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North Korea Standoff: More than a War of Words

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An imminent general election probably side-tracks considered NZ reflection right now about escalating brinkmanship over North Korea's (DPRK) nuclear ambitions. This meagre contribution does not in any way pretend to be an official NZ view.

NZ has minimal influence in the shaping of events. Its formal position as a non-nuclear country enshrined in its law and a touchstone for its claim to independent foreign policy surely obliges absolute NZ opposition however to any use, or threatened use, of nuclear weapons by any state - great or small. Moreover preventive military strike requires, in the established NZ view, UNSC authorisation, and that in the present crisis, is highly improbable.

Regime survival is DPRK's paramount obsession. It believes possession of nuclear weapons and their means of delivery is crucial to survival. Pyongyang is acutely aware nonetheless that first use of its gruesome new capability risks complete obliteration from a US second strike. That intuition offers ground for diplomacy which in the past came close to spiking DPRK ambition, under US President Bill Clinton's Agreed Framework; and also, but sporadically, through the Chinese led Six Party Talks, begun in 2003 under President GWB. Each time the process foundered because of perceived infractions or provocations by one side or by the other. Responsibility did not exclusively lie on one side alone.

Diplomatic negotiations without preconditions are indispensable. Military options are unimaginable in their consequences for North East Asia, the vital engine force for global prosperity - fettered by an aberrant settlement on the Korean peninsular imposed 70 years ago.

Resolution of the crisis by way of interminable sanctions is self evidently a lost cause. Collaboration is impossible without mutual trust, and mutual trust is impossible unless there is a basis of sure communication. The idea that exchange of diplomatic relations with DPRK can only be a reward for good behaviour, is self defeating.

Looking beyond just North East Asia, the spread of technology in a globalising world inevitably exacerbates the dire threat of nuclear weapons proliferation. DPRK's misdemeanour can provoke 'break out' amongst countries disposed to likewise arm themselves. The 1970 UN Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) aims to prevent such spread and to motivate nuclear disarmament. After 45 years and relentless equivocation by major powers about actually initiating nuclear disarmament, plus conspicuous failure to ratify the nuclear test ban treaty, international cooperation is confounded by a lamentable double standard.

Against such background some 122 UN governments agreed in July to approve the negotiated text of a universal nuclear weapons prohibition treaty. It is only a first step on a long road. The coincidence of its negotiation with the disturbing DPRK nuclear behaviour is profoundly ironic.

NZ was the only anglosphere democracy alongside active participation by ASEAN and support from South Pacific governments, to be involved. None of the nuclear weapon owning states participated, and they ensured boycott by allies and security partners. Given DPRK nuclear mischief and the wider implications, this is monumentally short sighted. The possession and continuous upgrading of nuclear weapon stockpiles by a handful of powerful states determined to reinforce their monopoly, compounds not reduces international instability.
