

Articles on the US-North Korea crisis (V) - Thaad deployment, trade sanctions...

Sunday 10 September 2017, by [BUNCOMBE Andrew](#), [FARRER Martin](#), [McCURRY Justin](#), [OSBORNE Samuel](#), [PHILLIPS Tom](#) (Date first published: 7 September 2017).

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South Korea deploys missile system as US strengthens North Korea trade threat

Controversial Thaad system brought in as China holds air warfare exercises and US treasury secretary issues threat to countries trading with Pyongyang.

Dozens of South Korean protesters have been injured in clashes with police over the full deployment on Thursday of a controversial US missile defence system intended to counter attacks from North Korea.

According to South Korean media, 38 people, including six police officers, were injured in the village of Seongju, 300km south of Seoul, as preparations were made to install four further terminal high-altitude area defence (Thaad) system batteries at a golf course in the village.

The morning protests came as the US threatened to impose sanctions on any country that trades with North Korea ahead of a crucial meeting of the UN security council to discuss fresh measures against the regime.

Donald Trump, along with Moon and the Japanese prime minister, Shinzo Abe, are pushing for an oil embargo against the North - a measure opposed by China and Russia.

The US treasury secretary, Steve Mnuchin, warned on Wednesday that if the UN security council failed to agree on additional sanctions when it meets on Monday, he had an executive order ready for Trump to sign that would impose sanctions any country that trades with North Korea.

"I have an executive order prepared. It's ready to go to the president. It will authorise me to stop doing trade, and put sanctions on anybody that does trade with North Korea. The president will consider that at the appropriate time once he gives the UN time to act," Mnuchin said.

The South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, approved the full deployment of the Thaad system this week after North Korea detonated a powerful nuclear device on Sunday, drawing widespread

condemnation and calls for tougher UN sanctions.

Thousands of police officers were sent to the village to protect the system, situated where similar clashes took place when the first two Thaad batteries were deployed in April.

Reports quoted a local police official as saying most of the demonstrators had been dispersed and that the launchers and other equipment had been driven on to the site.

The protests in Seongju took place as the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, told Trump that the escalating crisis on the Korean peninsula must be resolved through dialogue.

In a phone call early on Thursday, Xi told Trump he was “deeply concerned over the ongoing situation on the Korean peninsula, and attaches importance to China’s essential role in resolving the issue”, according to a readout by the official Chinese news agency Xinhua.

Trump later told reporters he and Xi had had “a very, very frank and very strong phone call”.

President Xi would like to do something ... we'll see whether or not he can do it.
Donald Trump

He added: “President Xi would like to do something ... we’ll see whether or not he can do it. But we will not be putting up with what’s happening in North Korea. I believe that President Xi agrees with me 100%. He doesn’t want to see what’s happening there, either.”

Asked if he was considering military action against North Korea, Trump said: “Certainly that’s not our first choice, but we will see what happens.”

Earlier, China’s air force carried out exercises near the Korean peninsula, practising its defence against a “surprise attack” coming from across the sea, Chinese state media said. An anti-aircraft defence battalion held the exercises early on Tuesday, near the Bohai Sea, the innermost gulf of the Yellow Sea that separates China from the Korean peninsula, an official military website said [\[1\]](#).

Despite their shared sense of alarm at the speed with which North Korea appears to be nearing its goal of developing missiles capable of delivering a nuclear weapon to the US mainland, permanent members of the UN security council are divided over their response.

In a draft of a resolution due to be put to a vote on Monday, the US called on countries to impose an oil embargo on North Korea – a measure opposed by Russia and China.

A leaked copy of the draft includes demands for a ban on gas supplies, as well as an end to textile exports and payments to North Koreans working overseas. The measures are also designed to strike at the heart of the North Korean regime, with a proposed freeze on the assets of the country’s leader, Kim Jong-un, and those of the ruling Worker’s party.

In addition, the resolution calls for Kim to be added to a UN sanctions blacklist, subjecting him to a global travel ban, along with four other North Korean officials. The country’s state-owned airline, Air Koryo, would also be hit by an assets freeze along with the Korean People’s Army and eight other groups linked to the government, the military and the ruling party.

