

Turnbull tackles missiles and puts up with dissent

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From G20 discussions in Hamburg aimed at curbing North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile ambitions to talking submarines with new French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris, Malcolm Turnbull will be glad to spend the weekend half a world away from the internecine warfare of the Liberal Party. It is not to downplay the central issues of the Prime Minister's overseas mission to note it may provide some political breathing space. On North Korea, Australia's role should be to support US and global pressure on Kim Jong-un to behave and on China to rein him in. Given our trade interests in north Asia, Mr Turnbull will need to be wary about talk of sanctions against anyone other than Pyongyang. Apart from the direct military menace of intercontinental ballistic missiles, the core threat to Australia's interests is how trade could be disrupted, with or without conflict. The players in Korean Peninsula machinations happen to be our four largest trading partners — China, Japan, South Korea and the US — so stability in the region is crucial for economic and security reasons.

Talking submarines in France, the Prime Minister could be dragged back to the domestic disunity that has made his past fortnight so uncomfortable. Just last week his predecessor, Tony Abbott, delivered a considered but mischievous speech outlining a case for reconsideration of the project that has France's DCNS designing and building a diesel-electric version of its Barracuda nuclear submarine. Mr Abbott says this \$50 billion procurement needs to be reopened to consider nuclear submarines, which would be more proficient and could be cost-effective. Whatever the merits of this argument — and they are considerable — it is viewed through the prism of leadership tension and government disunity. Such instability creates a difficult climate for any prime minister yet all five of them during the past decade have had to endure it. The nation tends to suffer most, and so it is burdened again.

Kicked off by Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne when he spoke in triumphalist terms two weeks ago about the dominance of the Liberal Party's moderate faction, the latest outbreak of internal enmity has only worsened since. Leaked tapes of speeches by Mr Abbott, together with regular media appearances, have been parsed in full for contradictions and conflict. Mr Turnbull and his colleagues have chosen to criticise Mr Abbott and admonish the media when they could just as easily have agreed with the former prime minister's observations. In one interview Mr Turnbull even refused to mention Mr Abbott by name, instead referring to "the gentleman you describe" when responding to an ABC host's questions. Oh dear.

Public denunciation does not work; we saw that when Julia Gillard, then prime minister, and her cabinet colleagues lined up to assassinate the character of Kevin Rudd in early 2012; the following year he was resurrected. The way to stave off treachery or disillusionment is to improve government performance and bring Mr Abbott's views and ideas into the tent. He won't be silenced, so attacks from MPs only elevate his status, distract the government and embolden him. This was reflected in another video this week, revealed by The Daily Telegraph. Speaking to party members in Sydney, Mr Abbott said he recognised "a bit of a

division” among Liberals, with some believing the government was starting to do some “things which are not really in the Liberal DNA”, before identifying budget superannuation changes, new taxes and spending increases as the problem issues. “At least for the moment,” he said, “it’s important for someone to stand up for those Liberals who are feeling a bit let down and disenfranchised.” This appears to be rather extraordinary, a former Liberal leader styling himself as the figurehead for dissent within the party.

Mr Turnbull is yet to comment on this turn of events. When he arrives home he needs not only to speak Mr Abbott’s name but also to deal with this shambles. Perhaps — and heaven help us that this needs saying — the men should speak and work out their issues so Mr Abbott can accept a constructive role in the government or party that may help to advance the national interest. It shouldn’t be so hard — there are no nuclear missiles involved.