

Advance praise for *On the Brink*

“A history that’s as illuminating for the policymaker as it is for the informed citizen. If you want to know how close the world came to nuclear war in 2017—and how to avoid it in the future—this is a must-read.”

Admiral James Stavridis, US Navy, former Dean of the
Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University,
former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe

“Van Jackson has written an insightful, detailed, and frightening history of the Korean nuclear crisis. It is like a thriller with the sequel yet to be written. Readers will understand both how deeply dangerous the past few years have been and how many nuclear dangers remain lurking just over the horizon.”

Scott D. Sagan, author of *The Limits of Safety*

“*On the Brink* is a smart, readable explanation of the nuclear crisis of 2017—one that explains how Washington and Pyongyang found themselves on a collision course, and one that offers sage advice about managing the risk of nuclear war in the future.”

Dr. Jeffrey Lewis, Publisher of ArmsControlWonk.com and author of
*The 2020 Commission Report on the North Korean Nuclear Attacks
against the United States: A Speculative Novel*

“*On the Brink* is a timely, serious, and substantive treatment of a perennial national security problem for the United States. Jackson successfully weaves theory, history, and policy into a book that makes every reader smarter on North Korea. Recommended reading not just for experts, but for general audiences.”

Victor Cha, D.S. Song-KF Professor, Georgetown University and former
National Security Council director for Japan, Korea, Australia, and Pacific
Island affairs

“With a deep sense of history, Van Jackson has given us a vital record of a near-disaster. Vigorous, wise, and highly informed, *On the Brink* decodes the theatrics and leaves the lessons inescapably clear for future generations.”

Evan Osnos, author of *The Age of Ambition*

“Van Jackson provides an excellent scholar-practitioner’s guide to the history of US-North Korean misunderstanding and mutual hostility. He provides a clarion call regarding the scope and magnitude of the danger that surrounded the Trump administration’s efforts to grapple for the first time with vulnerability to North Korean nuclear capabilities.”

Scott Snyder, author of *South Korea at the Crossroads*

“A terrific and terrifying story of stumbling into a nuclear crisis because of unrealistic goals and a failure to understand North Korea. Van Jackson, a fine scholar of Korean affairs, has written a remarkable history that anyone wishing to avoid nuclear war—or make sense of North Korea—should read.”

Robert Edwin Kelly, Pusan National University

On the Brink

In 2017 the world watched as President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un traded personal insults and escalating threats of nuclear war amid unprecedented shows of military force. Former Pentagon insider and Korean security expert, Van Jackson, traces the origins of the first American nuclear crisis in the post-Cold War era, and explains the fragile, highly unpredictable way that it ended. Jackson analyzes the US response to North Korea's increasing nuclear threat in the context of Trump's aggressive rhetoric, prior US policy failures, the geopolitics of East Asia, and North Korean strategy, including the acceleration of its nuclear program under Kim Jong Un. He argues that the Trump administration's policy of "maximum pressure" brought the world much closer to nuclear war than many realize—and charts a course for the prevention of future conflicts.

Dr Van Jackson is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at Victoria University of Wellington, Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, and the Defence & Strategy Fellow at the Centre for Strategic Studies. He served in the Obama administration as a policy adviser and strategist in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, participating in nuclear negotiations with North Korea and formulating deterrence policies with South Korea.

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On the Brink

Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War

Van Jackson

Victoria University of Wellington



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My work on Korea started at 17 years old in Monterey, California, when the US Air Force sent me to train as a Korean linguist at the Defense Language Institute. I've continued working on Korea issues one way or another—as an analyst, policy official, pundit, and scholar—ever since. When I entered my language classroom for the first time as a know-nothing teenager (back in the year 2000), the first inter-Korean Summit had just taken place. One of my instructors at the time told me there was no more North Korean nuclear problem. I never imagined that, 18 years later, not only would the nuclear issue still be unresolved; North Korea would be a de facto nuclear weapons state. In some ways, it makes this book feel like something I was always meant to write—the culmination of 18 years working at the intersection of the Korean Peninsula, deterrence, and US foreign policy. It's history, it's policy, it's international relations, and yet on some level it's also deeply personal. This is by no means a memoir, but I've either chronicled or directly participated in many of the events depicted here.

It's common for book-writing to incur lots of debts, and that's very much the case with this one. National security mogul Ryan Evans deserves a lot of credit, as friend, enabler, and network broker. Ryan also played a unique role in making this book happen, by encouraging me to write the *Nuke Your Darlings* series that he published on War on the Rocks. It was a bit strange at first to chronicle every day's writing progress and let thousands of strangers see it, but it kept me accountable to a strict writing regimen, helping me write this manuscript in record time.

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Victor Cha has been an informal mentor for as long as I've been writing about Korea, even though on the substance we occasionally disagree. His impact on me has been much greater than vice versa—perhaps the nature of mentoring. But I've been grateful for his career advice at every stage, as well as for the opportunities he's helped connect me with along the way. This research was supported by the Laboratory Program for Korean Studies through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and Korean Studies Promotion Service of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2016-LAB-2250001). Without Victor, I probably wouldn't have had that research support.

I'm also grateful to my colleagues at the Centre for Strategic Studies and Victoria University of Wellington. Rob Ayson, David Capie, Manjeet Pardesi, and Rob Rabel endured more expletive-laced conversations about Korea than they ever imagined, often from a colleague who showed up in the morning bleary-eyed and unshaven after writing the book long into the night. New Zealand has been an amazing home base for writing this book, and gave me just the right amount of detachment from the churn of Washington to do it.

