

INTRODUCTION

In 2017, for the first time since the Cold War, a US president found himself explicitly, publicly, and repeatedly threatening war against a nuclear-armed adversary. On August 8, 2017, the *Washington Post* published part of a leaked Defense Intelligence Agency assessment with an alarming conclusion: North Korea could now arm ballistic missiles capable of reaching the United States with nuclear warheads. Later that day, President Donald Trump faced a gaggle of reporters and bel-lowed, “North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.” North Korea fired back that it was considering a missile strike against Guam, a US territory that was home to a nuclear bomber base, as a “warning signal to the US.” Addressing the UN General Assembly a month later, Trump declared he “would totally destroy North Korea” if it attacked the United States or its allies.

In response to Trump’s fiery UN speech, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un issued a rare statement that derided Trump as “mentally deranged,” vowing he would make Trump “pay dearly for his speech calling for totally destroying the DPRK.” North Korea’s Foreign Minister subsequently claimed Trump had declared war on North Korea, giving them the right to shoot down the US bomber aircraft that had recently become a frequent presence in the South. Months prior to the crisis, it had already become routine for US officials to ruminate publicly on “military options” for dealing with the North.

Shortly after Trump’s UN speech, and amid the escalating war of words, rumors of an impending evacuation operation to

2 / On the Brink

remove American civilians from the Korean Peninsula—a classic prelude to war—made front-page national news in South Korea. US Navy surface ships operating within striking range of North Korea were then given “warning orders” to program North Korean targets into their guidance systems and prepare for a strike operation.¹ This was followed by disavowed reports of US nuclear-capable bombers being put on 24-hour alert—something not done since the darkest days of the Cold War. On October 8, Senator Bob Corker, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a member of the Republican Party, warned that Trump “doesn’t realize we could be headed toward World War III with the kind of comments he’s making.”² By that time, as one administration source claimed, “Everyone wants a ‘preemptive war’ now except [Secretary of Defense] Mattis.”³ North Korea’s state media subsequently lamented that war with the United States had become “an established fact . . . The remaining question now is: when will the war break out?”⁴

Only six months later though, on June 12, 2018, Trump met with Kim Jong Un in Singapore. It was the culmination of a six-month global charm offensive from Kim Jong Un that included an April 27, 2018 inter-Korean summit. Kim and South Korea’s President Moon Jae In came out of that summit (the first meeting of Korean leaders in more than a decade) issuing the “Panmunjom Declaration,” a joint statement committing both Koreas to reconciliation and peaceful unification. The Singapore meeting between Trump and Kim had the rhythm of Kim’s summit with Moon. Trump and Kim displayed bonhomie, shared a meal, shook hands in front of the camera, and signed a short joint communiqué in which Trump offered unspecified “security guarantees” and North Korea committed to the similarly unspecific “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” using even vaguer commitment language than in some of its past nuclear agreements with the United States. Nevertheless, Trump lavished praise on Kim Jong Un, and the next day, he tweeted, “There is No Longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea.” Yet nothing about the quantity, quality, or operability of North Korea’s nuclear warheads and missiles had changed. In symbolism, if not in substance, the Trump–Kim summit of June 2018 signaled a radical departure from the confrontation of the year prior, even though the underlying nuclear conflict remained the same. Given the immense stakes involved, the rapid swing from war footing to

3 / Introduction

a mood of détente, despite continuity in North Korea’s nuclear arsenal, cries out for an explanation. What happened, and why?

Specifically, why did the Trump administration in 2017 claim to reach such a starkly different conclusion than prior US presidential administrations about the need for military force against the world’s newest nuclear state, only to reverse course the following year? What role did Trump and the US policy of imposing “maximum pressure” on North Korea play in either causing or resolving the nuclear crisis that emerged? What motivated Kim Jong Un’s diplomatic outreach to South Korea and the United States in 2018? And to what extent is the nuclear standoff with North Korea a harbinger of future crises in what scholars now call the Second Nuclear Age? In short, what are the origins and implications of the first American nuclear crisis in the post-Cold War era? Addressing these questions reveals just how close the world came to nuclear war during the early Trump presidency. It also provides an informed basis for advising how best to avoid that near-tragedy from reappearing, in Korea or elsewhere.

