

## Apocalypse now? Not with this foe's limited nuclear option

[Niall Ferguson](#), The Australian, 12:00AM April 17, 2017

Brinkmanship is back, and the world is back on the brink of war. In the 1950s the word came to be associated with John Foster Dulles, Dwight Eisenhower's secretary of state, who defined it as "the ability to get to the verge without getting into the war".

In his words: "If you cannot master it, you inevitably get into a war. If you try to run away from it, if you are scared to go to the brink, you are lost."

Brinkmanship fell into disrepute after the Berlin and Cuba crises of the early 1960s when, as far as John F Kennedy was concerned, America and the Soviet Union came far too close to jumping over the brink into nuclear Armageddon.

Now we have come full circle. One of Eisenhower's first steps as president was to end the Korean War. More than 60 years have passed and now President Donald Trump has summoned up the spectre of the Second Korean War. As we have already seen in Syria and Afghanistan, Trump relishes shows of military strength. However, his use of US air power has primarily been intended to send a signal to Beijing.

America has deployed the USS Carl Vinson strike group to Korean waters. It includes an aircraft carrier and destroyers equipped with guided missiles. Are we on the brink of the Second Korean War, if not the Third World War? I doubt it.

North Korea has certainly made progress. Since their first nuclear test in 2006, which registered at just 0.7 kilotons, the scientists of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have scaled up rapidly and last September successfully tested a 20-30-kiloton device — roughly equivalent to the "Fat Man" bomb America dropped on Nagasaki in the Second World War. However, to pose a meaningful nuclear threat the DPRK would have to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of successfully delivering a warhead to its target, or (more precisely) to develop a warhead small enough to fit on an ICBM.

From what I can gather from American and Chinese experts, North Korea is not there yet. At this point the worst it could do in terms of nuclear war would be to use a drone, armed with enriched uranium, as a "dirty bomb".

As for conventional weapons, it is often claimed that Seoul has more enemy artillery focused on it than any other city in the world. However, of the tens of thousands of artillery and mortar pieces North Korea claims to have, only a couple have the range to reach Seoul. Those are the M-1978 Koksan 170mm self-propelled gun and the MRL240 M-1985 rocket artillery system. The lethality of Pyongyang's artillery looks even less impressive when one examines its recent performance. In November 2010 the Korean People's Army launched more than 100 heavy artillery shells at the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong. At least 25 per cent failed to detonate.

In theory, if unopposed, North Korean artillery could kill as many as 60,000 Seoul residents in the first day of a conflict. But that estimate does not factor in the substantial defensive capabilities of South Korea and America.

The South Koreans and Americans also have vastly superior satellite assets, allowing their forces to target DPRK forces much more quickly than the DPRK could target allied forces.

Is any of this actually going to happen? Probably not, unless North Korea leader Kim Jong-un has wholly ceased to be a rational actor. Both China and Russia are now stepping in, urging all parties to avoid hostilities and return to the negotiation table.

On balance, I think the Trump administration will be content to present a resumption of multi-party talks as a victory achieved by the President's brinkmanship, especially if it can plausibly claim that the Chinese government has leant harder on Pyongyang in response to US pressure.

However, I would not wholly rule out US action against North Korea. Defence Secretary Jim Mattis is an experienced military planner who will have weighed up the potential collateral damage in the event of US strikes against North Korean military targets. He will know better than anyone the military weakness of Pyongyang.

Remember: brinkmanship is effective only if your adversaries believe that you are more prepared to go over the brink than they are. Nor should the domestic political benefits of successful brinkmanship be forgotten.

Am I surprised that we are back on the brink, after all these years? No. At the beginning of February I was asked to make a five-year prediction. This was what I came up with: "By 2022 the Second Korean War will have ended in a stalemate. (Thirteen years later a comedy series about the war will be launched on Alibaba's Netflix platform.)"

Because I regard predictions over any timeframe longer than six months as little better than astrology, I was being facetious. But suddenly that prediction looks a little too close for comfort.