But China – the biggest exporter of crude oil to North Korea – is expected to oppose an oil embargo or any other action that could destabilise North Korea, fearing regime collapse could spark a refugee crisis and allow tens of thousands US troops based in South Korea to move to China’s border with the North.

The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, has also indicated Moscow would oppose an oil embargo, urging other countries not to “give in to emotions and push Pyongyang into a corner”.

In response to a plea from Moon to support cutting oil supplies, Putin said on Wednesday that depriving the regime of oil would be devastating for ordinary North Koreans, since it would leave hospitals and other public services without fuel.

A report by the Nautilus Institute thinktank warned of the huge disruption an oil embargo would cause: “People will be forced to walk or not move at all, and to push buses instead of riding in them,” the report said. “There will be less light in households due to less kerosene.”

The ban will lead to more deforestation, it added, as North Koreans will be forced to cut down trees to produce charcoal, leading to “more erosion, floods and more famine” in the already impoverished country.

Kim’s regime would immediately restrict supplies to private citizens, it said, and a ban would have “little or no immediate impact” on the North’s army or its missile and nuclear programmes.

Russia and China have instead called for a “freeze-for-freeze solution that would suspend North Korean nuclear and missile tests in exchange for the US and South Korea halting joint military exercises that Pyongyang regards as a rehearsal for an invasion.

The Trump administration has rejected the proposal, insisting the drills are essential in response to North Korean provocations, including a threat to launch missiles near the US Pacific territory of Guam.

On Thursday, the *China Daily* accused the US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, of being “narrow-minded and undiplomatic” for rejecting the China-Russia proposal [2].

Haley’s call for new sanctions “could lead to an enormous humanitarian disaster in North Korea, hurting millions of women and children and innocent people,” the newspaper said in an editorial.

Justin McCurry in Tokyo and **Tom Phillips** in Beijing

Agencies contributed to this report.

* The Guardian. Thursday 7 September 2017 05.28 BST Last modified on Thursday 7 September 2017 22.00 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/07/south-korea-deploys-missile-system-as-us-strengthens-north-korea-trade-threat>

Seoul pleads with Vladimir Putin to help tame North Korea

South Korean president tells Russian leader that situation risks becoming uncontrollable.

The South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, has warned that the crisis on the Korean peninsula risks becoming “uncontrollable” as he sought Russian cooperation in a meeting with Vladimir Putin.

"The global political situation has become very serious due to North Korea's repeated provocations," Moon told the Russian president during bilateral talks in Vladivostok on Wednesday.

According to South Korean media, Moon asked Putin to help "tame" North Korea, as the international community considers its response to Pyongyang's sixth nuclear test on Sunday.

There was further evidence that North Korea had made significant progress in its nuclear programme, with Japan saying it had revised upwards the estimated yield from Sunday's bomb to 160 kilotons – making it more than 10 times bigger than the Hiroshima bomb.

"This is far more powerful than their nuclear tests in the past," Japan's defence minister, Itsunori Onodera, told reporters.

The figure was based on a revised magnitude by the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organisation.

Japan's revised estimate is far greater than the 50-100 kiloton yield given by the UN security council. The council is due to vote on Monday on a resolution condemning the North's recent test, but there are signs of division over how to respond.

Putin has said he opposes fresh economic measures against the regime. While he condemned North Korea's provocations, Putin said further sanctions would be useless and ineffective, describing the measures as a "road to nowhere".

China, too, opposes any measure – namely an oil embargo favoured by the US and Japan – that could foment a domestic crisis big enough to topple North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, and potentially end the country's status as a buffer between China and South Korea, where US forces are based.

Japan's prime minister, Shinzō Abe, is expected to broach sanctions with Putin when they meet in Vladivostok on Thursday.

"We have to make North Korea change its current policy and understand that there is no bright future if North Korea continues the present policy," Abe told reporters before he left Tokyo.

The US president, Donald Trump, said military action against North Korea was not a first choice after what he called a strong and frank discussion with the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, about the issue.

"President Xi would like to do something. We'll see whether or not he can do it. But we will not be putting up with what's happening in North Korea," Trump told reporters at the White House.

