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The War of Words that Could Go Nuclear

Dueling Hotheads

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President Trump's "fire and fury" tirade against the regime of Kim Jong Un has escalated tensions with North Korea. A military conflict with the country would have catastrophic results. Is there still a diplomatic way out of this mess?

It's always the same ritual in August in South Korea. Not far from the shared border on the 38th parallel, artillery fires at targets supposed to represent North Korean tanks. Helicopters fly at low altitudes, fighter jets thunder through the air and tanks roll across beaches as around 80,000 South Korean soldiers and American troops conduct joint exercises simulating a defense against an attack from the north. The maneuver has already triggered serious crises in the past.

But this year, the nervousness peaked two weeks before the maneuvers. No tanks or troop deployments were required, all it took was these words: "North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen."

Donald Trump fired off these words on Tuesday night, slightly hunched forward, with his arms crossed and chandeliers and golfing plaques in the background, terrifying the rest of the world. It was the sharpest warning yet to the regime in Pyongyang, bordering a declaration of war. By doing so, Trump ignored the unwritten doctrine that a U.S. president doesn't boast of his nuclear arsenal like a teenager. He doesn't seem to care that the weapons are intended as a deterrent and that they do not exist to be used. Had he gone one step further, by threatening to lay Pyongyang to waste, it would have been difficult to distinguish him from Dictator Kim Jong Un.

Even the North Koreans, who do not shy away from making their own abrasive threats, criticized his "nuclear war hysteria" and described the statement as "extremely reckless."

A Verbal Tweet

The statement appears to have been triggered by an article published a shortly before in *The Washington Post*. It stated that North Korea had produced a miniaturized warhead that could fit inside long-range missiles theoretically capable of reaching the United States. The story was based on an analysis from the Defense Intelligence Agency that the president had presumably been aware of it. Despite that fact, it appears that the president felt he needed to comment on the newspaper report.

The New York Times reported that Trump had neither planned his choice of words in advance nor discussed them with his advisers -- despite the possibility that it could lead to an explosive conflict. The words slipped off the president's tongue at his New Jersey golf club like a verbal tweet, only more dangerous. It was as if he wanted to prove that, even during his vacation, he had the last say in the crisis. He had self-confidently tweeted in January: "North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the U.S. It won't happen!"

Still, the fact that Trump improvised his statements doesn't make them any less dangerous. To the contrary. Trump is actually adding fuel to the fire and, as such, is increasing the risk of a military conflict with North Korea. It's ironic that a country with a tiny economy and a gross domestic product equivalent to only about half the amount Americans spend on their pets is capable of developing nuclear bomb-equipped long-range missiles.

German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel criticized the "aggressive language," saying it evoked Kim Jong Un. "There is no military solution to this conflict," Gabriel told DER SPIEGEL. "The risks are so massive, for all parties, especially in Korea of course, but also for the region and the whole world."

Grave Consequences

A war would likely mean the deaths of hundreds of thousands, the destruction of the South Korean capital city of Seoul, possible attacks on U.S. military bases in East Asia and maybe even on American cities. North Korea would be laid to ruins and it would create a shock to the entire global economy.

Given its grave potential consequences, nobody is interested in this war, not even Donald Trump -- at least that's the hope. If things go well, then it may just be a trial of strength between Trump and Kim that ultimately results in negotiations. But the concern is that it could be followed by a series of new and uncontrollable threats and counterthreats that escalate the situation. At some point, one side could see itself forced to attack in order to pre-empt a first strike by the other side.

Seldom has that threat been as great as it is right now, given that nuclear warheads now exist on both sides of the Pacific, representing an existential threat to each end. On the one side, you have in Trump an unrestrained and unfocused Twitter tycoon who has achieved very little during his first 200 days in office. On the other side, you have North Korea's dictator, a man for whom shill war cries are merely a staged show of power.

At the end of July, the North Koreans released a floridly martial warning that they would "pre-emptively annihilate" any country that threatened the regime's "supreme dignity" by "mobilizing all kinds of strike means, including nuclear ones." Following Trump's "fire and fury" tirade, North Korea responded by saying that, if necessary, it might launch four intermediate-range missiles that would land in the sea around Guam, a U.S. Pacific territory that is home to an air base. A sixth nuclear test is also likely soon.

In the past, most U.S. presidents have put up with this kind of saber rattling. But not Trump, who responds to just about every threat with a counterthreat. On Wednesday, he just kept going, tweeting: "My first order as President" was to renovate and modernize America's nuclear arsenal. "It is now far stronger and more powerful than ever before," he wrote, despite this being untrue. He then tweeted: "Hopefully we will never have to use this power," adding, "But there will never be a time that we are not the most powerful nation in the world!"

Trump: 'Wasn't Tough Enough'

When asked by journalists on Thursday if he had gone too far with his statement, Trump countered, "maybe that statement wasn't tough enough."

