

Is this round of Korea threats any different?

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North Korea is a country lost in another dimension. The relative normalcy that prevails in most lands is spectacularly absent in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, such that Western commentators often feel called upon to point out that its young leader, Kim Jong-un, is “not crazy,” as one did on CNN the other day.

But being a little off-kilter is one thing. Being a little off-kilter with a million-strong army, long-range missiles and nuclear weapons capability is quite another, particularly when it's also a country on one side of the most heavily guarded border on Earth.

That's why the world is more than a little worried about the latest hostile actions and ferocious threats aimed at South Korea and the United States in recent weeks – extreme even by North Korea's shrill standards.

Every day seems to bring a new escalation, from ending the armistice that has prevailed between North and South for 60 years to declaring “a state of war” with South Korea to missile-rattling against U.S. military bases to, this week, an announcement that the North's mothballed Yongbyon nuclear facility will be restarted to produce material for nuclear weapons.

While photos of Kim Jong-un posing with military maps detailing attack plans for the U.S. mainland and ordering soldiers to send their enemies “to the bottom of the sea, as they run wild like wolves threatened with fire” are comical, and familiar enough, the overall tone seems different this time.

South Korea, normally a bystander when the North ramps up tension, is threatening back. Any incursion by the North will be met with full force, and the North's leaders will be specifically targeted in the event of war, the South has warned. There is also talk of the South developing its own nuclear deterrents.

At the same time, both countries have relatively new leaders, each from a powerful, political bloodline. Kim Jong-un, of course, is the grandson of the “great leader” Kim Il-sung and son of his successor, “dear leader” Kim Jong-il. South Korea's recently installed President, Park Geun-hye, is the daughter of the country's notorious former dictator Park Chung-hee.

There's a danger that these various factors could produce a situation where a small flashpoint spirals out of control into something major, with neither leader willing to back down or lose face.

Still, most don't see it that way. Experts have viewed this North Korean movie too many times before. They consider it just another ploy to wring concessions from the United States.

"The North is keeping the crisis alive to raise stakes ahead of possible future talks," said Hwang Jihwan of the University of Seoul. "They're asking the world: 'What are you going to do about this?'"

Meanwhile, probably no one wants a cooling off more than China, increasingly uncomfortable as North Korea's only ally. On Tuesday, speaking to a class at the University of British Columbia, Chinese Ambassador Zhang Junsai did his best to ease fears of military conflict on the Korean peninsula.

Yves Tiberghien of the Institute of Asian Research at UBC said Mr. Zhang told the class that the situation was manageable. "He said the rhetoric is high, but there has been no major change in reality."

The past eight days

March 26: North Korean military leaders place all missile and artillery units on "the highest alert," ready to reduce U.S. and South Korean targets to "ashes and flames."

March 27: North Korea severs a key hotline between the two countries, one that facilitates the daily travel of hundreds of South Korean workers to and from a large industrial park just across the border in the North.

March 28: A pair of U.S. B-2 Spirit bombers make practice runs over South Korea, dropping dummy bombs on a deserted island. The warplanes are equipped to carry the most powerful non-nuclear bomb in the arsenal of the U.S. Air Force.

March 29: Decked out in full military uniform, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is photographed in front of wall maps, brazenly labelled: "Plans to attack the mainland United States." He orders missile units to be ready to attack U.S. military bases in the Pacific.

Saturday: North Korea announces it is entering "a state of war" with South Korea. Observers note, however, that the industrial park it shares with the South remains open.

Sunday: The North says its nuclear weapons are not a chip to be bargained away but are, in fact, “the nation’s life.” The United States, meanwhile, sends stealth fighter jets to join joint drills with South Korea.

Monday: South Korean President Park Geun-hye warns that the South will hit back hard if there is an attack on its territory by North Korean forces.

Tuesday: North Korea declares its intention to boost production of material needed for nuclear weapons, leading to a restart of its Yongbyon nuclear complex, which was closed in 2007 as part of nuclear disarmament talks, now stalled.

2013 so far

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January North Korea begins ratcheting up the rhetoric, calling new United Nations sanctions a “declaration of war” and vowing to conduct a third nuclear test. The UN action was prompted by North Korea’s successful test launch of a long-range rocket in December.

February Making good on its threat, North Korea conducts its most powerful nuclear test yet, hours before U.S. President Barack Obama’s State of the Union address. The UN responds with a resolution, backed by China, to apply even more stringent economic sanctions against the rogue nation, inspiring its leaders to new heights of verbal bellicosity.

March Tensions are further inflamed as South Korean and U.S. forces begin their annual series of military drills, this time with the help of U.S. bombers and stealth fighter jets. Pyongyang announces that it is tearing up the armistice that ended the Korean War 60 years ago, puts its military on war alert and threatens to fire missiles against U.S. bases in South Korea. The South pledges to wipe out North Korea’s leaders if fighting breaks out.