"I believe that President Xi agrees with me 100% ... We had a very, very frank and very strong phone call."

In a flurry of phone calls with world leaders, Trump earlier took a tough line against negotiating with North Korea.

Trump stressed "now is not the time to talk to North Korea" and that "all options remain open to defend the United States and its allies", according to a White House description of his telephone call with Theresa May.

Trump also discussed North Korea with the Australian prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull. Trump and Turnbull "confirmed that their two countries will intensify joint efforts to denuclearise North Korea".

The UK defence secretary, Michael Fallon, told BBC Radio 4's Today programme on Wednesday: "The US is perfectly entitled to make all the preparations it needs to protect its people, its bases, its own homeland. They are clearly doing that at the moment to make sure the president has all options he needs."

He said the US defence secretary, James Mattis, "and I and others across the administration have made it clear we have to absolutely exhaust every possible diplomatic avenue to get this situation under control".

"That means working intensively in New York over the next few days to get a new resolution. It means looking at the existing sanctions and making sure they're properly enforced. It means looking at the European Union level and seeing what sanctions can be applied there and above all it means putting more pressure on China to deal with its neighbour. This last test was just 50 miles from the border of China."

Geopolitical concerns continued to simmer following the nuclear test on Sunday, with one of North Korea's most senior diplomats saying the US would receive more "gift packages" from the regime.

Han Tae-song, the country's ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, confirmed that North Korea had successfully conducted its sixth and largest nuclear bomb test on Sunday.

"The recent self-defence measures by my country ... are a gift package addressed to none other than the US," Han told a disarmament conference in Geneva on Tuesday. "The US will receive more gift packages ... as long as it relies on reckless provocations and futile attempts to put pressure on [North Korea]."

Tensions between the US and North Korea continued to take their toll on markets in the region on Wednesday. The Nikkei share average fell 0.7% to a four-month low in Tokyo in early trading but had mounted a slight recovery by mid-afternoon. In Sydney, the ASX200 benchmark index plunged by the same margin as investors opted for safe havens such as gold and government bonds.

The South Korean benchmark index - the Kospi - was 0.35% lower on Wednesday in the fifth successive day of losses. Shanghai dropped 0.4% while Hong Kong's Hang Seng retreated 1%.

Justin McCurry in Tokyo, **Martin Farrer** and agencies

* The Guardian. Wednesday 6 September 2017 18.46 BST First published on Wednesday 6 September 2017 02.38 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/sep/06/asia-pacific-shares-fall-sharply-as-north-korea-threatens-more-gift-packages>

Putin warns of planetary catastrophe

The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, has warned that the escalating North Korean crisis could cause a "planetary catastrophe" and huge loss of life, and described US proposals for further sanctions on Pyongyang as "useless".

"Ramping up military hysteria in such conditions is senseless; it's a dead end," he told reporters in

China. "It could lead to a global, planetary catastrophe and a huge loss of human life. There is no other way to solve the North Korean nuclear issue, save that of peaceful dialogue."

On Sunday, North Korea carried out its sixth and by far its most powerful nuclear test to date. The underground blast triggered a magnitude-6.3 earthquake and was more powerful than the bombs dropped by the US on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the second world war.

Putin was attending the Brics summit, bringing together the leaders of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Speaking on Tuesday, the final day of the summit in Xiamen, China, he said Russia condemned North Korea's provocations but said further sanctions would be useless and ineffective, describing the measures as a "road to nowhere".

Foreign interventions in Iraq and Libya had convinced the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, that he needed nuclear weapons to survive, Putin said.

"We all remember what happened with Iraq and Saddam Hussein. His children were killed, I think his grandson was shot, the whole country was destroyed and Saddam Hussein was hanged ... We all know how this happened and people in North Korea remember well what happened in Iraq.

"They will eat grass but will not stop their [nuclear] programme as long as they do not feel safe."

A US bid for the United Nations security council to vote on 11 September on new sanctions is "a little premature," Vassily Nebenzia, Russia's UN ambassador, said on Tuesday. Russia is a permanent member of the security council and has veto power.

