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Abstract: This Trends article discusses the importance of social inferential differences in the analysis of the intentions of adversaries, especially in crises. Countries discussed include North Korea (DPRK) and the United States.

Often in contemporary conflict, political authorities may mirror image decision-making processes of an adversary. At other times, political authorities may demonize these processes. Perhaps, most often, political authorities may simplify adversarial decision-making processes. The upshot is that explicitly or implicitly inferred heuristics, operational codes, and social attributional schemata of adversaries may be hopelessly incorrect. Barring luck, this upshot may not bode well for appropriate conflict management.

A recent study by Choi, et al. (2003) illustrates how different adversaries may be in social inference--i.e., trying to figure out the who, what, why, when, and how of what is happening in the social world. And social inference is certainly crucial in a conflict like that between the North Korean (DPRK) and United States (US) governments concerning DPRK nuclear weapons development.

Choi et al. found that their Korean research subjects took into consideration a greater amount of information than either American or Asian-American research subjects in developing social inferences about behavior that was considered deviant as a transgression of norms and about behavior that was considered prosocial and cooperative. Korean research subjects also made more inferences that someone’s behavior might be the result of factors outside the person--e.g., situational factors--as opposed to dispositional factors residing within a person. Moreover, a previous study by Norensayen et al. (2002) found that Korean research subjects were more likely than American subjects to endorse situationist theories of behavior and to believe that personality was more malleable.
