can strengthen its alliances and military presence to effectively deter Pyongyang and prevent it from resorting to nuclear blackmail, would minimum American needs be met?

What North Korea wants from its nuclear and missile programs has also become fairly clear. Above all, the regime wants to ensure its survival and deter a U.S. attack. Beyond that, it also appears to consider nuclear weapons to be a source of prestige and thus wants acceptance as a de facto nuclear state, much as Pakistan has. Nuclear weapons also

help advance other long-standing North Korean desires, such as reunification of the peninsula under Pyongyang's control and the undermining of U.S. security guarantees for South Korea and Japan.

The harder question to answer is whether the Kim regime now sees a nuclear capability as inextricable from its own survival—that is,

Both the United States and North Korea have bluffed in the past.

whether it thinks it needs to keep nuclear weapons under any circumstances. If it does, then there is no security assurance that Washington can offer Pyongyang that will convince it to give them up. The only steps that would work are

ones that U.S. diplomats would almost certainly never take—say, renouncing the U.S. treaty with South Korea and withdrawing all U.S. troops from the peninsula.

The needs and wants of other actors are also relevant. South Korea's objectives largely align with those of the United States. But because a conflict would inevitably spill onto its own soil, South Korea is more likely to privilege political solutions over military ones. Some differences in U.S. and South Korean positions can be managed, but if they diverge too much, North Korea may have reason to doubt Washington's security guarantee to Seoul. China, meanwhile, has traditionally preferred to have a stable, if irksome, North Korean buffer state along its border rather than to push for denuclearization at the risk of regime collapse. But Chinese–North Korean relations have been deteriorating for years, and it is now an open question how much Beijing values its client.

CREDIBILITY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

No matter what strategy it is using at any given moment, the United States relies on a combination of threats and promises to change North Korean behavior. Those threats and promises must go together: a threat only works if it is coupled with a promise not to carry out the threatened action if North Korea complies with a demand. And both the threat and the promise must be credible. Washington has to signal to Pyongyang what actions it can take to avoid punishment, as well as what actions it can take to produce better outcomes.

In discussions of international politics, credibility is often treated as a characteristic inherent to a given state and its signals. In fact, credibility is in the eye of the beholder: a threat or a promise is credible

only if the target sees it as such. The target makes that determination by assessing its opponent's interests, its previous behavior, the nature of its regime, and whether its leaders have lived up to prior commitments. Accordingly, any U.S. attempt to exert influence over North Korea necessarily leaves the decision to comply in the hands of North Korean leaders. They, not officials in Washington, make the cost-benefit calculation of the value of compliance and noncompliance.

The question of how to establish credibility is especially fraught in this case. The United States and North Korea face major hurdles to persuading each other that their intentions are genuine. Because they do not have formal diplomatic relations, they are basing their views on an impoverished set of interactions and data points. In the last two decades, state-level exchanges have taken the form of nuclear negotiations. With the exception of those leading to the 1994 Agreed Framework, which stayed in place for six years, all these negotiations resulted in failure. As a result, each side distrusts the other.

Moreover, the two sides interpret history differently. Kim looks at past agreements with the United States that his father and grandfather struck and likely infers that Washington seeks to make Pyongyang less secure and will renege on its commitments. He looks at the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Libya and likely concludes that nuclear weapons are a far stronger guarantor of survival than any U.S. promise. He sees Trump's threats to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal and likely worries that U.S. arms control agreements cannot be trusted. And when evaluating the prospect of U.S. military action, he may consider prior instances in which U.S. leaders have contemplated bombing nuclear sites in North Korea or elsewhere—and conclude that since the United States has always refrained from doing so in the past, it will again.

Making credibility even harder to establish, both states have bluffed in the past. Perhaps more than any other state, North Korea has a tendency to use incendiary rhetoric that does not result in action. It threatened to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire" in 1994, and it calls nearly every new round of international sanctions "a declaration of war." After the UN Security Council approved sanctions in 2013, a North Korean spokesperson said, "We will be exercising our right to preemptive nuclear attack against the headquarters of the aggressor."

