

## Kuwait Times

THE LEADING INDEPENDENT  
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF  
ESTABLISHED 1961

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## Focus

FEW GOOD OPTIONS  
IN TRUMP ARSENAL  
TO COUNTER DPRK

Despite his campaign vows to take a tougher line with North Korea, US President Donald Trump's restrained public reaction to Pyongyang's first ballistic missile launch on his watch underscores that he has few good options to curb its missile and nuclear programs. The responses under consideration - which range from additional sanctions to US shows of force to beefed-up missile defense, according to one administration official - do not seem to differ significantly so far from the North Korea playbook followed by Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama.

Even the idea of stepping up pressure on China to rein in a defiant North Korea has been tried - to little avail - by successive administrations. But Beijing is showing no signs of softening its resistance under a new US president who has bashed them on trade, currency and the contested South China Sea. More dramatic responses to North Korea's missile tests would be direct military action or negotiations. But neither appears to be on the table - the first because it would risk regional war, the latter because it would be seen as rewarding Pyongyang for bad behavior. And neither would offer certain success.

"Trump's options are limited," said Bonnie Glaser, an Asia expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank in Washington. Trump's initial public comments on Saturday on the test launch of what was believed to be an intermediate-range Musudan-class missile were unexpectedly measured - and brief - compared to earlier bluster about another US adversary, Iran, since he took office on Jan 20. "I just want everybody to understand, and fully know, that the United States of America is behind Japan, our great ally, 100 percent," Trump told reporters in Palm Beach, Florida, speaking in a solemn tone alongside visiting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

The US president did not mention North Korea or signal any retaliatory plans for what was widely seen as an early effort to test the new administration. By contrast, Trump tweeted "It won't happen!" in January after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said the North was close to testing an intercontinental ballistic missile. White House adviser Stephen Miller insisted on ABC's "This Week" that Trump's one-sentence statement was an "important show of solidarity" with Japan. He told "Fox News Sunday" the administration was going to bolster its allies in the region against the "increasing hostility" of North Korea.

While no one can rule out that Trump might still take to Twitter with harsh rhetoric as he often does, some analysts said his relatively subdued initial statement could show that aides have convinced him not to be baited by Pyongyang into issuing threats that would be hard to carry out, especially while his North Korea strategy is still being formulated.

