

On the Brink of Nuclear War

Special Report: As nuclear war looms in Korea, the life-or-death question is whether President Trump and his team can somehow marshal the skill and strength of President Kennedy in the Cuban Missile Crisis, writes historian William R. Polk.

By William R. Polk

In the first part of this essay, I gave my interpretation of the background of the current confrontation in Korea. I argued that, while the past is the mother of the present, it has several fathers. What I remember is not necessarily what you remember; so, in this sense, the present also shapes or reshapes the past.

In my experience as a policy planner, I found that only by taking note of the perception of events as they are differently held by the participants could one understand or deal with present actions and ideas. I have tried to sketch out views of the past as we, the North Koreans and the South Koreans, differently view them in Part 1 of this essay.

Now I want to undertake a refinement of the record I have laid out. I want first to show how our perception, the interpretation we place on the events that swirl past us, adds a new and formative element to them. Whether consciously or not, we tend to put events into a pattern. So the pattern itself becomes part of the problem we face in trying to understand events. Staking out a path – an interpretation or a theory of what random bits and pieces mean or how they will be interpreted and acted upon by others – is a complex and contentious task.

Getting it wrong can lead us astray or even be very dangerous. So the interpreter, the strategist, must always be tested to see if his interpretation makes sense and the path he lays out is the one we want to travel. I will make this explicit below.

My experience in what was certainly the most dangerous situation America ever experienced, the Cuban Missile Crisis, led me to believe that at least in a crisis *how* we think about events and what we remember of the past often determines our actions and may be the deciding difference between life and death. So here I will begin with the mindset that underlay American policy for the last half century.

Anyone who reads the press or watches TV is beset with countless scraps of information. In my experience in government service, the deluge of information was almost paralyzing. Some of my colleagues joked that the way to defeat our

adversaries was to give them access to what passed over our desks every day. It would immobilize them as it sometimes immobilized us.

How to separate from the flow the merely interesting from the important and how to relate one event to others were demanding tasks. Making them useful has been undertaken by strategists time after time over the last several thousand years. Machiavelli is the best known among us, but he was far from the first. [I have dealt with these issues in detail in *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).]

Theory of Deterrence

The latest and arguably the most persuasive recent attempt to develop a sort of framework or matrix to bring some sense of order and some ability to understand events has been the theory of deterrence. While “just a theory,” it set American policy toward the Soviet Union in the Cold War. It was developed to understand and deal with the Soviet Union in the Cold War, but it will determine much of what America tries to do with North Korea today.

To simplify and summarize, Cold War strategists led by such men as Henry Kissinger, Thomas Schelling and Bernard Brodie believed that ultimately relationships among nations were mathematical. Deterrence thus meant gathering the elements that could be added up by both sides. If country “A” had overwhelming power, country “B” would be deterred in its own interest from actions that were detrimental to them. Failure to “do the sums” correctly in the “game of nations” was to “misplay.”

Emotion and even politics had no role; in the real world. It was *realpolitik* that governed. Put another way, the weak would add up their capabilities and would necessarily give way to the strong to avoid being destroyed.

The great Greek historian Thucydides long ago set the tone: “Right, as the world goes,” he wrote, “is only in question between equals in power; the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” Only by acting in this mindset would the national interests, the *real* interests, of each country be preserved and peace among nations be achieved.

Deterrence worked reasonably well up to and including the Cuban Missile Crisis. But during that crisis, as some of the theory’s critics had long held, a potentially fatal flaw became evident.

The flaw is that “national interest” – what can be added up or quantified as the assets and what gives it its strength – is not necessarily always coincident with “interest of government.” That is, governments may not always be guided by a rational calculation of national interest. There are times when leaders cannot

afford, even if they precisely add up the figures, to act according to such slow-moving impulses as national interest. They may be subject to quite different and more urgent impulses. They may be emotional or otherwise be irrational, fearful of their lives or worried that they would lose their positions, or they may be driven by public opinion or by the different calculations of such other centers of power as the military. Being guided by the abstract calculation of national interest may then be impossible.

Let me illustrate this from my experience in the Cuban Missile Crisis, then in a war game the Department of Defense (DOD) organized to reexamine the Missile Crisis and finally in a meeting in Moscow with my Russian counterparts.

In the Missile Crisis, both President Kennedy (certainly) and Chairman Khrushchev (probably) were under almost unbearable pressure not only in trying to figure out how to deal with the events but also from the warnings, importuning and urging of their colleagues, rivals, supporters and from their military commanders. Whether either leader was in danger of overthrow of his regime or assassination is still unknown, but both were at least potentially at risk because the stakes were, literally, the fate of the world and opinions on how to deal with the possibility of ruinous war were strongly held.

Obviously, the loss to both of their nations in the event of a nuclear exchange would have been catastrophic so the national interest of both was clear: it was to avoid war. But how to avoid it was disputatious. And it was not nations that were making decisions; it was the leaders, and their interests were only in part coincident with national interest.

We were lucky that at least Kennedy realized this dilemma and took steps to protect himself. What he did is not well understood so I will briefly summarize the main points. First, he identified General Lyman Lemnitzer, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), as the main hawk. Lemnitzer was pushing him toward a nuclear war and had shown his hand by presenting a "black" plan ("Operation Northwoods") to be carried out by the JCS to trigger war with Cuba.

