

'Fire and fury': Trump's impulsive rhetoric on North Korea threatens the region

Written by Genevieve Hohnen, Lecturer in Politics and International Relations, Edith Cowan University



By promising 'fire and fury', Donald Trump actually plays into North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's hands. Reuters/Jonathan Ernst

On August 8, US President Donald Trump used his most extreme language yet in relation to North Korea. [He warned](#) the regime's leader, Kim Jong-un, that any North Korean aggression will be "met with fire and fury and frankly power, the likes of which this world has never seen before", if it does not stop threatening the US.

Trump said North Korea's threats had gone "beyond a normal state" and that "North Korea best not make any more threats". But his reaction is at odds with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's recent comments that the US is [open to dialogue](#) with North Korea and is not seeking regime change.

And by promising "fire and fury" Trump actually [plays into Kim's hands](#) and replicates the aggressive and posturing rhetoric of the North Korean regime.

North Korean state media predictably responded with reports Kim is "actively considering" a pre-emptive missile attack on the US Pacific island territory of [Guam](#), with the country's military experts reportedly [drawing up plans for this](#)

The role of personality

One of Trump's clear goals from the beginning of his campaign for the presidency was his desire to be seen as a strongman on the national and international stage.

His level of ego and his obsession with appearing to be the aggressor is all very well at a town hall rally. But on the international stage it is an incredibly risky part of his personality that places the entire Asian region – if not the world – at risk.

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So-called strongmen bring a distinct style and flair to international crises. Trump wants to sort things out personally. This often means he is prepared to ignore the advice of the highly trained diplomats who have been working on this issue for decades.

This kind of highly personalised, ad-hoc diplomacy may be exciting and play well for a domestic audience keen to see their leader as someone to be reckoned with. But it is inevitably destabilising and counter-productive to actually solving critical issues, such as the North Korean nuclear crisis.

Significantly, this is the first time we are dealing with unpredictable characters on both sides of the North Korean nuclear dispute.

Previously, North Korea would have been viewed as the most risky party in such a crisis. But right now its behaviour is entirely predictable, particularly in the face of confusion and a deliberate escalation of the US response – which Trump is leading.

There are more moderate forces within the US government, but their actions are being repeatedly drowned out by an unpredictable president who appears to have no appreciation of the damage and threat his statements are causing.

Strongman or madman?

The issue with Trump's ad-hoc response and commentary on North Korea is the inconsistent messages this sends to an already paranoid and isolated regime.

North Korea is led by a power-driven despot who will not hesitate to put his own needs and political survival well above the needs of his people. Kim is already paranoid about US actions. And the increasingly disjointed nature of Trump's dealings with North Korea serves to strengthen the regime's claim that the US is actively seeking to destroy it.

Prior to the Trump administration the US had taken a relatively consistent approach to North Korea through the Clinton, Bush and Obama years. Essentially, the US has previously always

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been careful to provide an exit strategy for North Korea.

By contrast, there are several critical errors with Trump's approach. It is imperative to allow leaders like Kim the space and flexibility to back down with some semblance of dignity. Irrespective of his character, political collapse in North Korea would be dangerous for the world – and disastrous for the region.

Trump needs to tread carefully and allow space for negotiators and diplomats to do their job. The inconsistency in message that is apparent through his tweets and off-the-cuff comments compromises the actions and statements of US diplomats working on this issue.

This undermines any progress that may be being made, and pushes North Korea further toward a critical nuclear tipping point.

US Secretary of Defence James Mattis has [previously warned](#) of an “overwhelming” response to nuclear provocation by North Korea, but said a military solution in North Korea would be “tragic on an unbelievable scale”.

As a direct result of Trump's actions, what could have been a week of triumph as the international community came together to [enact harsh sanctions on North Korea](#) has instead perhaps drawn us one step closer to the tragedy Mattis predicted.

Genevieve Hohnen does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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