

Danger of reckless threats

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By James T. Laney

President Trump's off-the-cuff comment that North Korea could expect fire and fury like the world has never seen if it threatens the US continues to occasion alarm and consternation here and abroad, especially in South Korea. Despite dire threats from the North over the years, South Korea has successfully relied on America's nuclear umbrella for its ultimate security.



Now North Korea's increasing capability to directly to attack well beyond the borders of Korea has prompted heightened concern in Washington about US security.

For decades the North has had the capability of inflicting huge damage on the megalopolis Seoul, including catastrophic loss of life, both Korean and American, civilian and military, even without nuclear weapons. Despite their most bellicose rhetoric, they have not dared initiate hostilities for they know their country would be utterly destroyed.

Does their nuclear capability and delivery system increase the likelihood of their initiating an attack? They must know their ultimate destruction would be swift and certain and that has not changed. What has changed is the president's threatening rhetoric.

That brings us back to President Trump's off-hand remarks. Does the president think by his stating publicly what has been known all along but never before issued as a direct threat, namely our capacity to utterly destroy North Korea, will now deter the North from continuing to develop its nuclear arsenal? Is he implying a willingness to make a preemptive strike should they persist?

His fiery words have prompted much discussion of international law and the definition of a justified first strike. Questions are being raised as to whether this new situation makes such a strike acceptable legally and morally. There is no question concerning the legitimacy of using force for self defense.

What is unresolved is whether North Korea's possessing this new capability makes its use so imminent and inevitable that a preemptive strike is warranted and justified.

On the other hand, to what extent does that new capacity mean North Korea itself is willing to risk a first strike? Probably not unless it concluded that the US intended to attack first, seeking to destroy their nuclear and missile capability. How would they make that determination? Do the president's threats have the potential to convince them the US is prepared to make a preemptive strike?

At least so far the North's reaction to Trump's fiery words cannot have given him much satisfaction. Their official response has been to ridicule his words as "nonsense". And from past experience we know President Trump cannot win the game of rhetorical chicken. North Korea has mastered the art of bellicose rhetoric, so when he states maybe he was not forceful enough he

stoops to their level with little prospect of their standing down.

We may be in the perilous zone of threat and counter threat, both made by vain and thin-skinned leaders. Saving face becomes the new necessity. That is why more responsible and mature leaders through the years have declined to voice such dire warnings. Threats can escalate beyond the point of no return. At some point they may

be taken seriously. The world's greatest power should be able to be counted on to exercise some restraint in its words even while wielding the biggest stick ever known.

The real danger is that North Korea might finally conclude that Trump really means what he says. How tragic if our threats to deter them should prompt them to act precipitously, thus bringing about the very catastrophe we have for decades sought to avoid. How tragic if President Trump finally concludes that their dire threats and unwillingness to back down justify nuclear preemptive action. The result in either case would be catastrophe of untold dimensions, especially in South Korea. For no matter how successful we might be in destroying their nuclear arsenal, the havoc wreaked upon the Seoul megapolis by thousands of long range artillery is incalculable. For in

addition to the millions in Seoul, there are well over one hundred thousand American civilian and military in the vicinity. And so far, Seoul, our staunch ally through the years, is not in the decision making loop concerning their fate. How sad.

James T. Laney is U.S. ambassador to South Korea, 1993-97