

## Turnbull's North Korea intervention could be his own 'all the way with LBJ' moment

Written by Tony Walker, Adjunct Professor, School of Communications, La Trobe University

---



EPA/How Hwee Young

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has dealt Australia into the argument over how to respond to North Korea's brinkmanship over its nuclear weapons program.

[Speaking on Melbourne radio](#) on Friday morning Turnbull invoked the [ANZUS Treaty](#), which obliges Australia and the US to come to each other's defence in the event either is attacked.

Debate persists over whether this is an absolute guarantee, but Turnbull left no wiggle room in his declaration that Australia would regard an attack on the US as a *casus belli*. He said:

America stands by its allies, including Australia, and we stand by the United States. So be very clear on that. If there's an attack on the US, the ANZUS Treaty would be invoked and Australia would come to the aid of the United States, as America would come to our aid if we were attacked.

Turnbull's forthright intervention might be regarded as fairly unexceptional were it not for the fact it aligns Australia with a US president untested in a crisis, and one who has shown a predisposition to shoot from the lip.

In effect, Turnbull is mortgaging Australian security policy to an unpredictable commander-in-chief whose instincts may be to take the safety catch off first and ask questions later.

Turnbull should remind himself that recent experience in which an Australian predecessor followed the US precipitately into the sands of Mesopotamia did not end well.

## Turnbull's North Korea intervention could be his own 'all the way with LBJ' moment

Written by Tony Walker, Adjunct Professor, School of Communications, La Trobe University

---

In his interview Turnbull might have calibrated his remarks more carefully when he said that: “In terms of defence, we are joined at the hip”.

This recalls unfortunate prime ministerial contributions such as Harold Holt’s “all the way with LBJ” at the time of Vietnam, or John Howard’s characterisation of Australia as America’s “deputy sheriff” in the Asia-Pacific. We can do without these sorts of glib statements.

Turnbull’s undertaking to apply the ANZUS Treaty should the US be attacked recalls Howard’s decision in September 2001 to invoke the treaty’s mutual defence elements after the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

This activation of Australia’s security obligations under ANZUS was largely pro forma. No follow-up ensued that could be described as action under the treaty itself. Australia’s support for the US in Afghanistan was part of a NATO deployment.

The question then becomes: how seriously should we regard an escalating war of words between a US president and North Korea in which Donald Trump has doubled down on his earlier “fire and fury” threats?

No-one should make light of the risks involved of a conflagration on the Korean Peninsula, which remains potentially the epicentre of the world’s most-destructive conflict. Nor should threats by North Korea’s idiosyncratic leader Kim Jong-un to fire a missile toward the American Pacific territory of Guam be dismissed as a stunt.

Where the real risks lie in a volatile environment is a miscalculation that could precipitate conflict that spirals out of control with unpredictable – possibly terrible – consequences.

South Korea’s vulnerability to a North Korea first – or retaliatory – strike cannot be overstated. The South Korean capital, Seoul, is within range of North Korean artillery, leaving aside a nuclear threat.

## Turnbull's North Korea intervention could be his own 'all the way with LBJ' moment

Written by Tony Walker, Adjunct Professor, School of Communications, La Trobe University

---

This raises the question of the extent to which North Korea has acquired the ability to arm its missile systems with a nuclear warhead, and whether intelligence reports of its development of a “miniaturised” nuclear device are correct.

It is not clear that North Korea has achieved this level of sophistication. However, no responsible leader can afford to exclude the possibility that North Korea is further advanced in its nuclear program than had been assumed.

In an analysis on the war of words that has erupted between Trump and Kim, the Council on Foreign Relations [put it this way](#) :

The war of words underscores both the American rejection of the idea of vulnerability to a nuclear-armed Kim and the increasing dangers of miscalculation that would accompany a North Korean capability to follow through on its past offensive threats to strike the United States with a nuclear weapon.

The intensity of the rhetorical escalation underscores the fact that North Korea is on a trajectory of confrontation with Washington that Defence Secretary James Mattis characterised as “catastrophic”.

Since there is no chance of Kim giving up his nuclear capability short of ironclad US guarantees of his regime’s survival, the crisis over North Korea’s nuclear pretensions will likely remain intractable. What represents the best outcome is a de-escalation of tensions, an end to the war of words, and some prospect of negotiations that would rein in North Korea’s nuclear ambitions.

If there is a model for such an arrangement it lies in the Obama administration’s agreement with Iran that led to an effective freezing of its nuclear program. Unhelpfully, the Trump administration persists in claiming Iran is breaching this agreement – without supporting evidence.

## Turnbull's North Korea intervention could be his own 'all the way with LBJ' moment

Written by Tony Walker, Adjunct Professor, School of Communications, La Trobe University

---

This is especially destructive at a moment when the US and its allies need to reduce tensions, not add to them.

In all of this, the best outcome is for North Korea to be drawn back into negotiations on its nuclear program under the threat of escalating sanctions to which China and Russia are party.

In the meantime, as the Council on Foreign Relations puts it:

The more the crisis escalates, the greater the dangers of miscalculation, and the harder it will be for either side to find an exit ramp from a high-stakes crisis.

Talk of the next Cuban missile crisis may be premature, but the risks of a destructive conflict in which nuclear weapons are deployed cannot be disregarded. This is shaping as the Trump administration's first big security policy crisis.

Authors: Tony Walker, Adjunct Professor, School of Communications, La Trobe University

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/turnbulls-north-korea-intervention-could-be-his-own-all-the-way-with-lbj-moment-82373>