

Has the world grown complacent about the horrors of potential nuclear war?

By Sholto Byrnes



Hiroshima, post-nuclear bomb. Stanley Troutman / AP

Will diplomacy prevail over the war of words being waged by North Korea's Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump? Referring to military action, the US president said on Sunday: "Would it be nice not to do that? The answer is yes. Will that happen? Who knows, who knows."

On Monday Japan's defence minister, Itsunori Onodera, warned on the sidelines of an Asean meeting in the Philippines that the "threat posed by North Korea has grown to the unprecedented, critical and imminent level," while on the same day in London, the UK's foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, said that the military option must "remain on the table".

One slightly more optimistic note was struck by the former US president Jimmy Carter, who announced over the weekend that he would be willing to act as a special envoy to the North Korean leader if asked by the White House; and given that he negotiated an end to a previous nuclear crisis in 1994, we must hope President Trump takes the offer seriously.

For what is becoming very stark is that the possibility of starting a conflict that would almost certainly immediately go nuclear is being more willingly contemplated than at any point in my lifetime. One of the most bellicose, Fox News' strategic analyst Ralph Peters, states bluntly: "Better a million dead North Koreans than a thousand dead Americans."

And this makes me ask: has the world grown complacent, or merely forgetful, about the horrors of nuclear war?

For anyone growing up in the 1970s and 1980s it was a distinct and terrifying prospect. We knew the predictions. In the aftermath of even a small nuclear war, there would be a global winter, deadly black carbon rain, famine in the wake of frosts that would curtail the crop growing season, increased UV rays due to a depleted ozone layer – and that is not even to mention the millions who would be vaporised in direct attacks, die from exposure to radioactive fallout, or suffer early, painful deaths from

cancer. The scenarios were apocalyptic. It would be the end of civilisation as we knew it. And the threat was very real.

We know that on more than one occasion, worldwide conflagration was only averted by the actions of individuals, such as Stanislav Petrov, who died last month. In 1983, Mr Petrov, on duty at a Soviet nuclear early warning centre, refused to believe computer readouts that said the US had launched a missile attack. He was correct. A later investigation found that Russian satellites had mistaken sun reflecting from clouds as the signs of incoming missiles. But as he told the BBC in 2013: "If I had sent my report up the chain of command, nobody would have said a word against it." – and the Third World War would have started.

In Britain, the keeping or giving up of nuclear missiles was one of the defining issues in general elections, with the Conservatives confident that the doctrine of mutually assured destruction, or MAD (seldom has an acronym been so appropriate), would ensure that neither Nato nor the Communist bloc would strike first, and unilateral disarmers in the Labour and Liberal parties insisting that we had get rid of so terrible a weapon, trusting, as Sting memorably sung, that "the Russians love their children too".

Now, however, there are generations who never lived through that time. There is nothing to connect them to the daily fears of the Cold War nuclear stand-off in the way that those of us born generations after the Second World War still felt it was living history. For our fathers or grandfathers had fought in it; war films or series were on the TV every day; and more often than not, it provided the backdrop to imaginary games children would play in parks and commons. For those not old enough to remember the Cold War, naturally it is hard for them to relate to an utterly different world; for it is one that has vanished. Communism and its threats must appear unreal, even quaint and bizarre, when all you have known is capitalism.

Mr Trump is, of course, not one of those younger generations. But he – and others – seem to have suffered a collective memory loss about the spectre of nuclear devastation. How else to explain the ease with which he can threaten to unleash "fire and fury" on the rogue nation?

Similarly, while the nuclear deal with Iran is far from perfect, Mr Trump's undermining of that agreement offers North Korea less incentive than ever to negotiate away its nuclear stock. The examples of Saddam and Muammar Qaddafi will loom large in the portly young dictator's mind. Those who gave up their WMD were eventually overthrown with Western encouragement and participation. The Kims have kept theirs, and are still in power.

If, as Noam Chomsky said, "As long as nuclear weapons exist, the chances of survival of the human species are quite slight," we should be doing everything we can to stop nuclear proliferation. That should be the aim of the Trump administration too, and that obviously means talks of some kind with the aim of North Korea halting, at the very least, its nuclear programme.

In these pages I have given Mr Trump more latitude than most, out of respect for his democratic election and the office he holds. But in even talking about risking nuclear war, he goes beyond what is acceptable. Time to send for the grown-ups, and especially Mr Carter. We cannot allow the nuclear nightmare to become a reality just because too many have forgotten, or never knew of, the unimaginable devastation it would inflict.

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