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Washington Watch

N KOREA NUKE
THREAT NOT ALL
BLUFF, BLUSTER

By Eric Talmadge

Skeptics of North Korea's nuclear threat, and there are many, have long clung to two comforting thoughts. While the North has the bomb, it doesn't have a warhead small enough to put on a long-range rocket. And it certainly doesn't have a re-entry vehicle to keep that warhead from burning up in the atmosphere before it could reach a target like, as it has suggested before, Manhattan. North Korea yesterday suggested it will soon show the world it has mastered both technologies.

That would require a huge jump in the North's suspected nuclear capabilities, so it may be just the latest case of Pyongyang saying with vitriolic propaganda something it cannot demonstrate in tests. But if it delivers, it will put to rest one other comforting thought: that it's safe for policymakers in Washington and elsewhere to take North Korea's claims as mainly just bluster.

"We have proudly acquired the re-entry technology, possessed by a few countries styling themselves as military powers, by dint of self-reliance and self-development," North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was quoted as saying. The authoritarian country's state-run media reported he made the comment after meeting scientists and technicians, following what it said was a successful ground test of a re-entry vehicle.

The report said Kim ordered the commencement of preparations for a "nuclear warhead explosion test" and test-firings of "several kinds of ballistic rockets able to carry nuclear warheads" to be conducted soon. As with all such reports, it's hard to separate Pyongyang's wishful thinking from the current reality. North Korea's most likely candidate for an intercontinental ballistic missile is generally known as the KN-08 - in North Korea it's called the Hwasong. The three-stage rocket has an estimated range of 5,000-6,000 km, longer if modified further. That range would be ample for attacks on US military bases in Japan, but not the US mainland. A militarized version of the rocket used to put a North Korean satellite into orbit last month is believed to have - potentially - a much longer range that could reach the US. A new version of the KN-08 was displayed at a military parade in October. IHS Jane's Defense weekly said it featured a smaller and blunter warhead shape "that could confirm US intelligence assessments and North Korean claims of success in miniaturizing its nuclear warheads."

