

# THE HILL: A nuclear 'Pearl Harbor' in our future?

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Dec. 7 marks the 79th anniversary of Imperial Japan's 1941 surprise attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor, beginning America's desperate struggle to survive and win World War II.

A nuclear "Pearl Harbor" may begin, and end, World War III.

Like the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor in 1941, most U.S. nuclear forces today are "sitting ducks." Bombers are not nuclear-armed or maintained on strip alert, and most missile submarines (SSBNs) typically are in port.

A surprise attack on just three bomber bases and two submarine ports could destroy about two-thirds of the U.S. nuclear deterrent — now within the capability of North Korea.

Hypersonic warheads being deployed by Russia and China, because of their great speed, accuracy and ability to evade radar, could surprise and destroy America's intercontinental ballistic missiles. ICBMs, always on high alert, are the chief deterrent against surprise attack.

The Department of Defense is working on new space-based sensors and improved strategic command-control-communications intelligence (C3I) systems to defeat a surprise attack.

But the best C3I in the world cannot compensate for the biggest U.S. vulnerability — a strategic culture inhabited by Washington elites who, although informed by the most sophisticated intelligence apparatus in human history, through stupidity, incompetence and ideological blindness are consistently surprised.

For example, after Pearl Harbor, Washington was surprised by North Korea's invasion of South Korea (1950); North Vietnam's Tet Offensive (1968) that began the eventual U.S. defeat in the Vietnam War; the Yom Kippur War (1973); the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington (2001); Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014); and China's annexation of the South China Sea (2013-2016).

Washington's psychological vulnerability to surprise attack is exemplified by, and was acknowledged after, the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli Yom Kippur War.

As recounted by former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan in his autobiography, even though warned by Israel, the New York Times reported in a Sept. 12, 1975, article: "The United States Intelligence Community acknowledged that it failed to predict the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and that several intelligence agencies even predicted there would be no war only hours before hostilities broke out," according to a leaked secret report.

Hours before the Yom Kippur War, the CIA reportedly dismissed as "exercises" massive Egyptian and Syrian mobilization: "The exercise and alert activities may be on a somewhat larger scale and more realistic than previous exercises, but they do not appear to be preparing for a military offensive against Israel."

We may hope that Washington will be more suspicious of large-scale nuclear exercises by Russia, China or North Korea, but the record is frightening. Because

U.S. strategic culture is conditioned to regard nuclear war as “unthinkable” — and most “unthinkable,” a nuclear surprise attack — U.S. elites and intelligence officers almost certainly will not believe even clear indicators of a possible impending surprise attack:

- November 1983, during NATO theater nuclear exercise Able Archer 83, U.S. intelligence failed to warn of Soviet preparations to preempt what Moscow mistakenly believed was an impending U.S. surprise attack.
- August 1991, during the attempted coup d’etat against Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, U.S. intelligence failed to warn that Soviet nuclear forces went on alert to detect and preempt a possible U.S. surprise attack.
- October 1993, during the attempted coup against Russian President Boris Yeltsin, U.S. intelligence failed to warn of elevated nuclear threat from Russian strategic mobilization disguised as an “exercise.”
- January 1995, U.S. intelligence failed to warn of unprecedented nuclear overreaction by Moscow to Norway’s launch of a meteorological rocket, initially mistaken as a U.S. surprise attack. Yeltsin almost “pushed the button.”

During the 2017 nuclear crisis with North Korea, then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis reportedly “generated” himself for a possible North Korean nuclear attack by having emergency communications available in his car, in his bedroom, and by sleeping in his clothes, ready to go. But the media and policymakers were allowed to believe that the North Korean nuclear threats were mere “bluster.”

The U.S. Triad never generated to a more survivable posture during any of these nuclear crises. If Russia or North Korea had struck the United States during any of the nuclear episodes described above, they would have caught the U.S. Triad vulnerable, in a “nuclear Pearl Harbor.”

It matters not that U.S. intelligence and defense communities are aware of rising tensions, nuclear indicators, or even if a conventional world war is raging (as prior to Pearl Harbor). If, despite these warnings, the U.S. nuclear Triad is not generated to a survivable posture, the enemy can successfully execute a nuclear surprise attack that will have the same destructive effect as a “bolt from the blue.”

What is to be done?

Technological trends such as hypersonic warheads, radar-evading stealth, and super-accuracy increasingly favor aggressors and nuclear Pearl Harbors. The U.S. must be competitive in these dangerously destabilizing first-strike technologies while modernizing the Triad.

However, simultaneously the U.S. should launch a technological counter-revolution in strategic defenses. Space-based anti-missile defenses, such as Brilliant Pebbles, can be deployed in five years for \$20 billion. Upgrade and expand the National Missile Defense. Deploy Iron Dome and Phalanx anti-missile systems to protect bombers, submarines and ICBMs.

Strategic defenses can finally make obsolete the principle of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), innovating a new principle: Strategic Assured National Existence (SANE).

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