[Curiously, "Operation Northwoods" is hardly known even today. It was described by the eminent scholar on intelligence James Bamford in *Body of Secrets* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 82 ff, as the "launching [of] a secret and bloody war of terrorism against their own country in order to trick the American public into supporting an-ill-conceived war they intended to launch against Cuba."

Provocations were to be manufactured: hijacking of aircraft, murders and the explosion of the rocket that was carrying astronaut John Glenn into space. Lemnitzer lied to Congress, denying the plan's existence, and had many of documents destroyed. Although he was dismissed as chairman of the JCS by Kennedy, the organization he formed within the JCS continued to plan covert

actions. It would have been surprising if Kennedy did not worry about a possible attempt on his government.]

Fearing a Coup d'Etat

Apparently realizing that the plan could easily have been turned into a coup d'état, Kennedy removed Lemnitzer as far from Washington as he could (to Europe to be the NATO commander). Kennedy also assembled a group of elder statesmen, most of whom had served under the Eisenhower and Truman administrations in positions senior to the current military commanders and were identified as conservatives – far from Kennedy's image as a liberal.

Ostensibly, he sought their advice, but in practice what he sought was their approval of his decisions. He also was careful to instruct the public in his speech on the Monday, the first public acknowledgement of the crisis, that he was firmly in control and was determined to protect American interests.

Then, in the solution to the crisis, removing the American missiles from Turkey, he pretended that their removal was not a price he had to pay to end the crisis. Thus, in several ways, he neutralized potential critics, at least during the crucial time of the Crisis. But, not long afterwards, he was assassinated by persons, forces, or interests about whom and whose motivation there is still much controversy. At minimum, we know that powerful people, including Lemnitzer, thought Kennedy had sold out national interest in pursuit of the interest of his administration.

At the same time in Moscow, Mr. Khrushchev probably risked his life by accepting the humiliation imposed on his regime by the forced withdrawal of Russian missiles from Cuba. Apparently, for of course we do not know, he felt less immediate danger than Kennedy because the Soviet system had always distrusted and guarded against its military commanders. A Lemnitzer there would probably have been "disappeared," not just sent into a polite exile. And hovering beside each of the senior officers of the Soviet army was a political commissar who was responsible to the civilian administration – that is, to the Communist Party leadership – for the officer's every move, every contact, almost every thought. The military did what the civil leadership told it to do.

I presume Khrushchev believed that he had his colleagues with him, but that cannot have been very reassuring given the record of the Politburo. And, when he died, Khrushchev or at least his reputation paid a price: he was refused the supreme accolade of Soviet leadership; he was not buried with other Soviet heroes in the Kremlin Wall. That we know; what we cannot know is whether or not he thought he was, or actually was, in danger of being overthrown.

What is clear is that he was strong enough – and faced with no blatant or destructive action by America – that he was able to surmount the “interest of government” to protect “national interest.” In short, he was not backed into a corner.

Were it not for the strength and bravery of both men, we might not have survived the Missile Crisis. Obviously, we cannot always be so served. Sometimes, we are apt to be dependent on weaker, more timorous and less steady men. This is not an abstract issue, and it has come back to haunt us in the Korean confrontation as it surely will in other confrontations. Understanding it may be a matter of our survival. That was not just my view but was also was even then the nagging worry of the DOD.

Thus, in the aftermath of the crisis, the DOD sought reassurance that deterrence had worked and would continue to work. That is, it sought to test the theory that leaders would add up the sums and be governed by what they found rather than by political, emotional or other criteria.

A Nuclear War Game

To this end, the DOD commissioned the conflict strategist Thomas Schelling to design and run a politico-military war game to push the experience of the Missile Crisis to the extreme, that is to find out what the Russians would they do if they were dealt a severe, painful and humiliating nuclear blow?

Schelling’s game pitted two small teams of senior, fully-briefed U.S. government officers against one another in the Pentagon. Red Team represented the USSR and Blue Team the U.S. Each was provided with all the information Khrushchev would have had. Shortly after assembling, we were told that Blue team destroyed a Red Team city with a nuclear weapon. What would Red Team do?

Since it was far weaker than the United States, by the deterrence theory it would cave in and not retaliate.

To Schelling’s exasperation, the game proved the opposite. It showed that action only in part depended on a rational calculation of national interest but rather in circumstances of crisis, would be governed by the political imperatives faced by the government. I have discussed this in detail elsewhere, but in brief, the members of Red Team, who were among the most experienced and gifted men from the State Department, the White House, the CIA and the DOD, chaired by the very conservative admiral who was Chief of Naval Operations, decided unanimously that Red Team had no option but to go to general war as fast and as powerfully as it could.

Shelling stopped the game, saying that we had “misplayed” and that if we were

right he would have to give up the theory of deterrence. We laid out the reasons for our decision.

That decision was taken on two grounds: the first was that acquiescence was not politically possible. No government, Russian or American or other, could accept the humiliation of the loss of a city and survive the fury of those who felt betrayed. Even if at ruinous cost, it would strike back. This is a lesson apparently still unlearned.