When asked what could be tougher than "fire and fury," he responded: "Well you'll see. You'll see."

Trump was then asked if he was considering a preemptive strike, to which he replied, "We don't talk about that."

But he followed that by saying, "North Korea better get their act together or they are going to be in trouble like few nations have ever been in trouble."

Many had hoped that the recent appointment of John Kelly as the new chief of staff might help bring a little bit of calm and order to the White House, but this week's comments show that the president cannot be reined in. Together with National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster and Defense Secretary James Mattis, former general Kelly is considered to be one of the few levelheaded members of Trump's close team. Mattis and Kelly already agreed months ago that one of them would always be in the United States in order to monitor the president's orders and decisions.

Otherwise, there are few people capable of influencing Trump's North Korea policies. Many positions remain vacant at the State Department and there is a lack of experts who could develop a strategy for North Korea. These days, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is essentially a battery-powered robot vacuum cleaner who tidies things up without making much noise. It was Tillerson himself who very suddenly announced in March that, "The policy of strategic patience has ended." But he was more conciliatory a few days ago, saying that Washington does not seek regime change in North Korea.

After Trump's fire and fury tirade, he seemed incapable of coming up with something better than saying there was no reason to worry about the president's statement and that the "American people should sleep well at night."

Fuel on the Fire

It is a sign of the chaos in Washington that the defense secretary, of all people, escalated the situation on Wednesday by warning North Korea it must "cease any consideration of actions that would lead to the end of its regime and destruction of its people."

But how great is the threat posed by North Korea?

The U.S. estimates that Kim now has up to 60 nuclear weapons, and he is intervening personally to ensure his military technology specialists are working fast. "He appears to be using a carrot and stick approach," says Lee Ho Ryung of the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses in Seoul. In 2016, the dictator had himself photographed in front of a miniaturized warhead for the first time. At the time, many experts wondered if the silver ball might be a fake, but few still doubt its authenticity today.

The miniaturized warheads mark a breakthrough for the country -- one that military experts had initially thought was only possible in two years' time. It remains unclear whether North Korea has the capabilities or the precision necessary to strike targets in the U.S.

Analysis of July's intercontinental-ballistic-missile test suggested that the missile had burned up as it fell through the Earth's atmosphere. For that reason, Robert Litwak of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington believes Kim's missile tests create a "new urgency" in the debate over the nuclear program, which he describes as Kim's "Manhattan Project," but that it will still take another year or two until Pyongyang will have nuclear-tipped missiles capable of striking targets thousands of kilometers away. Still, experts have often gotten things wrong in the past and Pyongyang appears to be making rapid progress.

A 'Political' Weapon

North Korea's state propaganda machine has already hailed the young leader as a military commander who has won numerous battles. He can already boast that he has fulfilled the legacy of his grandfather Kim Il Sung and his father Kim Jong Il, that he has protected the Stalinist dynasty from intervention by a major power thanks to the possession of nuclear weapons. Natural disasters, famines and ever-stronger sanctions did nothing to dissuade the Kims from achieving their goal. Kim Jong Un's most important strategic goal now may be recognition as a nuclear power -- possibly through the kind of compromise the U.S. reached with India.

"(North Korea) is developing its nuclear weapon for a political reason," concurs Ra Jong Yil, who is also the former deputy director of the South Korean intelligence service. He doesn't believe that Kim would actually use his arsenal. In the longer term, he argues, his goal is for the U.S. to withdraw its military from South Korea, an assessment shared in Japan. Sources in Japan's General Army Staff do not believe Kim to be suicidal enough to risk his power through a retaliatory strike against the United States.

The China Question

Kim has also been successful economically. He is transforming Pyongyang into one big propaganda backdrop with modern high-rises and amusement parks. Once empty streets are now experiencing traffic jams and many subjects who had previously been completely cut off in the hermetically sealed country can now be seen making calls and surfing the net on their smartphones. The boom has been financed through the export of raw materials and foodstuffs as well as through a large number of trading companies operating out of China. In addition, the intelligence services in Seoul estimate that North Korea also has stationed around 7,000 computer experts, spies and hackers abroad. A single hacking attack last year on Bangladesh's central bank supposedly yielded a booty of \$81 million.

That's why it seems unlikely the most recent, and thus far strongest, United Nations-imposed sanctions can stop Kim. Resolution 2371, which was also backed by China, is aimed at curbing North Korea's exports by \$1 billion -- about one-third of its overall exports. It also bans countries from allowing in workers from North Korea and from entering into joint ventures with North Korea. To secure China's vote for the sanctions, however, the U.S. reportedly made concessions. For example, Beijing is still allowed to continue its oil deliveries to North Korea.

It's also the reason Mark Fitzpatrick of Washington's International Institute for Strategic Studies is skeptical about the effects of sanctions. "The sanctions will undoubtedly not be fully implemented," he says. "North Korea will find other avenues of income." He suggests increasing the pressure through a naval blockade.

