

Track Your Clients Like a Foreign Policy Expert Tracks a Rogue Nation: Dig Deep

By [LawVision](#) on December 1, 2017

This week, North Korea launched a ballistic missile for the first time in over two months. During the summer, they were launching missiles almost every other week. Why the slowdown? Have the current administration's policies paid off? Did Kim Jong Un finally decide to come to the negotiating table and then change his mind when new sanctions began to take a toll on his country?

[Shea Cotton](#), thinks it's something else. Mr. Cotton is an international policy expert and creator and manager of the North Korea Missile Test Database and the Global Incidents and Trafficking Database at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies' **James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies**. He has been monitoring North Korea's missile activity since 2012, and he has identified a pattern. [Cotton reports](#) that North Korea always slows its missile tests in Q4, averaging an 80% drop from Q3 to Q4 each year. The current reduction in missile tests is not, necessarily, indicative of any policy change by Kim Jong Un because he always reduces his missile activity at the end of the year.

So, why the reduction in missile tests? Smart people, like Cotton, who study foreign cultures to predict their leaders' decisions think it may have nothing to do with nuclear strategy; it has more to do with potatoes.

North Korea is hungry. According to Cotton, it has a [GDP approximately the size of Vermont's](#), but its population is about 40 times larger, which means North Korea has many people to feed, but has limited resources. The people need to eat so when it's time to pick potatoes, everyone must pitch in, and that means everyone (remember it's a communist country). The country needs fuel, equipment, and workers to bring in the crops, leaving no time for launching rockets. In fact, many fields are located close to military bases so the soldiers are able to help with the harvest as well.

What does Korean missile policy and the potato harvest have to do with tracking your client's business? Think about how much policy experts know about foreign countries. Without much first-hand data, they identify an unstable country's possible next steps by employing deep, thoughtful analysis using a broad scope of knowledge about the country. If you want to be a resource for your clients, you need a similar focus.

Let's take the analogy a step further. Assume for a minute that North Korea is your client (I hope for your sake this is never the case). Your deeper "policy expert-like" analysis may begin with the following questions:

Thoughtful Questions to Understand your Client	Uncovered New Understanding
What does my client like to do?	My client likes to test and launch missiles.
Why does my client do this?	It seeks power in the world.
Can I identify any patterns in my client's activities?	It typically reduces missile tests in Q4.

What do I know about my client? What more can I learn about any area of my client's business? Is there something else going on that may cause this behavior? Will knowing this information give me an advantage in how I serve my client?	It has a severe food shortage, and during harvest time, my client needs as many resources (fuel, machinery, and manpower) as it can find to bring in the harvest.
What additional information is available through research?	Satellite pictures show that North Korean military bases are located near potato fields, and many soldiers help harvest these crops.
What does this research tell me about my client that helps me understand it better?	My client's people are starving and must help with the harvest.
What conclusions can I draw?	My client has a hidden need that is manifest by its seemingly unrelated behavior. Maybe I can help them in a way I hadn't considered.

Compare that to a probable corporate client scenario:

Thoughtful Questions to Understand your Client	Uncovered New Understanding
What does my client like to do?	My client creates software to support large enterprise systems.
Why does my client do this?	My client does this to seek a profit.
Can I identify any patterns in my client's activities?	For some reason, my client's production has fallen in the last year.
What do I know about my client? What more can I learn about any area of my client's business? Is there something else going on that may cause this behavior? Will knowing this information give me an advantage in how I serve my client?	I know my client hires employees from other countries to help with programming and other technical challenges. I also know that immigration policies have changed recently. If I probe deeper, I may uncover an unstated need.
What additional information is available through research?	My client's floor managers complain about the need for more people to help with the workload. After making some inquiries with senior management, I learn that my client has had trouble getting quality programmers from abroad due to tougher immigration policies.

What does this research tell me about my client that helps me understand it better?	My client has fewer programmers than it had two years ago, and it may be affecting production.
What conclusions can I draw?	My firm may be able to help my client's production problem by working with them to resolve their immigration issues.

When Chief Legal Officers say (as they often do) "I hire lawyers who understand my business." They aren't talking about people who look at websites and Hoover's reports or ask the firm librarian to create news summaries. Instead, they are talking about lawyers who take the time to pursue a thoughtful investigation into why a company is acting a certain way. Has production slowed? Have margins increased? Has the cost of goods gone down? Has the client's workforce been reduced? Have locations closed? If you want to know your client's business at the level at which your client wants to be understood, it's going to take some effort. Peel back a few layers, look at company activity, and inquire about what's happening beneath the surface.

When it comes to knowing your client's business, take a lesson from international policy experts and get down to the potatoes. Knowing the explanation for changed policies or shifts in activity will serve you well when you meet with clients and prospects to offer your services.