

# What If There Is A False Alarm In North Korea?

Han In-Taek

Jeju Peace Institute

Han In-Taek is Director of Research at the Jeju Peace Institute. He has done research on nuclear strategy, security cooperation, and public diplomacy. He received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of California, Berkeley, and his M.A. in political science and B.A. in economics from Seoul National University.

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Last year, on December 1st, Hawaii received attention both domestically and abroad for being the first and only one of the 50 states in the United States to conduct resident evacuation drills to prepare for North Korea's nuclear missile attacks. Last weekend, a false warning that a ballistic missile was approaching Hawaii left residents and tourists in fear and confusion, attracting worldwide media attention again. Meanwhile, this week Japanese public broadcaster NHK also issued a false report that North Korea fired a missile.

The issuance of false alarms in Hawaii proved to be a mistake committed by a state employee during a duty shift, and the false alarms of NHK in Japan were promptly confirmed to have been caused by improper manipulation of the equipment. Military response measures were not followed because the U.S. military and the Self Defense Forces knew that the missile launches were not a real situation. Following these incidents, improvements in the system and procedures are expected to prevent false alarms in Hawaii and Japan.

A false alarm is not a mistake that only the state government or the press make. Stanislav Petrov, who passed away recently, was the real life person of the documentary "The Man Who Saved the World". During the Cold War in 1983, Petrov was a lieutenant colonel of the Soviet Union Forces and worked at the nuclear war control center. On September 26, 1983, while Petrov was on duty, an alarm was issued warning that the United States had launched five intercontinental ballistic missiles to the Soviet Union. Petrov, however, judged that it was a false alarm caused by an error in the satellite alarm system and did not report to the head office. Had Petrov judged the false alarm to be a real

situation and reported to the head office, nuclear war would have broken out between the United States and the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union had adopted the strategy of “launch on warning”, which required all ground-based nuclear missiles to be fired when the radar signaled an alarm. It is for this reason that the documentary based on his story was titled “The Man Who Saved the World”.

Petrov prevented the outbreak of an accidental nuclear war, but was discharged early after being held responsible for failing to record the daily log that day. Petrov later recalled that his judgment that day was based on intuition, and that he thought the probability of being right was 50 percent. This incident was not known until the end of the Cold War. Such information is classified, and so there is way to confirm whether there were more false alarms - and if so how many - in the Soviet Union and modern day Russia.

False alarms are not limited to the Soviet Forces. In his autobiography, William Perry, the Secretary of Defense under the United States Clinton administration, told an anecdote from when he served as Deputy Secretary of Defense. On November 9, 1979, Perry woke up to a call from the North American Aerospace Defense Command. The duty officer reported that the computer showed two hundred Soviet ICBMs flying to the United States. He further reported that he determined that it was a false alarm. In the end, it turned out that the duty officer was right. It was later revealed that false alarms were caused by an accidental installment of a training tape on the computer. Recalling this incident, Perry questioned what would have happened if the duty officer had not make the right decision that day, and pointed out that there were serious deficiencies in the nuclear alert decision process in the past and even today. At the time, the United States, like the Soviet Union, was adopting a strategy of “launching on warning”.

Missile attacks can take as short as a few tens of minutes from launch to reaching the target, so there is no time to examine if the alarm is true or false. Whether the information is correct or faulty, a decision must be instantly made. In the aforementioned cases, the reason that nuclear war did not occur despite the false alarm was that both Lieutenant Petrov and the U.S. duty officer intuitively determined that the alarms were false and did not report to the head office. If they had immediately reported to the top, Soviet Union General Secretary Yuri Andropov and United States President Jimmy Carter would have had to decide whether to launch a counter-attack missile in less than 10 minutes.

As seen from the case of the North American Aerospace Defense Command in 1979, the case of the Soviet nuclear war control center in 1983, and the recent cases of Hawaii and Japan, false alarms can occur in any country anytime. Therefore, it can be inferred that false alarms can also occur in North Korea.

What would happen if a false alarm occurred in North Korea? If a false alarm shows that an attack is imminent, can North Korean duty officers discreetly judge and postpone reporting to the top, just as past U.S. and Soviet officers did? If a false alarm were immediately reported to the North Korean leadership without being verified, what decision would the North Korean leadership make? Unless North Korea's warning system is perfect, this is a perfectly possible scenario. Thus, it is necessary to ask these questions and contemplate.

