

Toward an unchecked global nuclear arms race? How the nuclear-armed nations brought the North Korea crisis on themselves

Sunday 10 September 2017, by [MASON Paul](#), [TISDALL Simon](#) (Date first published: 5 September 2017).

Failure to honour terms of the 1970 nuclear non-proliferation treaty has helped create ground for Kim Jong-un's recklessness.

North Korea's defiant pursuit of nuclear weapons capabilities, dramatised by last weekend's powerful underground test and a recent long-range ballistic missile launch over Japan, has been almost universally condemned as posing a grave, unilateral threat to international peace and security.

The growing North Korean menace also reflects the chronic failure of multilateral counter-proliferation efforts and, in particular, the longstanding refusal of acknowledged nuclear-armed states such as the US and Britain to honour a legal commitment to reduce and eventually eliminate their arsenals.

In other words, the past and present leaders of the US, Russia, China, France and the UK, whose governments signed but have not fulfilled the terms of the 1970 nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT), have to some degree brought the North Korea crisis on themselves. Kim Jong-un's recklessness and bad faith is a product of their own.

The NPT, signed by 191 countries [[1](#)], is probably the most successful arms control treaty ever. When conceived in 1968, at the height of the cold war, the mass proliferation of nuclear weapons was considered a real possibility. Since its inception and prior to North Korea, only India, Pakistan and Israel are known to have joined the nuclear "club" in almost half a century.

To work fully, the NPT relies on keeping a crucial bargain: non-nuclear-armed states agree never to acquire the weapons, while nuclear-armed states agree to share the benefits of peaceful nuclear technology and pursue nuclear disarmament with the ultimate aim of eliminating them. This, in effect, was the guarantee offered to vulnerable, insecure outlier states such as North Korea. The guarantee was a dud, however, and the bargain has never been truly honoured.

Rather than reducing their nuclear arsenals, the US, Russia and China have modernised and expanded them. Britain has eliminated some of its capability, but it is nevertheless renewing and updating Trident. France clings fiercely to its "*force de frappe*". Altogether, the main nuclear-weapon states have an estimated 22,000 nuclear bombs. A report by the non-governmental British-American Security Information Council in May said nuclear security was getting worse [[2](#)].

"The need for nuclear disarmament through multilateral diplomacy is greater now than it has been at any stage since the end of the cold war. Trust and confidence in the existing nuclear non-proliferation regime is fraying, tensions are high, goals are misaligned and dialogue is irregular," the report said.

“Internationally, relationships between the nuclear-weapon states have deteriorated, in particular between the US and Russia, and to some extent, China ... All nuclear-armed states are modernising their nuclear forces, at a worldwide cost of \$1tn per decade ... Attention tends to be focused on specific cases of proliferation concern, such as North Korea and Iran, at the expense of the bigger picture.”

Multilateral forums for advancing nuclear disarmament are in crisis. The next NPT review conference is not due until 2020. Like its 2015 predecessor, it is not expected to achieve much. The UN-backed conference on disarmament, which helped produce conventions banning biological and chemical weapons and initiated the 1996 comprehensive test ban treaty, is politically polarised and struggling to agree key measures such as a fissile material cut-off treaty.

Meanwhile, as South Korea and Japan consider acquiring nuclear weapons, Donald Trump appears irrationally determined to scrap one of the few recent arms control successes – the landmark 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.

There has been one big breakthrough this year, the under-reported adoption by 122 countries at the UN in July of a new treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons, which envisages an outright ban on the use of all nukes. It has, however, been potentially fatally undermined by a boycott by the nuclear powers. The US, Britain and France declared, cynically as critics saw it, that they preferred to stick with the never-ending NPT route to disarmament [3]. “This initiative clearly disregards the realities of the international security environment,” they said in a joint statement.

The ineffectiveness of current arms control and counter-proliferation efforts has helped to create an environment in which North Korea, allegedly using smuggled, Russian-designed ballistic missile engines, is rapidly advancing its nuclear ambitions with apparent impunity, at great risk to international stability.

Multilateral arms control failures also mean the Korean “solution” Trump talks about with increasing frequency – the use of preventive military action, notwithstanding its illegality under international law – could, if applied, spell the end of deterrence and the beginning of an unchecked global nuclear arms race.

Simon Tisdall

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/05/nuclear-armed-nations-brought-the-north-korea-crisis-on-themselves>

For Trump and the US right, breaking the nuclear taboo has always been thinkable

Launching a nuclear war against North Korea would teach China and Russia that it is morally and practically acceptable.

In November 1950, when North Korean forces had the US military on the run, President Truman

held an infamous press conference during which he threatened to declare nuclear war.

After a bland statement and several minutes of to and fro over diplomatic issues, one journalist asked whether the US was about to use its nuclear weapons. Truman stated not only that an attack was under active consideration but also that “the military commander in the field” would decide whether to hit military or civilian targets. He did not rule out attacking targets in China, either.

Calamity ensued. Support for the intervention in Korea ebbed away – among the US’s allies, at the UN and among the electorate. The event became a textbook example of how not to do nuclear diplomacy – one followed until August 2017, when President Trump made his “fire and fury” threats against Pyongyang.