Incredulity

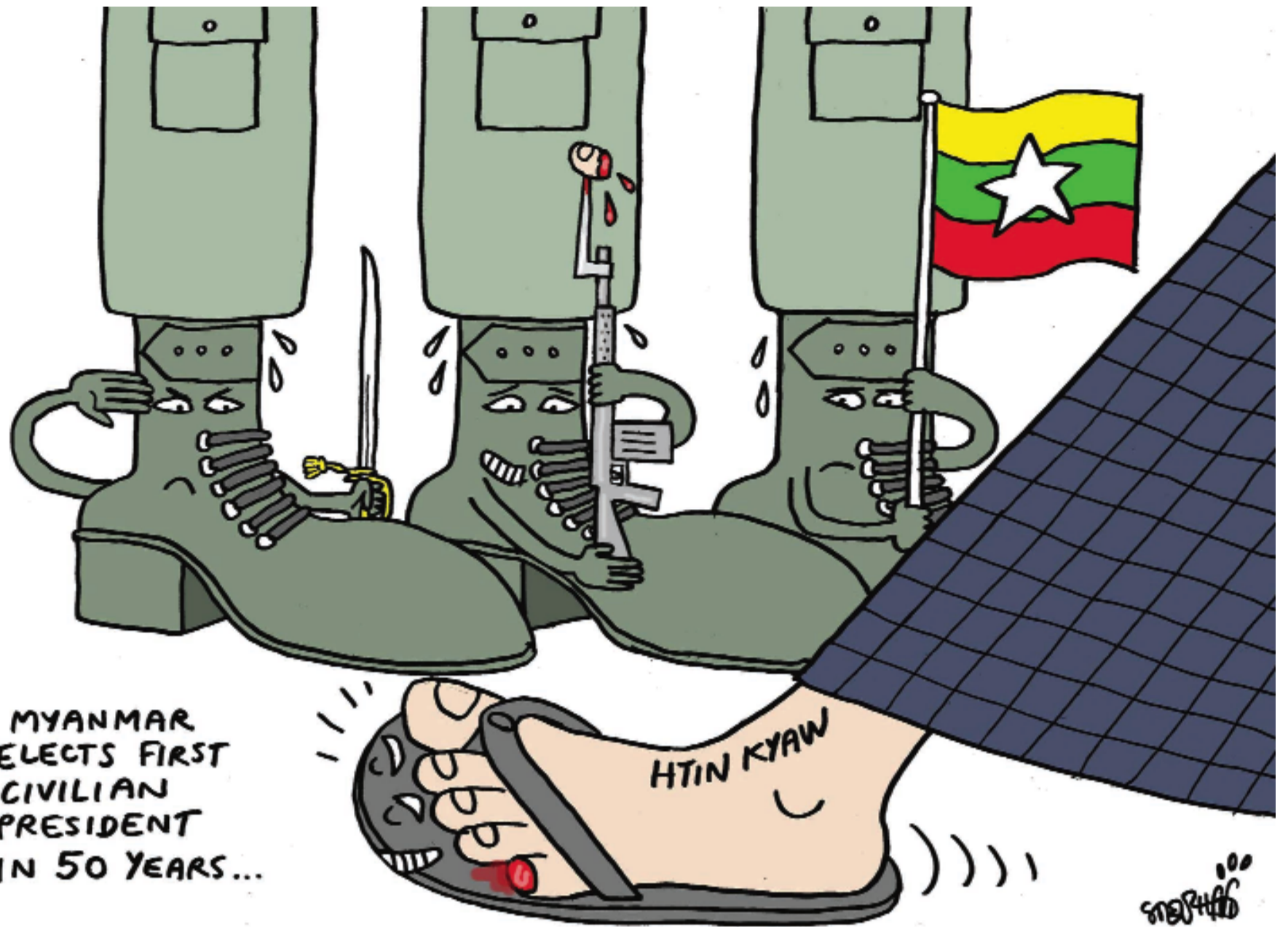
But the Pentagon has often expressed incredulity over the reliability of the KN-08 because North Korea has never tested it "end-to-end" - meaning from launch through re-entry and warhead delivery - to prove it works. Just last week, photos of Kim, splashed across the front page of the ruling party's Rodong Sinmun newspaper, showed him standing in a hangar filled with ballistic missiles and looking happily down at a silvery orb about the size of a disco ball.

Experts say the object looks very much like a credible nuclear weapon, though it was clearly a mock-up of whatever device the North may have. Kim and his scientists certainly wouldn't have stood so close to the real thing without radioactivity protection gear. Nor would Kim, a chain smoker, likely have been holding a lit cigarette right next to it. The message, however, was obvious: We know what you think our weaknesses are, and you might consider thinking twice.

"Every time the North Koreans test another bomb or a missile, I get calls asking what message the North Koreans are trying to send," wrote Jeffrey Lewis, director of the East Asia Nonproliferation Program at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, in a recent op-ed in the influential Foreign Policy magazine. "Well, let's see: They've paraded two different ICBMs through Pyongyang, conducted four nuclear tests, showed us a compact nuclear design sitting next to a modern re-entry vehicle in front of one of those ICBMs, and hung a giant wall map of the United States marked with targets and titled 'Mainland Strike Plan,'" he wrote. "Here's a wild guess: They are building nuclear-armed ICBMs to strike the United States! Why is this so hard to grasp?"

Timing

The timing of Pyongyang's recent moves is crucial. It's facing a new UN sanctions package after its Jan 6 nuclear test - which it claimed was of an H-bomb - and has significantly amped up its rhetoric amid unprecedentedly large-scale war games between the US and South Korean militaries. Those exercises continue through April. The country is also conducting a 70-day "loyalty campaign" ahead of a once-in-a-generation ruling party congress in May. The congress could be something of a coming-out party for Kim, a venue to emerge from the shadows of his father and grandfather and more firmly establish himself at home and abroad as North Korea's supreme leader. He could also lay out his own long-term domestic and international agenda. — AP



TRUMP WITHOUT HAIR? EU POLICY GETS ROUGH

By Paul Taylor

Europe's emerging migration policy is looking increasingly like Donald Trump without the hair. Except that, unlike the Republican presidential frontrunner, who wants to make Mexico pay for a wall to keep migrants out of the United States, the Europeans are willing to pay their neighbor Turkey to do the job for them. Seven months and a million migrants after Chancellor Angela Merkel declared a "welcome culture" for Syrian refugees in Germany, the European Union is rushing to erect "No vacancy" signs along its internal and external borders.

