

The world's attention is currently focussed on developments on the Korean peninsula. This is due in large part because of the remarks made by US President Trump at the recent UN General Assembly (UNGA). North Korea has been a neuralgic problem since the end of hostilities in 1953. This week the London based Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) has published a paper 'Preparing for War in Korea'; a title which its author Professor Malcolm Chalmers, the Deputy Director General of RUSI, hastens to stress does not imply any inevitability, reports Nick Watts

At the UNGA Trump lambasted North Korea and Iran. Washington sees worrying parallels between the nuclear programmes of Iran and North Korea. What is troubling to the international community is Trump's threat to withdraw from the July 2015 nuclear deal, known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was painstakingly negotiated with Iran, Russia, the US and the EU.

Trump is clearly worried that the dithering of the international community over Iran gives comfort to the regime in Pyongyang. Dr. Jack Caravelli served on the White House National Security Council Staff from 1996-2000 for President Bill Clinton with responsibility on non-proliferation issues. He notes: "the UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, has issued a series of bland reports that claim Iran is abiding by its commitments but they do little to shed light on key and unresolved issues regarding Iran's adherence to the JCPOA, including the regime's refusal to allow inspections of suspect military sites. One of those is at Parchin where Iran is suspected of having carried out tests related to nuclear weapon design. Those suspicions were further fuelled when Iran undertook extensive actions to tear down parts of the facility associated with the tests."

Caravelli adds: "there is a larger dynamic in play as well. Iran may be carrying out other parts of its JCPOA commitments as the IAEA says. It is doing so in large measure because of significant financial incentives to do so, but based on the recent statements of its "moderate" president the regime has not abandoned its long-term nuclear ambitions."

According to Caravelli, Rouhani has timed a series of statements that use North Korea's ongoing confrontation with the United States over the DPRK's nuclear program to position Iran

as threatening to reinvigorate its nuclear weapons program. Fearing a decision by President Trump to refuse to recertify Iran's adherence to the JCPOA, Rouhani has taken a confrontational rather compromising approach.

John Everard, a former British Ambassador to North Korea says that "The DPRK is less secretive than many think. It is currently following through decisions of the 7th Party Congress on 8 May 2016 (the first since 1980)." The Congress decided that: "We will wage a vigorous struggle to put a definite end to the danger of a nuclear war, imposed by the U.S., with a powerful nuclear deterrence and defend regional and global peace. We will consistently take hold on the strategic line of ..... building a nuclear force and boosting a self-defensive nuclear force both in quality and quantity as long as the imperialists persist in their nuclear threat and arbitrary practices." Everard points out that a DPRK MFA statement of 13 September noted this meant "establishing a practical equilibrium with the USA".

Everard notes that the DPRK's nuclear capability has advanced: "the 3 September test is probably too large to be just a fission device. It was originally thought to be fission blast boosted by deuterium and tritium." Some observers think that the test blast may have been as much as 250kt (John Hopkins University), so perhaps a full fusion weapon. Everard notes: "This is important as it would compensate for targeting inaccuracies. The DPRK has its own uranium ore mines and probably a lot of centrifuges, so it is capable of producing quite large amounts of weapons-grade uranium." Everard further notes that it is unclear whether DPRK claims to be able to mount their warheads on their missiles are true, but consensus among experts is swinging towards accepting this.

The RUSI report assesses that 'war is now a real possibility' as North Korea continues to make rapid progress in its missile and nuclear programmes and the Trump administration responds with suggestions that 'classical deterrence theory' is no longer applicable. It states that 'the US is prepared to maintain the option of preventive strikes against North Korean nuclear facilities despite the knowledge that these could result in a new Korean war, perhaps comparable in scale and loss of life with the conflicts in Iraq or even Vietnam'.

The report also looks at the United Kingdom's response to the crisis. It states: 'The UK government would have, at most, only a few hours to make clear how it stood on what would be one of the most momentous strategic shocks of the post-Cold War era. Its decision would have

as profound an impact on the UK's international standing, and on its domestic politics, as the fateful decision to stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with the US in the run up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. But there would be no time for multiple consultations and deliberations before positions had to be taken. The die would be cast on Day One.'

The report suggests that 'if this war is launched, it will not be surgical or short.' The scale of such a conflict could be even greater if North Korea were able to unleash a nuclear attack on South Korea or Japan before its forces were overrun, or if China became directly involved in the fighting. 'While the broader political and economic effects of such a conflict are highly unpredictable, they are likely to be global in nature, dwarfing the effects of the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath in Afghanistan and Iraq. For the two Koreas, casualties could run into the hundreds of thousands. China and Japan, the world's second- and third-largest economies, could face severe disruption to their societies, especially if nuclear weapons were used or if a conventional war were to last for several months. US leaders also know that a war could put 60,000 American troops based in the region at risk, along with many tens of thousands of American civilians.'

At present the level of rhetoric between President Trump and Kim Jong-un, the leader of the DPRK is shrill. Other voices, notably the president of South Korea and the Chinese leadership have called for a lowering of the temperature. The US has repeatedly considered the possibility of pre-emptive or decapitation strikes against North Korea. Bill Clinton considered the possibility in 1994, before agreeing to an arrangement which lasted until 2003. In 2011 Kim Jong-un succeeded his father as leader of the DPRK.

The combination of a relatively new regime in North Korea combined with advances in their nuclear programme mean that the incoming President of the US regards as the legacy of his weak predecessor. Trump may be hoping that by ratcheting up the rhetoric, China may be persuaded to take its neighbour in hand. For its part, China can see the problem as one which involves the US and the DPRK, but it must also have an eye on its own neighbourhood. A significant war on its doorstep would have a huge impact on regional trade and stability, as the report makes clear. The opportunity to act as a broker, to de-fuse the current situation would suit Beijing's relationship with the new man in the White House.

There is scope for diplomacy to work. Several states have become nuclear powers, notably

Israel, India and Pakistan. There has been no talk of punitive strikes against any of these. If the DPRK feels that it can be just like India, then the question becomes one of managing the relationship until such time as the regime feels sufficiently confident to open its economy, as the Chinese did after the death of Mao. It may not result in regime change, however, as many hope will happen.

Strategic patience will be needed by all of the parties, if a second Korean war is to be avoided.

*Nick Watts is Deputy Director of U K Defence Forum and a strategic analyst*