

A Call to the U.S. and North Korea: End Threats of Nuclear War and Progress Towards Peace and Nuclear Disarmament

Psychologists for Social Responsibility strongly condemns the reckless and senseless use of inflammatory language from the White House in its recent threats to North Korea. This extremely dangerous rhetoric includes warnings to North Korea of “fire and fury like the world has never seen¹”, reference to “locked and loaded” weapons², as well as the threatened “destruction of its people³”—a nation of 25 million human beings.⁴ We also strongly condemn the use of equally inflammatory language from North Korean leadership in their threats to the United States. The declared intention (since walked back) to launch a nuclear strike against the United States Pacific island territory of Guam, with its population of 172,000 human beings⁵, is provocative and terrible. This war of words could lead directly to a nuclear catastrophe.

It is a great irony that both the peoples most recently threatened with genocidal mass extermination—those of Guam and North Korea—are colonized or dictatorially-ruled. Neither people have institutionally-guaranteed representative power in the governments that rule them. Should a nuclear war occur, it would cause massive death and destruction to completely innocent people living, to their great misfortune, under leaders who engage in reckless mutual provocation. Should the conflagration escalate further among allied powers, the scope of the death and destruction could be global. Even without allied participation, a nuclear exchange would accelerate global warming and provoke widespread famine far beyond the countries directly involved.

The rhetoric by rulers on both sides unveils what should have long been obvious. Even in limited use, nuclear weapons are weapons of genocide. They are inherently unjust and morally horrific. They have no place in any country, particularly not those claiming to live in accordance with universal moral principles. Recognizing the moral indefensibility and extreme danger posed by conflict between nuclear powers, the United Nations General Assembly, on July 7, 2017, adopted a legally binding *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons* with a vote of 122 to one⁶. *Psychologists for Social Responsibility*, who sent a representative to the treaty conference, greeted this news with jubilation. Psychologists committed to nonviolence and social justice created our organization in 1982 with the specific goals of preventing nuclear war, eliminating all nuclear weapons, and replacing war itself with cultures of peace.

Psychological science offers resources for helping to understand the escalation of nuclear rhetoric and how to reverse it. Reacting out of emotions, unprincipled thinking and bravado will of course make it worse. We stand by our late member and renowned social psychologist Morton Deutsch’s summary of the empirical evidence on this score: “a win-or-lose orientation tends to escalate conflicts,” “malignant conflicts encourage misperception and misjudgments that yield unwanted results,” and “when one party in a conflict attempts to increase its security without regard for the security of the other party, the attempt readily becomes self-defeating⁷.”

Out of various psychological biases, from selective attention to cognitive simplicity, our “image of the enemy” tends to exaggerate the evil of both a perceived enemy’s motivations and their actual behavior⁸. Likewise, self-serving biases make us too charitable towards the motivations and actions of our own leadership.

People are more dangerous when afraid and threatened. A more psychologically sound policy towards North Korea would be an exchange of de-escalations. The U.S. and South Korea might, for instance, offer to cease military exercises—which North Korea finds extremely provocative⁹—on the condition that North Korea stops tests. In any case, there need to be more respectful negotiations, sensitive to the ways that North Korean leadership wants to save face, and also the ways that their interests overlap with the North Korean people's interests (in spite of the non-democratic nature of that leadership). The U.S. avoided a nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis in part because President Kennedy helped U.S.S.R. Premier Khrushchev both save face and protect his nation's welfare by promising secretly to remove nuclear missiles aimed at the U.S.S.R. from Turkey if Khrushchev removed their weapons aimed at the U.S. from Cuba.

There are viable alternatives to escalation and brinksmanship. We support sustained, focused, tough-minded, and courageous negotiations, with an eye toward achievable goals. Such goals include measurable progress towards human rights and other moves to establish peace on the Korean peninsula, along with ongoing diplomatic ties among all nations. The South Korean people, who are most vulnerable to North Korean military provocation, have taken the lead in this work. South Koreans mobilized a popular and successful nonviolent movement to impeach their corruption-scandalized and militarily confrontational president¹⁰ and to elect a new president promising to work towards a peace treaty to officially end the war between the two Koreas¹¹.

The commitment to peace shown by the South Korean people¹² is far more likely than war to lead to viable and sustainable solutions. We do not subscribe to the psychological idea that “stable equilibria” in human communities are best reached through selfish and amoral actors credibly threatening each other with “defection” (Mutually-Assured Destruction in the case of nuclear threats). This idea derives from the game theory of human relations developed by mathematician John Nash¹³. The embrace of Nash's theory in the paranoid context of the Cold War has not made the world safer. We have come too close to catastrophic nuclear Holocaust too many times¹⁴ for us to view our current survival under the “delicate balance of terror” as anything but good luck on borrowed time.

As noted in psychologist Steven Pinker's flawed but thought-provoking work *Better Angels of Our Nature*, many nations have unilaterally ceased their nuclear weapons programs—eight since 1985—without necessarily inviting their destruction by other selfish actors looking for their first opportunity to prey on the weak¹⁵. Some take the fate of Iraq, which the U.S. invaded knowing from intelligence briefings that it lacked a nuclear defense¹⁶, as evidence that nuclear weakness can be provocative. Libya's case is also troubling in this regard. But the illusion of invincibility combined with the perceived need to make credible threats of genocide is potentially much more provocative, as the U.S. and North Korea skirting at the edge of doomsday reminds us.

