

GLOBAL

What Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un Don't Know About Their Own Standoff

If the Cuban Missile Crisis is any indication, today's leaders may be dangerously misinformed about the nuclear crisis.

GEORGE PERKOVICH MAY 25, 2018



A carnival float depicting North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and U.S. President Donald Trump in Mainz, Germany, in 2018. (RALPH ORLOWSKI / REUTERS)

When President Donald Trump canceled his June summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, he told him in a [letter](#) that the past few days of “tremendous anger and open hostility” had made it “inappropriate” for the two to meet and discuss denuclearization. “You talk about your nuclear capabilities,” Trump wrote, “but ours are so massive and powerful that I pray to God they will never have to be used.” The language echoed a January [tweet](#) in which the president wrote, “I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!”

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The North issued a statement in short order emphasizing a willingness to “sit down with the United States any time, in any format, to resolve the problems.” Yet it’s getting harder to see how Trump and Kim can make the mutual accommodations necessary for diplomacy to succeed. In fact, beneath the surface, the current situation resembles the prelude to the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, which historical research continues to show was much more dangerous than anyone knew at the time. If the Trump-Kim summit stays canceled, and saber-rattling returns as the dominant mode of communication, the odds of military crisis will rise dramatically. And, as the Cuba experience shows, once begun, a military crisis involving nuclear weapons will almost inevitably bring lots of surprises—ones that could make the shocking twists and turns of the summit buildup look pedestrian by comparison.

Daniel Ellsberg thought he knew all that could be known about the Cuban crisis. Brainiacs with top security clearances in Washington often think that way—but Ellsberg had solid reasons. In 1964, before he became famous for releasing the Pentagon Papers, he conducted a higher-than-top-secret study of the crisis for the Defense Department. Yet, as he narrates in his recent memoir, *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*, alarming facts about the military dynamics in 1962 were unknown to anyone in the U.S. until decades later. Indeed, to the extent that Americans today have any understanding of the Cuban crisis, it’s probably misinformed. This raises the shuddersome question: What will historians 50 years from now know that Trump and Kim do not now know about their own nuclear standoff?

“The similarities of the Cuban crisis and now are quite striking,” Ellsberg told me in an interview the day after President Trump’s “my nuclear button is bigger than yours” tweet in January. “To begin with, this is the first time since 1962 that a president has threatened imminent military action, with clear nuclear imagery, directly against a nuclear-weapon state. Then, as now, the United States was seeking regime change.”

In 1962, Ellsberg explained, the Soviet leadership was worried that the communist project would be undermined by American threats to invade and overthrow the communists in Cuba. The Soviets lagged far behind America’s capacity to deliver nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs, to the adversary’s

homeland. But Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev realized he could threaten the U.S. directly by putting nuclear weapons in Cuba.

“Kim makes a similar calculation today,” Ellsberg said. South Korea is next door, a prospering country that, if the North Korean people knew about it, would be an object lesson in how they’ve suffered under the Kim family. Meanwhile, the U.S., allied with South Korea, represents an existential military threat. “Kim needs ICBMs as a deterrent against attack by the United States to overthrow him or to intervene if he loses his grip over North Korea,” Ellsberg concludes. “A big difference is that the Soviets did it secretly, whereas Kim is doing it very openly.”

The clock of the Cuban crisis began ticking on October 16, when President Kennedy was notified that U.S. spy planes detected medium-range ballistic missiles in Cuba that could target the East Coast. Top military, intelligence, diplomatic, and White House officials were working around the clock to prepare options for the president. Kennedy’s secret tape-recording of meetings in the Cabinet Room and the Oval Office reveal military leaders pressing the president to authorize an invasion, and Kennedy calmly asking questions and reminding everyone of the consequences of nuclear war.

On October 22, Kennedy announced the discovery of Soviet missiles on television and said that he would impose a naval “quarantine” of Cuba in two days. He warned that the launch of a single missile from the island would cause “a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.” This meant a massive U.S. nuclear attack on the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites.

Meanwhile, U.S. Air Force and CIA planes were flying high and low over Cuba to glean intelligence on the Soviet missile buildup and to prepare plans for attacking key installations and invading the island. On October 27, an American U-2 spy plane was shot down over Cuba by a Soviet surface-to-air missile (SAM). When Kennedy wondered aloud why Khrushchev would do this, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara answered, “I don’t know how to interpret it.”

There is much that U.S. officials did not know how to interpret during the crisis, and much that they misinterpreted. For example, when the U-2 was shot down, all American officials assumed that the anti-air firing on U.S. planes was authorized by Khrushchev. In fact, however, Khrushchev was not in control of anti-aircraft forces in Cuba. Rather, Cuban personnel were conducting operations under the direction

of Fidel Castro. Castro had feared an imminent invasion and ordered his anti-aircraft personnel to fire on American planes. Some Soviet operators were carried away by the example of their Cuban comrades and ignored orders not to fire without authorization from the Soviet general in charge in Cuba. This turned out to be the case with the Soviet officer who had successfully struck the U-2 plane.

That night, Attorney General Robert Kennedy met secretly with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin at the Justice Department and delivered a two-part ultimatum. The first demand was that the Soviets begin removing the missiles within 48 hours, or the U.S. would attack them. The second demand, which long remained secret, was that firing on American reconnaissance planes must end immediately. According to Ellsberg's notes, the attorney general declared, "If one more plane was shot at, we wouldn't just attack the site that had fired at it; we would take out all the SAMs and anti-aircraft and probably all the missiles. And that would almost surely be followed by an invasion."

