



# THE DANGERS OF ACCEPTING NUCLEAR BRINKSMANSHIP AS THE NEW NORMAL



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Celebrations over the 50 signatures appended to the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as soon as it opened for signature on 20 Sep 2017 were overshadowed by the rather sharp statements and counter-statements being traded by the topmost leadership in Washington and Pyongyang around the same time. Twitterati was abuzz with prospects of nuclear war as nuclear threats and caustic insults were hurled quick and fast by both sides. Nuclear brinkmanship had become the flavour of the times.

Nuclear deterrence is a psychological game of perception manipulation. Nuclear nations prey upon the adversary's mind to make him believe that they have the capability and the resolve to use their nuclear weapons in case of an action that they consider undesirable and unacceptable. Usefulness of projecting irrationality and madness is well established for enhancing deterrence. It may be recalled that during the Vietnam War, President Nixon cultivated the 'madman theory' to make his enemy believe that he was irrational and volatile and could take extreme steps such as using nuclear weapons.

Ironically, in 2017, President Trump and Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un are outdoing each other in establishing the madness of the other. In his speech at the UNGA on 21 Sep 2017, President Trump called Kim Jong Un a "rocket man on a suicide mission". Kim responded by describing Trump as a "rogue and a gangster" "having mentally deranged behaviour". Trump further returned the compliment by declaring Kim a "madman". Besides trading personal insults, the leaders hurled nuclear threats at each other – To Trump's threat of unleashing 'fire and fury like the world has never seen before', Kim responded with the possibility of his conducting test of a hydrogen bomb over the Pacific Ocean. Both sides seemed to be touching a new high, or low, in nuclear signalling.

By according madness to the other, rather than assuming it for own self as Nixon did, today's leaders appear to be granting credence to the other's ability to behave irrationally. This could be a perfect recipe for deterrence breakdown if the other fell into a commitment trap to actually do something really 'mad' that triggers off inadvertent escalation. So, while nuclear brinkmanship may be useful for creating deterrence, the road from nuclear coercion to inadvertent escalation is slippery and surrounded by fog. While the leaders may only be seeking to heighten risks in order to make the other blink, or to create more negotiating space or leverages for self, the danger lies in this strategy quickly getting out of hand.

One well known and even well understood risk of such a situation is inadvertent nuclear war. A lesser known danger, but one which would have far reaching implications for future of international security and non-proliferation, is the inadvertent acceptance of brinkmanship behaviour as the new normal. Traditionally, and at least since the sobering effect of the Cuban missile crisis, the US-Soviet dyad showed a desire for nuclear stability. Even when caught in a relationship of bitter hostility, the two sides laboriously negotiated nuclear confidence building and arms control to create an interlocking web of strategic stability. Casual references to use of nuclear weapons were frowned upon and avoided especially after the Reagan-Gorbachev understanding that 'a nuclear war could not be won and must not be fought'.

In contemporary times, brandishing nuclear capabilities and threatening nuclear use appears to have resurfaced. USA, Russia, North Korea and Pakistan seemingly subscribe to this trend and have not shied away from showcasing their nuclear weapons – not just through conduct of tests of delivery systems, but also through statements of nuclear use made with an ease clearly meant to invoke unease. China and India appear to be the only two countries that are not quick to mention the nuclear word. Even during the Doklam crisis, neither country found it necessary to remind the other of its nuclear weapons. This is quite distinct from Pakistan that misses no opportunity to push its nuclear status under the nose of India and the rest of the international community.

If the world survives the ongoing US-North Korean standoff, students of nuclear strategy will derive many fresh lessons on nuclear deterrence just as it was done after the Cuban missile crisis. Alarming, one of these lessons might be on how to hone nuclear brinkmanship into a fine art. If this came to be accepted as the new normal, it could only increase the relevance of nuclear weapons for national security. This would certainly push away the possibility of the non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) ever being able to convince the NWS to give up their nuclear arsenals or to join the ban treaty. Rather, the NNWS might find themselves struggling to keep their own flock together as more

non-nuclear nations could evince greater security benefits in developing nuclear weapons of their own.

Accepting nuclear brinkmanship as regular behaviour would have repercussions not only for the immediate security situation between USA and North Korea, but also for the future of nuclear non-proliferation. It is, therefore, necessary and desirable that such behaviour continues to be considered 'rogue' rather than becoming the new normal. It would be best if the US would display maturity and a sense of responsibility with its nuclear capability just as much as North Korea is made to understand the same by China.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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