While personal factors such as an officer's intuition were one of the reasons the United States and the Soviet Union did not immediately initiate a counterattack and observed carefully, there was also a structural factor: the "balance of terror" between the United States and the Soviet Union. Both countries had enough nuclear capacity (second strike capability) to destroy the other country even after a preemptive strike. Thus, even if a country succeeded in a preemptive strike, it could not avoid its own destruction. The same is still true for the United States and Russia.

While the balance of terror implies the extinction of humankind if nuclear war breaks out, it also creates a situation in which a preemptive attack will inevitably result in the attacker's own demise. Thus, the balance of terror is seen to have paradoxically reduced the incentive for preemptive attacks, preventing the outbreak of a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. This structure is not irrelevant to the aforementioned cases, where the officers' judgments of a false alarm prevented the precarious situation of having Soviet General Secretary Andropov and U.S. President Carter from deciding a counter missile attack in 10 minutes. Under the balance of terror, there is virtually no or very little incentive for either the United States or the Soviet Union to launch a preemptive strike. Therefore if an alarm is issued, it is logical to determine that the alarm was more likely caused by a device malfunction than an actual preemptive attack.

The current situation on the Korean peninsula is very different from that of United States-Soviet Union or United States-Russia. North Korea has relatively fewer nuclear weapons, and SLBM technology and SLBM submarines have not yet reached the completion stage. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that North Korea has a weak nuclear capability, or its ability to retaliate after a preemptive strike.

On the other hand, while the Republic of Korea is under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, it does not independently deploy or possess nuclear weapons. Hence, if an attack from North Korea were imminent, rather than become helpless victims of nuclear weapons, the Republic of Korea's strategy is to strike first to destroy North Korea's nuclear weapons and neutralize leadership before the nuclear weapons are launched.

While North Korea is vulnerable to preemptive attacks and the Republic of Korea is in a situation

where it must strike first in the event of an emergency, U.S. hard-liners against North Korea and some Republic of Korea citizens have argued that the Republic of Korea must preemptively attack before North Korea perfects its nuclear weapons and capacity. These claims may not be limited to assertions. In 1994, the United States had as a matter of fact planned a surgical strike on North Korea's nuclear facilities. If President Carter had not resolved the first North Korean nuclear crisis by visiting North Korea, the plan to attack North Korea might have been carried out.

Under these circumstances, North Korea may recognize that there is a high possibility of a preemptive attack on North Korea regardless of the actual intentions of the Republic of Korea or the United States. Therefore, in the case of a false alarm, it is likely that North Korea will not see the alarm as a human or device mistake but as a real attack and respond to a military manner. Especially as the development of stealth weapons makes it difficult to detect attacks, there may be more mistakes, such as radar misdiagnosing a bird or clouds for a stealth weapon. North Korea's leadership may have strategically adopted 'launch on warning' like the United States and the Soviet Union did in the past, rather than risk losing their nuclear weapons or becoming removed. Of course, it is not possible to accurately grasp North Korea's nuclear strategy from the outside. But the possibility that North Korea followed U.S. and Soviet precedent and adopted the same strategy cannot be dismissed. If such analysis is accurate, the North Korean leadership will order the total mobilization of nuclear weapons and counterattack upon receiving a report.

The balance of terror between the United States and the Soviet Union contributed to preventing accidental warfare. However, it is neither possible nor desirable to reproduce the balance of terror on the Korean peninsula in order to prevent an accidental war with North Korea. Therefore, new approaches and ideas are needed to prevent accidental warfare on the Korean peninsula by false alarms.

Dialogue between the North Korea and the Republic of Korea has resumed this year. Although the discussion is currently focused on the success of the Pyeongchang Olympic Games, it is worth suggesting as future agenda a joint research on ways to prevent accidental warfare by false alarms. Unlike the incidents in Hawaii last week or that in Japan this week, if there is a false alarm in North Korea, there could be serious consequences. Preventing accidental warfare is a common interest to both Koreas. Therefore, dialogue between the two Koreas is necessary and may be feasible.

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