The US's top diplomat acknowledged that more sanctions on North Korea are unlikely to change its behaviour, but insisted that they would cut off funding for its ballistic missile and nuclear programmes.

"Do we think more sanctions are going to work on North Korea? Not necessarily," Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the UN, told a thinktank in Washington. "But what does it do? It cuts off the revenue that allows them to build ballistic missiles."

Diplomats have said the security council could consider banning North Korean textile exports, banishing its national airline and stopping supplies of oil to the government and military. Other measures could include preventing North Koreans from working abroad and adding top officials to a blacklist aiming at imposing asset freezes and travel bans.

China accounted for 92% of North Korea's trade in 2016, according to South Korea's government. China's foreign ministry said on Tuesday it would take part in security council discussions in "a responsible and constructive manner".

But China is likely to block any measure that could cause instability and topple the regime of Kim Jong-un, sparking a refugee crisis and potentially allowing tens of thousands of South Korean and US troops to move north as far as the Chinese border.

German chancellor Angela Merkel and Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe spoke by telephone on Tuesday and agreed that sanctions against Pyongyang should be stepped up.

The row over further sanctions came as South Korea refused to rule out redeploying US tactical nuclear weapons on its territory - a move that could seriously harm efforts to ease tensions as signs emerged that Pyongyang was preparing to launch another intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on or around 9 September, when it celebrates its founding day.

Seoul has routinely dismissed the option of basing US nuclear weapons on South Korean soil for the first time since the 1990s, but the country's defence minister, Song Young-moo, said "all available military options" were being considered to address the growing threat from North Korean missiles.

Kim Hyun-wook, a professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy in Seoul, said: "No one in South Korea is seriously proposing that the US reintroduce strategic assets [such as nuclear weapons]. That's something they might discuss further down the line, but there are no plans for that to happen right now."

But calls have also been growing in South Korea for the country to develop a nuclear deterrent independent of the US.

On Tuesday, South Korean warships conducted live-fire drills, with further exercises planned this week. "If the enemy launches a provocation above water or under water, we will immediately hit back to bury them at sea," said Capt Choi Young-chan, commander of the 13th Maritime Battle Group.

The drills came hours after Donald Trump and his South Korean counterpart, Moon Jae-in, agreed "in principle" to remove restrictions on the size of Seoul's missile warheads and approved a deal to sell it "many billions of dollars'" worth of US military weapons and equipment.

Washington appears to have moved to ease South Korean doubts about US commitment to its security after Trump openly accused its east Asian ally of "appeasing" Pyongyang by holding out for a negotiated solution to its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

Speaking to a nuclear disarmament conference on Tuesday, North Korea's ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, described Pyongyang's nuclear test as a "gift package" for the US.

"The recent self-defence measures by my country, DPRK, are a gift package addressed to none other than the US," said Han Tae Song. "The US will receive more 'gift packages' from my country as long as it relies on reckless provocations and futile attempts to put pressure on the DPRK," he added without elaborating.

North Korea has been observed moving what appeared to be a long-range missile towards its west coast, according to South Korea's Asia Business Daily. The newspaper claimed the missile had been transported towards the launch site overnight on Monday to avoid surveillance.

South Korea's defence ministry said it was unable to confirm the report, although ministry officials told parliament on Monday the Pyongyang regime was preparing to launch more missiles.

On Monday, the US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, accused North Korea of "begging for war", adding that the time had come for the security council to impose "the strongest possible" sanctions after Sunday's test of what Pyongyang claimed was a hydrogen bomb that could be loaded on to an ICBM.

Justin McCurry in Tokyo and **Tom Phillips** in Beijing

Agencies contributed to this report

* The Guardian. Tuesday 5 September 2017 19.46 BST First published on Tuesday 5 September 2017 06.37 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/05/south-korea-minister-redeploying-us-nuclear-weapons-tensions-with-north>

What are Donald Trump's options for solving the North Korea crisis?

De-escalating Kim Jong-un's nuclear threat - through force, sanctions or talks - will require the US to navigate its tricky relationship with China.

In the wake of North Korea's sixth and most powerful nuclear test to date, the US has called for the toughest possible sanctions at the United Nations and said there are ample military options on the table.

