

The North Korea
Instability
Project

North Korea, Weapons of Mass Destruction and Instability: Strategic Issues for Managing Crisis and Reducing Risks

Rebecca K.C. Hersman

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North Korea, Weapons of Mass Destruction and Instability: Strategic Issues for Managing Crisis and Reducing Risks

I. How Did We Get Here? The Road to War (Or Collapse) Matters.

1. *The origin of the instability—crisis at the center or gradual erosion from the perimeter?*

All too often discussions of *instability*, *insurgency* and *regime collapse* are used interchangeably to describe the catalyst of a potential weapons of mass destruction (WMD) crisis in North Korea. In fact, these are related, but discreet phenomena with critical distinctions that need to be made when considering related WMD risks. Most planning or exercise scenarios assume that a sudden regime collapse—coup, revolt or abdication—would ignite a WMD security crisis in the North. These “inside out” regime decapitation scenarios envision crisis at the center of the regime followed by potential instability or insurgency—a la the collapse scenarios of post-Cold War Europe or the Arab Spring in the Middle East. In such scenarios, North Korea’s chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) programs may be physically secure (at least initially) even as command and control grows murky. The situation will either stabilize a “new normal” or deteriorate as a successor regime fails to firmly grip the reins of power. While such a situation is fraught with danger, it is comparatively easy to imagine the international system responding and potentially intervening, perhaps under the authority of the United Nations (UN) or through some form of multilateral division of labor among the key players.

Far fewer plans consider a different and perhaps more insidious scenario in which the North Korean leadership gradually loses control at the perimeters and is forced to hunker down in strongholds around the capital, while at the same time fighting brush fires around the country to maintain order and allegiance. Even as the regime retains at least tenuous political control, these scenarios—exhibiting parallels to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and even Ukraine—can suggest the slow erosion of verifiable control and physical security of territory and programs in ways that are difficult to assess and greatly complicate intervention. It is critical to consider a range of scenarios with differing baseline assumptions to determine where challenges and opportunities for international response differ and where they remain constant.

2. *The catalyst—crisis or opportunity?*

When faced with a WMD challenge, the imperative to act comes in two forms—crisis or opportunity. In simplistic terms, US WMD planners and analysts generally think in terms of crises, or the need to respond to negative stimuli. In these cases, something bad has happened or is about to happen and a response is required to prevent or ameliorate negative effects. But the ability to respond to

opportunity—positive stimuli such as a diplomatic opening or favorable regime development—is just as important, and sometimes more so. Recent WMD elimination efforts in Libya and Syria were potential crises that turned into opportunities.

How might the international community react to WMD challenges in North Korea if the call to action there took the form of opportunity rather than crisis? Would we be able to respond? Such a situation might appear very different from the war and collapse scenarios the United States typically plans for, but is it really less likely or difficult? Opportunities are just inverted crises and as such, they are no less complex, demanding or important in terms of the need for time-sensitive response. In fact, the difference in time, distance and urgency between a crisis and an opportunity may be very small. The events may require that we use our tool kit differently and rely on some different partners, but they incorporate many of the same essential challenges.

3. The timeline – fast or slow?

The imperative to secure, disable or destroy North Korea's WMD programs, during crisis or opportunity, can arrive on two timelines: the sudden or no warning event or the slow boil. Is it a bolt from the blue? Or an unexpected catastrophic attack for which there was little or no warning? Or is it a long, slow-boil crisis that has simmered for months or even years without a clear path forward that suddenly flares up or cools down?

Human intuition and years of planning and exercising for crisis response suggest that rapid, bolt from the blue crises involve the greatest risk to US security and place the greatest strain on military responses. Being caught flat-footed, unprepared and with unready forces when disaster strikes is a deep-seeded fear that runs through almost all aspects of operational response—from nuclear deterrence to earthquake relief. Effective response to a sudden regime collapse or loss of control scenario requires advance planning and preparation, and is highly dependent upon good crisis coordination mechanisms to manage responses. Crises will test response readiness, timeliness and preparedness, but generally the path to decision and imperative to act is more straightforward. In a sudden and intense crisis, warning factors converge rapidly, decision space is limited and well-defined, and time for debate and second-guessing is constrained. The imperative for action is generally clear, and the path to vital partnerships or coalitions is straightforward. In these crises, it is easier to galvanize action even if such action is less “ready” than decision makers might hope.