Although Washington's bluffing has typically been less brazen, the effect is similar. Washington has called North Korea's nuclear

development “unacceptable” but then gone on to accept it. It promised to hold Pyongyang accountable for proliferation but took no action when it sold a nuclear reactor to Syria in 2007. In August 2017, Trump threatened to unleash “fire and fury like the world has never seen” against North Korea if it made more threats, only to do nothing when the country conducted more missile tests. He even prides himself on his ability to backtrack. When *The Wall Street Journal* asked him about his combative tweets against Kim, he replied, “You see that a lot with me and then all of a sudden somebody’s my best friend. I could give you 20 examples.” Although no single bluff completely erodes a state’s credibility, habitual empty threats degrade it over time.

North Korea may be more likely to treat a U.S. threat or promise as credible under certain conditions: when the United States has previously demonstrated the capability to act as it says it will, when the costs to the United States of action are low, when it has a significant incentive to act, and when there are not less costly ways of carrying out a threat. To increase the credibility of a threat, Washington can make it more specific, detailing which precise conditions would trigger which precise responses. Doing so might mean issuing an ultimatum, one of the strongest types of threats in international politics. In the case of military threats, Washington could send costly signals of imminent action, such as evacuating American personnel from Seoul or sharing prospective military plans with allies in the hope that they will leak them. Such moves, in addition to causing public alarm and giving up the advantage of a surprise attack, would make it harder for the United States to step back from the brink.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF DIPLOMACY

Pyongyang’s perception of U.S. credibility will determine the success or failure of any U.S. strategy. Whether the Trump administration is relying on diplomacy, pressure, deterrence, or force, it and North Korean leaders will interpret the same actions differently, and neither will fully understand the other’s view. Misperception afflicts all policy options, with different risks in each case.

Diplomacy—whether a Kim-Trump summit or lower-level exchanges—presents its own difficulties and dangers. Each side views the other’s behavior in a different light. The United States sees North Korea as an insincere actor that has reneged on countless commitments in the

past, whereas North Korea sees the United States as intent on threatening its existence. For both parties to come to the negotiating table, they must believe that the potential upsides of diplomacy outweigh the costs, including the likelihood that the other side will agree to and then scuttle a deal.

The United States faces what might be called a “time-technology dilemma” in diplomacy. North Korea is close to reaching its technical goals, making it all the more important for Washington to secure significant enough concessions quickly enough to make the gambit worthwhile. The more time that passes, the less the United States will be able to gain from negotiations, and the more North Korea will be able to secure for itself. Pyongyang may, for example, get away with making minor concessions in exchange for significant sanctions relief or security assurances, strengthening its hand without meaningfully improving the security situation for the United States and its allies.

Given these perceptual dynamics and the likelihood that they will cause diplomatic failure, why would the United States pursue diplomacy at all? After all, many argue that it can deter, contain, and manage the North Korean threat without talks. Any progress on constraining Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs, no matter how modest or unlikely, will require concessions that can be made only at a negotiating table. Just as important, engagement can reduce the risks of misperception and miscalculation in the bilateral relationship, which is especially important given how few other ties exist between Washington and Pyongyang. That said, ill-conceived diplomacy may lead each side to its worst-case assessment of the other. If it does, tensions will only spiral.

YOUR ECONOMY OR YOUR NUKES

Similar perceptual problems affect other U.S. policy options—including the tool of choice in recent years, financial sanctions. Whatever the economic impact of sanctions, their effectiveness in achieving a broader political objective still depends on North Korean perceptions of U.S. intentions. Sanctions are meant to decrease North Korea’s ability to pursue its weapons programs and to inflict pain on the regime without raising the risk of direct military conflict. Because they are usually applied reactively and episodically, however, their influence is only incremental.