Experts warn that there are few good options the US can take without assistance from China, which has been wary of pushing the North Korean regime to the brink of collapse. China has advocated a freeze on development of the North's nuclear program in return for an end to joint US-South Korea military exercises, an idea the US has rejected.

Donald Trump has floated three ideas as a candidate and later US president to deal with the crisis: military strikes, punishing China economically and direct talks.

War

US defence secretary James Mattis warned earlier this week of "a massive military response" to any threat from North Korea against the US or its allies, and Nikki Haley, the American ambassador to the UN, accused leader Kim Jong-un of "begging for war".

"Kim Jong-un doesn't want to talk: he wants to develop the economy and a nuclear arsenal, not one or the other but both at the same time," said Park Byung-kwang, director of centre for north-east Asia at the Institute for National Security Strategy in Seoul, a thinktank affiliated with the country's intelligence agency.

"The crisis on the Korean peninsula is getting worse, which means the likelihood of Trump exerting more pressure and even [a] military strike is becoming more feasible."

According to Park, Trump has three options: ratcheting up pressure through sanctions, starting a direct dialogue with Kim or considering surgical strikes on North Korean military facilities.

But it remains uncertain if Trump would coordinate with South Korea and Japan, two important US allies in the region, ahead of a military strike. Both countries would likely vehemently oppose attacking North Korea, Park said, given that their citizens are most likely to die in any conflict.

Talk of war could bolster Kim's position in the short term.

"Donald Trump's sabre-rattling plays into Kim's logic of domestic power that positions the US as a dire threat, justifying the regime's political repression," according to Benjamin Habib, a politics professor at La Trobe University.

"One could be forgiven for observing the current US-North Korea standoff as a game played by privileged men in suits on either side, gambling with the lives of ordinary citizens," he added. "Millions of lives on both sides of the demilitarised zone and beyond are placed at unnecessary risk through such high-stakes brinkmanship."

“Trump’s penchant for military posturing does little to increase the likelihood of denuclearising North Korea.”

Military action could also draw China into a conflict. Beijing is opposed to North Korea’s nuclear program but does not want to see the Kim regime collapse. China sent more than a million troops to fight in the 1950-1953 Korean war, which is still officially known there as the “war to resist US aggression and aid Korea”.

Tariffs on China

China is North Korea’s most important ally and largest trading partner, accounting for 90% of its foreign trade. The isolated country exported \$2.3bn in goods to China in 2015, while the second biggest destination – India – bought only \$98m, according to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Imports into North Korea follow a similar pattern.

But despite Trump’s threat to stop “all trade with any country doing business with North Korea”, China is also the US’s largest trading partner, and banning trade with the country would likely require an act of Congress.

Trump does have the power to impose tariffs that would make importing Chinese goods prohibitively expensive, but experts warn that could set off a trade war that ultimately harms US consumers.

“It may be that [Trump] thinks that being able to say that such tariffs have been imposed for reasons of national security, such as a response to the threats posed by North Korea, it will mean that they will be subject to less criticism,” said Saul Eslake, an independent economist who has consulted the Australian government on trade.

“Other options include denying access to the US capital markets, or to the use of the US dollar, or to travel to the United States, and exerting pressure on US allies, including Australia, to impose similar measures,” he added. “Like tariffs, though even more so, measures such as these would cause more harm to the US than to China.”

Tariffs would increase the cost of goods almost overnight, hitting low-income and industrial consumers the hardest.

“There are very few avenues for the US to exert pressure on North Korea, other than to make threats of military action, and perhaps even to carry them out,” Eslake said.

China is also the largest holder of US debt, giving it significant leverage if it decides to sell en masse.

“Risking global recession through a foolish protectionist spiral or forcing China to drop the ‘dollar bomb’ is not a credible strategy for soliciting Chinese assistance with handling North Korea,” Habib has written.

Direct negotiations

Most experts agree that North Korea will not give up its nuclear weapons. Kim is aware that Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi relinquished his nuclear programme in 2003 only to have US and European forces aid an insurrection against him less than a decade later.

