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Madmen, North Korea, and War

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The seemingly accepted wisdom that American President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un are paired madmen on the edge of war has little to support it other than projected fears. There will be no war because war on the Korean peninsula benefits no one and is very bad for everyone (we'll get to the madmen theory in a moment.)

North Korea's weapons, nuclear and conventional, are arguably the most defensive ever fielded. The North has no realistic claims on overseas territory or resources to resolve, and its borders are stable. Its weapons have not been used offensively more or less since 1953. They exist within the most perfect example of mutually assured destruction history has seen.

Mutually assured destruction, MAD, is what kept the Cold War cool, the understanding that if either the United States or Russia unleashed nuclear weapons, both sides would be destroyed. The same applies today on the Korean Peninsula, where any conflict means the end of the North and the end of the Kim dynasty. "Conflict" in this sense also includes an invasion of South Korea by the North. The United States and its allies will win any fight. Kim and everyone with any power, influence or stake in the North knows that. The nation of North Korea exists to exist, living proof of its own *juche* philosophy of self-reliance. North Korea has no reason to start a war that will end in its own destruction. Its nuclear weapons are only useful if they are never used.

Any talk of an American conventional "surgical strike" ignores the reality that no amount of planning can ensure every weapon of mass destruction will be destroyed; if that was possible the United States would have done it. Any attack on North Korea will result in a nuclear response — there is nothing "limited" for

a cornered animal fighting for its life. While it is unclear a North Korean missile could reach American territory, no one in Washington has ever been willing to bet the house that a submarine with a nuke, or North Korean special forces with a dirty bomb, couldn't do significant damage to an American city. Or to Seoul and Tokyo, both also well within range of North Korean nuclear and conventional missiles.

So while the American mainland is not under the threat of mutually assured destruction from Pyongyang per se, war on the Korean Peninsula would inevitably destroy American allies South Korea and Japan, unleash radioactivity across the Pacific, and cripple the global economy such that from Washington's point of view it does indeed exist in a state of virtual mutually assured destruction. Deterrence works. Ask the Cold War.

All that's left is the madman theory, the idea that Kim and Trump are irrational, impulsive people who could just one night say let's push the button. The problem with this theory is that nothing in history supports it.

The Kim dynasty has been in power some 70 years, three generations. They have weathered conventional conflict, famine, crushing sanctions, internal strife, and hostile acts. They survived the fall of the Soviet Union, the transition of China to a pseudo-capitalist economy, and American governments from Truman to Trump. You don't stay in power for seven decades acting irrationally or impulsively. You stay in power and hold your own against multiple superpowers by careful action. And there is nothing in the current record to support any contention the current Kim might act any more irrationally than his nuclear-armed dad did.

The Central Intelligence Agency agrees. A top official said Kim's actions are those of a "rational actor" motivated to ensure regime survival. "There's a clarity of purpose in what Kim Jong UN has done," according to Yong Suk Lee of the Agency's Korea Mission Center. "Waking up one morning and deciding he wants to nuke Los Angeles is not something Kim is likely to do. He wants to rule for a long time and die peacefully in his own bed."

Which leaves Trump as the last standing madman. The problem is, after some ten months, it is hard to point to any irrational act, an actual decision made or action taken that is without logic or reason, something that a madman did anyway knowing the consequences would be dire.

Forget the tweets; whatever they are, they have come to be seen by the world outside the media as inconsequential. The Tweets are mean, stupid, crude, unpresidential, provocative, and all the rest, but they have never added up to much more than steamy fuel for pop psychologists. Internationally, governments have learned to leave them unanswered except for the occasional diplomatic snark. Nothing that scales to the level of nuclear war-irrationality has actually happened.

The strongest case for "irrational" is based on Trump's apparent impulsivity. Despite his lack of political experience, Trump has lived a very public life, in the spotlight for most of the time at least two of the three Kim's have been on the world stage. He ran companies, made and lost money, he got himself elected president. He's been in office now some ten months and absolutely none of the apocalyptic predictions people have made have come to pass. We end up right back at the tweets, a long string of impulsive remarks not followed by impulsive acts.

In comparison, President George W. Bush invaded Iraq in part because they tried to assassinate his dad 12 years earlier. It was Bush's nonsensical inclusion of North Korea in his "Axis of Evil" that scuttled the last real attempt at nuclear diplomacy with Pyongyang. Bush provocatively demanded regime change, a

string of actions which lead in a direct line to the North going nuclear in 2003. Bush also found time to refer to North Korea's previous leader, Kim Jong Il, as a pygmy.

President Obama created new American wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, re-entered the Iraq war, and surged without result into Afghanistan. He held weekly meetings where he alone decided which human beings across the globe would be snuffed out by drones, allegedly claiming "I'm really good at killing people." With one failed exception, Obama avoided substantive negotiations with Pyongyang, while threatening the United States "will not hesitate to use our military might" against the North.

And yet the current president is the one voted most likely to act impulsively and start a war. So far he's the only recent president who hasn't.

What's left is the "but not yet" pseudo-argument, that whatever one expects Trump to do, just because he hasn't done it does not mean he won't. Hard to refute people who demand one foretell the future, but go ahead and bookmark this page and see how the conclusions look in a year.

At this point we have run out of reasons why there will be war on the Korean Peninsula.

With the exception of the Trump element, all of the factors that will prevent war in 2017 have been preventing war in Korea for decades. There is nothing in the record, recent or historical, that supports the idea Trump (or Kim) will wake up for cocoa, push a button, and start World War III. It's a rough, messy, incomplete version of peace, and we're just going to have to learn to live with it.