

### **RESPONDING TO NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR FIRST USE: MINIMIZING DAMAGE TO THE NUCLEAR TABOO**

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#### **ABSTRACT:**

The nuclear taboo is increasingly recognized as a critical, although not well understood, element of nuclear deterrence and stability. Clearly, the future of the nuclear taboo is most vulnerable after it is first violated, but norm theory suggests the response to a first violation has a strong influence on whether a norm is irrevocably damaged or reinforced. This study will examine how alternative US responses to first use of nuclear weapons might further undermine or, alternatively, serve to resurrect and perhaps even strengthen the nuclear taboo.

Our focus is on North Korea, one of the most troublesome challenges to our deterrence strategy as well as a focus of public attention and concern. We will develop a spectrum of scenarios involving a variety of geopolitical contexts, weapon characteristics, targets, consequences, and other variables that culminate in North Korean nuclear first use. We will then consider alternative US retaliatory options, both nuclear and non-nuclear, and, through a multidisciplinary workshop, assess longer-term impacts on the nuclear taboo. While we do not anticipate consensus, we believe that capturing the diversity of opinion and reasoning regarding nuclear retaliation will motivate and enrich discussions of nuclear strategy well beyond DoD to nongovernmental organizations and the public.

*Research in Progress* describes ongoing PASCC research. For more information please contact [INSS@usafa.edu](mailto:INSS@usafa.edu).