

# The Rational Actor’s MADMAN Theory for the New Age: The Korean Mutually Assured Death-grip



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One of the most interesting things of the ongoing North Korean Crisis<sup>1</sup> is its inability to be solved by conventional military or diplomatic means.

Fifty years from now we may very well be still contemplating how to handle Pyongyang’s provocations. Years of half-hearted efforts by a slew of US administrations failed to achieve anything meaningful, giving sufficient space for the Kim dynasty to manoeuvre and survive in spite of sanctions, multiple military confrontations and intimidating military ‘exercises’.

A number of more extreme ‘solutions’ have been indirectly proffered by the Trump administration.<sup>2</sup> Flagged by some of the US commentariat is the possibility of the US launching a pre-emptive military strike against North Korea.<sup>3</sup> To them a strike of this nature would, at the very least, ‘de-fang’ the Kim dynasty by levelling its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and would severely affect the credibility of the ‘Dear Leader’ himself, and may lead to a coup d’état against him.

However, the problem with this option is that Kim Jong Un, should he survive a decapitation strike, could throw caution to the wind and launch a massive retaliation against South Korea and the US military presence it hosts. Were that to happen, all bets are off. Pyongyang, knowing full well that it could not sustain a conventional military assault against the combined forces of South Korea and the US, may engage in a complex hybridised war. Not a re-run of 1950-53, but something far more gruelling such as an artillery and cyber attack on the South Korean capital Seoul, followed in short order by commando attacks, both over the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel and delivered by submarine against targets within South Korea. The chaos that this would cause to the South Korean and American militaries cannot be underestimated.

A second wave of assaults targeting the South Korean port city of Busan as well as the city of Incheon, site of MacArthur’s famous flanking manoeuvre against North Korean forces back in 1950, would have one specific mission – to wipe out as much of South Korea’s critical infrastructure as possible, so that ROK<sup>4</sup> and US forces are unable to mount effective conventional movements and get access to rapid resupply.

Much of the North Korean Army may well then charge over the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel to engage the combined ROK and US forces to ‘punish them’ before retreating back to North Korea to conduct a defence-in-depth. While conducting its defence-in-depth, North Korea could play for time, anticipating that foreign ‘volunteers’, seeing American forces in disarray, enter the fray and internationalise the conflict. Again, this possibility cannot be discounted. A war on the Korean Peninsula, however it starts, may well evolve in quite different ways from how red-team war gamers anticipate.

And should foreign volunteers arrive in unmarked uniforms to aid North Korea with new technology, or even simply turn up for the fight, possibly employing anti-American extremist groups as mercenaries such as Islamic State and Al Qaeda fighters, the likelihood of the US having a quick victory over Pyongyang is doubtful. The fact that North Korea has a handful of potentially operational nuclear weapons that it could use in any future fight certainly alters the equation. North Korea now has three major deterrents in its arsenal – a hair-trigger conventional response, a cyber response and a nuclear response. The fact that a hypothetical ‘limited’ US military strike can potentially be met by a series of coordinated, highly organised hybridised asymmetric counter-strike/s must be borne in mind by Washington and its allies.

Yet arguably the most important thing that Washington needs to understand and consider is what military unilateralism in the Korean context would do to US-China relations.<sup>5</sup> If Washington moves to dethrone the Kim regime without Beijing's expressed backing, there is the outside chance of China indirectly supporting North Korea from the sidelines.

North Korea is a critical buffer state for China – a buffer it is unlikely to relinquish irrespective of its public or private misgivings about Kim Jong Un. China has no interest in a US garrison on its border with North Korea, nor a South Korean garrison, because as a US ally, South Korean forces would be seen to be acting in America's interest and therefore against the interest of China.

Underlying all of this, the most critical issue with Korea is that everyone believes that the status quo ante is the best of all possible outcomes because war would be ruinous for Northeast Asia as a whole. The multilayered interlinkages, economic and strategic, that bind the US to Northeast Asia as it is currently configured, would mean that war on Korea would potentially unravel trade and investment networks worth billions, the very networks keeping current political leaderships in place.

So what to do?

Let the Chinese and the Russians support the Kim dynasty. Respond to Kim's threats with valid counter-threats to save face and reassure allies that no one is about to escalate or miscalculate their way into a disastrous military conflict. And always keep the door open to a diplomatic settlement to current tensions. Prior Kim regimes were open to lessening international tensions when it suited them, and this Kim will be no different. The Korean Crisis of today is really a matter of 'keep calm and carry on'.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> White H., [North Korea crisis: A hard look at what's next](#), The Straits Times, August 28, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Perry D., [U.S. military hawks consider preemptive military strike as North Korea nuclear-weapon capability grows](#), The Oregonian, August 9, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Lockie A., [Trump says the military is 'locked and loaded' to strike North Korea – Here's how it would go down](#), Business Insider, Military & Defense, August 11, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Republic of Korea (ROK), the alternative name for South Korea

<sup>5</sup> Campbell C., [Unilateral Action by Trump on North Korea Will Simply Add to an Already Intractable Problem](#), Time.com, April 10, 2017