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North Korea and the United States: A Nuclear Family of Conditionings

Editor

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Abstract. This article posits several cognitive heuristics that may at least metaphorically constitute the North Korean and United States Governments' operational codes of international security decision-making.

Although not yet approaching the global frenzy of the Cuban missile crisis, public and intrapsychic discourses on the North Korean Government's efforts towards nuclear weapons development are giving the 1962 discourses on the Soviet Union's nuclear proliferation into Cuba a run for the money as to the heterogeneity of cognitions ascribed to the respective political actors. If anything, the heterogeneity is broader in the contemporary crisis involving nuclear weapons development and North Korea.

The Soviet Union was generally labeled as an indomitable superpower and formidable counterweight to the United States (US). Soviet decision-making was generally characterized as bound by consensual and easily understood cognitive structures such as rationality, reason, logic, and motives for power and security. At Issue were variants of cognitive content such as the quest for parallelism and congruence with the US nuclear threat towards the Soviet Union, an opportunity to test a US leader assumed to be lacking in world-class resolve and fortitude, and a business-as-usual one-upmanship in a global contestation for power. One general US Government cognition that served as an ascription of such seeming formidability towards the Soviets was that the latter seemed to share the same basic rules of the game. Even as an Evil Empire or a Force of Darkness, the Soviets were bound by our rules but, perhaps, employed them better or more insidiously.

On the contrary, some political authorities and some people who believe what these authorities seem to be stating maintain that the North Koreans either have a different set of coherent rules of the game or no rules at all--not even a rule that directs an intention to seem to be or to be abiding by no rules. Thus, cognitive structure as much as cognitive content is at Issue with the former being exemplified by attributions that North Korean decision-making is irrational, illogical, psychopathological, or outright bizarre. North Korean membership in an Axis of Evil is earned through some inscrutable and, perhaps, through some racist or ethnocentric notion of unknowability and even an unworldly malignancy.

But an adversary (the USG) to such an evil may be at a disadvantage in any conflict or even in appropriately identifying when there is a conflict. The disadvantage would stem from the lack of a language beyond what constitutes very general ascriptors to conceive the exemplar of such evil. After all, how can one know the unknowable and discern the inscrutable? It should, thus, be of no surprise that USG public spokespersons, including high-level officials, continue to use a language of knowability to describe what purportedly is unknowable. And the language of knowability is that of conditioning.

Here are some common assertions from this language. (1) The USG cannot negotiate with the North Koreans without the latter formally disavowing and disestablishing nuclear weapons development. Unless the latter occurs, the USG would be positively reinforcing or engaging in omission training towards North Korean nuclear weapons development by negotiating. And negotiating has become a positive reinforcer or the exemplification of taking something negative away from the North Koreans

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(omission training). This is because negotiating has previously been withheld altogether or has been made contingent on something when previously it was provided on a non-contingent basis. (2) The North Koreans intentionally create crises to obtain positive reinforcers or induce omission training from political actors seeking to attenuate or disestablish crises. (3) The North Koreans are being punished by the very reality of an adversary (the USG) possessing nuclear weapons and have construed the punishment as a vehicle for vicarious conditioning or for an identification with the aggressor and are seeking to emulate USG nuclear weapons possession. (4) The North Koreans believe that they are under the (nuclear) gun of the USG and must return the favor via deterrence through nuclear weapons development.

Within the language of knowability manifested by conditioning, the USG has made its own uncomfortable bed to lie in by treating the threat of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction threat so differently than those of North Korea's. For it has not been lost on many participants in public and intrapsychic discourses that North Korea's very real military threat to its neighbors and to proximal USG personnel ensure its differential treatment and that the North Koreans are aware of this. Surely, the thing to do might then be--in the attempt to further condition the USG--to develop an even more significant military threat. In other words, the North Korean attempt to condition the USG is occurring courtesy of the USG conditioning of the North Koreans.

Many political psychologists might assert that the almost frustrating and maddening sets of cognitive options are indicative of the unknowable truly being operative during the current crisis. Are all of us engaging in a sincere contestation of cognitive alternatives? Whistling in the dark? Functioning as postmodern relativists without a cognitive anchor? However we answer this, the North Koreans are in this with all of us, knowingly or otherwise and regardless of conditioning. (See Gordon, M.K. (December 29, 2002). U.S. readies plan to raise pressure on North Koreans. *The New York Times*, 1,14; Koopman, C., Snyder, J., & Jervis, R. (1990). Theory-driven versus data-driven assessment in a crisis: A survey of International Security readers. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 34, 694-722; Stein, J.G. (1988). Building politics into psychology: The misperception of threat. *Political Psychology*, 9, 245-271; Wehr, P. (1988). Commensurate security: An alternative defense paradigm. *Journal of Social Issues*, 44, 155-173.) (Keywords: Nuclear Weapons, North Korea, Soviet Union.)