The United States and the UN tend to apply new sanctions after North Korea has taken a prohibited action. Because this has been the

pattern for years, North Korea can anticipate new sanctions before it makes a given move and decide whether the benefits will outweigh the costs. Moreover, because sanctions are applied only after the fact, the regime has time to adjust to the new economic circumstances it will face after it takes the action. Indeed, because it chooses when next to conduct a nuclear test, it actually has some control over whether and when it will get hit with another round of economic measures, even if the exact contents of the sanctions package are a surprise. In other words, what international actors view as resolute and punishing steps may not actually do much to affect Pyongyang's preferences.

The United States hopes that its sanctions will send a message that forces North Korea to choose between its economy and its nuclear weapons. But the incremental nature of the financial punishment may instead signal that it will continue but the pain will be tolerable, encouraging North Korea to hurry up and complete its nuclear program so that it can start negotiating the sanctions away. This represents another instance of the time-technology dilemma: North Korea has few technical hurdles left to cross, yet new sanctions take time to bite. Still, international financial pressure has inherent credibility, because multilateral sanctions include the participation of countries on which North Korea depends, such as China and Russia. Moreover, it is difficult to draw conclusions about how multilateral sanctions against Pyongyang are affecting its political behavior. Did Kim seek a summit with Trump because he is desperate for sanctions relief and willing to make concessions or because he seeks the prestige of a presidential summit and *de facto* recognition of North Korea as a nuclear power? American observers may assume the former, whereas Kim may believe the latter, leading to a yawning gap in diplomatic expectations.

MAKING DETERRENCE WORK

One of the foremost questions that has occupied U.S. policymakers is whether North Korea can be deterred. But the better question is what North Korea can be deterred from doing and what it can be compelled to do differently. It is one thing for the United States to deter the use of nuclear weapons or a major attack—since the end of the Korean War, North Korea has not tried to invade the South because the U.S. threat to destroy the North Korean regime in such a circumstance is credible, thanks to U.S. conventional and nuclear military superiority.

But it is another thing entirely to deter lower-level provocations. When North Korea makes such moves, as it did when it sank a South Korean warship in 2010, it presumably estimates how the United States will respond and then selects actions and targets that limit U.S. options. The United States and South Korea may be able to deter some North Korean provocations through their conventional force posture and military doctrine, but they are unlikely to be able to prevent them all.

Further complicating matters, U.S. goals have gone beyond deterrence to compellence—that is, seeking to change what the North is already doing. Coming only when deterrence has failed, compellence—in this case, getting North Korea to abandon a mature nuclear arsenal—is even harder to achieve. As behavioral economists have demonstrated, decision-makers are more willing to pay costs and run risks to avoid losing something they already possess than they are to get something they don't yet have. Even growing U.S. pressure is unlikely to alter this; it may just reinforce Kim's belief that he needs nuclear weapons to deter Washington. Similarly, it is possible that U.S. threats only heighten Kim's perceived need for a better deterrent—meaning that Washington's messaging around deterrence undermines its own objectives.

After all, deterrence goes both ways, and so U.S. policymakers must also consider what their messages tell Kim about his ability to deter an American attack. When Washington declares that a North Korean ICBM capability would pose an unacceptable threat to the United States, it is in effect admitting to Kim that the United States is easily deterred by such a capability. Similarly, drawing a sharp distinction between threats to the American homeland and threats to U.S. allies is deeply problematic, because extended deterrence requires demonstrating that allies are as valuable, or nearly as valuable, as the homeland itself. Both South Korea and Japan should be concerned that Washington appears preoccupied with weapons aimed at it and relatively unconcerned about the weapons aimed at them. Understandably, they might worry that Trump's "America first" stance means a weaker nuclear umbrella.

