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5 on 45: Trump threatens North Korea at the UN. What now?

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

PAK: My name is Jung Pak and I am the S-K Korea Foundation chair in Korea studies at the center for East Asia policy studies at the Brookings Institution. I'm also a senior fellow in the Foreign Policy program.

President Trump's speech at the U.N. General Assembly yesterday, during which he threatened to totally destroy North Korea if the U.S. is forced to defend itself or its allies, is likely to reinforce Kim Jong-un's commitment to his nuclear weapons program. In fact Kim could point to Trump's speech as a key argument for why he should never give up nuclear weapons. North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons is, at a minimum, to ensure regime survival and the Kim family rule.

As we have seen over the summer, rhetoric between North Korea and Washington escalated tensions pretty quickly with Pyongyang defiantly conducting ICBM test launches and its sixth nuclear test. We shouldn't be surprised if Kim Jong-un conducted another ballistic missile test in spite of Trump's threats to show that he will not back down. Especially if he thinks the U.S. president is bluffing. Kim is almost certainly aware that the lack of message discipline in this administration as analysts have pointed out.

The threat to destroy North Korea also has the unintended effect of rallying North Koreans around the current regime and strengthening Kim's rule. We shouldn't underestimate North Korean's sense of nationalism, the deeply ingrained fear and loathing of the United States, and frankly, their pride about the advances North Korea has made in its nuclear weapons program.

Lastly, the president's full throated attack on the Iran nuclear deal and his denunciation of the Iranian leadership will not inspire confidence in Pyongyang even in the unlikely event that Kim agrees to dialogue.

The president also missed an opportunity to reassure allies. They weren't even mentioned in his speech, though he did think China and Russia for signing on to the recent U.N. sanctions.

Perhaps he thought that talking tough would be welcomed by South Korea and Japan, but those countries would suffer the most if war broke out on the peninsula. In fact in response President Trump's inflammatory tweets about “fire and fury” and “locked and loaded” earlier this summer South Korean president Moon warned “no one should be allowed to decide on a military action on the Korean Peninsula without South Korean agreement.”

Chinese President Xi Jinping had then also called the White House to call for calm and restraint on all sides. Let's also not forget that there are around 200,000 American citizens in South Korea at any given time including 28,500 U.S. service members.

Presidents Trump and Moon, and Prime Minister Abe are scheduled to meet tomorrow on Thursday on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly. I hope that their discussion serves to shape a unified policy toward North Korea.

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