Shen Dingli, head of the Centre for American Studies at Shanghai’s Fudan University, said he believed both China and the US now needed to accept North Korea’s status as a nuclear power and

normalise relations with Pyongyang.

Shen pointed out that Richard Nixon had reestablished ties with Mao Zedong during the early 1970s, just a few years after China's first nuclear test, and said Trump and Chinese president Xi Jinping now needed to do the same with Kim.

"Nixon hated China, he never liked China. It was a Communist country staging the Cultural Revolution. But Nixon was smart. He needed China to counter the Soviet Union," Shen said.

"The US had to live with China's nuclear weapons peacefully. China has to live with North Korea's nuclear weapons peacefully, rather than opposing it, which is destined to fail."

Shen predicted Trump would soon realise he had no choice but to sit down with Kim just as Nixon sat down with Mao.

"Trump is a smart man ... He will be the first US president to accept North Korea."

Benjamin Haas in Hong Kong and **Tom Phillips** in Beijing

* The Guardian. Tuesday 5 September 2017 13.20 BST First published on Tuesday 5 September 2017 07.32 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/05/north-korea-crisis-donald-trump-options>

China lodges 'stern representations' with Kim Jong-un regime over nuclear test

Urges state to 'exercise restraint and refrain from further escalating tensions'

China has lodged "stern representations" with the North Korean embassy in Beijing over its sixth and most powerful nuclear test, the country's foreign ministry has said.

North Korea is clear about China's opposition to its nuclear tests, ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said, adding that China upholds talks as the means to resolve the Korean peninsula issue.

He went on to say North Korea "must be very clear" UN Security Council resolutions prohibit such activities, and said China hopes all parties, especially North Korea, "exercise restraint and refrain from further escalating tensions."

The North said it tested an advanced hydrogen bomb for a long-range missile on Sunday, prompting a vow of "massive" military response from the United States if either it or its allies were threatened.

A day later, South Korea fired missiles into the sea to simulate an attack on North Korea's main nuclear test site.

The heated words from the United States and the military manoeuvres in South Korea are becoming familiar responses to North Korea's rapid, unchecked pursuit of a viable arsenal of nuclear-tipped missiles that can strike America.

In Seoul, Chang Kyung-soo, an official with South Korea's defence ministry, told MPs it was seeing preparations in the North for an ICBM test.

Mr Chang also said the yield from the latest nuclear detonation appeared to be about 50 kilotons, which would mark a "significant increase" from North Korea's past nuclear tests.

In a series of tweets, US President Donald Trump threatened to halt all trade with countries doing business with North Korea - a warning to China - and faulted South Korea for what he called "talk of appeasement".

In response, Mr Geng, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, told reporters in Beijing that China regarded as "unacceptable a situation in which on the one hand we work to resolve this issue peacefully but on the other hand our own interests are subject to sanctions and jeopardised." "This is neither objective nor fair".

Samuel Osborne
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Additional reporting by agencies

* The Independent. Monday 4 September 2017 13:31 BST:
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-north-korea-nuclear-weapon-test-react-hydrogen-bomb-beijing-embassy-a7929126.html>

North Korea's nuclear plans are actually very clear. It's far less obvious what Donald Trump will do

'There's no military solution here - they got us'

What is North Korea up to and can Washington do anything about it?

Ever since Pyongyang this summer tested a missile capable of striking the US mainland, Washington has been forced to rapidly rethink its approach to the East Asian nation. A more recent test of what appears to be a thermonuclear device, several times more powerful than the ones America dropped on Japan 73 years ago, has intensified the panic.

Donald Trump has responded with bluster and noise. He has threatened to bring "fire and fury" upon North Korea, he has criticised South Korea for what he considers appeasement and, without mentioning China by name, he has threatened sanctions against nations that trade with North Korea.

Alongside this, other senior figures within the Trump administration, including Defence Secretary Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, have continued to play up the path of diplomacy and talks. At times, whether intentionally or not, their comments have appeared to contradict those of the President.

"We're going to continue our peaceful pressure campaign, as I have described it, working with allies,

working with China as well to see if we can bring the regime in Pyongyang to the negotiating table,” Tillerson said, following the most recent rocket launch.

