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# Rage, Rocket Man and the price of Donald Trump's vanity

**US allies' policy of working to minimise the president's impact is running out of road**

Philip Stephens

The rage in the White House is unbounded. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un — “Little Rocket Man”, the US president calls him — must be destroyed. The international nuclear agreement with Iran is the worst deal ever. Free trade is a conspiracy against the US. America's allies are freeloaders. It is a struggle not to conclude the real and present danger to international peace and security now sits at the point of collision between Donald Trump's narcissism and the limits on US power.

As a candidate, Mr Trump promised to bury liberal internationalism. He would throw off global entanglements in favour of America-first nationalism. As president, he now wants the world to do as he tells, or tweets, it. Mr Trump is unaccustomed to defiance, especially from those with foreign-sounding names from unfamiliar places on the map. In threatening to eviscerate Pyongyang or disavowing the nuclear accord with Tehran, the president is nothing so much as an angry ego confounded by the failure to get his own way.

The outbursts have consequences, something I was reminded of during a few days this week in Seoul. The drums of war beat more ominously when you are within easy range of North Korea's artillery batteries. Not so much because South Koreans live in permanent fear. These are stoics grown accustomed to the threat from the north. More because, in Mr Kim, Pyongyang has a leader as volatile as the US president. The rules of containment, deterrence and the rest depend on a certain predictability on both sides.

Old wounds have never properly healed in east Asia, injecting a visceral quality into competing nationalisms. The post-1945 American-led system gave Europe a collective security architecture and incentives to promote reconciliation and integration. As Hahm Chaibong, the director of the Seoul think-tank the Asan Institute, writes in a paper presented this week at a gathering of the Korea Global Forum, east Asia has had to make do with a “hub-and-spoke” arrangement that leaves allies each and individually beholden to the US.

When Mr Trump talks of going to war to halt Pyongyang's nuclear programme, the interests of the region are brushed aside. What matters is that Mr Kim may soon have a missile capable of reaching the American west coast. Seoul rarely gets a mention — even though it would face

devastating retaliation. When the president says he can deliver a “knockout” blow to North Korea he discounts the potential loss of countless thousands of South Korean lives.

This is all of a piece. To the degree Mr Trump has a foreign policy, he laid it out last month in his speech to the UN General Assembly. Part one avowed that the US had jettisoned the values-based approach of soggy liberal internationalists in favour of one blind to the national choices of others. States should be free to make their own decisions as between liberty and tyranny. Part two established that the inviolability of states was a universal principle that would not be applied, well, universally. Only those playing on the same side of the field as the US could expect to run their affairs free of US interference. Almost everything you hear from Mr Trump is shot through with this contradiction. Bellicose isolationism, I call it.

The temptation is to ignore the president’s ravings. Nine months of dealing with a capricious White House has seen allies turn to a policy of “workaround” — ignore the Twitter storms, deal with the grown-ups, notably US defence secretary Jim Mattis, and hope something can be preserved of the old multilateral system beyond the day of Mr Trump’s departure.

The strategy is running out of road. Mr Trump’s disavowal of the Iran nuclear deal threatens to tear up the most successful exercise in collective security for a generation. At best, it destroys the credibility of the US in international efforts peacefully to forestall further nuclear proliferation. Mr Trump might just as well have hung a sign on the White House declaring Washington can no longer be trusted by friends or adversaries alike.

At worst, it will put Iran back on the road towards a nuclear weapons programme, with all the immense risks that would imply for regional and global peace. Congress could avoid an open breach with America’s allies by declining to re-introduce sanctions against Tehran. The damage to the standing of the US, though, has already been done.

The messaging is plain. Why should North Korea take notice of the international community when the US, the pivotal player in its mind, could renege on any deal? As it happens, Pyongyang does not think it needs any such excuse. Mr Kim seems determined come what may to build a nuclear-tipped missile capable of reaching the US. It still matters that the US has squandered its moral authority.

Restraining Mr Kim, if it is any longer possible, requires a strong and united international coalition embracing Russia and China as well as allies in east Asia and beyond. That in turn demands a US president whose grasp of diplomacy reaches beyond the pugnacious vanity of the bar-room brawler. The price of Mr Trump’s brittle ego may turn out to be war.