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Strategic Insight

Contingencies

by [Daniel Moran](#)

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January 13, 2003

Contingency *n. pl.* **-cies** **1:** the quality or state of being contingent **2:** a contingent event or condition as **a:** an event (as an emergency) that is of possible but uncertain occurrence < trying to provide for every ~ > **b:** something liable to happen as an adjunct to something else **syn** see JUNCTURE

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary

History is just one goddamn thing after another.

Brooks Adams

Before United States defense planners started using *contingency* as a synonym for "war other than World War III," the word had no particular strategic application. It has acquired one because, in the wake of the Soviet collapse, it captured the one-thing-after-another quality of the new security environment. For reasons that surpass understanding, people convinced themselves that the half century of world politics since the end of World War II—during which (to take but one measure of systemic chaos) the number of sovereign states on earth more than tripled—had in fact been a stately progress of bilateralism, in which every difficulty could be parsed as a variation on the theme of Great Power confrontation. Once that confrontation had ended, however, history kept happening. Only now events no longer seemed to be driven by a deeper, unifying logic that could give you some idea of what to expect. The world was suddenly full of contingencies—of things happening because of other things that happened—and the challenge became how to plan, budget, train, procure, and so on, in circumstances in which all problems seemed equally possible, and all scenarios equally uncertain.

History Lessons

The element of contingency in human affairs has long preoccupied historians, for a reason that may seem absurd: analytically, it is not easy to capture the fact that the past was once the future. When my students tell me that hindsight is twenty-twenty—a phenomenon that is, alas, seldom in evidence come exam time—they are seizing upon the only really distinctive feature of historical knowledge, and the one most obviously superior to what can be known by contemporaries: historians know what comes next. We know whose expectations will be vindicated by events, what an airplane will look like, which struggling artist will go on to achieve greatness. This sort of knowledge can cast a long shadow, and make it hard to see things as they appeared at the time. If you know about Hiroshima, it becomes harder to remember that in the spring of 1945 Allied planners expected the Second World War in Asia to require another eighteen months of hard fighting; which is why British and American leaders were so concerned to get the Soviet Union engaged against Japan; which is why, a few months later, Soviet troops had occupied Manchuria; which put them in a position to provide vital sanctuary to China's communist revolutionaries; from which sanctuary Mao's Red Army would go on to seize power in China; which regime would in turn save another

fledgling communist state, in North Korea, from certain destruction at the hands of the United States. One goddamn thing after another.

The reason this sort of stringing together of events and consequences never constitutes an adequate historical explanation is, first of all, because the historian's knowledge of consequences is rarely matched by a comparably precise knowledge of motives—that is, of the exact cognitive and emotional weight that various considerations possess for historical actors; secondly because other strings get twisted together with the one we care about, so that the original thread gets lost; and finally because, even when our knowledge of motives is reasonably sure, and all the exiguous knots have been untied, it is still necessary to identify and take into account the unspoken assumptions that shape people's actions without their being aware of it—this last being the practical embodiment of all those "forces" and "factors" that find expression in social theory. "Men make history," as Marx said, "but not as they please." For anyone seriously interested in the past, this is a big problem.

One Thing and Another

It is also a problem for anyone seriously interested in the present. The United States is today confronted with two looming crises, in Iraq and in North Korea, whose historical juncture cannot seriously be regarded as surprising, though it certainly is contingent in the strict dictionary sense of the word. During all the years when the prospect of "two mid-sized regional contingencies" provided the baseline for American defense planning, the two unnamed hot-spots lurking behind this bland abstraction were always the Persian Gulf and the Korean Peninsula. The 2MRC metric was eventually deemed too expensive, too improbable, too dismissive of other missions, too obstructive of defense "transformation," and was accordingly set aside in favor of more open-ended, "capabilities-based" planning, by which we figured out what we wanted to do, and put off worrying about where we would do it. Yet no one lost sight of Iraq and North Korea, which are, after all, on the very short list of places where enduring American interests are threatened by declared adversaries. When these two states ended up on opposite ends of the Axis of Evil, some people wondered about their connection to the terrorist attacks that had brought Evil to the top of the American agenda. Yet the fact that such familiar names had floated to the surface was also reassuring in a way, since it suggested that the world had not become altogether strange.

The contingent nature of these quarrels nevertheless presents problems for the United States, to the extent that both have arisen as a consequence of the deliberate exercise of American power. One does not need to believe anything but the worst about both Iraq and North Korea to recognize that neither country would today be occupying the center of the world stage, were it not for the newly confrontational character of American foreign policy since the terrorist attacks of September, 2001. It is the United States that has chosen this moment to settle accounts with Iraq, based upon a declaratory policy of "preempting" threats from rogue states and WMD proliferators. That policy has in turn inspired North Korea to take the remarkable and dangerous step of publicly repudiating its earlier agreements respecting its nuclear weapons program. Pyongyang has expelled UN weapons inspectors from its territory, dismantled the associated monitoring equipment, and announced its intention to withdraw immediately from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, in violation of treaty provisions requiring three months notice before doing so. Although North Korean officials insist that their government has no interest in obtaining nuclear weapons, the claim is incredible on its face, and has been mooted by the equally startling claim of the United States that Pyongyang already possesses such weapons, so that the only thing now at stake is whether or not they have a few more.