In reality, many crises simmer for months and often years. They may reach a tipping point that demands response, but often they do not. Warning indicators are often clear only in retrospect. The cost-benefit analysis of action or intervention is uncertain and contentious. Decisions to assume more ready postures are costly in fiscal and human capital terms, especially over uncertain and possibly extended durations. Warning indicators come and go in an incremental fashion, each one prompting a reconsideration: Do we wait? Do we get ready? Do we go? Will action make the problem worse or better? Will we simply provoke an adversary into a conflict that might otherwise be avoided or will we buy essential time?

Indicators only provide warning if they can produce an informed response. Slow crises only provide valuable time for readiness if we know when, where and how to act, and can conclude that the risks of action are less than the risks of waiting. Time is only a benefit in a crisis response

scenario if we know how to use it. Otherwise, decision makers simply re-habituate to each step in an escalating crisis until the new normal takes hold or a tipping point appears.

If North Korea experiences a more gradual unraveling, through instability, insurgency or both, then, over time, the crisis may creep up incrementally. In such a crisis, the political planning and coordination process is more likely to be front and center—needing to guide, call for and ultimately demand operational response—rather than simply respond to an obvious imperative. And the greatest danger is complacency and/or inertia that will have departments “doing business as usual,” succumbing to fatalism or lapsing into policy hypnosis as time drags on and decisions are delayed until the crisis accelerates or the opportunity emerges. Unfortunately, by that time it often seems like the response cupboard seems pretty bare, offering limited, and generally unpalatable, options.

II. Why WMD Matters? The Power of The Value Hierarchy.

Insurgency, instability or regime collapse in North Korea will engage multiple conflicting interests and priorities, each of which has its own requirements, risk tolerances, timelines and stakeholders (both internal and external to the US government). Preventing the use or proliferation of North Korean WMD capabilities will compete with a range of other critical US objectives, including:

- Preventing humanitarian and/or refugee disaster;
- Minimizing instability and/or insurgency;
- Limiting negative economic impacts;
- Advancing successful reunification of the Korean peninsula; and
- Working cooperatively with China (or at least preventing direct conflict).

US crisis planning efforts typically pay lip service to the reality of competing, contradictory objectives, but rarely do such efforts resolve the inherent tensions or establish clear priorities. Within the US government, these priorities generally co-exist in a highly competitive value hierarchy, engaged by highly motivated stakeholders and advocates who are shaped by their individual communities and perceptions of risk. This dynamic is exacerbated by the nature of interagency structures and organizations that divide the policy and response apparatus along regional and functional lines and encourage the development of specialized communities that have little call for interaction on a day-to-day basis. But competing value hierarchies are not limited to the US government—they also exist within, between and among other critical partners such as South Korea, Japan, and China, as well as with other institutions such as the European Union, NATO or the United Nations. As more actors become involved in the crisis and gain a seat at the table, even more interests and value hierarchies must be considered and incorporated, further complicating cooperation and constraining bargaining space.

When a crisis unfolds under a WMD (especially a nuclear) shadow, the imperative to control, neutralize or eliminate these threats will find its way to the top of the value hierarchy, displacing other priorities and risking cleavages with key partners that do not share the same values (or

promoting strange bedfellows with those who do). This dynamic is further intensified as direct risks to US forces, citizens or the homeland rise, often in ways highly disproportionate to the objective CBRN risks at issue. (See examples of Libya, Japan/Fukushima, and Syria, in which lower threat CBRN issues repeatedly trumped higher risk/likelihood threats). In a crisis, these misalignments can come as a surprise as longstanding priorities such as promoting reunification, managing relations with China, or preventing humanitarian crisis get pushed aside and nuclear (or chemical/biological) dangers move to center stage. This dynamic often leads to unhealthy stakeholder competition, zero-sum solutions and a lack of collaborative approaches and mitigating strategies.

North Korea's growing nuclear arsenal and missile delivery systems are increasingly able to hold US vital interests, and, in short order, perhaps even the US homeland, at risk. Its offensive biological weapons program provides covert options to inflict high casualties and sow terror, while a vast chemical weapons program can rain terror on civilian populations and complicate any opposing military advance, all while perhaps staying below the threshold for US nuclear retaliation. Decades of combined military planning with South Korea for North Korean collapse or attack have prioritized maintaining the alliance, increasing South Korean leadership and responsibility, and setting the conditions for reunification. These established priorities may not hold when confronted with the looming WMD reality. Rather, it is increasingly likely that these priorities will be swept aside in the face of more pressing needs to find, secure, and eliminate North Korean chemical, biological, nuclear and missile capabilities before they can be used or proliferated.