Indeed, it could cause the death of each person reading this essay if applied in real life in a nuclear first strike as I will shortly make clear in discussing the Korean crisis.

The second basis for the decision was that, despite Kissinger, Schelling and other "limited nuclear war" advocates, there is no such thing as limited nuclear war in the real world. A nuclear strike would inevitably lead to retaliation, nuclear if possible, and that retaliation would lead to counter-retaliation.

In the war game, Red Team realized that if Mr. Khrushchev were to retaliate for America's destruction of Baku by incinerating St. Louis, it would have posed a challenge, regardless of who was at fault or what the odds of success were, that Kennedy could not have ducked. He would certainly have been overthrown and almost certainly assassinated if he had not responded. He almost certainly would have destroyed a second Russian city.

Tit-for-tat had no stopping point. Each response would lead to the next and quickly to general war. So Red Team went immediately to the best of its bad options: hitting back immediately with everything it had: in short, we opted for general war.

Fortunately that scenario was not tested. In the real Cuban Missile Crisis, no city was incinerated. Neither Kennedy nor Khrushchev was pushed beyond "calculation." But it was a very close call. My own hunch, from having been one of the 25 or so civilians closely involved in the real-life crisis, is that Kennedy and his team could not have held firm much longer than the Thursday or Friday of that terrible week.

The implications are clear – and terrifying – but neither Schelling nor other Cold Warriors have accepted them. We are still today approaching the conflict in Korea with the mindset that our war game showed was fatally flawed.

The last test of the result of the war game came when I lectured on strategic planning and participated in a seminar on the Missile Crisis with the members of the then principal advisory group to the Politburo, the Institute of World Economy and International Affairs of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. In a word,

my opposite numbers there agreed with the analysis I have just laid out: Khrushchev could not have accepted an American nuclear attack. He would have responded even though he realized that the overwhelming advantage – the “numbers” – were against him.

They also agreed that in practical terms there was no such thing as limited nuclear war. A “limited” nuclear strike would be, inevitably, the first step in a general war.

Lacking Wise Leaders

I will speculate below on how the actual events of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the result of the war game might apply to the current conflict in Korea. Here let me anticipate by saying that we have no reason to believe that the men who will decide the issue are of the caliber of Kennedy and Khrushchev.

Both Kennedy and Khrushchev were strong, pragmatic, experienced and well supported men. In today’s conflict between the United States and North Korea, neither Donald Trump nor Kim Jong Un evince similar attributes. Some critics even question their sanity. But, they will make the decisions, so I focus on them, their motivations and their capacities. I begin with Mr. Trump.

I have never met Mr. Trump and our backgrounds are very different so I am driven to two, admittedly incomplete and questionable, ways of understanding him. The first of these is his own description of his thought process and way of acting. The three characteristics that seem to me most germane to foreign affairs and particularly to the confrontation in Korea are these:

–On November 12, 2015, Mr. Trump declared, “I love war.” In fact, as the record showed, he went to considerable trouble to deny himself the pleasures of going into harm’s way during the Vietnam War. And, now, should he decide to take America to war, he would not put his own life in danger.

In my time in Washington, such “war-lovers from afar” were often referred to as “chicken-hawks.” They loved to talk about war and to urge others to get into it, but, like Mr. Trump, they never volunteered for action and never, in their pronouncements, dwelt on the horror of actual combat. For them war was another TV episode where the good guys got a bit dusted up but always won.

Mr. Trump presumably meant by the word “war” something very different from real war since he explained, “I’m good at war. I’ve had a lot of wars on my own. I’m really good at war. I love war, in a certain way but only when we win.”

For Mr. Trump, as his actions show, every business deal was a sort of war. He conducted it as what military strategists call a zero-sum game: the winner took

all and the loser got nothing. There was little or no negotiation. "Attack" was the operational mode and his opponent would be driven to defeat by the threat of financial ruin. This was the "certain way" he called his many "wars on my own."

The record bears him out. He overwhelmed rivals with lawsuits against which they had to defend themselves at ruinous cost, convinced them that if they did not acquiesce he would destroy them and was unrelenting. He was very good at it. He made his fortune in this form of "war." He seems to believe that he can apply his experience in business to international affairs. But nations are not so likely to go out of business as the rivals he met in real estate transactions and some of them are armed with nuclear weapons.

—On several occasions, Mr. Trump set out his understanding of the role of nuclear weapons. In 2015, as a candidate, he was quoted as saying, "For me, nuclear is just the power, the devastation is very important to me." But I find no evidence that he realizes what "devastation" really means. It is one thing to drive a business rival into bankruptcy and quite another to oversee the burning to death of hundreds of thousands or millions of people and relegating still more to homelessness and starvation in a ruined environment.

One supposes that he is aware of what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but they are misleading. Modern nuclear weapons are far more powerful: a one megaton weapon, for example, is about 50 times as powerful as the weapon that destroyed Hiroshima. Those of us who dealt with the threat of nuclear war in the Cuban Missile Crisis were aware of the effects of such "standard" weapons.

I see no evidence that Mr. Trump knows what a nuclear war would actually do. Indeed, he is quoted as saying, "what is the point of having nuclear weapons if you don't use them?" He will find advisers who will tell him that they must be used. The ghost of General Lemnitzer hovers near the Oval Office.