The contrast between America's refusal to give an inch over Iraq and the complacency of its response to North Korea's evidently more menacing nuclear program has rendered absurd the Bush administration's claim to be crafting a foreign policy based upon categorical norms of the with-us-or-against-us variety. Such talk was never realistic. The world is comprised overwhelmingly of states that are sometimes with us, rarely against us, often indifferent, but always disposed to remain the sole judge of their own interests. There is nothing the United States can do about this, and we can now expect to suffer our share of abuse for having sought to cast ourselves as more constant and principled than those we seek to lead. International acceptance of the necessity of war with Iraq has frayed somewhat in light of America's

willingness to hold its fire toward Pyongyang, though probably not enough to affect our determination to proceed. On the other hand, commentators who have exhausted themselves cataloging the now obvious contradictions of U.S. policy might have spared a moment to welcome the return of pragmatism, multilateralism, and a sense of limits, which have no less obviously shaped the administration's response to the North Korean challenge.

In strategic terms, moreover, the contradictions are more apparent than real, having to do entirely with the administration's self-presentation as the unflinching champion of the Light, rather than with its actual conduct. America is not deterred by Iraq, and is preparing to take the bull by the horns there precisely in order to avoid being deterred in the future. The main reason this hasn't been done already is because the administration wishes, within limits, to mollify the apprehensions of the rest of the world by acting on the basis of international consensus. In contrast, we are somewhat deterred by North Korea, which poses a lethal conventional threat to the population of South Korea, even without taking into account its nuclear arsenal. Whether that deterrent will suffice to hold off the United States indefinitely may be doubted; but it is obviously sufficient to rule out "preemptive" war, and to create an incentive for negotiation, to which the administration is now responding as quietly as possible. The difficulty with all this is not that it exposes American inconsistency, but that it exposes a consistency that is too painful to admit. Iraq is in the throes of trying to acquire the kind of military leverage that North Korea possesses, and the United States is determined to prevent that from happening because, as Pyongyang has now demonstrated, that sort of leverage is worth having.

Looking Backward

One thing historians of the future are likely to puzzle over when they consider our present moment is exactly how North Korean nukes come into it. They will, of course, know what comes next, and if that turns out to be nuclear war in Northeast Asia, the answer is going to seem a lot more obvious to them than it does to us. For now, North Korea does not claim to possess nuclear weapons. It is the Bush administration that makes the claim, which Pyongyang has declined to confirm, though one might imagine that, if their aim is to deter the United States, it would be in their interest to do so. As someone with a proven track record of flubbing questions about North Korean nuclear capability—I once got flustered and said on PBS that I couldn't answer the question, which the host just loved because it seemed like an admission that the nukes were there—it is, to say the least, interesting to see the Secretary of State go on Sunday morning television and talk about them as if they were no big deal. Doing so affords the political advantage of locating the roots of the present crisis in the Clinton administration, which is fair enough: the Bush team is not responsible for the North Korean nuclear program, which, whatever its current maturity, is certainly not new. But the present administration, which had determined to abandon its predecessor's more conciliatory policy even before 9/11, is responsible for the fact that that program is now being pursued on a crash basis, to the point where North Korea has taken the enormous gamble of abandoning its long-standing policy of surreptitious cheating, in the apparent hope of confronting the United States with a *fait accompli* while its energy and attention are tied up in Iraq.

Exactly why Pyongyang would take such a risk is hard to say, and likely to remain so, motive being one of those problems that does not necessarily become easier to solve with the passage of time. My impression is that North Korea's conventional capability is and has long been sufficient to deter the United States from taking military action against it. Kim's government evidently disagrees, and has decided to roll the nuclear dice at what it takes to be an opportune moment. Whether it is doing this because it has developed realistic apprehensions about America's capacity to decapitate and overwhelm its decrepit military organization, or because it has been frightened by the Axis of Evil speech, or both (always a good choice for historians), may or may not be revealed in the future.

For now, the United States is hoping that the prospect of a nuclear North Korea will galvanize other regional powers into weighing in on our side. On the other hand, if a nuclear North Korea is not a "prospect," but a settled fact, as we now claim, it is hard to see why this should motivate a change of policy in Beijing, Tokyo, or Seoul. The least that can be said in the imperfect light of the ever-vanishing present is that the North Korea crisis has revealed what might be called the moral limits of preemptive

unilateralism: how far is the United States prepared to risk the lives of South Koreans in order to avert a more remote threat to our own population? This is a question to which we are not prepared to give a hasty answer—a reluctance whose merit deserves to be recognized regardless of what comes next.

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