

# Fatal Distraction: Maintaining Proper Focus in Chaos

Written by Jason Schultz

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JASON SCHULTZ, SEP 14 2017

North Korea has apparently attained the ability to produce and test a hydrogen bomb. Headlines to this effect dominated the news on Sunday, September 3, 2017. However, by Wednesday, September 6, 2017, this had virtually disappeared from the front page of CNN. The only reminder of this emergence, with its potentially disastrous consequences, to be found on cnn.com frontpage were a couple of smaller links located under the dominating headline about CNN reading Hillary Clinton's latest book overnight. One is left wondering if we, as a nation, have lost our ability to maintain proper focus on critical issues in the international arena.

It is difficult for a leadership team to prioritize efforts and maintain proper focus in the best of times. In our current social and political environment, the cacophony of competing demands generated by crises that appear almost daily and the causes of various interest groups may actually be drowning efforts to gain any sense of national focus. Within the last month alone, the nation has been wracked by a seemingly never-ending barrage of crises: the ongoing Russian probe, Charlottesville, North Korean missile launches, Hurricane Harvey, the attainment of the hydrogen bomb by North Korea, the cancellation of the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, and now the potentially devastating Hurricane Irma rapidly approaching the US coastline. The list of "urgent" issues expands exponentially if one were to simply go back to the beginning of the year.

Maintaining focus on priorities requires the ability to differentiate between the urgent and important. This may have always been difficult, but it seems more elusive or even impossible in the face of growing divisions in the US, identity politics, and the sensationalism of the 24-hour news cycle. The Monkey Business Illusion is a useful illustration of the difficulties inherent in developing policy and strategy in a complex and dynamic environment. In this case, viewers are asked to count the number of times a set of players pass a ball in a short video. During the scenario, a man in a gorilla suit walks onto the court, a player leaves the court, and the background curtain changes color. These occurrences are often missed. The opposite is normally true of those who notice the anomalies – they fail to complete the assigned task of counting times the ball is passed by a particular team. It's all a matter of focus.

Of course, all of the occurrences mentioned above would be noticed by a team of observers with clearly coordinated responsibilities. That's easy enough for a short scenario which involves watching a video – arguably a linear event lacking complexity. Translated into US foreign policy and strategy development, coordinating efforts to focus on what is important (and maybe even urgent at the same time) while avoiding distractions is exponentially more difficult. This becomes more apparent when one considers that the US must respond to North Korea obtaining the hydrogen bomb and potentially the means for delivery, continue the battle to destroy ISIS, determine the proper means for going forward in Afghanistan, monitor the crisis in Venezuela and develop options, counter Russian aggression, and interact with a more assertive China. This is an incomplete list of issues in the international sphere and doesn't even consider the myriad domestic issues that face our leaders daily.

The decisions made, or not made, to deal with these intense issues in the coming months will have long-lasting effects. The question remains: will the US be able to avoid distractions, effectively focus its efforts, and convince the general public and the world that its policies and strategy are correct? Or will we succumb to fighting the latest headline?

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## **About the author:**

**Jason Schultz** is an active-duty Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army and a PhD Student of Political Science at Brown University under the US Army Strategic Plans and Policy Program (ASP3).