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## Amid mad rhetoric Donald Trump is ready to talk to North Korea but China must do more

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Donald Trump's brinkmanship on North Korea is dangerous. But one aspect of the US President's walk on the nuclear wild side might make sense - he's talking to Pyongyang, but Beijing is the audience he needs to bend to his will.

By accident or design, Trump is stealing from the Richard Nixon playbook, what the former president called his "madman theory", by which he wanted adversaries to think he was so obsessed, so angry he was ready to do the unthinkable.

Trump was at it again on Thursday, telling reporters that maybe his "fire and fury" warning to Pyongyang on Tuesday wasn't tough enough; that the North needed to know "things will happen to them like they never thought possible".

The reckoning among most analysts is that, somehow, this North Korea crisis will be defused by negotiations.

Trump can get all kinetic but, in the end, a deal has to be struck - and for that to happen China has to exert more pressure on dictator Kim Jong-un.

Lost in much of the reporting of the threats from Trump's Bedminster golf club is that China bent significantly at the weekend, casting its UN Security Council vote for a harsh new round of sanctions on Pyongyang - which also called for a resumption of talks.

The North laughed off the resolution and responded to Trump's "fire and fury" warning with its own threat to strike the US Pacific territory of Guam, which means Beijing will have to bend further - the pace and timing of which, if it is to happen, will be dictated by the realities of Chinese politics and Beijing's irritation at being squeezed by Washington.

And, on Thursday, Trump squeezed a bit more, saying: "I think China can do a lot more, yes, and I think China will do a lot more. Look, we have trade with China. We lose hundreds of billions of dollars a year on trade with China. They know how I feel. It's not going to continue like that. But if China helps us, I feel a lot differently towards trade, a lot differently towards trade."

That in itself is a problem. Trump lives by a need to see significant shifts between one Fox News bulletin and the next. But the wheels of diplomacy turn slowly, with the necessary prodding, pushing and cajoling and negotiations, if they eventuate, unfolding over months or years.

Analysts, such as the International Crisis Group's Michael Kovrig, say a significant policy debate is under way already in Beijing - one side insisting on backing the Kim regime, the other ready to abandon Pyongyang and to line up with the US against North Korea.

But the debate can't be resolved before a Communist Party Congress later this year and Chinese President Xi Jinping is unwilling, or unable, to rock the boat before that gathering - a precise date for which is yet to be revealed.

Beijing wants a resumption of the six-nation talks between the Koreas, the US, China, Japan and Russia, which petered out with no result in 2009, as called for in Saturday's Security Council resolution.

In that context, the debate moves on. Jeffrey Lewis, director of the East Asia Nonproliferation Program for the James Martin Centre for Nonproliferation Studies at the California-based Middlebury Institute of International Studies, declared, "The game is over and North Korea has won," because it has achieved nuclear power status.

And, invoking the uneasy accommodation between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan, former Cato Institute analyst Charles Pena proposes that perhaps the best deterrent to a nuclear North Korea is to seek a regional balance by urging South Korea to invest in its own nuclear weapons program.

Writing on his Geopolitical Futures blog, analyst George Friedman suspects that Pyongyang is very deliberately creating a framework for negotiations "in which it holds all the cards".

He marvels at the success of what he calls Pyongyang's "ferocious, weak and crazy" ploy - "Ferocious as they were, why take the risk of engaging them? Weak as they were, why bother? Crazy as they were, prudence dictated avoidance."

Here is Friedman's bottom line: "The North Koreans likely can't get all of what they can imagine, but given the American fear of North Korean nuclear weapons, the South Korean fear of war, and tensions between China and the US, the Americans would have to consider not only a nuclearised North Korea, but also a North Korea supported by Russia and perhaps China.

"The public American statement on the reluctance to go to war and its constant search for a diplomatic solution might convince North Korea that it is on the right track."

Through history, the words of leaders have been heard, but it's action that has enlivened their adversaries and, in this sense, there has been no significant change in US military posture.

And not all in Team Trump take the President seriously. Making no distinction between Kim and Trump, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson advised Americans they could sleep easy because he had "no concerns about this particular rhetoric over the last few days".

US Defence Secretary James Mattis struck the same tone, saying: "What we're doing is a diplomatically led effort that is succeeding in drawing the international community together. Of course, there's a military option, [but] we want to use diplomacy. That's where we've been, that's where we are right now and that's where we hope to remain."

Asked about Trump's "fire and fury" threat, Mattis seemed to rebuke the President, telling reporters: "The rhetoric is up to the President - this is my rhetoric."

Trump is another who wants talks. Even as he refused to rule out a pre-emptive strike on North Korea, he said on Thursday he was open to negotiations with Pyongyang.

Earlier this year, Trump said he would be "honoured" to meet Kim "under the right circumstances". And in keeping with his attachment to strongman leaders, he has described Kim as "a pretty smart cookie" and has spoken admiringly of how he assumed national leadership "at a very young age".

There is uncertainty on the precise state of Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal, but Kim and Trump have to reckon that each is capable of inflicting the most horrendous damage on the other - and their allies - and that each knows that the other knows.

In 1962, at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, any comfort president John F. Kennedy might have taken from America's vastly superior nuclear arsenal counted for little when he asked how many Americans would die if just a single Soviet missile hit the US: 600,000, he was told. That crisis was resolved by negotiation.

Speculating this week on the chances of Washington destroying all of North Korea's estimated 60 nuclear-armed missiles before any might be launched, nuclear expert Jeffrey Lewis was sceptical - and sobering.

"Do you really think US strikes could get all of them? That not a single one would survive to land on Seoul, Tokyo or New York? Or that US missile defences would ... intercept not most of the missiles aimed at the United States, but every last one of them?"

"On a good day, maybe we get most of the missiles. We save most of the cities, like Seoul and New York, but lose a few like Tokyo. Two out three ain't bad, right? I kid - but not really."

As he upped the rhetorical ante, Trump reassured nervous Americans, telling them that he had the situation under control: "The people of this country should be very comfortable."

In that, he flipped historical comparisons. By North Korea's crazy standards, Kim is being utterly predictable. But by all the diplomatic and strategic norms of Washington, Trump is the unpredictable one - or maybe he's just feigning the madman thing.