Proud of Unpredictability

—Mr. Trump prides himself on unpredictability. Unpredictability was his business strategy. As he told an interviewer from CBS on January 1, 2016, "You want to be unpredictable ... And somebody recently said — I made a great business deal. And the person on the other side was interviewed by a newspaper. And how did Trump do this? And they said, he's so unpredictable. And I didn't know if he meant it positively or negative. It turned out he meant it positively."

Another time Trump said on TV "I want to be unpredictable." The record shows his use of the ploy, but perhaps it is more than just a ploy. Perhaps it is a manifestation of his personality, so I want to probe its meaning.

Years ago, I was informed that the CIA maintained a staff of psychoanalysts to

profile foreign leaders. If the office still exists, the doctors presumably do not practice their arts on American officials, and certainly not on the President. As part of their professional code, psychiatrists are not supposed to diagnose anyone they have not personally examined, and I doubt that anyone will be able to get Mr. Trump to lie down on the couch.

But, as psychiatrists Peter Kramer and Sally Satel have pointed out, Mr. Trump has shown himself to be “impulsive, erratic, belligerent and vengeful” so “many experts believe that Mr. Trump has a narcissistic personality disorder.” Reacting to having such a leader with his hand on the nuclear trigger, Maryland Congressman Jamie Raskin introduced a bill to establish an “Oversight Commission on Presidential Capacity” (H.R. 1987) as authorized by the 25th Amendment to the Constitution. It has not been acted upon and it allows the President latitude to “pardon” himself.

Since his actions and the efforts of others do not offer much insight, I suggest his actions lend themselves to a perhaps instructive analogy, the game of “chicken.”

—In “chicken,” two drivers aim their speeding cars at one another. The one who flinches, turns aside, or (as Secretary of State Dean Rusk put it to me during the Cuban Missile Crisis) “blinks,” is the chicken. The winner is the driver who convinces the loser that he is irrational, deaf to all appeals and blind to danger. He cannot get out of the way.

In Mr. Trump’s strategy of war, the irrational man wins because he cannot be reached with any warning, argument or advice. Knowing this, the other man loses precisely because he is rational. Three things follow from this analogy. They seem evident in Mr. Trump’s approach to the issues of war or peace:

The first is that irrationality, ironically becomes a rational strategy. If one can convince his opponents that he cannot be reasoned with, he wins. This has worked for years in business for Mr. Trump. I see no reason to believe that he will give it up.

The second is that the driver of the car does not need information or advice. They are irrelevant or even detrimental to his strategy. So, we see that Mr. Trump pays no attention to the professionals who man the 16 agencies set up by previous administrations to provide information or intelligence.

One example where his professed plan of action flies in the face of the intelligence appreciation is Iran. As the former deputy director of the CIA David Cohen found “disconcerting,” Mr. Trump has repeatedly said that Iran was not abiding by the terms of the Iranian-American deal on nuclear weapons before

“finding the intelligence to back it up.” But that is inherent in Trump’s strategy of confrontation. He surely knows – but does not care – that the entire intelligence community holds that Iran has abided by the deal.

In Trump’s mind, intelligence analysts are “back seat drivers” and should keep quiet. By questioning his blindness, they suggest to the driver of the other car that Mr. Trump might swerve aside. Thus, they threaten to destroy the irrationality that is the essence of his strategy.

And, third, what Mr. Trump, the “driver” of the car in the “chicken” confrontation, does need is absolute loyalty. Those who sit beside him must never question how he is driving. Any hint of their trying to dissuade his actions threatens to destroy his strategy. So, as we see almost daily, at any hint of disagreement, he pushes his copilots out of the car. Indeed, at least one hardly even got into the “car” before being pushed out the door.

His actions both in business and in the presidency illustrate these points. He takes pride in irrational actions, shifting from one position to another, even its opposite, on what appears to be a whim. He disdains advice even from the intelligence services and also from presumably loyal members of his inner circle. What he demands is absolute loyalty.

Finally, it seems to me that Mr. Trump has understood, far better than most of us, that the public likes to be entertained. It is bored by consistency. It doesn’t pay much attention to explanation or analysis. And as the financially successful record of the TV industry and the sorry record of the book publishing industry show, the public wants entertainment. Mr. Trump caters to popular taste: every episode is new; every remark, simple; every threat, dramatic; and, perhaps most powerfully of all, he echoes angers, disappointments, hurts, desires that many of his supporters also feel.

This mode of operation worked for Trump in the business world. His image of ruthlessness, determination and even irrationality caused some of the biggest potential rivals to get out of his way and many others to accept his terms rather than risk a collision. It is not Trump or his mode of operation that has changed but the context in which he operates. Citibank with which he clashed did not have nuclear weapons; North Korea does. So how does Kim Jong Un measure up?

Measuring Kim Jong Un

Kim Jong Un is the third generation of the North Korean leadership. That position is almost beyond the comprehension of modern Westerners. Ruling dynasties went out of fashion in the First World War. But perhaps consideration of “dynasty” can be made to yield useful insights. One who tried to learn what

dynastic succession could tell us was the great medieval North African philosopher of history, Ibn Khaldun.

