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Kim the Capricious

Dealing with Pyongyang requires a steady hand. Donald Trump's may not fit the bill

North Korea's nuclear programme has been a seemingly solution-less problem plaguing American presidents for more than twenty years. Donald Trump's presidency is already exceptional in many ways, and, barely 100 days into office, his approach to North Korea is verbally more aggressive than that of his predecessor. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Vice President Mike Pence have both said the US is coming to the end of its "strategic patience," but this is just to distance themselves from the Obama administration, which coined the phrase. Trump has also tweeted that if China doesn't rein in its ally, the US will "solve the [North Korea] problem without them," but again this doesn't indicate what a new US policy would look like.

Trump believes Beijing has always been key to North Korea. Despite this, he appeared to be rattling his sabre when he spoke of sending an "armada" to Korean waters, though it turns out this was a more complicated story than his statement implies. But while the media-hungry president may be feeling trigger-happy after his strike on a Syrian airfield brought him some rare positive press, it is to be hoped that cooler and wiser heads will prevail. Any military intervention to solve the DPRK's nuclear programme would lead to further escalation of violence and regional destabilisation.

"Sea of fire"

Military options are in any case limited. The whereabouts of North Korean nuclear facilities are problematical. We know of some, but others may be concealed. Only the most sunny of optimists would assume an air campaign would be successful; even the compromise option of a missile shoot-down could lead to a major escalation.

Even if all of the North's nuclear weapons were destroyed, the twenty million or so people who live around Seoul – not to mention 30,000 or so American troops – are hugely vulnerable to conventional retaliation from the hundreds of artillery emplacements and missile sites just across

the demilitarised zone. The North has frequently threatened to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire" in the event of an attack; the South's nuclear power stations are vulnerable.

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That said, Kim isn't stupid. He knows the end result of a serious attack on the South would be a war he would lose; dealt a weak hand, he – or more accurately, his father – quite logically concluded that, after Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi gave up their weapons of mass destruction and were toppled by the West anyway, the best way to dodge intervention was to arm himself with the biggest weapons going.

Nuclear weapons and sanctions have been bargaining chips on the Korean peninsula for decades, with a kind of dance developing, the routine's steps seeing posturing from the North before their backing down in return for some supplies or the small easing of sanctions. The regime's desired endgame is only to stay in power.

Time to court China

Whatever doubts there may be over the North Koreans' technological capability, America is concerned about their apparent determination to develop the capacity to strike at the US mainland. This concern may lead to the Trump administration trying to engage North Korea in some form of diplomatic discussion. At present Mr Trump appears to be making a bid to get China on side, but this might require modification of some of his other policies.

The North Korean endgame is survival. Their overwrought language is mere posturing, as is what Trump says, but a new element will come into play after the South Korean presidential elections in May. Whoever wins that contest is likely to make attempts to improve relations with the North. Just as in the first George Bush administration, the US and South Korea will be pursuing different policies – a situation the North might seek to exploit.

Does Trump have leverage over the Chinese? He could give them an easier ride on trade. On the other hand, China has little interest in regime change in North Korea, fearing it would inevitably lead to an increased role for the US on the Korean Peninsula and even possibly US troops on the Chinese border. But the signs are that China is growing more concerned about North Korea's behaviour and it might be willing to provide more pressure than it has hitherto done. In the world's most

complicated poker game, the US does not hold the most important cards; China does.

The Korean peninsula's potentially deadly game is a dangerous one indeed. Let us hope this new player realises that the best way to win is not to play.



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