III. What Do We Do Now? Why the WMD Challenge Is SO Hard.

In the face of instability or collapse in the DPRK, the United States and its allies will face three overarching and overlapping WMD-related objectives:

- 1) Preventing, detecting and responding to the loss of control or transfer of CBRN capabilities;
- 2) Deterring, and if necessary, responding to CBRN coercion and use; and
- 3) Securing and eliminating CBRN programs and capabilities safely and verifiably.

Decision makers will not have the luxury to choose between these priorities or engage them sequentially. While each of these objectives is fraught with its own complexity and risk at the tactical and operational levels they share a number of broad strategic challenges.

1. Scoping and Prioritizing the Problem.

The size, diversity and distribution of the North Korean chemical, nuclear and biological weapons programs represent a challenge of unprecedented magnitude. Moreover, detailed and actionable information on the locations, materials, weapons and personnel associated with these programs is entirely lacking. Preventing the proliferation or use of North Korea's chemical, biological and nuclear programs are tasks of enormous proportion. When faced with a problem that is too big and too hard, human nature (and therefore governments and decision makers) seeks to redefine the problem into more manageable pieces or simply to compartmentalize the problem away into the

“too hard to do” pile.

Many experts will seek to prioritize the nuclear challenge and ignore the chemical or biological threats, but given the geographic distribution of North Korean WMD capabilities and the threat they may pose to ROK population centers, this type of prioritization may be far more difficult in practice than in theory. Others may seek to prioritize based on scale of threat (large-scale use or proliferation rather than smaller risks and quantities) only to find themselves on a slippery slope that encourages proliferators or adversaries to test our response thresholds. Finally, some will seek to prioritize our objectives—putting primary emphasis on preventing and responding to use, tolerating degrees of proliferation risk and deferring efforts to secure and eliminate capabilities. This approach risks placing the United States and its allies in a highly reactive posture, heightening homeland risks that may be politically intolerable, and dragging out elimination and disablement efforts that would reduce or eliminate other risks if employed early rather than late. While prioritization is essential, doing so along simplistic categories is ineffective. Rather, prioritization is more successful through a robust, cost-benefit analysis at the operational level that incorporates all kinetic and non-kinetic tools targeting key leverage points, which can best buy down risk in achievable ways.

2. Defining and communicating triggers, thresholds and redlines.

In a collapse or instability scenario, preventing proliferation and use is best accomplished by deterring such behavior by all potential actors involved. This requires that the United States and its allies establish and communicate clear thresholds about which behaviors are unacceptable and what costs will likely be incurred if they are crossed.

Balancing *precision* (which establishes clear boundaries but limits flexibility) with *ambiguity* (which affords decision makers more options but encourages “testing”) is a substantial challenge. Does the United States want to suggest different use boundaries for nuclear, chemical or biological threats? Broadly worded red lines afford very little flexibility, but suggesting we would only respond forcefully to nuclear threats could invite devastating consequences. Will threats to the homeland invite far greater costs than attacks that remain in theater? How should deterrence messages about use differ from those designed to prevent transfer or proliferation? Does scale matter? Zero tolerance for WMD use may be ideal, but very difficult to achieve in terms of risk, escalation and feasibility. Clearly, the United States may be very reluctant to resort to military strikes in the wake of small-scale chemical attacks occurring early in the crisis, a la Syria in 2012 and 2013. But a lack of decisive action is nearly certain to encourage escalation and risk-taking by increasingly desperate parties. This dynamic has played out in the Syria case for most of the last three years, leading to the recent escalation of chemical weapons (CW) use in Syria and the subsequent Trump administration strike against the al-Shayrat air base.

Even if the United States can decide on a clear message with well-defined consequences, communicating such thresholds and redlines is incredibly difficult with North Korea and the various institutions and individuals within the country. Technology, language, access and culture pose substantial obstacles to effective communications—challenges that will only compound in a crisis environment, particularly if leadership is fractured and messages cannot penetrate to specific individuals.