Observing Berber and Arab societies, Ibn Khaldun found that the first dynasty, sweeping in from the desert, was made up of men who were rough and vigorous; their sons still remembered times of struggle and retained their hardihood, but the third generation grew used to ease and settled into luxury. Its leaders kept power by relying on outside forces. The fourth generation lost it all.

The fit to Korea is far from exact, but it is provocative. Kim Il-sung was a guerrilla warrior, not unlike the warring tribal leaders with whom Ibn Khaldun dealt. Sweeping in from Siberia he took power (admittedly with Soviet help), ruled for nearly half a century and established the dynasty; in the second generation, his son Kim Jong-Il came seamlessly to power on his death in 1994. While he shared little of his father's war-like experiences, he seems to have been a hard man, as Ibn Khaldun expected. But he gives just a hint of the growth of the enjoyment of the new environment. The luxury he enjoyed was exactly what Ibn Khaldun would have predicted. He took as his mistress a beautiful dancer. From this union came Kim Jong Un, the personification of the third dynasty.

Young Kim Jong Un grew up in what was, in Korean terms, the lap of luxury and as a child was allowed to play the child's game of soldiers. His soldiers, however, were not toys; they were real. There is no certain information, but it is believed that he was made a senior officer in the North Korean army when he was just a child. When he was 12 years old, his father sent him to a private school in Switzerland. Being provided with a personal chef to cook Korean dishes as well as a tutor and a driver/bodyguard, he does not seem to have really been "in" Europe.

He was taken out of the Swiss school when he was 15 and put into a public school in Korea. Those few who knew him have commented that he was intensely patriotic. At his father's choice, although he was not the elder son, he was singled out as the successor, the man of the third generation.

Despite this unusual background he seems remarkably like an ordinary American schoolboy: he loved sports, particularly basketball, spent a lot of time watching movies and was an indifferent student. This is just about all known about his background. He did not emerge in public until about the time his father was dying.

In 2009, he is thought to have married a beautiful young woman who has been variously described as a singer in a popular music group, a cheerleader in a sports event and a doctoral candidate in a Korean university. When his father finally died in 2011, the 32-year-old Kim Jong-un became North Korea's leader.

But on assuming power, he showed himself a more ruthless, determined and absolute ruler than Ibn Khaldun would have predicted.

Almost immediately, he purged his father's top general among other senior officials, and allegedly he ordered or tolerated the murder of his elder brother whom he must have seen as a potential rival. More generally, he proved himself skillful in organizing the bitter memories of the Korean War among his people to support his regime.

To explain in part the inconsistency of what he did and what was expected of the third generation, I suggest that that he must have constantly had before him lesson of Saddam Husain who lacked nuclear weapons, could not defend himself and was hanged. Watching these events as a young man, Kim Jong Un must have been convinced that he could not afford to give himself up to luxury. As his opponents charge, he may have many vices but sloth is not one of them.

Policy Options

From this sketchy background of the two men whose hands are on the nuclear trigger, I turn to what their choices are. That is, what is the range of policies they must be considering or enacting to accomplish what they say are their objectives.

As I understand his objectives, the ruler of North Korea is determined to protect his regime (and of course his own life) and believes he can do so only if he has the capacity to deliver a blow sufficiently painful to any attacker that would deter him.

As Siegfried Hecker, the former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory who has visited North Korea seven times and toured its nuclear facilities, has written (*Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 7 August 2017), Kim Jong Un "is determined to develop an effective deterrent to keep the United States out." His answer is a missile-carried nuclear weapon.

Contrariwise, President Trump's announced objective (which in general echoes that of previous administrations) is to get the North Korean government to stop its development of both nuclear weapons and missiles. He has, theoretically, a range of policies to effect his objective.

Taking back my former role as a policy planner, I would divide the possible courses of American action, the cost of each and its likelihood of being accomplished as follows:

—The first possible policy is what could be called "bluster and threat without armed action." This is what President Trump is doing today. His outbursts

apparently go over well with his loyal supporters but his words have not apparently at least so far affected Kim Jong Un.

However his words have delivered the worst possible result: it has increased North Korean fear of U.S. invasion, has increased Kim Jong Un's determination to develop a deliverable nuclear weapons capability and has probably stoked the war fever of the Koreans.

Thomas Schelling, with whom I disagreed on other issues, got this one right. As he wrote in *The Strategy of Conflict*, "madmen, like small children, can often not be controlled by threats" and "if he is not to react like a trapped lion, [an opponent] must be left some tolerable recourse. We have come to realize that a threat of all-out retaliation gives the enemy every incentive, in the event he should choose not to heed the threat, to initiate his transgression with an all-out strike on us; it eliminates lesser courses of action and forces him to choose between extremes."

In making that choice, Kim Jong Un hears President Trump. threatening "fire and fury, the likes of which this world has never seen before." (Kim responded with the threat to bomb America's air base on Guam island "to teach the U.S. a severe lesson.")