Under fierce political pressure in her own conservative camp and from an insurgent right-wing populist party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), Merkel's mantra of "We can do this" is morphing into "The Turks can do this for us". In a surprise overnight deal she negotiated with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu last week, Ankara offered to take back all migrants, including Syrian refugees, who cross from its shores into Europe from now on or are intercepted off its coast.

Having thus sealed its most porous border to irregular migrants, the EU would admit a limited number of carefully vetted Syrian refugees directly from Turkey - one for each Syrian asylum seeker Ankara took back from Greek Aegean islands. The lucky few would be chosen with the help of the UN refugee agency from among those who had waited patiently in camps in Syria's neighbors, not those who had paid smugglers thousands of

euros for a risky sea crossing. They would be sent to those EU countries that agreed last year to take in a quota, although some states are resisting that.

Stifling doubts about the legality of such a blanket return policy, discomfort at outsourcing it to a partner many of them see as worryingly authoritarian, and irritation at the price Turkey is demanding, stunned EU leaders gave their provisional assent.

Desperation

European public opinion is so petrified by images of tens of thousands of bedraggled migrants trekking across muddy fields and highways towards western and northern Europe - and populists have made such capital out of those fears - that governments are desperate to halt the flow. Another summit in Brussels this week is due to conclude the Faustian bargain, granting Turkey €6 billion (\$6.7 billion) in aid to keep refugees on its soil, an accelerated path to visa-free travel for Turks and faster EU membership talks in return for its agreement to act as Europe's gatekeeper. European Council President Donald Tusk says regaining control of Europe's external borders is a condition for gaining public acceptance to take in refugees. In practice, it looks more like a way of keeping them out, if it can be implemented. Human rights groups and volunteers who work with refugees are outraged to see Europe slamming shut its open door for victims of war and persecution.

EU lawyers are working overtime to try to make it legal. The Geneva Convention on

refugees requires signatories to examine individually each claim for protection submitted by an asylum seeker on their soil. The German-Turkish deal would get around that provision by declaring Turkey a "safe" third country to which irregular migrants could be returned under a bilateral Greek-Turkish readmission agreement. The United Nations' top human rights official has said that could entail illegal "collective and arbitrary expulsions".

Apart from the moral issues raised by this dodge, there are several legal problems. Turkey restricts its application of the Geneva Convention to refugees from Europe. People fleeing war or persecution in the Middle East and Asia will not be covered unless Ankara amends its laws. Turkish officials say they will ensure Turkey complies with international law to fulfill its part of the potential EU deal. Even so, lawyers say asylum seekers who reach Greece have a right to appeal against being sent back to Turkey if they fear for their personal safety there. A Greek court would have to hear each appeal before a person could be removed. There is no appropriate court on the Greek islands, and Greek justice is notoriously slow.

Embarrassment

At the same time, the rush to declare Turkey "safe" could hardly have come at a more embarrassing time for the EU. President Tayyip Erdogan has stepped up a military crackdown on Kurdish militants, the government has seized Turkey's best-selling newspaper, critical journalists face prosecu-

tion and jail, and businessmen and public officials close to a dissident Muslim cleric have been purged. Unlike Trump, most EU leaders do not declare they want to prevent more Muslims settling in their country, with the exception of Hungary's Viktor Orban and Slovakia's Robert Fico, who have stressed preserving their countries' Christian identity.

However, anti-immigration campaigners like Marine Le Pen in France and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands openly cite Islam as a reason for rejecting refugees, and they are increasingly setting the agenda for mainstream politicians. They oppose visa-free travel for Turks in Europe for the same reason. France, which has a tradition of political asylum and took in tens of thousands of Vietnamese "boatpeople" in the 1970s, is limiting its intake of Syrian refugees now, citing security concerns following last year's Islamist attacks in Paris.