The historical narrative I present in this book is constructed from openly available sources, but I've made judicious use of dozens of interviews with current and former officials to make sure that narrative is as correct as possible. I owe special thanks to a large number of people, many of whom shared their insights on the condition of anonymity. But among those I can name, Patrick McEachern, Terence Roehrig, Abraham Denmark, Keith Luse, Scott Sagan, Ryan Hass, Zach Hosford, Kevin Kim, Mason Richey, Vipin Narang, Adam Mount, Frank Aum, Christopher Green, Dan Pinkston, Mike Urena, Rob York, Ryan Jacobs, Hans Schattle, Youngwuk Kim, Michael Schiffer, Drew Winner, David Straub, Mira Rapp-Hooper, Steve Denney, David Santoro, Andrew O'Neil, Matt Squeri, Jennifer Hendrixson-White, Jake Stokes, Yoon Young-kwan, and Robert Kelly were all generous to me in some way relating to this book. Some of these great folks read parts of my manuscript, provided critiques, or sent me useful source material. Others offered counsel along the way that helped me shape the manuscript. Some even allowed me to interview them, or introduced me to US officials who became valuable interview subjects.

I must confess I never would have pulled the trigger on this book if my Cambridge editor, Lucy Rhymer, hadn't seen a strategic

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opportunity for it. Without her active encouragement, I'm not sure I would have polished off that book proposal and put my other research on hold. And while any errors in the book are on me, Lucy was terrific at shaping the manuscript as I wrote it to make it resonate with the broadest possible audience.

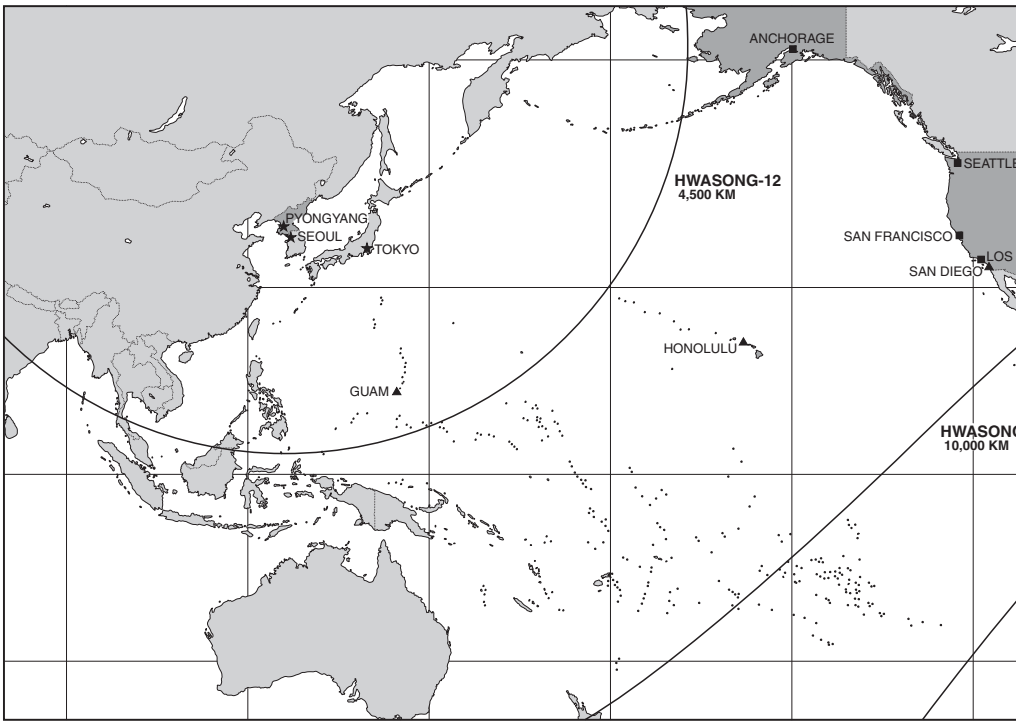
The most crucial enabler of this book is, of course, Kristin Chambers. She knew how time-consuming this project would be, and she pushed me to do it when I hesitated at first. She makes everything possible, and that's no exaggeration. Aside from being my daily dialogue partner and the first place I go to test my narratives, she also took on a disproportionate burden to keep our daily routines going. I literally wouldn't have had the windows of time to write this book without her support, and for that I'm extremely grateful. I only hope that the book proves worthy of the investment we've both made to make it happen.

While parts of this book have the advantage of deep historical perspective, the more recent chapters—on the Trump years—represent merely a first cut at history. More time is needed to determine if my interpretations here are correct, and if I've even seized on the right themes. I've been sensitive to what Daniel Nexon calls “analytical normalization” of the highly abnormal Trump presidency, while also avoiding polemical broadsides aimed at Trump. Again, time will tell if I've struck the right note. One thing I can assure the reader of: in this book I have rendered the most forthright, evidence-based, and unjaun-diced explanation of the US–North Korea nuclear crisis (and its end) that I can. Whatever its flaws, I hope it serves as a useful touchstone for future desk officers, diplomats, soldiers, and scholars.

MAPS



Map 1 The Korean Peninsula in 2018. Reproduced with permission of Scott LaFoy/Andrew Facini



Map 2 Range of Key North Korean Missiles Tested in 2017. Reproduced with permission of Scott

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