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The Rationality of Kim Jong-un (and His Nukes)

By Gary Leupp
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Kim Jong-un is not mad. Quite the contrary. He has pulled off a wholly rational feat. By producing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles capable of delivering them to U.S. territory, Pyongyang has obtained near-assurance that the U.S. will not attack it, in (yet another) attempt at regime change.

Wait, you'll say. He already had that insurance. Every talking head on cable news says a U.S. strike would inevitably mean an attack on Seoul, which would kill tens of thousands immediately. South Koreans would blame the invasion on the U.S. So it's just not tenable. Even

if limited to conventional forces, the threat of invasion already constituted adequate deterrence. There's no way the U.S. would trigger an attack on a city of 10 million people who are supposed to view the U.S. as their benevolent protector. So the North Koreans didn't need to upset the world by acquiring nukes.

But think about it from Jong-un's point of view.

Born in 1984, Jong-un was 7 when the U.S. first bombed Iraq, supposedly to force its troops out of Kuwait (although Saddam Hussein had already agreed to withdraw). Then the U.S. imposed sanctions on the country that killed half a million children.

He was 11 when the U.S. intervened in Yugoslavia, bombing Serbs to create the dysfunctional client state of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

He was 15 (probably in school in Switzerland) when the U.S. bombed Serbia and created the dysfunctional client state of Kosovo.

He was 17 when the U.S. bombed and brought regime change to Afghanistan. Seventeen years later, Afghanistan remains in a state of civil war, still hosting U.S. troops to quell opposition.

He was 19 when the U.S. brought down Saddam and destroyed Iraq, producing all the subsequent misery and chaos.

He was 27 when the U.S. brought down Gaddafi, destroyed Libya, forced the Yemeni president from power causing chaos, and began supporting armed opposition forces in Syria. He was 30 when the U.S. State Department spent \$5 billion to topple the Ukrainian government through a violent coup.

He knows his country's history, and how the U.S. invasion from September 1950 leveled it and killed one-third of its people, while Douglas MacArthur considered using nuclear weapons on the peninsula. He knows how U.S. puppet Syngman Rhee, president of the U.S.-proclaimed "Republic of Korea," having repeatedly threatened to invade the North, executed 100,000 South Koreans after the outbreak of war on the grounds that they were communist sympathizers who would aid the enemy. He loves Elizabeth Taylor movies but hates U.S. imperialism. There's nothing crazy about that.

Jong-un was 10 years old when the U.S. and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework, by which Pyongyang agreed to freeze its nuclear power plants, replacing them with (more nuclear proliferation resistant) light water reactors financed by the U.S. and South Korea, and the gradual normalization of U.S.-Pyongyang relations. He was 16 when U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang and met with his father Kim Jong Il. (In that same year, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung met with Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang during the period of "Sunshine Diplomacy" eventually sabotaged by the Bush/Cheney administration.) He was 20 when the agreement broke down (undermined by Dick Cheney and his neocons in 2004).

He was 17 when his older half-brother Jong-nam was busted at Narita Airport, for stupidly trying to enter Japan with his family on forged Dominican passports, to visit Tokyo's Disneyland. That stunt ruled Jong-nam (murdered as you know in Malaysia in February 2017) out for the succession, whereas the next son, Jong-chul, was deemed "effeminate." (At a Clapton concert in Singapore in 2006 he was seen with pierced ears.) Jong-un probably didn't expect to be the next monarch until he was in his mid-20s.

He was 24 when the New York Philharmonic Orchestra visited Pyongyang to a warm welcome. (Washington refused a North Korean offer for a reciprocal visit.) Selected as successor, he became the new absolute leader of North Korea at age 27, a young, vigorous, well-educated man (Physics degree from Kim Il-song University) groomed for the post and with a strong sense of dynastic responsibility. That means returning the DPRK to the relative economic prosperity of the 1970s and 80s, when average per capita energy consumption in the north exceeded that of the south.

Analysts suggest that Kim has make economic development primary, and the long-standing "military first" (Songun) policy is giving way to a policy more empowering civilian Korean Workers Party leaders. The DPRK economy, according to The Economist, "is probably growing at between 1% and 5% a year." A new class of traders and businessmen (donju) has emerged. The complex social status system (Songbun) that divides society into 51 sub-categories of "loyal," "wavering," and "hostile" (and distributing privileges accordingly) has been falling apart with the rise of market forces.

Fourteen months into his tenure, Jong-un invited Dennis Rodman, a member of the U.S. Basketball Hall of Fame, to Pyongyang for the first of what have now been five visits. He is a huge basketball fan, an aficionado of U.S. popular culture, a child of rock 'n roll. He is also rationally aware of the threat the U.S. poses to his country (among many countries). So his strategy has been to sprint towards nukes while he can. Perhaps he thought that since the Trump administration was (and is) in such disarray, no violent response (such as an attack on the Yongbyon nuclear complex) was likely. But it was risky; the U.S. president is, after all, unstable and ignorant. He has asked his advisors repeatedly, why can't we use nukes since we have them?

The fact is, Mattis, Tillerson and McMaster have been presented with a nuclear fait accompli to which they must respond, in a period of diminishing U.S. influence and relative economic decline. http://www.growth-dynamics.com/news/SEP20_04_files/image004.gif They cannot do it by dropping a MOAB bomb (like they did in Afghanistan in April) or a missile strike on a base (like they did in Iraq the same month, to display their manhood). Jong-un has insured that.

If Jong-un plays his cards right, he will get international recognition for the DPRK as a nuclear power—the same degree of recognition afforded other non-NPT signatories like India, Pakistan and Israel. The U.S. will have to defer to Chinese and Russian sobriety and abandon hollow threatening rhetoric. It will have to back down, as it did in the Korean War, when it realized it could not conquer the North and reunify Korea on Washington's terms and had to accept the continued existence of the DPRK.

In return for tension-reducing measures by the U.S. and the South, and the establishment of diplomatic and trade ties, Pyongyang will suspend its nuclear weapons program, content with and proud of what it has accomplished. It is the only way.

The other way is suggested by John McCain, crazy warmonger to the end. The Senate Armed Services chairman told CNN's "State of the Union" that if the North Korean leader "acts in an aggressive fashion"—whatever that means to McCain who will never realize that his bombing of Vietnam constituted aggression—"the price will be extinction." Shades of Gen. Curtis LeMay and his casual comments about killing every man, woman and child in Tokyo during the terror bombing of that city in 1945.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, McCain's good buddy, has said that Trump told him: "If there's going to be a war to stop [Kim Jong-un], it will be over there. If thousands die, they're going to die over there. They're not going to die here... And that may be provocative, but not really. When you're president of the United States, where does your allegiance lie? To the people of the United States."

Just knowing that the enemy is capable of contemplating one's people's extinction surely motivates some leaders to seek the ultimate weapon. The dear young Marshall pulled it off. He replicated what Mao did in China between 1964 and 1967. He got the bomb, which had been introduced to the world over Hiroshima on August. 6, 1945, and used again three days later over Nagasaki. And never used anywhere since in the years since, in which the U.S. has been joined by the USSR, UK, France, China, Israel, India, and Pakistan as members of the nuclear club. He has no reason to use it, unless the U.S. gives him one.

Negotiations on the basis of mutual respect and historical consciousness are the only solution.