Mr. Trump said America was "locked and loaded" and its "patience is over." And, in addition to remarks on the internet and to audiences all over America, he authorized a simulated war exercise (known as Foal Eagle 2017) by some 300,000 troops armed with live ammunition in and around South Korea which, of course, the government of the North regarded as provocative. But the U.S. did not alert its troops in South Korea nor its aircraft on Guam nor its ships at sea that an outbreak of hostilities was imminent. In short, the threat appeared all talk but no action.

Sen. John McCain, a man with some experience in combat, commented that President Trump's recent fiery rhetoric on North Korea would only ratchet up the heat for a possible confrontation but nothing else.

As the conservative political commentator Anthony Cordesman wrote on August 5, 2017, "One would hope that the North Korean 'crisis' is moving away from bluster and counter bluster ... [since] gross overreaction and issuing empty threats discredits the U.S. in terms of allies support and is not a meaningful bargaining tool in dealing with fellow blusterers like Kim Jong Un."

Conclusion: the likelihood of this line of action accomplishing the stated objective of American policy is near zero, but the costs are twofold: first, the threat of intervention forces the North Korean government to accelerate its

acquisition of the very weapons America wishes it to relinquish and serves to keep its armed forces on alert lest the Americans convert threat to attack or stumble into war; the second cost is that such a policy undercuts the image Americans wish to project as the upholders of peace and stability even if not always of democracy and independence.

The Limited Strike Option

–The second possible policy would be to attack selected targets, including members of North Korea’s government, with Special Forces and/or drones. Employment of such tactics even in less organized societies, such as Somalia, Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan, have created chaos but have not produced what their advocates predicted.

North Korea is a regimented state with a high level of “security” comparable to China. In the 1960s, I once was ordered to find out what the CIA might be able to do with this or a similar option to slow down Chinese nuclear development. The CIA was then sending agents into China from secret bases on Quemoy and Matsu. I asked what they found out. The responsible CIA officer replied that he did not know because none ever returned. That experience would probably be repeated in Korea.

Conclusion: the likelihood of such action accomplishing the stated objective of American policy is near zero, but the cost could be catastrophic: An American attack, even if denied and covert, almost certainly would trigger a North Korean response that might provoke an American counterstroke that could escalate to nuclear war.

–The third possible policy would be to encourage North Korea’s neighbors to attempt to coerce it to disarm and/or to scale back its military policy. Such a policy could aim to get China to control the North Koreans and possibly then encourage or allow Japan and/or South Korea to acquire nuclear weapons and so, themselves, pose a threat to North Korea and indirectly to Chinese interests.

Mr. Trump has several times called on the Chinese to effect the American policy on North Korea and has expressed his disappointment that they have not done so. When their own interests were at stake, the Chinese did impose sanctions and cut back on the import of Korean coal, iron ore and seafood. But China can hardly be expected to lend itself to be a tool of American policy. It too has memories of the Korean War and of attempts to weaken or overthrow it. Today, it also sees the U.S. as its rival in the Pacific. So, it is unlikely that Mr. Trump’s saying that “they do Nothing for us with North Korea, just talk. We will no longer allow this to continue” – will win Chinese support.

If not the Chinese, what about the Japanese? As I have pointed out in Part 1 of this essay, Japan is tarred by the nearly half century of its brutal regime in Korea. Korean “comfort women,” sexual slaves, are still seeking compensation for the misery inflicted on them and their plight is standard fare in Korean media.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has been pushing for Japanese rearmament and is known for his hard line on North Korea, is not a good choice to convince North Korea to cooperate with America. Encouraging militarism in Japan will raise bitter memories all over East Asia.

Moreover, were Japan to rearm itself with nuclear weapons or were South Korea to be given them, as Mr. Cordesman thinks Mr. Trump may feel forced to do, the overall and long-range objectives of the United States would be severely damaged: the “cure would be worse than the malady.”

We don’t need more nuclear weapons powers; the political history of South Korea gives little assurance of a “responsible” nuclear policy; and there is no reason to believe that a nuclear-armed South Korea or a nuclear-armed Japan would be more successful than a nuclear-armed America.

Worse, if South Korea and Japan were to develop or acquire nuclear weapons, such action might set off a scramble by other nations to acquire them. The world was already deadly dangerous when only two states had nuclear weapons; the danger of use by design or accident was multiplied when five more states acquired them and if the number keeps on growing accidental or deliberate use will become almost inevitable.

To spread weapons further is against America’s national interest although some of President Trump’s advisers apparently discount the danger and believe enhanced nuclear power at home and selective spread abroad is to the interest both of the nation and of his administration.

Conclusion: the likelihood of getting others to successfully accomplish American objectives vis-à-vis North Korea is near zero. Faced with nuclear-armed South Korea and Japan, North Korea would logically accelerate rather than cut back its weapons program. China has its own policies and is unlikely to serve as an American proxy. Moreover, the costs of giving South Korea and Japan nuclear weapons is potentially enormous.

The Nuclear Option

–The fourth theoretical policy option would be an American or American-led “coalition” attack on North Korea similar to our two attacks on Iraq and our attack on Afghanistan. America could hit the country with almost any level of destruction it chose from total annihilation to targeted demolition. Knowing

that they could not prevent attacks, the North Koreans have adopted a policy that sounds very like America's Cold War strategy against the Soviet Union, mutual assured destruction or MAD. What would this amount to in the Korean conflict?