The most obvious answers to these questions about the 2017–18 nuclear standoff—North Korea’s hostility or Donald Trump’s tough talk—are only part of the story. North Korea has long been a belligerent and politically isolated state, whose colorful threat-making toward the United States and South Korea was as vivid in 2017 as it had been in the 1960s. It was also on a decades-long journey to become a nuclear weapons state capable of threatening the United States. But some of the most significant accelerations in North Korea’s nuclear and missile capabilities (miniaturizing nuclear warheads to fit on missiles that could reach US territory in the Pacific) actually predated Trump by several years, and therefore cannot be described as the “cause” of the crisis, important factor though it was. What is more, Korea experts inside and outside government viewed North Korea’s behavior as largely predictable; North Korea was, after all, building a nuclear arsenal that it frequently admitted was aimed at rectifying an imbalance of power with the United States and guaranteeing regime survival. It is illogical to single out predictable events as the cause of a crisis, given that the very definition of crisis involves unexpected events and high-stakes decisions.⁵

Similarly, Trump critics and many foreign policy elites in Washington were quick to finger Trump’s indiscipline as the cause of crisis in Korea. In this view, Trump’s irresponsible Twitter habit and his

4 / On the Brink

own incendiary rhetoric toward Kim Jong Un brought on the crisis. But this explanation, while not wrong, does not explain everything. At various points during his presidency, Trump has threatened numerous other countries, from Afghanistan to Iran to Syria, and even Venezuela, including with the possibility of military action, without triggering anything like the crisis on the Korean Peninsula. Trump's words and leadership style proved problematic for US foreign policy, but *how* it created problems and fueled a crisis depended greatly on the surrounding circumstances he inherited.

Even if Trump had never existed, the situation in Korea was growing increasingly dire. And as I argue later in the book, a Hillary Clinton presidency would have found itself sleepwalking into a crisis with North Korea at some point, even if a shorter, less explosive, and more manageable one than that which occurred during Trump's tenure. Any thoughtful portrayal of the origins of the crisis in Korea must account not only for Trump's leadership style on the issue or North Korea's strategic trajectory, but also the conditions that made some kind of confrontation with North Korea plausible even under a Clinton presidency.

The way the crisis ended similarly eludes the most obvious explanation. The Trump administration was quick to take credit for Kim Jong Un's decision to pursue crisis-ending diplomacy with the outside world in 2018, claiming it was due to its policy of imposing maximum pressure on the North. In this view, military confrontation, tough talk, and tougher economic sanctions brought Kim to heel. As Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani boasted, Kim Jong Un "got back on his hands and knees and begged" to meet Trump.⁶ But that narrative ignores the role maximum pressure played in causing the crisis of 2017 in the first place, and that in the past North Korea had almost always responded to pressure with pressure in kind. It was why US threats over the years repeatedly begat counter-threats, missile launches, and nuclear tests. Capitulation to threats or bullying was simply antithetical to North Korean strategic culture. What is more, North Korea weathered threats of war and economic strangulation for decades as it pursued the bomb. The idea that, in 2018, merely intensifying these same elements of pressure would suddenly induce North Korea to abandon its own strategy under duress defies both common sense and a long historical record that suggests the contrary.

Origins of a Nuclear Crisis

This book shows how the nuclear crisis that arose in 2017 was the result of several forces converging in time: a gradual narrowing and hardening of US policy toward North Korea; Kim Jong Un's resolve to secure a viable nuclear deterrent against the United States no matter the cost; and a US president with a penchant for personalized insults and extemporaneous threat-making. These overlapping forces created multiple realistic pathways to the unthinkable: nuclear war with North Korea. There would have been no foreseeable off-ramp from conflict if not for a different set of fortunate convergences: North Korea demonstrating the technical ability to fire missiles able to reach anywhere in the United States in late 2017; Kim Jong Un's willingness to prioritize economic development after securing a minimally viable nuclear deterrent; South Korea's hosting of the Winter Olympics in March 2018; the snap election of a dovish progressive president in South Korea as the crisis brewed; and Trump's fondness for the pomp and circumstance of meetings with foreign heads of state, combined with his unique amenability to requests from South Korea and China for restraint and diplomacy.