Like other west European countries, France has struggled to integrate second and third generation young people of Muslim or north African origin. The place of Islam in public life is fiercely contested in these secular societies, and resentments from Algeria's war of independence still simmer. European politicians may be aghast at the rhetoric of Trump, who has said he wants a database to register and track Muslims in the United States and would bar any Muslim entering the country until Congress could act. But if the pact with Turkey goes through as conceived, the EU will be retreating into a "fortress Europe" policy for fear of its own Trumps. — Reuters

BOMBING EXPOSES DIVISIONS TEARING TURKEY

By Umit Bektas, Nick Tattersall and Humeyra Pamuk

Government resign!" chanted some of the mourners at the funeral yesterday of four young victims of the suicide bombing in Turkey's capital Ankara. "Our child has become a victim of ugly politics. We don't want any politicians at our funeral," one of the relatives called out, before family members hushed him and warned him against speaking out in front of journalists. Far from bringing the nation together in mourning, the aftermath of Sunday night's attack has again laid bare the deep divisions tearing at Turkey as it struggles to avoid being drawn into its neighbors' conflicts.

If Turkey continues on this path, some analysts warn, it risks a cycle of violence and a lurch away from the European standards of freedom and democracy to which it once aspired. President Tayyip Erdogan shows little sign of healing the rifts. Parties from across the political spectrum - from nationalists to the pro-Kurdish opposition - have condemned the car bombing, which killed 37 people in the heart of Ankara and was the third in the city in five months.

But the question of how to respond is far more divisive. Officials quickly blamed Kurdish militants. Turkish warplanes began bombing their camps in northern Iraq within hours, and clashes with the security forces widened in Turkey's predominantly Kurdish southeast. In his first speech since the attack, Erdogan said the country's anti-terrorism laws, already seen by rights groups as too invasive and used in recent months to detain academics and journalists, should be widened further.

"It might be the terrorist who pulls the trigger and detonates the bomb, but it is these supporters and accomplices who allow that attack to achieve its goal," he told a dinner for doctors in his palace late on Monday. "The fact their title is lawmaker, academic, writer, journalist or head of a civil society group doesn't change the fact that individual is a terrorist... We should redefine

terror and terrorist as soon as possible and put it in our penal code."

Erdogan's opponents say he is using anti-terrorism laws to silence dissent and that his authoritarian leadership is dangerously dividing a nation needed by its European and NATO allies as a bulwark against the instability of the Middle East. Almost as Erdogan spoke in Ankara, police used tear gas and water cannon to disperse several hundred leftist demonstrators in Istanbul who had gathered to protest what they perceive to be the government's failure to prevent Sunday's attack. Some in the crowd began chanting "Thief, Murderer, Erdogan", a rallying cry during the anti-government protests of recent years, prompting police to intervene, Reuters witnesses said.

'Angry Country'

"Turkey has become a country that can neither rejoice nor mourn together, or find a common sense to unite around. It has become an angry country, with ever shrinking and fragmenting tribal outlooks," said

Turkish-British researcher Ziya Meral. "Pressure on media and denials of freedom of expression are only fuelling mistrust, dangerous propaganda and misinformation," Meral, a research fellow at Britain's Sandhurst military academy and founder of the London-based Centre on Religion and Global Affairs, wrote in a blog post.

The ruling AK Party, founded by Erdogan more than a decade ago, was "no longer driven by pragmatism" but by its own survival and its ambition of securing the stronger presidential system that Erdogan wants, he said. Since winning Turkey's first popular presidential election in 2014, Erdogan has lobbied for replacing its parliamentary system with an executive presidency more akin to the United States or France. Many of his supporters, who represent just over half the electorate and see him as champion of the pious working class, believe the narrative that Turkey, battered by regional conflicts, needs strong leadership for its long-term stability. His opponents fear too much power in the hands of a man who brooks no dissent.



Family members and friends gather around the bridal veil and Turkish flag-draped coffin of Zeynep Basak Gursoy, 19, one of 37 victims of Sunday's explosion, during the funeral procession in Ankara yesterday. — AP

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