The cost of war to North Korea would be almost unimaginable. If nuclear weapons were used, much of North Korea would be rendered unlivable for a generation or more. General Douglas MacArthur had wanted to use the nuclear bomb during the first Korean War in the early 1950s, but even with only conventional weapons used in that conflict, the Koreans suffered casualties, reportedly, of about one in each three persons.

If the U.S. used nuclear weapons this time, millions, perhaps as many as 8 million to 12 million, would be killed and many of the rest of the 26 million inhabitants would be wounded or afflicted with radiation sickness. Once initiated, the attack would have done this damage in minutes or hours. So how would the North Koreans respond?

Their government would order them to retaliate. That is what they are constantly being trained to do. As the Korean War demonstrated, the North Koreans are determined fighters. It would be foolish to expect them to surrender.

The North Korean army is said to be the fourth largest in the world, roughly 1 million men, and is backed up by an active reserve about 5-6 times that many from a potential enrollment of about 10 million. This force is equipped with perhaps 10,000 tanks and self-propelled cannon.

The numbers are impressive but, as in chess, it is position that counts in war. The North is believed to have about 12,000 cannon and roughly 2,300 rockets within range of Seoul, the capital of South Korea. Seoul has a population of somewhat more than 10 million people and, in the event of an American attack on North Korea, the North Koreans have said they would obliterate it.

As David Wood wrote on April 18, 2017, "In a matter of minutes, these heavy, low-tech weapons could begin the destruction of the South Korean capital with blizzards of glass shards, collapsed buildings and massive casualties that would decimate this vibrant U.S. ally and send shock waves through the global economy."

In addition to the South Koreans who would suffer and die, there are about 30,000 US troops in the armistice zone. They, and the hundreds of thousands of dependents, supporters and families of the troops living in Seoul, are hostages to U.S. policy. They also would suffer terrible casualties.

Could the North Koreans carry out such massive counterstrikes? There seems

little or no doubt that they could, even if they were subjected to massive first strikes even with nuclear weapons. The North Koreans learned from the first Korean War to use mobile, hard to detect or target, launchers and to go underground to prepared firing points.

Probably many of the North Korean weapons would be destroyed, but there are so many that the surviving pieces could inflict massive casualties. Almost incredible photos, from North Korean television, published in *The Sun* on April 26, 2017, showed demonstration by hundreds of North Korean artillery pieces and rocket launchers firing into the sea. In the event of war, they would be firing into Seoul.

Then there are the missiles. Japan generally and U.S. bases in Japan and on the island of Guam are within the range of North Korean mid-range rockets. And Alaska and the U.S. West Coast are either already or soon will be within range. Would North Korea use them as a counterstrike? On August 7, as *Business Insider* reported, "North Korea issued a stark warning to the US: If you attack us, we will retaliate with nuclear weapons."

Judging from my experience in the Cuban Missile Crisis, I am sure that we would have done so. It is unlikely that Kim Jong Un would do less than John F. Kennedy.

Losing Los Angeles

If in reply to an American attack, the North Koreans struck the United States what would be the result? Loren Thompson speculated in the August 30, 2017 issue of *Forbes* on "What a Single North Korean Nuclear Warhead Could Do To Los Angeles." He picked Los Angeles because it is or soon will be in range of North Korean missiles and would be an obvious choice against which to threaten retaliation. With a population of more than 13 million, it is the second largest city in America.

As I write this, North Korea appears to have demonstrated a somewhat less powerful thermonuclear weapon, about seven times the power of the bomb that obliterated Hiroshima, but Thompson speculates on the result of Los Angeles being hit by a bomb that North Korea presumably will soon have, about 33 times as powerful as the Hiroshima bomb.

Hit by it, all structures, no matter how securely built with reinforced concrete, within a radius of half a mile from ground zero "would be either totally destroyed or rendered permanently unusable." The enormous pressure created by the fireball would heavily damage the adjoining circle of 2½ to 3 miles. Virtually all civic facilities (electrical grids, water mains, transport

facilities, etc.) would be rendered inoperative and civil services (fire departments, police, hospitals, schools) would be destroyed or severely damaged.

A cloud of radioactive materials would be spread over a far larger area. And perhaps as many as a million people would have been burned to death immediately with many more grievously wounded and unable to get help. And that would be only in the first hours or days. In the following days, the wounded, often suffering from burns, hungry, thirsty, terrified and desperate, would limp out of the core area into the suburbs and surrounding towns, overwhelming their facilities.

Los Angeles would be only one target. North Korea would have nothing to lose by using all of its missiles and bombs. Some might go astray or malfunction, but some might hit San Francisco, Seattle, perhaps Denver and more remotely St. Louis, Dallas and perhaps Chicago. If one reached New York, the damage would be far greater than in Los Angeles.

Conclusion: As Steven Bannon, President Trump's former "Chief Strategist" is quoted as saying, "There's no military solution [to North Korea's nuclear threats], forget it. Until somebody solves the part of the equation that shows me that ten million people in Seoul don't die in the first 30 minutes from conventional weapons, I don't know what you're talking about, there's no military solution here, they got us."