THE FOG OF WAR

Of all the ways in which perceptual pitfalls could come into play on the Korean Peninsula, the most consequential would involve the use of military force. The United States is unlikely to wage a campaign of total destruction against North Korea now that Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal is advanced enough to stave off utter defeat. If war did break out, the

United States would be more likely to use military force as a form of coercion. But even that would be unlikely to achieve denuclearization. The mere fact that the United States possesses superior military capabilities would not guarantee that it would prevail, since each country's resolve would help determine the outcome. That is why U.S. officials must consider North Korea's willingness to run risks and pay high costs.

After an attack, North Korea's perception of the initial military campaign would determine whether Pyongyang complied with U.S. wishes. For the United States to get its way, it would have to send signals that it would continue to use force if North Korea refused to comply, but also that it would cease to use violence if North Korea

The prospect of a meeting between Kim and Trump has raised hopes that, if dashed, could make war more likely.

cooperated. In particular, the United States would have to indicate that the leadership in Pyongyang had a clear pathway to survival. If Kim believed that the United States was bent on his destruction no matter what, he would have no choice but to mount an all-out counterattack. The United States would find this balance difficult to achieve. If

Kim anticipated some form of U.S. military action but the strike was less destructive than feared, he might actually be bolstered in his refusal to comply with U.S. wishes. In either case—a devastating attack or an underwhelming one—the United States should expect to face significant retaliation, at least until Kim figured out whether compliance or resistance made more sense in the long term.

How third parties and domestic actors reacted to a strike could influence any additional U.S. efforts to use violence coercively. If the domestic audience vehemently supported a strike, the United States could more credibly claim that it would attack again if Pyongyang failed to cooperate. If international parties expressed outrage and condemned the strike, as seems plausible, the U.S. threat to launch a devastating follow-on strike would become less potent, and Pyongyang would have far less motivation to comply. U.S. leaders would also have to contemplate the signals they sent beyond the military strike itself. What message would Trump deliver to accompany the use of force? Would he demand full denuclearization? Throughout the history of warfare, once one side has resorted to violence, emotions play a larger role in leaders' calculations and states become prone to gamble,

willing to accept greater risks and take bigger chances to prevent major losses. North Korea is unlikely to be an exception.

A PERFECT STORM OF MISPERCEPTION

The greatest risk is that the perceptual challenges that afflict all these approaches could build into a perfect storm of misperception. It is all too easy to imagine how such a crisis might develop—no less amid a flurry of diplomacy than amid a volley of threats.

In fact, the prospect of an unprecedented meeting between Kim and Trump has raised hopes that, if dashed, could make war more likely. There is a real danger of a *Rashomon* situation: Washington might believe that sanctions and military threats made Kim realize that his nuclear program could lead to his demise, whereas Pyongyang might believe that Trump's willingness to meet without demanding substantive concessions indicates that the United States is finally ready to accept North Korea as a nuclear state. Even the same words may mean different things to the two sides. For the United States, "denuclearization" is the North giving up nuclear weapons; for North Korea, it may mean an arms control agreement in which the two sides bargain over each other's force levels. Well-intentioned mediation by South Korea could postpone the day of reckoning but make it worse when it comes, by encouraging both Washington and Pyongyang to believe that the other is ready to make major concessions. If face-to-face talks reveal that neither is in fact willing to do so, the hostility will be magnified.

It is not difficult to imagine how this scenario could come to pass. Following North Korea's reasonably good behavior during the Winter Olympics, the United States' postponement of military exercises, and South Korean President Moon Jae-in's efforts at diplomacy with the North, a diplomatic window has opened. Imagine that Kim and Trump arrive at the summit only to discover that they hold radically different views of the commitment to "denuclearize": Trump believes that Kim is willing to negotiate away his arsenal for sanctions relief, whereas Kim believes that full denuclearization also requires the removal of U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula and an end to the U.S.–South Korean alliance (a possibility that was reinforced by comments Trump made in March that appeared to threaten to withdraw U.S. troops from South Korea unless the U.S.–South Korean trade deal was renegotiated). After it becomes clear that Trump will not move forward on Kim's

terms, Kim is outraged and renews his August 2017 pledge to test missiles over Guam.

