

# Unnerving the Donald: North Korea's Sixth Nuclear Test

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*We are now into reckless territory with the latest North Korean nuclear test – in all probability a genuine hydrogen weapon – sending the ever reckless US President Donald Trump into a true state of belligerent adolescence.*

After Saturday midnight, Washington time, when the test is meant to have taken place, Trump took little time to start pushing out those less than encyclopaedic tweets. He felt, for one, that South Korea needed a good ticking off, a scolding for presuming that some diplomatic, accommodating stance between Seoul and the north might be possible.

“South Korea is finding, as I have told them, that their talk of appeasement with North Korea will not work, they only understand one thing!”[1]

Peering through that transparent glass, Trump's anger with Seoul may well also have another context: the issue of trade, or practices he deems “unfair”. (The spirit of Steve Bannon still rides high.) Given his aversion to various free trade deals, Trump has taken exception to arrangements with South Korea.

Gary D. Cohn of the National Economic Council, and national security advisor H.R. McMaster, warn against the needless aggravation that would ensue should the US wish to rewrite, or withdraw from the South Korean deal.[2] But the position is by no means uniform, and diplomats are fully charged with the mission of extricating Washington. Even under threat of incineration and the mushroom cloud, the president reveals his true enthusiasm: doing business, and doing it badly.

Defense Secretary James Mattis, who had been the more stable of the two, was feeling an insistent and heavy breather down his back. Be strong, came the message, and do so with a promise of violence, should the circumstances arise. Importantly, give the impression that a bag of tricks so vast was still available to the Trump administration. Just don't let one that this bag has gone missing.

Mattis' briefing to the press in front of the White House came dangerously close to those lunatic appraisals by mega-death advocates who believed that fighting a nuclear conflict would be entirely feasible.

For one thing, Mattis insisted that there were “many military options and the President

wanted to be briefed on each of them.” In truth, these options, at least vis-à-vis the North Korean nuclear project, are non-existent.

The issue would be different should Kim Jong-un prefer to attack the US and its interests:

“Any threat to the United States or its territories including Guam, or our allies, will be met with a massive military response, a response both effective and overwhelming.”

Having laid out the necessary punches, even if into thin air, Mattis retracted a bit, considering it good form to tell Pyongyang that the US was against obliterating it.

“Because we are not looking to the total annihilation of a country, namely North Korea, but as I said, we have many options to do so.”[3]

US satellite spokesman and Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull was doing his best to stir the war pot, insisting that the peninsula was on the verge of conflict at a point closer than any time since the Korean war. (Does this sage know something we do not?) Such statements are beyond testing, and only have meaning if there is, in fact, a conflict: the rest, till then, is not merely speculation but irresponsible venting.

After the initial doom and gloom rant, the economic option again remains a point of fancy. According to Trump,

“the United States is considering, in addition to other options, stopping all trade with any country doing business with North Korea.”[4]

Tediously, China is again being pressed, as if Beijing wishes to aid in perpetrating a collapse in Pyongyang. Trump is ever decent enough to suggest that Beijing might be trying to help, but has proven ineffectual – much like an ignored parent.

“North Korea is a rogue nation which has become a great threat and embarrassment to China, which is trying to help but with little success.”[5]

Turnbull similarly likes speaking for China, having, it would seem, a telepathic linen into the Chinese foreign ministry.

“The Chinese are frustrated and dismayed by North Korea’s conduct, but China has the greatest leverage, and with the greatest leverage comes the greatest responsibility.”[6]

Given that China does trade with Pyongyang, the cessation of trade between the US and the world’s second largest economy is bound to be an own goal of dramatic idiocy. Doing so will make the US smaller rather than great, somewhat against the current puffy rhetoric preferred in the White House.

As for other options – take the denuclearisation of the peninsula – realism starts to ebb. The

idea was again advanced by Mattis as an important goal of the UN Security Council; but such matters remain the stuff of nonsense. Having struck gold, a person is hardly going to relinquish it. The nuclear weapon remains Kim's best insurance policy, his plumage of warning. He also knows that his opponents in the west, most notably in the United States, know that fact better than most.

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## Notes

[1] <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/904309527381716992>

[2] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/09/02/trump-plans-withdrawal-from-south-korea-trade-deal/>

[3] <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/349081-mattis-on-north-korea-we-are-not-looking-for-the-annihilation-of-north-korea>

[4] <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/904377075049656322>

[5] <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/904307898213433344>

[6] <https://www.fiveaa.com.au/content/pm-calls-urgent-un-action-n-korea>

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