## Vowing more assertive approach

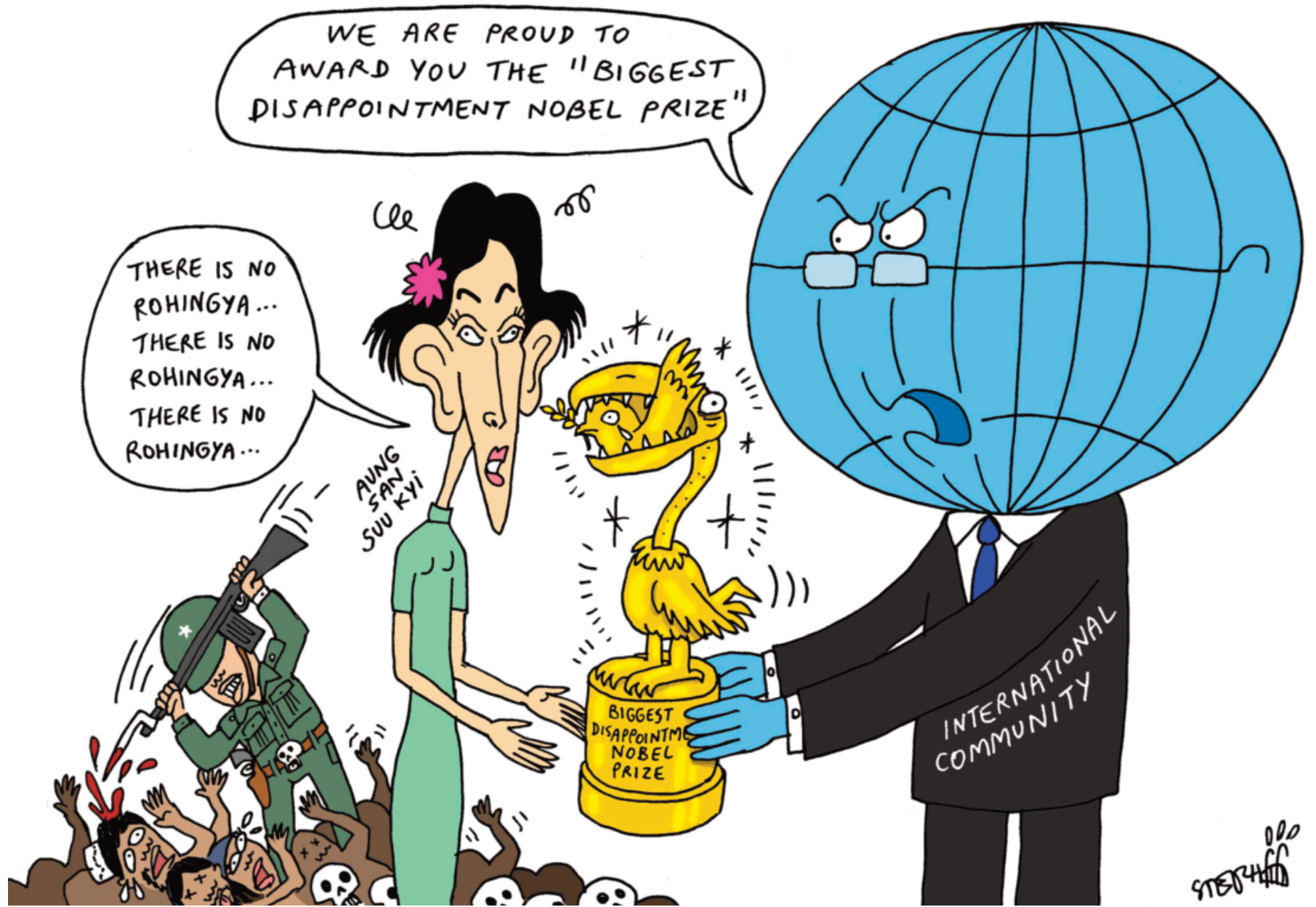
Trump's aides have said that they will take a more assertive approach than the Obama policy dubbed "strategic patience," which involved gradually scaling up sanctions and diplomatic pressure and essentially waiting out the North Korean leadership. But the new administration has been vague about how it would do this. The Trump administration had been expecting a North Korean "provocation" and will consider a full range of options in response, but they would be calibrated to show US resolve while avoiding escalation, the US official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The stakes would be higher, however, if nuclear-capable North Korea makes good on its threat to test an ICBM of a kind that could someday hit the United States, analysts said. Trump and his aides are likely to weigh new US sanctions to tighten financial controls, an increase in naval and air assets and joint military exercises in and around the Korean peninsula and accelerated installation of new missile defense systems in South Korea, the official said.

Trump has also made clear that he believes China has not done enough to use its influence to help rein in Pyongyang's nuclear and ballistic programs. The US official told Reuters that Trump would now step up pressure on Beijing, but acknowledged that there were limits to how far China would go, especially in enforcing sanctions, because of its own interests in avoiding destabilization of North Korea.

It remains to be seen, however, whether the new administration might go a step beyond Obama's approach and focus on imposing "secondary sanctions" on firms and entities that help North Korea's weapons programs, many of which are in China. Also unclear is whether Trump's phone call last week with Chinese President Xi Jinping, in which the US president backed away from his threat to break from America's long-standing "one China" policy, would engender greater cooperation from Beijing on North Korea. — Reuters

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## DUTERTE TARGETS CHILDREN IN DRUG WAR

Before Rodrigo Duterte's bloody war on drugs had even begun, allies of the Philippines president were quietly preparing for a wider offensive. On June 30, as Duterte was sworn in, they introduced a bill into the Philippine Congress that could allow children as young as nine to be targeted in a crackdown that has since claimed more than 7,600 lives.

The bill proposes to lower the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 9 years old to prevent what it calls "the pampering of youthful offenders who commit crimes knowing they can get away with it." "You can ask any policeman or anyone connected with the law enforcement: We produce a generation of criminals," Duterte said in a speech in Manila on Dec 12. Young children, he said, were becoming drug runners, thieves and rapists, and must be "taught to understand responsibility".

The move to target children signals Duterte's determination to intensify his drug war, which faces outrage abroad and growing unease at home. The president's allies say his support in Congress will ensure the bill passes the House of Representatives by June. The House would approve the bill "within six months," said Fredenil Castro, who co-authored the legislation with the speaker of the House, Pantaleon Alvarez. It might face opposition in the Senate, but would prevail because of Duterte's allies there, added Castro.

National police chief Ronald Dela Rosa recently announced that he was suspending anti-narcotics operations, which have killed more than 2,500 people, while the force rids itself of corrupt cops. The announcement came after it emerged last month that drug squad officers had killed a South Korean businessman at national police headquarters.