3. Knowing when something has gone wrong.

Preventing or responding to the transfer of chemical, biological or nuclear capabilities is highly dependent upon detailed, comprehensive information about key programs, facilities and personnel and the ability to monitor all three on a real-time basis. Such detailed knowledge on the North Korean programs is completely lacking and even if it existed, the size, scale, geographic distribution and diversity of the program would preclude any prospect of comprehensive monitoring. Indications of loss of control or transfer of nuclear, chemical or biological capabilities would almost certainly arrive well after the fact—possibly by days or weeks—and be very difficult to verify. Real-time tracking is difficult or even impossible without extraordinary luck and investment. Decision makers will constantly seek assurances that these WMD-related capabilities are secured, but such assurances are impossible to provide. It is very difficult to solve a problem that you do not even know you have.

4. Finding the needle in the haystack.

Given that real-time knowledge is unlikely, searching for proliferating chemical, biological or nuclear capabilities once on the loose will be a nearly impossible task. Such capabilities can be easily hidden or disguised and are profoundly difficult to detect. Any interdiction effort will require a layered and personnel-intensive security cordon emanating from the peninsula, but even then chances of success are limited. Human or signals intelligence will be the key, not physical detection capabilities. This case would demonstrate the counter-intuitive difficulties between a sudden crisis and a “slow boil.” In a slow boil, leakage or transfer of such capabilities will be deeply worrying, but opportunities to prevent or interdict such action closer to the source, particularly through military force, will be fraught with escalatory risks. In a fast-moving crisis, the imperative to neutralize capabilities before use or transfer occurs will be evident as well as the risks of a widespread high-stakes military conflict.

5. Managing the fear factor.

Nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons inspire a level of fear often well in excess of their objective risks, especially with regard to any direct threats to US forces, civilians or territory. This disproportionality is especially acute with chemical and biological threats, where certain objective risks such as battlefield efficacy against protected forces may be relatively low, but public paranoia and panic may run high. Failure to anticipate the fear factor, educate relentlessly, and consistently manage or mitigate concerns, even at the state and local levels, can result in highly disruptive or distracting policy distortions at critical moments.

6. Bringing others along.

The United States cannot and will not be alone in addressing the WMD aspects of collapse or instability in North Korea. Washington will have to manage and at times restrain its bilateral partner, South Korea, and its other regional ally, Japan. China’s tacit, if not direct, cooperation will be essential. Internationalization of the crisis—particularly through UN Security Council resolutions—will be critical. Partners will reflect the needs of the crisis or the opportunity in all its dimensions—political, military and economic—even if it means the coalition is large, complex,

unwieldy and perhaps unfamiliar.

CBRN crises are likely to be complex, technically and operationally demanding, and politically fraught, and the coalitions needed to deal with them will be as well. This coalition will not just be on the international front. Every counter-WMD challenge, opportunity or crisis will involve a coalition in response—first across the Department of Defense (DoD), then the interagency and finally, internationally. The relative mix of civilian and military or DoD/non-DoD components can and will shift depending on the nature of the action, the timeline of the crisis and the broader context or environment in which that occurs. This doesn't mean following business as usual bureaucratic approaches—adaptable and flexible crises coordination mechanisms are essential, but the United States and its coalition partners will need to reflect their own “whole of government” approaches that will extend well beyond military-to-military dynamics.

7. Bring in the lawyers.

Legal authorities are foundational to any counter-WMD effort and essential to establishing both domestic and international support. A strong legal foundation has several essential components and layers: the international legal basis to enter another state's territory; the domestic authorities to provide assistance; appropriate legal protections from liability for individuals and states; and assurances that such efforts will not result in international treaty violations and/or other conditions that could place states in political or legal jeopardy. Of course, matters of intervention and sovereignty are foremost when considering counter-WMD actions in times of armed conflict, and when permission to enter sovereign territory is withheld, illegitimate or unavailable (for example, in a state-collapse scenario). Is a plausible “self-defense” rationale available and is the government prepared to act unilaterally? In most cases, where multilateral support is necessary or preferred, even in terms of implementing diplomatic or post-conflict WMD elimination efforts, support from NATO or the United Nations is essential to build support and legitimacy.

Do not assume that a sudden conversion from crisis to opportunity, resulting in an invitation to cooperate from government entities inside the DPRK, resolves the legal challenges. While this would ameliorate some sovereignty concerns, many states would still require UN Security Council authorization or a NATO-approved mission if military assets are needed to support the effort, regardless of permission from governing authorities on the ground. What if legal governing authority is absent, such as in a possible collapse scenario? Such a scenario poses additional legal challenges for which the international legal system is ill-prepared. This challenge could be particularly acute in the Korean context as Chinese-backed North Korean entities could be competing with South Korea or its proxies for legitimate control of the country.