China's Role

For now, though, the situation largely hinges on China. Trump has been trying for some time now to apply pressure on Beijing, but those efforts have been unsuccessful so far. He once again warned China on Thursday that it must do more, claiming that the U.S. loses "hundreds of billions of dollars" a year in its trade with China and that this would not continue. That is unless, Trump argued, China helps him with North Korea. But this isn't the first time he's made threats like these, and it's hard to imagine Beijing still taking this U.S. president seriously anyway.

"It's good that China went along with this most recent, significant tightening of the sanctions and that it now also wants to implement them in a resolute way," says German Foreign Minister Gabriel. Pyongyang, he says, must understand that it has no more partners in its "aggressive path of provocation." But is that really what China wants?

According to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the UN resolution will help the leadership in Pyongyang make the "correct and prudent decisions." The truth, though, is that Beijing doesn't believe that sanctions will work.

"Decades ago, China was facing similar pressure from the outside," says Jin Qiangyi, the head of the Center for Inter-Korean Studies at Yanbian University. "At the time, China didn't give up either. Beijing thus knows from its own experience that the effect of sanctions is very limited."

It believes the opposite to be true: The experience with famine in the 1990s, he argues, showed that sanctions lead to suffering among North Korea's population and only encourage the regime to harden its position. Beijing approved the sanctions to counter the accusation that China only sides with Kim -- and also because a growing number of Chinese people are now critical of China's loyalty to the dictator in Pyongyang.

Beijing's Interests

Beijing's recipe for resolving the conflict is primarily to pass the buck to the U.S. and its allies and to call on them to negotiate directly with North Korea. Officials in Beijing have preached that it will only be possible to convince North Korea to freeze its missile and nuclear program if Washington, Seoul and Tokyo stop conducting joint military maneuvers in the Western Pacific.

China's suggestion can't be dismissed out of hand. Bringing the two rivals to the negotiating table would at the very least prevent a further escalation. But so far, Beijing hasn't shown any sign it would itself like to take on greater responsibility.

This fuels the suspicion that Beijing is less interested in finding a solution than it is in safeguarding its own interest -- namely that of breaking the United States' hegemony in the Pacific and rising to become the region's leading power.

Of course, Beijing would also prefer it if Kim were to freeze his missile and nuclear program and stop provoking others. But what frightens Beijing more than North Korea's atomic weapons is the idea that the regime in Pyongyang might one day collapse, precipitating reunification under the leadership of Washington and Seoul -- a development that could result in the stationing of American soldiers along China's own frontier.

In order to assuage such fears, it has been reported, Henry Kissinger, the old master of diplomacy with China, recently advised Secretary of State Tillerson to provide some guarantees to Beijing, including a large-scale withdrawal of American troops from the south in the event of reunification. This, he is said to have argued, was the only way for America to eliminate Beijing's reservations about the idea that North Korea might no longer exist one day as a buffer state.

For now, Beijing considers the outbreak of a new Korean War to be unlikely. But the closer North Korea gets to its goal of building an intercontinental ballistic missile armed with a nuclear warhead, the greater that risk grows. And what would Beijing gain from being the leading power in a region if it descended into chaos?

Few Chances for a Diplomatic Solution

In Tokyo and Seoul, meanwhile, people are almost as worried about the U.S. and China reaching an agreement without them as they are about military escalation. Both countries want to continue amassing their own arms. Japan's defense minister now argues his country has to have the capability of carrying out pre-emptive strikes. Even South Korea's new president is striking a more aggressive tone. Moon Jae In took office with the goal of furthering reconciliation with the North, but now he is calling for a comprehensive overhaul of South Korean defenses.

As catastrophic as a war would be, there are few chances of a diplomatic solution, and that is the major dilemma in this conflict.

In 1994, the Clinton administration signed an agreement with Kim Jong Il, who promised to stop reprocessing fuel rods in exchange for oil delivery. But the North Korean leader, who is the father of Kim Jong Un, secretly continued it. A further attempt in 2005 also failed. As long as the people in power in Pyongyang believe they need nuclear weapons to secure their power, it seems, they will not be prepared to give them up.

Trump, it turns out, only has bad options at his disposal. Even the powerful U.S. military lacks the capability to hit all the North's military installations simultaneously and prevent Kim from launching a retaliatory strike. Most experts are certain that the only thing that can keep Kim in check is a mixture of sanctions, cyber-warfare and isolation -- and that the world will ultimately have to come to terms with North Korea as a nuclear power.

This wouldn't be a new thing. When Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong built their first atomic bombs, pre-emptive strikes were also discussed. Fortunately, Trump's predecessors acted level-headedly, and the Soviet Union and China ultimately became nuclear powers. Since then, the fragile logic of mutual deterrence has prevailed.

Trump is now 71 years old. He grew up in the most peaceful period that his country has ever experienced. Hopefully he hasn't forgotten that.