

*From the Desk of...*

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### **Tensions with North Korea are escalating.**

Pyongyang's nuclear test on September 3 followed the firing of an intermediate-range missile that flew over Japan, the Trump administration sending stealth F-35 fighters and nuclear-capable B-1 bombers for exercises over South Korea, and South Korea's defense minister asking whether the U.S. should deploy tactical nuclear weapons in the South. Now, there are indications Pyongyang may be preparing to launch another intercontinental ballistic missile which could reach the continental United States.

Yet there is no evidence that enhanced sanctions will prompt Kim Jong-un to change his behavior, no sign China is prepared to do anything dramatic to intensify its own pressure on Pyongyang, and no indication a heightened U.S. military posture is having a deterrent effect.

It is a particularly dangerous moment. And the risks are exacerbated by the fact that there is no meaningful communication between North Korea and the United States. The Trump administration is responding to Pyongyang's missile tests and the fire-breathing threats from North Korea's state-run media. For their part, the North Koreans are reacting to U.S. military moves – and Donald Trump's tweets.

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In a recent tweet, the president declared that “The U.S. has been talking to North Korea, and paying them extortion, for 25 years. Talking is not the answer.”

There is no question the past record of U.S. diplomacy with Pyongyang is uneven. Indeed, the idea of negotiations with the North is not politically sustainable. There is virtually no support within the administration or more broadly in Washington for reviving old and discredited policies.

So what to do in a climate where even the idea of talking to North Korea is widely portrayed as a sign of weakness or rewarding bad behavior? Here's a suggestion. Send an envoy to Pyongyang who can speak for the president – and has the clout to deliver some blunt truths to Kim Jong-un and his associates.

That person is Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

This would not be a mission to negotiate, but to make clear to North Korea's leadership – ideally to Kim Jong-un himself – where the U.S. stands, while trying to acquire a first-hand understanding, unfiltered by the overheated rhetoric of the North Korean propaganda machine, of Pyongyang's thinking.

The message from Mattis should be blunt. The U.S. and North Korea are at the edge of a cliff. The U.S. will defend itself and its allies. If the North fires a missile in the direction of Japan or the United States, the U.S. is

prepared to knock the missile down and possibly take out the launch site. But the U.S. is also willing to listen to North Korean concerns and see if there a way back from the brink.

Mattis is the ideal person to undertake such a mission. He is one of President Trump's most potent assets. His nickname of "Mad Dog" won't hurt either. But he won't need to act in a threatening manner. The fact that he heads the world's most powerful armed forces speaks for itself.

There are reasons to think North Korea might respond positively to the idea of a Mattis visit. Former U.S. officials who have extensive contact over the years with Pyongyang say the North Koreans won't mind dealing with someone who is tough – indeed they prefer such an interlocutor over someone they see as a patsy—as long as they are fair and willing to listen.

And there is a precedent. In 2000, Kim Jong-il, the father of Kim Jong-un, sent his top general to Washington to meet with President Bill Clinton in an

overture for better relations. The prospective rapprochement ultimately failed when George W. Bush became president, but the episode shows that North Korea might well appreciate the importance of such a move.

If it succeeds, a Mattis visit might open the door to a reduction of tension and a diplomatic path forward. If it fails, the U.S. can at least claim – especially to countries like China and Russia that have repeatedly called for talks – that it tried the path of dialogue, making it easier to generate support if tougher measures are required.

During the Iraq war, then-Major General Mattis held a meeting with Iraqi tribal leaders. In one of the moments that helped earn him his nickname, he told them, "I come in peace. I didn't bring artillery. But I'm pleading with you, with tears in my eyes, if you f\*\*k with me, I'll kill you all."

It's a message he should deliver to Kim Jong-un.

This article was first published in "The Cipher Brief," where Mike Chinoy is a regular contributor on Asian security matters.

### About Mike Chinoy and The Insight Bureau

Mike Chinoy, former CNN International correspondent, is a non-resident Fellow at the U.S.–China Institute at the University of Southern California and the author of author of the world acclaimed book, *China Live: People Power and the Television Revolution*, which is a unique insider's view of the most important forces shaping our era —the rise of global satellite news and the rise of China. His latest book, *Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis*, provides a gripping account of one of America's longest-running, most volatile foreign policy crises, explaining why North Korea remains a danger today. Mike belongs to The Insight Bureau's resource network, providing speeches and presentations at international forums and at client events and also moderates and chairs dialogues. He brings unmatched experience of Asia's geopolitical and security issues.

The Insight Bureau provides speaker placements and briefings as a service that helps achieve a better understanding of the world in which we do business and ultimately enables companies to make better business decisions.

[www.insightbureau.com/MikeChinoy.html](http://www.insightbureau.com/MikeChinoy.html) to hire Mike for an in-person event, or for a phone briefing.

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