North Korea's Path

The nuclear crisis Trump faced during his first year in office was not solely a function of US decision-making past and present; it was the convergence of that decision-making lineage with North Korea's own. For nearly all of its history, North Korea has treated the United States as a threat to its existence, in propaganda and in practice. In the North Korean version of history, it was not the North, but rather the United States and South Korea that launched an invasion in June 1950. It is the United States that has always stood in the way of unifying the Peninsula under the communist North. And for more than 60 years, it was the United States that rendered South Koreans into mere puppets while threatening to invade the North at any moment. By any reasonable measure, North Korea has generally hated and feared the United States.

North Korea's popular antipathy toward the United States has some basis in fact, as we shall see, but was nevertheless manufactured in Pyongyang. North Korea's ruling family—starting with its founder,

6 / On the Brink

Kim Il Sung (1948–94), his son, Kim Jong Il (1994–2011), and his grandson, Kim Jong Un (2011–present)—deliberately seared a history of victimization at the hands of American power into the fiber of North Korea’s being. Three generations of the family-run Kim regime have benefited from an external enemy as a basis for unity and a rationale for decades of large-scale human misery within its borders. Something had to bind a people who, in the 1990s, suffered a famine so severe that it killed between 800,000 and 1.5 million people.⁷ Orwellian propaganda vilifying the United States has partly served that unifying purpose, in conjunction with a number of other tools of political and social control.

When Kim Jong Il, who had formally ruled North Korea since 1994, died in 2011, dynastic succession passed to his youngest son, Kim Jong Un.⁸ The eldest, Kim Jong Nam, was seen as possibly too keen on opening North Korea to the outside world and embarrassed the family when he was caught at Narita International Airport in Tokyo in 2001, traveling on a fake passport in hopes of visiting Tokyo Disneyland. The middle son, Kim Jong Chol, was seen as effeminate and unlikely to have the wherewithal to rule. He was also rumored to be a fan of the musician Eric Clapton (not that there is anything wrong with that). In contrast with his father and grandfather, Kim Jong Un grew up surrounded by luxury and endowed with privilege. The universe bent for him. Though Jong Un was young, his precise age is unknown (thought to be 33 at the time of the nuclear crisis). He was educated in Switzerland, and was a bright enough but unremarkable student. In governing style and public persona, Kim Jong Un has chosen to emulate his grandfather, a gregarious politico who exercised centralized rule, rather than his father, who was insular, insecure, and relied on state institutions to stay in power. After coming to power in 2011, he has frequently given public speeches, and has been portrayed in state media as being comfortable out and about among common folk. He and his wife, Ri Sol Ju, go out of their way to try and create a Kennedy-esque image of youth, stylishness, and vigor.

Many expected Kim Jong Un’s reign would be short-lived because he was an inexperienced millennial and the youngest of his father’s children. Yet Kim Jong Un set about immediately killing and purging large numbers of senior North Korean officials (more than 300 as of 2017⁹) and replacing them with loyalists and trusted family

7 / Introduction

members. From the outside he appeared to be proactively silencing any whiff of internal opposition to his rule.