8. Knowing when we are done.

Monitoring, deterring, securing and eliminating or reducing WMD threats requires highly precise and detailed information about types, quantities and locations of materials and capabilities on a real-time basis. Reliably locating, characterizing and securing CBRN capabilities, materials and facilities is profoundly challenging under the best of circumstances, such as benign security environments, cooperative partners and well-documented programs of limited scale and diversity.

Even in the most cooperative environments, information on the exact locations and amounts of chemical, biological or nuclear materials, weapons or equipment may be missing or insufficient. When counter-WMD efforts involve an unwilling or uncooperative partner, especially if it involves the use of force, the armed forces will be completely dependent upon intelligence to ensure an action is precise, effective, thorough and reasonably safe for both forces and innocent parties on the ground.

Moreover, thinking in terms of “stuff”—weapons, materials, precursors, equipment, locations, etc.—will be wholly insufficient. Identifying, tracking and redirecting individuals will also be essential to reduce proliferation and maximize elimination of the programs. It is not difficult to imagine a multi-year treadmill of discovery and response as new and perhaps unknown capabilities are revealed. Such an endless effort to “prove a negative”—the absence of all chemical, biological and nuclear capabilities—is a hopelessly impossible task.

9. Ensuring effective verification and accountability.

Eliminating weapons, materials, facilities and programs can reduce WMD threats. But eliminating “things” is insufficient to deal with matters of intent. Without some process of justice for the misdeeds of the past and mechanisms to verify and hold to account future behavior, enduring threat reduction is not possible. The most profound of these deeds is the actual use of these weapons, especially when used criminally and reprehensibly against civilians.

The track record for dealing with WMD use is poor: the international community never took any actions against Saddam Hussein or his cronies for the horrific use of CW in the Iran-Iraq war or against his own Kurdish civilians in Halabja. In Syria, the sarin attacks in Ghouta that killed more than 1,400 civilians prompted the entire international effort to eliminate Syria’s CW program, but nothing has yet been done to hold the perpetrators of that attack to account. Moreover, the continued use of chemicals as weapons in Syria, including the recent nerve agent in Khan Sheikhou, demonstrates the difficulty of a threat reduction approach, with a country or entity that destroys its WMD under coercive pressure and remains deeply ambivalent about the fundamental rejection of this form of warfare. For deterrence to be credible in North Korea, especially in the context of instability or collapse, individuals must believe that they can and will be held accountable for their actions at both the national and individual level.

IV. What Can We Do About It? Bring Me Another War.

A WMD crisis on the Korean peninsula is unlikely to unfold in an orderly, linear fashion, from steady state to crisis to military intervention with clear hand-offs from civilian to military control and back again for “post-war clean up.” If linear, phased planning constructs are problematic in most military planning scenarios, they are useless for dealing with the CBRN aspects of North Korean collapse or instability. In fact, most modern CBRN responses have not been conducive to traditional military-style intervention and have involved largely civilian-led efforts with military support. The WMD aspects of instability or collapse in North Korea may require a larger, more complex, and more dangerous response than any previous effort. However, this suggests that the combining and pooling of military and civilian approaches will be more, not less, likely. This will require processes for both political and operational coordination and synchronization across

multiple lines of effort simultaneously.

More likely, the only viable strategy to address the WMD challenge emanating from North Korean collapse or instability will resemble a planning matrix or pyramid. This would involve simultaneous military and civilian, kinetic and non-kinetic, and unilateral, bilateral and multilateral actions occurring in different areas and against different types of facilities, materials and weapons. By necessity, such actions would unfold simultaneously in accordance with their urgency, threat, accessibility, feasibility and other key operational factors.

In such a layered, multidimensional approach, the United States will need to observe and act on its own value hierarchy, while simultaneously working to internationalize the effort effectively across a wide range of stakeholders with value hierarchies that differ from its own. This includes, first and foremost, preserving the right to act unilaterally and preventively in self-defense if faced with the threat of nuclear or biological attack. But such an approach also includes essential bilateral actions to support and defend allies in the region, as well as international efforts, sanctioned and validated by the United Nations Security Council, to locate, secure and ultimately dismantle or destroy North Korean capabilities made vulnerable through crisis and instability. The United States and its allies will need to pivot successfully between crisis and opportunity—endeavoring throughout to create conditions such that the latter is more likely than the former. The job is simply too big to do otherwise.



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