That may explain why he was fired. And retired Lt. General James Clapper, who as the former Director of National Intelligence was not in danger of losing his job, told CNN, we must "accept the fact that they are a nuclear power."

An attack on North Korea, while almost certainly devastating to North Korea, would be prohibitively expensive for America. Moreover, while it would temporarily prevent North Korea from posing a nuclear threat, it would create another area of chaos, like those created in Iraq, Libya, Somalia and Afghanistan. Attacking North Korea is not a rational policy choice.

Trying to Talk

—The remaining policy option is negotiation. What would be negotiable and what not? What would be the modalities? What would constitute success and what would be the result of failure? How could a result be made believable and how could it be enforced?

I think we must begin by recognizing that it would be irrational for North Korea to give up missiles and nuclear weapons. Despite the horror with which I view nuclear weapons, they are very attractive to small nations. They level the playing field. A Texas saying from my youth sums it up: Mr. Colt's invention of the cowboy's pistol "made all men equal." The nuclear weapon is pistol writ

large. It is the ultimate defense.

For Kim Yong Un to give up his nuclear weapons, while we keep ours and have announced that we intend to overthrow his regime, would be tantamount to his committing suicide. He may be evil, as many believe, but there is no reason to believe that he is a fool.

Could not America offer in the course of negotiations a series of graduated steps in which over time a slow-down and ultimate elimination of missiles and nuclear weapons could be traded for ending of sanctions and increased aid? The answer, I think, is "yes, but." The "but" is that Kim Yong Un would almost certainly insist on three things: the first is that he would not give up *all* his weapons and so would insist that North Korea be recognized as a nuclear power; the second is that he not be humiliated in the negotiated cut; and the third is that some formula be worked out to guarantee the deal. I have dealt with the first two issues above; I turn now to the third, how to guarantee the agreement.

The Bush administration invasion of Iraq in 2001 showed that America could create excuses to void any commitment it might make and provide excuses for any action it wished to take. The current push by the Trump administration to renege on the treaty made with Iran and written into American law by the Senate must convince the North Koreans that a treaty with America is just a scrap of paper. He must be convinced that America cannot be trusted.

But, if China and Russia were prepared to guarantee the deal and Japan and South Korea acquiesced to it and also gave up their option to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons, that could be the first step in a phased series of steps that might be productive. At the same time, America would have to give up its ineffective sanctions, stop such provocative acts as the massive war game on the frontier and the barrage of threats and undertake a sort of Marshall Plan to lift North Korea out of poverty and hunger.

Conclusion: I am convinced that it will not be possible in the foreseeable future to get Kim Jong Un or any conceivable successor to give up deliverable nuclear weapons. Thus, there can be no "success," as described in current policy statements by the Trump administration. But, arrangements can be created – by enlisting China and Russia as partners in negotiations and by renouncing threats and such damaging (and ineffective) policies as sanctions – to gradually create an atmosphere in which North Korea can be accepted as a partner in the nuclear "club."

Failure to move in this direction will leave us, at best, in the limbo of fear and the possibility of stumbling into war. This is obviously a gambit that may fail. What is clear, however, is that none of the alternatives has worked or is

likely to work. To embark on this path will require a degree of statesmanship, which we may not have.

How to Do It

If the United States government should decide to try this option, I think the following steps will have to be taken to start negotiations:

First, the U.S. government must accept the fact that North Korea is a nuclear power;

Second, it must commit itself formally and irrevocably to a no-first-strike policy. That was the policy envisaged by the Founding Fathers when they denied the chief executive the power to initiate aggressive war;

Third, it must remove sanctions on North Korea and begin to offer in a phased pattern aid to mitigate the current (and potentially future) famines caused by droughts and crop failures; helping North Korea to move toward prosperity, and reducing fear; and

Fourth, stop issuing threats and drop the unproductive and provocative war games on the DMZ.

Will, or even can, any American administration move in this direction? I think the answer will depend in large part on the education of the government leaders and the public among both of whom the level of ignorance of the real costs of war, especially nuclear war, is politically crippling.

As I have suggested, Mr. Trump has shown no comprehension of the costs of war in a nuclear context. Nor has the general public. The pictures of children on Guam being told not to look at the flash of the fireball reminds one of the ridiculous advice to school children in America in the Cold War to take refuge under their desks.

The reality of a modern war must be explained and taught. I do not know if Korean children are so taught, but their parents or grandparents knew it firsthand. This generation of Americans has never seen war up-close in America although some of their fathers saw it in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Unfortunately, memories fade and Americans today do not want to be informed of the danger of a new war. Escapism is one of the great dangers we face.

In the American tradition, the President is the nation's teacher. We must insist he perform that task or we could pay the supreme price of falling off the edge into the dark void of nuclear war.

William R. Polk is a veteran foreign policy consultant, author and professor who

taught Middle Eastern studies at Harvard. President John F. Kennedy appointed Polk to the State Department's Policy Planning Council where he served during the Cuban Missile Crisis. His books include: *Violent Politics: Insurgency and Terrorism*; *Understanding Iraq*; *Understanding Iran*; *Personal History: Living in Interesting Times*; *Distant Thunder: Reflections on the Dangers of Our Times*; and *Humpty Dumpty: The Fate of Regime Change*.
