

10-15-2018

North Korea and The Nucleus of Denuclearization

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (2018) "North Korea and The Nucleus of Denuclearization," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 18 : Iss. 5 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol18/iss5/5>

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For many years with three different supreme leaders of the Democratic Republic of North Korea (DPRK), United States Government (USG) efforts to deter, limit, minimize, and abolish DPRK nuclear weapons development and production have all failed (1). One might attribute failure to an inadequate rationale for allowing some governments but not others to develop and produce such weapons; inadequate USG intelligence collection, intelligence analysis, clandestine and covert intelligence operations, and counterintelligence capabilities; inadequate USG will to employ suitable intelligence and military capabilities; or a nonpartisan inadequacy in developing and implementing national security policy.

But there's a core psychological issue behind the failure as well. Many years of *operant conditioning* research suggest only 4 main approaches to influencing any behavior (2). In *positive reinforcement* one introduces a consequence—something experienced as pleasurable—after a desired behavior that has the effect of increasing the probability that the behavior will occur again. In *negative reinforcement* one introduces a consequence after a desired behavior that has the effect of decreasing something experienced as noxious by the behavior's perpetrator. This will have the effect of as well of increasing the probability that the behavior will occur again. In *omission training* one introduces a consequence—removing something experienced as positive—after an undesired behavior that has the effect of decreasing the probability the behavior will occur again. And in *punishment* one introduces a consequence experienced as noxious after an undesired behavior to decrease the probability of that behavior.

National security policy, thus, can be rescued by psychological research, and decision makers can then go on to engage the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. But there are just a few nagging problems. First, there's a circularity to the 4 main approaches influencing behavior. Looking *a priori* for what will increase or decrease the probability of a behavior *a posteriori*, when the likely candidates are those with an *a posteriori* not an *a priori* track record, presumes different situations are the same, or similar enough. This is the key vulnerability of inductive logic—coming up with a universal conclusion based on finite, specific examples—that founds much of science, including psychological science. Second, what is experienced as desired or undesired, pleasurable or noxious, even meaningful or without substantive meaning, is often enough not easy to identify for operant conditioners and their targets. Even if identification were easy at one moment, matters change with time. This is the case for initiators, targets, and observers of national security initiatives. Third, there are problematics with predictability, *punishment* being the most researched example. Yes, *punishment*-related learning may result in a lower probability of a specific behavior. *Punishment* also may alternatively result in the target learning how better to hide undesired behaviors. The target also may learn how to apply noxious consequences to others with less power or even those with more power, if the target has nothing but the

undesired behavior in its behavioral repertoire. And it turns out that *punishment* along with *negative reinforcement* and *omission training* are difficult to apply consistently, with the right timing, over extended periods of time. In addition, all 3 may lead to the target picking up mixed messages, depending on what else the target perceives is happening domestically, regionally, and globally at the hands of various others.

So although the nucleus of the atom has been split, the psychological nucleus of denuclearization has proven too tough a nut to crack. Similar problems occur with the two other most common approaches to conditioning—*classical conditioning* and *vicarious conditioning* (3). As with more sophisticated variants of behavioral economics, approaches acknowledging the significant roles played by the irrational, illogical, and the emotional in human nature may prove more successful. Some would say that the negative attributes rightly or wrongly ascribed to the current leaders of the USG and the DPRK may fit the bill.

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Keywords: Classical Conditioning. Conditioning. North Korea. Nuclear Weapons. Operant Conditioning. Philosophy of Science. Vicarious Conditioning.

Abstract/Description: This article describes common operant conditioning principles contributing to the seeming intractability of ‘denuclearizing’ the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea.

Disciplines: Other Psychology, Philosophy, Philosophy of Science. Political Science, Other Political Science, Psychology, Defense and Security Studies, International Relations

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