Both Washington and Pyongyang now think the other is responsible for derailing diplomacy. Out of a desire to induce the United States to drop its denuclearization demands, Kim decides to show that his willingness to negotiate does not mean his will has been broken, and he proceeds with his missile launch. Much as the Japanese did before they attacked Pearl Harbor, he hopes that a missile test over Guam—a U.S. territory but not a state—will unnerve the United States enough to persuade it to accept his nuclear program, but not so much as to bring a full-scale war.

But then, one of his missiles expels debris over Guam. Fragments from the reentry vehicle strike the island itself, killing a few residents—who are, after all, U.S. citizens. Trump declares this “an act of war” and gives Kim 48 hours to issue a formal apology and a pledge to denuclearize. Kim does not comply, and the United States dusts off one of its plans for a limited military strike. It attacks a known missile storage facility, believing the limited nature of the target will induce Kim’s cooperation and minimize the risk of retaliation. Instead, Kim views the strike as the beginning of a larger effort to disarm him and as a prelude to regime change. Following his conventional bombardment of Seoul, the United States begins to attack other known weapons sites and command-and-control facilities to neutralize the threat. Kim launches nuclear weapons the following day.

The purpose of this vignette is not to suggest that war on the Korean Peninsula is inevitable, likely, or totally beyond the control of the parties involved. Rather, it is to illustrate how the forms of misperception now ingrained in the U.S.–North Korean relationship may interact with a situation that is already unfolding to invite a catastrophe that neither side wants.

KNOW THYSELF

There is no set of policies that can eliminate these risks. But there are steps U.S. policymakers can take to sharpen their own perceptions of North Korea; better understand how U.S. actions and signals affect the perceptions of their North Korean counterparts; and, perhaps most important, recognize the assumptions behind American beliefs.

The Trump administration should start by deepening its assessment of Pyongyang’s aims and bottom line. There are a handful of former

U.S. officials who have experience negotiating with the North Koreans and who could help current policymakers more accurately read North Korean signals. Even if it has arrived at a diplomatic opening by accident, the administration must now work with these experts to devise a strategy for diplomacy, including coming up with objectives that are more limited than full denuclearization. U.S. policymakers should also press the intelligence agencies not only to offer their best assessments of North Korean intentions but also to be explicit about the gaps and shortcomings in them.

Policymakers should also work with the intelligence community to examine how existing U.S. policies may look from Pyongyang. They should consider how those perceptions (or misperceptions) serve to reinforce or undermine U.S. objectives and how future changes in policy may be viewed. There is an all-too-human tendency to assume that an action will be seen as it is intended to be seen; intelligence analysts should help policymakers actively counter this tendency, especially when it comes to potential military strikes.

In addition to trying to understand the assumptions of North Korean policymakers, U.S. policymakers must work to understand their own. They should go back and examine them, carefully mapping the causal logic of any move they might make. By recognizing the flaws or weaknesses in their own assumptions, they will be better prepared to react nimbly to unexpected North Korean concessions or to manage the situation if engagement abruptly fails. Diplomatic encounters are not likely to unfold according to script, and if the United States and North Korea are not willing to be surprised and learn, they can neither take advantage of opportunities nor avoid making worst-case inferences that would rule out further discussions.

The prospect of grave misperceptions should instill a degree of caution in U.S. officials and prompt them to insert the equivalent of speed bumps into the policy process, above all in a moment of crisis. If the U.S.–North Korean relationship begins to deteriorate further and escalate toward conflict, they should pause to consider the problems of perception. Why did North Korea enter into direct talks if it didn't intend to denuclearize? What assumptions were made about the North that must now be interrogated? Such questions may seem basic, but they too often go unasked. Simply by considering them, U.S. policymakers can reduce the risk that flimsy credibility and hazardous misperceptions will bring about an unnecessary war. 🌐