Calculated ambiguity and coercive diplomacy appear to be at the heart of U.S. President Donald Trump's approach to dealing with North Korea.

As a candidate, Trump seemed to revel in keeping his opponents guessing — for example when he announced his “secret plan” for dealing with the Islamic State militant group (ISIS).

Now, in confronting the threat of Kim Jong Un’s North Korea, a similar dynamic appears to be at play. Sending a carrier strike force to the Western Pacific hints darkly at the possibility of military action, including possible pre-emptive attacks on the North’s nuclear assets. It makes it clear that the U.S. is willing to go it alone in finally resolving the North Korean problem.

The objectives behind the U.S. approach appear to be three-fold: impose maximum deterrent pressure on the North to discourage it from further missile tests or a possible sixth nuclear test; incentivize China to impose tougher economic sanctions on North Korea as a way of disciplining a recalcitrant ally and to avoid the risk of escalation to full-blown military conflict; and demonstrate to the American public that Trump’s White House has broken decisively with the failed policy of “strategic patience” that defined the approach of past U.S. administrations.

But are any of these goals close to being realized? Pyongyang’s abortive April 16 missile launch was a clear act of defiance. And uncompromising warnings in a BBC interview from Vice Foreign Minister Han Song Ryol that the North will continue to test missiles on “a weekly, monthly and yearly basis,” is a sign that Kim has not been cowed by Trump’s “big stick” display of military force.
While China has agreed with South Korea that it would be willing to impose tougher sanctions against Pyongyang if it continues to provoke—and has hinted at the option of cutting off oil supplies to the North—it is by no means clear that Beijing would be willing to impose lasting pain on its ally for fear of toppling the Kim regime and creating a destabilizing power vacuum in the North.

As for public opinion in the U.S., the jury is still out. This is high-risk opportunism, which mistakes assertive posturing for a calibrated, integrated combination of careful alliance management and plausible, consistent signaling of intent to one’s adversaries.

Despite Pence’s visit, America’s key allies in the region are worried. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has warned that North Korea might be able to hit Japan with sarin-gas laden missiles, and the country is already carrying out evacuation drills to plan for a possible conflict on the peninsula.

In South Korea, the leading candidate in the forthcoming May 9 presidential contest, Moon Jae In, has critically warned that any U.S. military action must involve full consultation with the Republic of Korea, while also stressing the importance of future engagement with Pyongyang.

History reminds us that in international crises, dialogue and clear lines of communication are essential to minimize the risk of conflict arising not through malign intent but as a result of misperception and miscalculation. At the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962—when the world teetered on the brink of nuclear Armageddon—it was Nikita Khrushchev’s warning to President Kennedy that helped spell out the importance of a negotiated settlement rather than the use of force:

“Mr President, we and you ought not now to pull the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter the knot will be tied. And a moment may come when the knot will be tied so tight that that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it,” he said.

Read more: What do volleyball games at North Korea's nuclear test site mean?
For the U.S. and North Korea, two countries without formal diplomatic relations, there is no channel for direct communication or the exchange of letters as was the case 55 years ago.

The danger of the current standoff is that the psychology of the two protagonists—leaders with large egos, thin skins and a preference for maximalist solutions—will encourage them to keep tightening the knot with potentially devastating consequences.

Rationally, U.S. military pre-emption makes little sense given the low probability of removing all of Kim’s WMD assets and the high probability that the North will launch a crippling conventional assault on Seoul. While the U.S. and its South Korean ally would almost certainly prevail in a war with the North, a devastated North would pose its own challenge given the risk that hidden fissile material might fall into the hands of extremist organizations or other rogue regimes—the “loose nukes” scenario.

The U.S. has few options apart from tougher economic sanctions, which are only likely to have substantial impact on the North if they are backed by China.

Beijing has made it clear that sanctions alone are not enough and is pushing for renewed talks, whether formal or informal, between the U.S. and North Korea. Ultimately, these will require concessions from both sides: at the very least a freeze by Kim of his missile and nuclear weapons tests. In return, it could be offered a suspension of joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises. This could lead to an expansion of diplomatic ties between Washington and Pyongyang and eventually a peace settlement on the peninsula.

Such talks will take time and sustained, considered and — yes, patient — US involvement from Trump and his national security team. Given the enormous stakes involved, including the fate of some 75 million Koreans on both sides of the DMZ, it is time, to heed Khrushchev’s advice:

“Let us not only relax the forces pulling on the ends of the rope. Let us take measures to untie that knot.”

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