The killing of drug suspects has continued, albeit at a slower pace, with most following the pattern of killings that police have blamed on vigilantes. Human rights monitors believe vigilantes have killed several thousand people and operate in league with the police - a charge the police deny. Duterte has signaled he intends to continue his drug war. In late January, he said the campaign would run until his presidency ends in 2022.

## 'In cahoots with drug users'

Lowering the age of criminality was justified, Castro told Reuters, because many children were "in cahoots with drug users, with drug pushers, and others who are related to the drug trade." He said he based his support for the bill on what he saw from his car and at churches - children begging and pickpocketing. "For me, there isn't any evidence more convincing than what I see in every day of my life," he said.

A controversial bill to restore the death penalty, another

presidential priority, is also expected to pass the House of Representatives by mid-year, according to Duterte allies in Congress. Supporters of the bill to lower the age of criminality say holding young children liable will discourage drug traffickers from exploiting them. Opponents, including opposition lawmakers and human rights groups, are appalled at a move they say will harm children without evidence it will reduce crime.

There is also resistance inside Duterte's administration. A member of Duterte's cabinet who heads the Department of Social Welfare and Development opposes the move. And a branch of the police responsible for protecting women and children disputes the claim that children are heavily involved in the drug trade - a claim not supported by official data.

Opponents warn that lowering the age of criminality would further strain a juvenile justice system that is struggling to cope. At worst, they say, with a drug war raging nationwide, the bill could legitimize the killing of minors. "What will stop them from targeting children?" said Karina Tava, a local politician and child rights advocate in Manila. "They are using the war on drugs to criminalize children."

## In the firing line

The drug-war death toll includes at least 29 minors who were either shot by unidentified gunmen or accidentally killed during police operations from July to November 2016, according to the Children's Legal Rights and Development Center (CLRDC) and the Network Against Killings in the Philippines, both Manila-based advocacy groups. Dela Rosa said the Philippine National Police "fully supports" the new bill. It is "true and supported by data" that minors are used by drug traffickers because they can't be held criminally liable, the police chief said in a submission to the House of Representatives.

Some police officers working on the streets agree with Dela Rosa. In Manila's slums, children as young as six act as lookouts for dealers, shouting "The enemy is coming!" when police approach, said Cecilio Tomas, an anti-narcotics officer in the city. By their early teens, some become delivery boys and then dealers and users, said Tomas. Salvador Panelo, Duterte's chief legal counsel, said the bill would protect children by stopping criminals from recruiting them. "They will not become targets simply because they will no longer be involved," he said.

Child rights experts say the legislation could put children in the firing line. They point to the deadly precedent set in the southern city of Davao, where Duterte pioneered his hardline tactics as mayor. The Coalition Against Summary Execution, a Davao-based rights watchdog, documented 1,424 vigilante-style killings in the city between 1998 and 2015. Of those victims, 132 were 17 or younger.

For all but three years during that period, Duterte was either Davao's mayor or vice-mayor. He denied any involvement in the killings.

## Contradictory evidence

Althea Barbon was one of the children killed in the current nationwide drug war. The four year old was fatally wounded in August when police in an anti-narcotics operation shot at her father, the two Manila-based advocacy groups said. Unidentified gunmen shot dead Ericka Fernandez, 17, in a Manila alley on October 26, police said. Her bloody Barbie doll was collected as evidence. And on December 28, three boys, aged 15 or 16, were killed in Manila by what police said were motorbike-riding gunmen.

If the bill passes, the Philippines won't be the only country where the age of criminality is low. In countries including England, Northern Ireland and Switzerland it is 10, according to the website of the Child Rights International Network, a research and advocacy group. In Scotland, children as young as eight can be held criminally responsible, but the government is in the process of raising the age limit to 12.

Critics of the Philippines' bill say lower age limits are largely found in countries where the legal systems, detention facilities and rehabilitation programs are more developed. Statistics from the police and the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), the government's top anti-narcotics body, appear to contradict the Duterte camp's claim that there is a large number of young children deeply involved in the drug trade.

There were 24,000 minors among the 800,000 drug users and dealers who had registered with the authorities by November 30, according to police statistics. But less than two percent of those minors, or about 400 children, were delivering or selling drugs. Only 12 percent, or 2,815, were aged 15 or younger. Most of the 24,000 minors were listed as drug users. The number of minors involved in the drug trade is "just a small portion," said Noel Sandoval, deputy head of the Women and Children's Protection Center (WCPC), the police department that compiled the data.