But girding himself against internal dissent was only one necessary step in seeking regime security. His country was also geopolitically isolated. China, with whom it shares a large, porous border, was technically its only ally, yet the regime's relationship with China was marked by mutual antipathy. North Korea had long been famously defiant of Chinese preferences, and in turn it could not count on China for its security. Kim Jong Un refused to even meet with China's Xi Jinping until 2018, when he turned to global diplomacy as a way to dampen the nuclear crisis. Because Kim could not rely on outside powers for his security, he sought a viable nuclear deterrent to guard against external threats. The decision to pursue a reliable nuclear strike capability was one that built on what Kim Jong Un inherited from his father and grandfather: a regime with a functional nuclear device and a nuclear industry with two successful nuclear tests. But Kim not only continued the nuclear pursuit of his father and grandfather; he did it with a gusto all his own, conducting four nuclear tests and 86 missile tests in only six years. His Swiss education initially gave some hope that he would be a reformer who would open the North to the world, but any prospect of opening took a backseat to nuclear survival in the initial years of his rule. Kim's pace of testing nuclear and missile devices made good on the nation's long-stated intention to achieve a secure deterrent, which it believed was the only means of rectifying a dangerous imbalance of power with the United States. Under Kim Jong Un, as with his forebears, North Korea sought nothing short of guaranteeing a nuclear attack against regional military bases and American cities if the United States invaded or sought regime change.

In order to secure that ability, North Korea needed to diversify the types of missiles it developed, disperse the locations from which missiles could fire, increase its overall missile inventory, and miniaturize nuclear warheads so they could be fitted on missile delivery systems. Kim Jong Un made significant advancements on all these fronts through accelerated testing, and by making military-technical nuclear progress the regime's top priority in 2013, alongside economic development (these twin goals referred to as the "*byungjin* line").

Because of its nuclear and missile progress, North Korea made the greatest strides toward regime security during Kim Jong Un's early years in power. From the US perspective, however, it was in those early

8 / On the Brink

Kim years that it saw North Korea evolve from a local security threat, limited largely to the Korean Peninsula and its surrounds, to a long-range threat with the potential to attack strategic US positions in the region, and even the US homeland itself. Kim's accelerated pursuit of nuclear weapons vexed US policymakers and North Korea's neighbors. The American public gradually became more alarmed as the traditional image of North Korea—a Cold War outpost, with aging and poorly maintained Soviet-era conventional military equipment, run by an eccentric dictator—gave way to an image of a global twenty-first-century threat, with an advanced offensive cyber capability, a large stock of chemical weapons, and a survivable nuclear-armed missile arsenal.

Kim Jong Un's commitment to nuclear weapons made him no less responsible for the 2017 nuclear crisis than Trump. Yet the confrontational decisions of Kim and Trump were extensions of what each inherited. Kim's strategy built on, rather than jettisoned, the legacy of his father and grandfather. That strategy, aimed at girding himself against internal challengers, demonstrating a viable nuclear deterrent, improving people's standard of living, and elevating North Korea's international standing, gave fuel to the nuclear crisis, but also played a unique, decisive role in bringing the crisis to an end. Once North Korea demonstrated the technical ability for one of its missiles to reach anywhere in the United States (which it did with the November 28, 2017 test of the Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile), Kim sought to mute Washington's talk of giving him a "bloody nose" by pursuing an ambitious agenda of international diplomacy, aimed at sanctions relief and the normalization of North Korea as a *de facto* nuclear state. In essence, the crisis came to a close only because Kim had gotten far enough along the nuclear path to feel secure against external bombing or invasion.

America's Path

The United States was already drifting toward an acute military confrontation with the North when Trump ascended to the presidency. Under President Obama, the United States persisted with the policy goal it maintained since the end of the Cold War: denuclearization through the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of

9 / Introduction

North Korea's weapons and nuclear program. It also continued with war planning and a military posture toward Pyongyang that was specifically configured to achieve regime change and Korean unification in the event of a conflict. But those aims were relics of the Cold War, when North Korea did not have nuclear weapons capable of striking the United States and its allies. The North's unprecedented leaps in nuclear capability, starting in 2012, were rendering those goals obsolete, and deceptively dangerous, unless the United States was willing to entertain a nuclear war. In prior decades, North Korea not only lacked nuclear weapons and reliable missile systems to deliver them; many thought it to be on the verge of collapse and focused primarily on regime survival. Under these conditions, US coercive diplomacy may have been of questionable value, but it was not particularly risky.

