

Hawaii False Alarm Hints at Thin Line Between Mishap and Nuclear War

The following article, by Max Fisher, appeared in *The Interpreter*, *New York Times*, on January 14, 2018, the day after state emergency officials in Hawaii made a false warning to take shelter from an inbound missile threat. Three days later, Japan's public broadcaster accidentally sent news alerts that North Korea had launched a missile and that citizens should take shelter. The Japanese broadcaster, NHK, corrected itself five minutes later and apologized for the error on its evening news, initially blaming the J-Alert system but later conceding it was not to blame. NHK's swift rectification of its error stands in contrast to the 38-minute delay by officials in Hawaii on Saturday in cancelling warnings of an incoming ballistic missile threat. Notwithstanding common misperceptions to the contrary, there is no legal means to prevent launch once the President of the U.S. has made an order to launch, which can be done without consultation and whose timing follows "launch on launch (by the enemy)" to pre-empt the destruction of ground-based missiles by the enemy. Today's issue of *The Independent* has an interesting take on how the Hawaii alarm may have been interpreted in Pyongyang on the following website:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/hawaii-missile-alert-nuclear-war-text-stop-north-korea-us-norad-defence-pacific-a8161501.html>

and a very close call is described by former U.S. Secretary of Defence William Perry on this website:

<https://www.npr.org/2018/01/16/578247161/ex-defense-chief-william-perry-on-false-missile-warnings>

Nuclear experts are warning, using some of their most urgent language since President Trump took office, that Hawaii's false alarm [on January 13, 2018], in which state agencies alerted locals to a nonexistent missile attack, underscores a growing risk of unintended nuclear war with North Korea. To understand the connection, which might not be obvious, you need to go back to the tragedy of Korean Air Lines Flight 007.

In 1983, a Korean airliner bound from Anchorage to Seoul, South Korea, strayed into Soviet airspace. Air defense officers, mistaking it for an American spy plane that had been loitering nearby, tried to establish contact. They fired warning shots. When no response came, they shot it down, killing all 269 people on board.

But the graver lesson may be what happened next. Though it was quickly evident that the downing had been a mistake, mutual distrust and the logic of nuclear deterrence — more so than the deaths themselves — set Washington and Moscow heading toward a conflict neither wanted. The story illustrated how imperfect information, aggressive defense postures and minutes-long response times brought both sides hurtling toward possible nuclear war — a set of dynamics that can feel disconcertingly familiar today.

Ronald Reagan had taken office in 1981 pledging to confront the Soviet Union. Though he intended to deter Soviet aggression, Moscow read his threats and condemnations — he had declared its government an "evil empire" that must be brought to an end — as preludes to war.

Mr. Trump's White House has issued its own threats against North Korea, suggesting that it might pursue war to halt the country's nuclear weapons development.

The 1983 shooting down, on its own, might have passed as a terrible mistake. But the superpowers had only fragmentary understanding of something that had happened on the far fringes of Soviet territory. In an atmosphere of distrust, technical and bureaucratic snafus drove each to suspect the other of deception. Moscow received contradictory reports as to whether its pilots had shot down an airliner or a spy plane, and Soviet leaders were biased toward trusting their own. So when they declared it a legal interception of an American military incursion, American leaders, who knew this to be false, assumed Soviet leaders were lying. Moscow had downed the airliner deliberately, some concluded, in an act of undeclared war.

At the same time, Washington made a nearly perfect mirror-image set of mistakes — suggesting that such misreadings are not just possible, but dangerously likely. Mr. Reagan, furious at the loss of life, accused Moscow of deliberately targeting the civilian airliner. He denounced Soviet society itself as rotten and in pursuit of world domination. In fact, a C.I.A. assessment, included in the president's daily briefing that morning, had concluded the incident was likely an error. Mr. Reagan appeared to have simply missed it.

But Soviet leaders had never considered this; they assumed Mr. Reagan was lying about their intentions. Some concluded he had somehow lured the Soviet Union into downing the aircraft as cover for a massive pre-emptive attack, which they feared might come at any moment. Each read the other's blundering and dissembling as intentional, deepening suspicions among hard-liners that the other side was laying the groundwork for war. And if war was coming, the logic of nuclear deterrence all but required firing first.