In threatening invasion for actions over which Krushchev may not have had control, Kennedy ominously did not know that the Soviets had deployed 98 "tactical" nuclear weapons with Soviet forces on Cuba. These weapons were to defend Cuba against an expected marine invasion by the U.S. Prior to October 22, local officers were pre-authorized to use them. Neither the existence of these weapons nor the delegation of authority to use them was known to Americans until 30 years later.

Another unknown—or mistakenly known—"fact" also added impetus to an American invasion. The Defense Department told Kennedy that there were "about 8,000-10,000" Soviet "probably military personnel" in Cuba. Calculations of what it would take to complete an invasion followed from this. In fact, the Soviets had roughly 42,000 troops on the island, which also was not known until decades later.

If Kennedy had assented to his generals' constant pressure to invade Cuba, the higher-than-known Soviet troop numbers would likely have made the landing and ground war much more difficult to win. This, in turn, would have created even greater pressure on Kennedy to escalate in order to avoid a politically devastating defeat. Such escalation would have then probably driven the Cubans and Soviets to use some of these nuclear weapons against invading forces. According to Soviet archives, Khrushchev did not initially comprehend that this would cause the U.S. to escalate to general nuclear war.

“We don’t need to speculate what would have happened,” McNamara declared when he finally learned—in 1992—about the Soviet deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Cuba. “It would have been an *absolute disaster* for the world.”

In the 55 years since the Cuban Missile Crisis, America’s technical capabilities to gather intelligence have improved breathtakingly. Still, it’s extremely difficult to know how foreign adversaries perceive their situation and calculate their moves, especially when key targets of intelligence do not reveal their inner thoughts in phone calls, texts, and emails that can be intercepted.

The U.S. and other governments know that North Korea has nuclear weapons that work. The number is uncertain; estimates run from 15 to 60. North Korea has tested a variety of missiles whose ranges extend from 50 to 8,000 miles. (Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, is 120 miles from Seoul, the capital of South Korea. Washington is about 6,750 miles from Pyongyang.) The reliabilities of the various missile types, again, are uncertain. Outsiders, as well as Kim himself, cannot know whether nuclear warheads mounted on longer-range missiles would detonate as planned.

Similar uncertainties apply to the effectiveness of the ballistic missile defenses that the U.S. has deployed in Alaska to knock out North Korea’s long-range missiles. Such defenses have not been tested in wartime conditions. Last October, Trump told Fox News’s Sean Hannity, “We have missiles that can knock out a missile in the air 97 percent of the time.” Experts debunked this claim and the Pentagon did not defend it. But if the president believes it, or the North Koreans believe he believes it, then the risk of nuclear conflict could be greater than it should otherwise be. The president could be emboldened to strike North Korea, believing that missile defenses would limit North Korea’s retaliation. Kim could back down for the same reason, or, more likely, he could be motivated to expand his nuclear arsenal and delivery options so that he would have more confidence in being able to retaliate against Trump.

Prior to talk of a summit, the Trump administration had been contemplating and preparing for strikes against North Korean military facilities if North Korea were to conduct another test of an ICBM or a nuclear weapon. The idea, according to credible reports, was not to undertake or signal a war to remove the North Korean regime, but rather to demonstrate America’s seriousness and capacity to compel Kim to stop such provocations. If the North Koreans respond to the summit’s

cancelation by flexing their nuclear or missile capabilities, the White House will feel pressed to push back. Advocates of such military action seem to presume that the North Korean leadership and all the officers dispersed under their command would correctly interpret the limited threat that Trump would be signaling and would not respond militarily in ways that would compel Trump to one-up the North.

Yet, senior U.S. military officials privately acknowledge that they have very little insight into how Kim and his inner circle would react to various U.S. military actions or diplomatic negotiating positions. Indeed, senior officials in the current administration and its predecessors say that less is known about North Korea than about any other adversary. Meanwhile, recent interlocutors report that North Korean officials are desperate for insights into what Trump will do.

“The Cuban Missile Crisis shows that a small power can decide to go down in a blazing act of glorious defiance rather than being occupied,” Ellsberg told me. Soviet archival research and memoirs reveal that Castro pleaded to Khrushchev that if the U.S. invaded—as Castro expected and the Russians feared—Khrushchev must preemptively use nuclear weapons against the U.S. Castro wrote to Moscow, “if they [the Americans] actually carry out the brutal act of invading Cuba ... that would be the moment to eliminate such danger forever through an act of legitimate defense, however harsh and terrible the solution would be.” Castro knew this would destroy Cuba and himself, but he could not stand the idea of the U.S. getting away with invading, and he thought global socialism would prevail.

“Smart guys can make crazy judgments—crazy, not just ignorant,” Ellsberg noted. “Castro was young, very smart, very ideologically committed. Kim is young, perhaps smart, and probably very ideologically committed not to go down and lose his family’s legacy without a fight.”

What about the U.S. and its leadership? Ellsberg noted the widely reported concerns about Trump’s mental and temperamental fitness, and his predilection for making fiery threats. “The question is, will the military hold the president back from his impulsiveness?” he asked. “My own guess is they can’t, they won’t. They can be replaced in an instant. Someone else will step in. They can’t hold him back. Who has ever told the president ‘you can’t do this’?”

