

## Sabre-rattling: on the crisis in the Korean peninsula

North Korea's adventurism continues unabated. On Sunday, it tested what it claims was a ["hydrogen bomb"](#), its sixth nuclear weapons test, cocking a snook at non-proliferation and international test ban laws, as well as at U.S. President Donald Trump. Even as the tests drew global condemnation, this was clearly a response to Mr. Trump's sabre-rattling rhetoric claiming that the [U.S. would rain "fire and fury"](#) over the country and implying that its nuclear weapons were "locked and loaded" to respond to any threat from North Korea. Mr. Trump's response to Sunday's development was to ratchet up threats, besides calling out U.S. ally South Korea for "appeasement" and threatening to cut trade ties with countries that conduct any form of business with the North Koreans. Clearly the tough talk is not working — it is only pushing North Korea's totalitarian regime to take even more provocative steps in a quest to attain the status of a *de facto* nuclear power. In response to the exacerbated tensions in the region, South Korea and Japan have significantly enhanced their defence capabilities, including spending on missile defence. South Korea's new President Moon Jae-in, who is in favour of talks, has now accepted the U.S.'s missile defence system, THAAD, which is opposed locally by many South Koreans.

North Korea relies on increasing militarisation and show of missile and nuclear prowess for various reasons. Part of its ploy is to convince its impoverished and isolated citizenry of the need for the country to attain military parity in light of the presence of the U.S. military shield in South Korea and Japan. Another part of it is to justify the years of the Kim family rule, as these tests add to the myth of strong leadership by its 33-year-old, third-generation dictator, Kim Jong-un. The unpalatable prospect of the escalation of a possible military conflict into a nuclear war is also a way to stave off any external intervention against the dictatorship, the likes of which were seen in Iraq and Libya. Mr. Trump's latest Twitter threat against nations doing business with North Korea is clearly targeted at China, the only regime with some degree of influence — though it is not clear exactly how much — over the North Korean regime. The Chinese, however, seem to be willing to live with a nuclear North Korea as opposed to applying drastic trade sanctions that could lead to a crippled economy and a refugee crisis besides other unpredictable responses by a beleaguered regime. In light of all this, it is important to de-escalate the conflict by having direct talks involving the U.S., China, South Korea and North Korea. Multilateral talks are, in fact, by far the best option, given the trigger- and Twitter-happy supreme leaders in Pyongyang and in Washington DC.

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