Nuclear-armed missiles had recently achieved a level of speed and capability so that one power could completely disarm another in a matter of minutes. This created something called first-strike instability, in which firing first — even if you think you might be firing in error — is the only way to be sure of preventing your own obliteration. The result was that the United States and the Soviet Union repeatedly went to the brink of war over provocations or even technical misreadings. Often, officials had mere minutes to decide whether to retaliate against seemingly real or impending attacks without being able to fully verify whether an attack was actually underway. In the logic of nuclear deterrence, firing would have been the rational choice.

That dynamic is heightened with North Korea, which is thought to have only a few dozen warheads and so must fire them immediately to prevent their destruction in the event of war. "Today's false alarm in Hawaii a reminder of the big risks we continue to run by relying on nuclear deterrence/prompt launch nuclear posture," Kingston Reif, an analyst with the Arms Control Association, wrote on Twitter, referring to the strategy of firing quickly in a war. "And while deterring/containing North Korea is far preferable to preventive war, it's not risk free. And it could fail."

If similar misunderstandings seem implausible today, consider that an initial White House statement called Hawaii's alert an exercise — though state officials say it was operator error. Consider that 38 minutes elapsed before emergency systems sent a second message announcing the mistake. If even Washington was misreading events, the confusion in Pyongyang must have been far greater. Had the turmoil unfolded during a major crisis or period of heightened threats, North Korean leaders could have misread the Hawaiian warning as cover

for an attack, much as the Soviets had done in 1983. American officials have been warning for weeks that they might attack North Korea. Though some analysts consider this a likely bluff, officials in Pyongyang have little room for error.

Vipin Narang, a nuclear scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, suggested another possible scenario, using shorthand terms to refer to the president and his nuclear command systems, which Mr. Trump has nearby at all times. “POTUS sees alert on his phone about an incoming toward Hawaii, pulls out the biscuit, turns to his military aide with the football and issues a valid and authentic order to launch nuclear weapons at North Korea,” Mr. Narang wrote on Twitter, adding, “Think it can’t happen?”

Unlike in 1983, no one died in Hawaii’s false alarm. But deaths are not necessary for a mistake to lead to war. Just three months after the airliner was shot down, a Soviet early warning system falsely registered a massive American launch. Nuclear war may have only been averted because the Soviet officer in charge, operating purely on a hunch, reported it as an error.

North Korea is far more vulnerable than the Soviet Union was to a nuclear strike, giving its officers an even narrower window to judge events and even greater incentive to fire first. And, unlike the Soviets, who maintained global watch systems and spy networks, North Korea operates in relative blindness. For all the power of nuclear weapons, scholars say their gravest dangers come from the uncertainty they create and the fallibility of human operators, who must read every signal perfectly for mutual deterrence to hold.

In 1983, Washington and Moscow took steps that heightened the uncertainty, darkly hinting at each other’s illegitimacy and threats of massive retaliation, in a contest for nuclear supremacy, and survival. Each was gambling they could go to the brink without human error pushing them over. William J. Perry, a defense secretary under President Bill Clinton, called the false alarm in Hawaii a reminder that “the risk of accidental nuclear war is not hypothetical — accidents have happened in the past, and humans will err again.”

Mr. Reagan concluded the same, writing in his memoirs, “The KAL incident demonstrated how close the world had come to the nuclear precipice and how much we needed nuclear arms control.” Mikhail Gorbachev, who soon after took over the Soviet Union, had the same response, later telling the journalist David Hoffman, “A war could start not because of a political decision, but just because of some technical failure.” Mr. Gorbachev and Mr. Reagan reduced their country’s stockpiles and repeatedly sought, though never quite reached, an agreement to banish nuclear weapons from the world. But Mr. Trump and North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong-un, remain locked in 1983, issuing provocations and threats of nuclear strikes on push-button alert, gambling that their luck, and ours, will continue to hold.