The great danger became that America's historically preferred approach to North Korea (coercive diplomacy) was laden with heightened risks against a newly emboldened nuclear weapons state run by a young and inexperienced dictator. Military deployments, exercises, and veiled rhetorical threats could be calamitous if North Korea interpreted them the wrong way. Despite the shift in strategic circumstances, North Korea policy and planning under Obama proved remarkably consistent with all of his post-Cold War predecessors: combining deterrence, pressure, and intermittent diplomacy in pursuit of the maximalist objective of CVID, even though that objective grew further out of reach with time.

As it became evident that Kim Jong Un was intent on pursuing a nuclear strike capability no matter the price, Obama's policy rigidified, but never quite took on a sense of visible urgency. Consequently, all manner of pressure on North Korea was at its historical peak when Trump came to office, and military solutions were being publicly ruminated on for the first time in years. Trump officials believed that the Obama approach had failed to contain the North Korea threat, and saw a departure from it as essential, but America's path was already largely fixed on what Trump's team would eventually dub "maximum pressure," which primarily differed from Obama's North Korea policy only in tone. In addition, Trump gave foreign policy hawks much greater prominence in his administration—especially at the National Security Council (NSC)—and oversaw the interagency and external marginalization of the State Department, reducing the role for diplomatic

10 / On the Brink

options. As I discuss later in the book, Trump himself blunted State Department diplomacy with North Korea on multiple occasions in 2017. As a result, the Trump administration disproportionately emphasized the one part of US foreign policy (the military and rhetorical threats) that most directly drove North Korean paranoia, insecurity, and justification for both its nuclear weapons and its constant war footing. Trump's national security team was ideologically predisposed to a hawkish approach; the conditions they inherited from Obama played to their bias. Adding Trump's extreme rhetoric to this volatile mix simply accelerated the collision of America's path with that of Kim Jong Un.

South Korea's Shift

Although the nuclear crisis of 2017 was primarily between the United States and North Korea, there is no way to understand it without an appreciation for South Korea's important role in US–North Korea relations. South Korea's perspective on North Korea was embedded in its domestic politics. For decades, South Korean progressives saw the North as a wayward sibling, advocating policies favoring diplomacy, reconciliation, and economic inducements. South Korean conservatives, by contrast, have long viewed North Korea as an existential and political threat, advocating militaristic solutions of deterrence, containment, and even regime change. For the decade prior to the nuclear crisis of 2017, conservatives ran the South Korean government, pursuing an increasingly hard-line policy toward the North that leaned heavily on military threats and its alliance with the United States.

South Korea's conservative approach in these years decisively impacted US policy. The ability of the United States to ponder alternative approaches to North Korea was constrained by the imperatives of keeping allies reassured of US commitments. In the years before the crisis, South Korean governments under Presidents Lee Myung-bak (2007–13) and Park Geun-hye (2013–17) respectively were always in the background, encouraging the United States to seek nothing short of comprehensive denuclearization, in tandem with the isolation of the North. Early in the 2017 crisis, however, South Korea underwent a sudden and dramatic shift in government that removed the conservatives from power and

11 / Introduction

brought to the presidency Moon Jae In, a progressive who promised a reconciliatory approach to North Korea.

Before President Moon came to office, South Koreans popularized a term that described their marginal role through much of the nuclear crisis: “Korea passing.” It connoted that big decisions affecting them were being made over their collective heads, without due consideration to their interests. As Trump blustered toward crisis and settled on a maximum pressure approach, South Korea was an afterthought. Even after Moon became president in May 2017, the South Koreans remained on the periphery of the looming question of whether war would occur. But everything seemed to change after Kim Jong Un’s January 1, 2018 New Year’s speech inviting reconciliation with the South, which became President Moon’s moment to reassert the South Korean role, brokering diplomacy and shifting the narrative away from notions of preventive war and toward peace. Whatever the long-term consequences of Moon’s diplomatic gambit, it coincided with Kim Jong Un’s strategy to bring an end to the imminent threat of nuclear war the year prior.