The WCPC is not pushing to lower the minimum age of criminal responsibility, said Sandoval, but if the age is to be lowered, his department recommends a minimum age of 12, not 9. Between January 2011 and July 2016, 956 children aged six to 17 were "rescued nationwide from illegal drug activity," according to PDEA. They were mostly involved with marijuana and crystal methamphetamine, a highly addictive drug also known as shabu, and were handed over to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). Of these, only 80 were under the age of 15. — Reuters

## THAILAND'S NEW KING SHOWS HIS STRENGTH

From requiring constitutional changes to pushing for unity in the divided country and reshaping the royal household, Thailand's new king is putting an assertive stamp on his rule. King Maha Vajiralongkorn has made it clear to the generals running the country that he will not just sit in the background as a constitutional figurehead since taking the throne in December from a father treated by Thais as semi-divine.

That matters in Thailand, where relationships between monarchy, army and politicians have long determined the stability of Southeast Asia's second-biggest economy and America's oldest regional ally. Predictions by some pundits of a troubled royal transition have proven wrong - at least for now. "His majesty has proven himself to be very adept at managing the junta and the military," said academic Paul Chambers at the Institute of Southeast Asian Affairs in Chiang Mai.

None of more than two dozen serving or former officials, military officers, parliamentarians, diplomats or analysts that Reuters spoke to for this story saw any immediate threat to that balance of power. With jail facing anyone found guilty of insulting the monarchy under the nation's "lese majeste" laws, few Thais comment openly on royal matters. Asked for a response for this story, a palace official said it did not comment to the media. A government spokesman declined comment.

## Relationship of obedience

King Vajiralongkorn started from a very different place to his father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who died on Oct 13. When the teenage Bhumibol took the throne in the late 1940s, the future of the monarchy itself looked in doubt. Building alliances, he quietly re-established the royal aura and authority - becoming ultimate arbiter during coups and spells of chaos as Thailand changed from rural backwater to

middle-income country.

King Vajiralongkorn, 64, has spent years abroad, his private life complicated by three marriages, and he has yet to win the public adoration received by his father. But the king's background puts him on different terms with the generals: He went through military academies; he saw combat against insurgents in the 1970s; he can fly a fighter jet. In line with protocol, junta members prostrate themselves before the new king at audiences, as palace photos show. "The relationship is at least one of obedience," said Eugénie M'Ériau, a lecturer and researcher at Sciences Po in Paris.

## Constitutional changes

The junta was quick to obey when the palace asked for constitutional changes - the first such request in decades. Changes relating to current royal powers were pushed through within days. So was the ability to make further changes to a new constitution that is in the works. Behind the palace walls, the royal household is being reshaped. Over 20 appointments and promotions have been made by the new king and published in the Royal Gazette.

This includes reshuffling senior members of the household, many of whom had held posts for decades under King Bhumibol, and promoting military officials with ties to the new king. The head of the influential Privy Council, 96-year-old Prem Tinsulanonda, remains in place, but half the other members are new. The six new appointments have increased representation of those with a background in the army's Wongthewan faction or King's Guard, where the king served.

Among other notable military promotions was Suthida Vajiralongkorn na Ayudhya within the King's Own Bodyguard. Often seen at the king's side, though not publicly designated as his consort, she became a general on the day he took the throne. Last week, the king appointed a

new Buddhist supreme patriarch, ending more than a year of tussling over the position. Parliament restored the king's authority to do so after 25 years of having a council of monks make the decision. The new patriarch is from a fraternity closely tied to the monarchy rather than the one the religious council had first proposed.

## Unity and reconciliation

The big question is what happens when there is a resumption of political competition, suspended after the last military coup in 2014. The king has stressed unity within the divided country, both in his New Year address and at a late night meeting with the country's leadership in January to push for more help for flood victims, Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha said. That meeting also coincided with the government's moves to set up a reconciliation committee ahead of elections expected next year.

The aim of the panel is to listen to different political factions, to establish some common ground between them and then come up with an agreement all would sign to ensure a peaceful transition to civilian-led democracy. One name above all polarizes Thais: Thaksin Shinawatra. The former "CEO prime minister" was a hero for poorer Thais loyal to his populist movement. Overthrown in 2006, he lives in Dubai to avoid a jail sentence for corruption. His sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, was prime minister from 2011 until just before the 2014 coup.

Thaksin, a self-made billionaire, is reviled by a Bangkok-based, royalist and pro-army elite. Conservative politicians voice fears in private of any unity deal that would allow Thaksin to return. Both Shinawatras have been ahead of many other Thai politicians in adopting gold framed pictures of King Vajiralongkorn as the banners on their Twitter feeds. Nobody from their political camp would comment about the monarchy. — Reuters