It has been reported that when Trump was preparing to enter the White House after his surprise election victory, Barack Obama, then with just a few weeks left of his presidency, warned the man set to succeed him that North Korea, its young leader and its aggressive nuclear weapons programme would be among the most pressing challenges he would face.

In recent weeks, as North Korea has continued to surprise US experts with the pace of its testing and the sophistication of its weapons, Obama’s forewarning has appeared only more prescient. How can this nation of 25 million, a dictatorship whose people have endured famines and human rights abuses, be challenging a superpower?

The West frequently falls back on cliches when talking about the East Asian country. We hear North Korea is a “rogue nation”, that its leader Kim Jong-un is “crazed” or, in the words of senator John McCain, is a “crazy fat kid”.

But while North Korea’s leadership and its 33-year-old head of state remain mercurial, some experts see a consistency to Pyongyang’s actions in recent months - a steady and measured declaration of its nuclear status that has sparked global jitters, but has almost certainly strengthened its own position and that of its leader.

Jon Wolfsthal, an expert at the nuclear policy programme at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, warned that anyone who proclaimed they knew North Korea’s desires was “lying or guessing”.

Yet he added: “All the information we have suggests that North Korea is rational. They seek regime survival, and nuclear weapons are a means to that end. Beyond that it’s uncertain.

“They may be seeking nuclear weapons to further undermine the US position in the region and disable South Korea. On the other hand they may hide behind their nuclear shield and engage an economic development and other domestic activities.”

Alison Evans, deputy head of the Asia-Pacific Desk, Country Risk, at IHS Markit, said this was North Korea’s sixth nuclear test and it appeared to be preparing a seventh.

““Bellicose rhetoric from President Trump and high-level officials, intended to deter North Korea, probably reinforce the North Korean leadership’s belief that such a capability is essential to deterring the perceived US threat.”

North Korea has previously engaged in diplomacy. Six-party talks involving Pyongyang, Beijing, Washington, Tokyo, Moscow and Seoul were launched by George W Bush in 2003. They achieved mixed results and were most recently suspended in 2013 after Kim Jong Un succeeded his father, Kim Jong-il.

As the talks towards disarmament continued, North Korea also watched what happened to those leaders who handed over their nuclear weapons (Muammar Gaddafi) or suspended their programmes years ago (Saddam Hussein).

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un attends a meeting with a committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea about the test of a hydrogen bomb (STR/AFP/Getty Images)

If North Korea’s actions appear predictable - however condemnable - Washington’s response has seemed shifting and uncertain. Trump’s approach appears to have created divisions among

America's regional allies, such as South Korea and Japan. Meanwhile, his suggestion of sanctions against China opens the prospect of a trade war with a country the US currently does \$578bn worth of business with.

"Unfortunately, US policy under President Trump has been uncoordinated and poorly communicated," said Wolfsthal.

"Given his unpredictability I think it would be very dangerous for President Trump to directly engage Kim Jong-un. Right now, the most important thing is direct military-to-military engagement to avoid miscalculation and conflict."

While people such as Mattis insist the US has "many military options", nobody thinks any of them are any good. Most immediately, the lives of millions of civilians in Seoul would be at risk from a retaliatory strike if the US were to launch a preemptive attack on North Korea.

"We always have military options, but they're very ugly," Mark Hertling, a retired US Army general, told CNN. In short, the US has no genuine alternative but to get North Korea back to the negotiating table.

Shortly before he was fired, Steve Bannon, until recently a special adviser to Trump, was asked by a reporter from Prospect magazine about the US's military options for North Korea.

"Forget it," he said.

"Until somebody solves the part of the equation that shows me that 10 million people in Seoul don't die in the first 30 minutes from conventional weapons, I don't know what you're talking about, there's no military solution here, they got us.

Andrew Buncombe New York
@AndrewBuncombe

* The Independent. Monday 4 September 2017 16:15 BST:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/north-korea-donald-trump-nuclear-tests-intentions-us-military-options-diplomacy-china-south-seoul-a7929441.html>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.81.cn>

[2] http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-09/07/content_31663738.htm