Pinker argues that the Flynn Effect—the steady increase in abstract intelligence in human communities documented by psychologist James Flynn¹⁷—has increased the peace by making broad applications of the Golden Rule more intellectually intuitive¹⁸. According to Pinker, growth in abstract intelligence helps human communities collectively apply the moral algebra of the Golden Rule—“I should, on principle, not do X to Y if I would not want Y to do X to me”—beyond members of their families and tribes and to those they once considered outsiders or even enemies. This broadened application of the rule should include “never threaten or commit nuclear genocide against another nation's people, as you would not want others to threaten or commit nuclear genocide against your people.” It is possible that the leadership of

nuclear nations continue to stockpile weapons of genocide like moral imbeciles because of morally narrowing processes like cognitive dissonance, self-justification, rationalization and denial. These processes can potentially short-circuit the consistent application of intuitive moral principles, even and especially among the intellectually astute.

Whether Pinker is right or not about intellectually-driven growth in collective human moral intelligence, those who do broadly apply the Golden Rule against the grain of morally narrowing process do not appear to automatically invite conquest and dissolution. Going beyond mere nuclear non-armament, the nation of Costa Rica gave up its standing army altogether in 1948, and since then has successfully relied on the enforcement powers of international law to protect its people, way of life and territorial integrity¹⁹. The path of a principled and vulnerable commitment to peace may or may not arise from intellectual brilliance, but it appears to be the best path for the future survival and flourishing of the human species.

The history of peace agreements, while imperfect, is a history of time bought for the creation of longer-term solutions. With the Doomsday Clock a mere two and a half minutes to midnight²⁰, a negotiated settlement may allow time for the world's nations to progress from prohibiting nuclear weapons to implementing nuclear disarmament in all nations.

¹ Steven Lee Myers and Cho Sang-hun, "Trump's 'fire and fury' threat raises alarm in Asia," *New York Times*, August 9, 2017. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/09/world/asia/north-korea-trump-threat-fire-and-fury.html>

² Mythili Sampathkumar, "South Korea in plea to avoid North Korea war after Trump's 'locked and loaded' comment," *The Independent*, August 14, 2017. URL: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/south-korea-north-donald-trump-non-military-nuclear-war-locked-loaded-us-president-a7892781.html>

³ W.J. Hennigan, "Defense chief warns North Korea against actions that would lead to 'end of its regime and the destruction of its people,'" *The Guardian*, August 9, 2017. URL: <http://www.latimes.com/politics/washington/la-na-essential-washington-updates-defense-chief-warns-north-korea-against-1502298984-htmllstory.html>

⁴ Democratic People's Republic of Korea, *World Statistic Pocketbook*, United Nations. URL: <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Democratic%20People%27s%20Republic%20of%20Korea>

⁵ Guam, *World Statistics Pocketbook*, United Nations. URL: <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Guam>

⁶ Aria Bendix, "122 Nations Approve 'Historic' Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapons," *The Atlantic*, July 8, 2017. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2017/07/122-nations-approve-historic-treaty-to-ban-nuclear-weapons/533046/>

⁷ Morton Deutsch, "Preventing Armageddon in the 21st century," *Psychologists for Social Responsibility*. URL: <http://www.psysr.org/about/programs/violence/deutsch.php>

-
- ⁸ Enemy images: A resource manual on reducing enmity, Psychologists for Social Responsibility. URL: http://www.psysr.org/about/pubs_resources/Enemyimagesmanual.pdf
- ⁹ “North Korea denounces sanctions, threatens to turn USA into sea of fire,” Agencia EFE. URL: <https://www.efe.com/efe/english/portada/north-korea-denounces-sanctions-threatens-to-turn-usa-into-sea-of-fire/50000260-334547>
- ¹⁰ Justin McCurry, “Park Geun-hye: South Korean court removes president over scandal,” The Guardian, March 10, 2017. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/10/south-korea-president-park-geun-hye-constitutional-court-impeachment>
- ¹¹ “What Moon Jae-in pledged to do as president,” Korea Herald, May 10, 2017. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20170509000521>
- ¹² Jon Letman, “The U.S. is ready to ‘fight tonight’ but South Koreans reject war as the solution to North Korean threats,” The Daily Beast, July 12, 2017. URL: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/the-us-is-ready-to-fight-tonight-but-south-koreans-reject-war-as-the-solution-to-north-korean-threats>
- ¹³ “Prison Breakthrough,” The Economist, August 20, 2016. URL: <https://www.economist.com/news/economics-brief/21705308-fifth-our-series-seminal-economic-ideas-looks-nash-equilibrium-prison>
- ¹⁴ Gunnar Westberg, “Close Calls: We were much closer to nuclear annihilation than we ever knew,” Counterpunch, May 27, 2016. URL: <https://www.counterpunch.org/2016/05/27/close-calls-we-were-much-closer-to-nuclear-annihilation-than-we-ever-knew/>
- ¹⁵ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, Penguin Publishing, 2012, pp. 272-273. (p. 650-660).
- ¹⁶ David Corn, “George W. Bush’s CIA briefer: Bush and Cheney falsely presented WMD intelligence to public.” Mother Jones, May 19, 2015. URL: <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/05/michael-morell-bush-cheney-iraq-war/>
- ¹⁷ James R. Flynn, *What is intelligence?* Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- ¹⁸ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, Penguin Publishing, 2012, pp. 650-660.
- ¹⁹ “Settled: 2010 Google Maps invasion of Costa Rica by Nicaragua,” Costa Rica Star, December 17, 2015. URL: <http://news.co.cr/settled-2010-google-maps-invasion-of-costa-rica-by-nicaragua/43405/>
- ²⁰ “Timeline: It is two and a half minutes to midnight,” Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, January 26, 2017. URL: <http://thebulletin.org/sites/default/files/Final%202017%20Clock%20Statement.pdf>