Why the Crisis Matters

This book has multiple purposes. First, in the most straightforward sense, it provides an informed perspective on the origins and end of a defining nuclear crisis: how Washington and Pyongyang ended up on a nuclear collision course, and the felicitous, idiosyncratic way that all sides avoided catastrophe. It explains how the United States ended up in a situation where, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, inadvertent nuclear war became plausible, and American anxieties about nuclear war reached a fever pitch not experienced in decades. The history presented here reinforces a hard-learned lesson from Cold War studies of coercion that contemporary nuclear scholars and practitioners too often ignore: coercion is difficult and risky, and nuclear coercion even more so. Believing otherwise encourages dangerously irresponsible policies. Processes of communicating threats to adversaries—the “diplomacy of violence,” to borrow from Thomas Schelling—involve orchestrating complex military and diplomatic organizations.¹⁰ Orders are frequently implemented in ways other than how leaders intend. The receiver of a threatening message may interpret it in a manner

12 / On the Brink

other than what the sender intended. The sender of a threatening message, in turn, can misunderstand what the receiver of the message will actually respond to, or how they might respond. And the precise timing (or context) of the issuance of a threat can cause an adversary to either jump to radical conclusions, ignore it altogether, or fail to recognize the threatening communication for what it is. In short, as I show throughout this book, opportunities for bad judgment and catastrophic misperception are as common today as when earlier generations of scholars first warned of their prevalence in world politics.

Second, the book illustrates how leadership in foreign policy amplifies, and gets constrained by, ongoing historical processes. Important as Trump and Kim Jong Un were to the telling of this story, remembering these events as nothing more than something *they* caused and resolved ignores how the legacies they inherited from their predecessors defined what was possible in the circumstances each faced, as well as the crucial role that other external factors played in forestalling nuclear war. Kim, Moon, and Trump mattered at crucial moments but understanding how and to what extent they made a difference requires situating them in time.

Accumulated history conditioned the threat perceptions of US and Korean officials. History also exercised a kind of “lock-in” effect on the goals of both sides, making it harder to compromise established policy positions as events ensued. Kim was exercising a more robust version of what his father and grandfather had pursued. For the United States, recasting what it saw as US interests in Korea felt impossible to those involved in the decisions. And history narrowed the choice of strategies available to either side. For Trump, a departure from Obama’s risk-averse North Korea strategy fed his troubled, risk-prone North Korea strategy.

The way the crisis ended—indeed that the crisis ended at all without war—followed a similar dynamic. Everything that helped resolve the crisis in 2018 (Kim’s charm offensive, Trump’s attitudinal pivot from confrontation to diplomacy, and Moon’s ceaseless efforts to establish better relations with the North) looked superficially like the decisions of bold leaders taking history in their hands. But their initiatives were only unlocked because North Korea attained its goal of demonstrating a viable nuclear deterrent at the end of 2017. Without North Korea realizing the first principle of its security strategy when it

13 / Introduction

did, and without South Korea just so happening to host the Winter Olympics immediately after North Korea's nuclear milestone, Trump would have had little choice but to succumb to the arguments of preventive war advocates; Moon's outreach would have continued to go nowhere, as it had for most of the crisis; and Kim's crisis-blunting charm offensive never would have happened when it did.

Finally, my rendition of events here has real-world implications for practitioners of foreign policy. In the final analysis, maximum pressure played a central role in bringing about the nuclear crisis and, at best, a background role in resolving it. If policymakers come to believe that maximum pressure was a virtue rather than a gratuitous risk, future crises will be inevitable, on the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere. Maximum pressure against small nuclear-armed states engenders a distinct set of dangers about which policymakers should be fully witting before entertaining them.

In making the case for preventive war against North Korea, Senator Lindsay Graham explained in December 2017 that "North Korea is the ultimate outlier in world order . . . I don't know how to put North Korea into a historical context."¹¹ He believed the extreme option of a preventive war against North Korea was justified by what he saw as the extreme, historically unprecedented nature of the threat it posed to America. This book aims to do precisely what Graham could not: put North Korea and decisions about it in a comprehensible historical context. It may be the world's best chance at avoiding nuclear war.