Now, in the aftermath of Kim Jong-un’s sixth nuclear test, it looks increasingly as though Trump is determined to create another debacle. He has attacked South Korea for appeasement and threatened to scrap its trade deal with the US; he has threatened China with sanctions and warned that he may use nuclear weapons. International co-operation over the North Korea crisis is waning as I write.

For a section of the US right, nuclear war has always been thinkable. The tradition goes back to the eyewitness report on Hiroshima by diplomat Paul Nitze in 1945 [4]. Nitze was struck by the fact that people fairly close to the impact survived, that the trains were running within 48 hours, and that the number of dead and injured was similar to those in Allied raids on Berlin and Dresden.

Though Nitze would become, at the end of his life, a supporter of unilateral disarmament, he spent much of his career trying to inject the ideas of thinkability and winnability into US nuclear strategy. Only if you can conceive of fighting, surviving and winning a nuclear war, Nitze believed, can you deter it.

This is, effectively, what Trump and a group of recently sidelined strategists also believe. Throughout his life, Trump has been obsessed with nukes. In 1984, he claimed that he could single-handedly force Russia to accept a nuclear truce, telling a reporter [5]: “It would take an hour and a half to learn everything there is to learn about missiles ... I think I know most of it anyway.” In 1990, he told Playboy [6]: “I’ve always thought about the issue of nuclear war; it’s a very important element in my thought process,” adding that the assumptions behind the US’s long tradition of non-use were “bullshit”.

But the point about the US’s nuclear hawks – from the postwar Truman era to the presidency of George HW Bush – was that they did not use nuclear weapons. Nitze, for example, repeatedly and courageously tried to engineer strategic agreements to reduce nuclear stockpiles, even while applying military and economic pressure on Russia.

Even the most aggressive hawks understood that they had stewardship of an international system. When that system became “unipolar”, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, their delusions of absolute global power quenched the US right’s thirst for nuclear annihilation. Infantry soldiers kicking in the doors of villagers was what absolute power meant; parading ballistic missiles was for weaklings.

Now, however, the US is the weakling. Trump’s decision to throw his toys out of the pram with Seoul is a perfect demonstration of that.

The South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, swept to power in May after millions of protesters forced the impeachment of his rightwing predecessor, Park Geun-hye. He has promised to repeal national security laws used to repress the left, promoted reconciliation with North Korea, called repeatedly

for Seoul to pursue a more independent foreign policy from Washington and opposed – initially, at least – the deployment of US missile defence systems.

If you are going to use North Korea to wage a proxy conflict with China – which former Trump strategist Steve Bannon admitted openly – it is best to ensure that your ally in that conflict is led by a hawk. But the US could not. First, because South Korea's shaky democracy is functioning better than the US's and allowed the removal of Park for alleged crimes much less serious than actions of which Trump has been accused. Second, because the people of South Korea understand that China is the emergent hegemonic force in the Pacific. The unipolar world is being replaced with a chaotic system in which China and Russia are creating weak local polarities. Working out whose polar attraction will shape your region in the 21st century is not hard if you live on the Korean peninsula. These global facts are what guide the hands restraining Trump.

Suppose Kim fires a nuclear-armed missile at Guam or Japan, then the US hits two or three military targets in North Korea with nuclear bombs and sinks Pyongyang's navy. A short, conventional war follows, destroying Seoul and most of North Korea. A shocked China accepts it has miscalculated badly and does nothing in response. That is probably the least destructive possible outcome of what would be the first nuclear attack since 1945. But what would it teach Russia and China? Practically, it would teach them that nuclear weapons can be used with successful geopolitical outcomes. Morally, it would teach them that nuclear annihilation is OK.

In a world where the US's power is declining, the onus is on everyone – above all, the mature democracies of western Europe – to push for the creation of a multipolar system underpinned by treaties that explicitly de-link trade from geopolitics. The danger facing us is not only the end of the nuclear taboo, it is also that irrational acts by Kim and Trump could destroy any possibility of a multipolar world system emerging via agreement.

Bannon, who was kicked out of the White House by the cabal of ex-generals trying to restrain Trump, labels his opponents “rational accommodationists”. But, faced with the rapid emergence of China into the global power system, accommodation is rational.

Accommodation does not mean you stop criticising other states' actions or you stop supporting democracy campaigners in countries such as China and North Korea. It does not mean withdrawing conventional forces unilaterally. It means talking.

Paul Mason

@paulmasonnews

• *This article was amended on 6 September 2017 to clarify that President Truman authorised the US's use of nuclear weapons in the second world war.*

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<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/04/annihilating-north-korea-create-more-problems-than-solves-trump-us-right-nuclear-taboo>

Footnotes

- [1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_on_the_Non-Proliferation_of_Nuclear_Weapons
- [2] <http://www.basicint.org/sites/default/files/BASIC%20UNA-UK%20Meaningful%20Multilateralism%20May%202017%20Web.pdf>
- [3] <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsId=57139#.WbVWtK3pNBx>
- [4] <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2004/oct/22/guardianobituaries.usa>
- [5] https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1984/11/15/donald-trump-holding-all-the-cards-the-tower-the-team-the-money-the-future/8be79254-7793-4812-a153-f2b88e81fa54/?utm_term=.cd1f9f3aa859
- [6] <https://filthy.media/donald-trump-playboy-interview>