

STATES OF MATTER

The button line

A delusional President sitting dangerously close to the US nuclear arsenal is as menacing as the weaponry he loves to tom-tom



SUKUMAR
MURALIDHARAN



Trigger unhappy
When panic broke out in Hawaii after push notifications of an incoming North Korean missile strike were sent to every cell phone, Trump was on the golf course in his Florida resort
REUTERS/VIA TULSI GABBARD

Leadership is judged by how effectively it gets others to behave in desired ways without overt pressure. Terms such as hegemony and dominance are applied here, one a more subtle exercise in leadership than the other, though both on the same scale.

Current diplomatic practices from the country that claims the mantle of “leader of the free world” offer fresh interpretative challenges in being completely off the scale. Amid the stream of invective — a practice for which no diplomatic term of art has yet been invented — signals of manifest ineptitude foretell multiple, but yet unquantified hazards.

When panic broke out in Hawaii after push notifications of an incoming North Korean missile strike were sent to every cell phone, US President Donald Trump was on the golf course in his Florida resort. For over an hour after the alert was identified as error and rescinded, White House officials remained clueless about how much he knew. Ignorance was obviously the preferred option for a president who had, just a few days before, attracted derision with his boast of a “bigger nuclear button” than North Korea.

Between the sombre anniversaries last August of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Trump warned that continuing North Korean provocations could potentially be met with “fire and fury, the likes of which the world has never seen before”. In his address to the UN General Assembly the follow-

ing month, he spoke of “totally destroying” North Korea.

North Korea was not the only target of Trump’s unhinged bellicosity. In defiance of the global consensus that the deal his predecessor Barack Obama crafted to restrain Iran’s nuclear programme was working, Trump denounced the agreement as “an embarrassment” and “one of the worst transactions the US has ever entered into”.

When the moment arrived early in January for the US to recertify Iran’s compliance and extend the deal, Trump stepped up with sullen reluctance. Further US endorsement would be conditional he warned, on a comprehensive renegotiation of the deal, a possibility that European partners and Iran have repeatedly ruled out of court.

Trump’s verbal crudity loudly signals the collapse of leadership, but perhaps a stronger symptom is the US’s inability to stick to a logically coherent or consistent position. The latter failing could, in earlier contexts, be covered up by a readiness and determination to use force. No longer.

On North Korea, the Trump administration has oscillated wildly between conceding the possibility of dialogue and insisting that coercion is the only approach. It has, at times, called on China to take the lead in reining in its truculent neighbour. China, for its part, has

taken the stand that scaling back US military exercises in the region would facilitate a settlement, a possibility the US shows little interest in.

When North Korea switched from trading insults to a charm offensive, the South responded with alacrity. An official meeting in the demilitarised zone produced an agreement in principle to begin military talks, though the North resented the credit given to Trump in the Southern narrative.

When agreement on the North’s participation in the Winter Olympics next month in South Korea was reached, it seemed an echo of the mood of the 2000 Sydney Olympics. With Kim Dae Jung as President in South Korea and the “sunshine policy” of reconciliation in full flower, the two hostile neighbours had fielded a joint team that year.

It was a time when the US seemed prepared to making uncharacteristic admissions of error, when Madeleine Albright, then the secretary of state, flew into North Korea for a meeting with its “dear leader” Kim Jong Il. On the Iran front, after months of suggesting that full disclosure was imminent, Albright held out a partial apology, admitting the US role in the 1953 putsch that overthrew Iran’s first democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and imposed the long tyranny of the Shah.

Possibilities of a durable rapprochement vanished in 2001 with the return of the right-wing to power in the US. There were few provocations from either Iran or North Korea, but the war lobby’s lust for launching its pie-in-the-sky dream of a “national missile defence” required the confection of a threat.

Following the September 11 terror, President George Bush enfolded North Korea along with Iran and Iraq — bitter regional adversaries with not the faintest connection to the attacks — into his theological construct of an “axis of evil”. And it was some signal from a divine being — and unobtrusive nudging from Israel — that pushed Bush into invading Iraq.

In November last year, the US Congress, for the first time in over four decades, held committee hearings on the President’s authority to launch nuclear war. The chairman of the same committee had earlier questioned Trump’s mental stability and likened the White House to an “adult day care centre”.

There is some reassurance in the growing awareness that the man *The New Yorker* editor David Remnick described as a “mad Emperor” cannot be trusted anywhere near nuclear codes. But

systems have their own logic and, as the glitch in Hawaii showed, correctives take a while before they kick in. A delusional man who can deploy the power of the US nuclear arsenal is a nightmare in itself. That there could be a few in the chain of command susceptible to similar delusion, magnifies the horror many times over.

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