

North Korea's nukes test Trump, China resolve

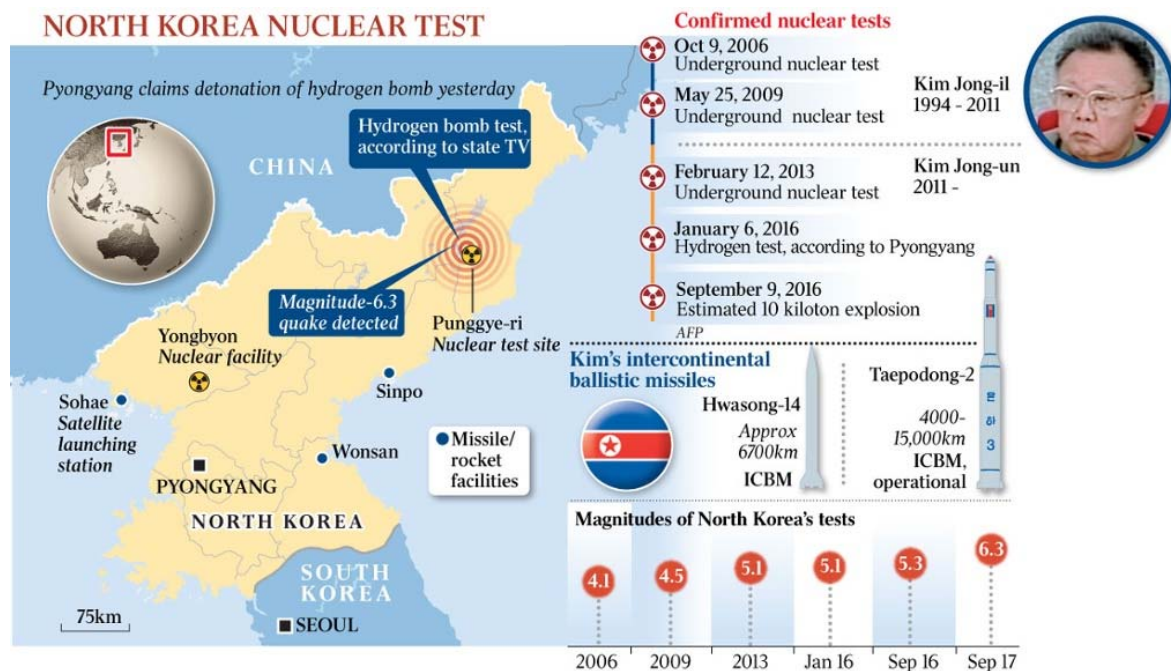


North Korean leader Kim Jong-un provides strategic benefits to China by putting the US's Asian alliances under strain.

Greg Sheridan, *The Australian*, 12:00AM September 4, 2017

Dictator Kim Jong-un has created the moment of truth for US President Donald Trump and China's Xi Jinping. If the Americans and Chinese cannot prevent this hyper-Stalinist gangster state from possessing the full range of nuclear weapons and missiles, and brazenly producing, as Pyongyang says, as many nukes as it wants to, then all hope of long-term strategic co-operation and stability is gone.

The nuclear device the North exploded deep underground is 10 times stronger than the one it tested a year ago. North Korea boasts it can put this device on its intercontinental and intermediate- range missiles.



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It has greatly expanded the number of its launch sites, missiles and nuclear devices. It brags that every part of its program is now homemade and it can keep producing more weapons. [read more](#)



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The immediate crisis is for Trump, but the long-term dilemma for China is just as real.

Let's be clear about one thing: Trump did not create, nor in any meaningful way, exacerbate the crisis on the Korean peninsula. This is entirely the work of the North Koreans under the leadership of the third generation of their communist dynasty.

But Trump has an enormous credibility problem arising out of all the bellicose threats he has made and the red lines he has drawn for North Korea. He said of the prospect of Pyongyang acquiring nukes that could hit the US: "Won't happen." On August 8 he declared: "North Korea better not make any more threats to the US. They will be met with fire and fury the likes of which have never been seen before." More recently, he said "talking is not the answer" and US military forces were "locked and loaded" to respond to North Korea.

In that time, Pyongyang has accelerated its weapons program, testing intercontinental, medium- and short-range missiles and now conducting its sixth nuclear test, its fourth under Kim, and the first of a hydrogen bomb.

But still Trump does not appear to have a workable military option, despite his threats and bluster.

Apart from the danger of North Korea retaliating against an American strike by hitting US allies South Korea or Japan, Trump also has tens of thousands of Americans in both those nations. He could not strike before evacuating these Americans.

The Americans have had detailed, active, pre-emptive strike plans to hit North Korea since at least the early 1990s. In the end, every president who has considered it has decided the risks of such a move are too great. But there has always been a minority view within the Pentagon that it could conduct a limited strike on specific nuclear facilities and convince North Korea not to launch a suicidal, all-out war in response.

This is given extra weight by a fascinating analysis delivered in a speech in Stockholm last week by former prime minister Kevin Rudd, who as a young diplomat in Beijing once had responsibility for relations with North Korea. Rudd argues that although the US system is painfully aware of all the dangers in striking North Korea, it is wrong to think that such a strike is impossible. He cites two reasons for this: the US desire not to allow Kim to threaten US cities with nuclear-armed ICBMs, and the personal factors surrounding Trump.

Rudd said the chances of major conflict on the Korean peninsula had risen from about 5 per cent to 20-25 per cent. He presents a witheringly pessimistic view of China's likely behaviour.

The Chinese condemned North Korea's latest test. And recently they signed up to tougher UN sanctions on North Korea. But they provide the vast majority of North Korea's fuel and much of its food. The North Korean economy could not operate for three months without Chinese help.

This provides a non-nuclear path for US escalation — to target Chinese companies that trade with North Korea for sanctions.

But Rudd argues that while Beijing does not approve of Pyongyang's behaviour, it believes a nuclear-armed North Korea is a vastly greater problem for the US than it is for China. North Korea still provides strategic benefits to China, such as by putting the US's Asian alliances under strain.

Beijing also, in Rudd's view, has come to the realist judgment that the US won't strike North Korea and that neither Japan nor South Korea will embark on a program to acquire nuclear weapons. So the US will just have to learn to live with a nuclear North Korea, and if that involves humiliation for the US, so be it.

Rudd also proposes a solution of a grand bargain but this involves North Korea giving up its nuclear weapons, something of which there is little chance of happening.

This is the moment when Washington and Beijing show us if the international system still has any order or coherence or consequence left. There are no reasons for optimism.