

Time for a North Korea ultimatum: Choose peace or obliteration

The 21st century lesson learned by the Kim dynasty is, if you don't want to wind up like Saddam Hussein or Moammar Gadhafi, keep building nukes.

by James Robbins



North Korea's Fourth of July missile test launched some diplomatic fireworks in the United Nations Security Council, including [threats of force](#). As Kim Jong Un grows increasingly belligerent and irrational, the international community should deliver a calm but stern message: "[It is no concern of ours](#) how you run your own country – but if you threaten to extend your violence, it will be reduced to a burned-out cinder."

This line is paraphrased from the 1951 anti-nuclear science fiction film, [The Day the Earth Stood Still](#). In the contemporary context, the North Koreans are the Earthlings, and we are the aliens.

The Day the Earth Stood Still was a message film from the dawn of the Cold War's nuclear arms race. In it, the wise, hyper-rational alien Klaatu lands in Washington D.C. as an emissary from beyond, accompanied by a planet-busting [robot named Gort](#). Klaatu notes that humanity (like North Korea) has "discovered a rudimentary kind of atomic energy" and is "experimenting with rockets." He observes that "in the hands of a mature civilization, these would not be considered weapons of aggression."

This is also true of seasoned superpowers that accept the nuclear deterrence paradigm. But, Klaatu continues, "We don't trust you with such power. ... We know the potentiality of these developments and we are disturbed to find them in the hands of children." Or in the contemporary case, in the hands of an unstable young dictator with delusions of grandeur.

The aliens Klaatu represented had their own crushing experience with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). After the alien Armageddon, they rebuilt their civilization and established an army of Gort-style galactic policemen to identify and snuff out aggression, kind of like the original vision for the United Nations. They could thus engage in peaceful interplanetary trade (think globalization) without fear of experiencing another apocalypse. "We do not pretend to have achieved perfection," Klaatu declares, "but we do have a system – and it works."

Unlike some other peace-themed films, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* did not preach an unconditional form of love thy neighbor. Klaatu makes clear that the Earthlings have "no alternative" to the alien proposal to end Earth's weapons research and join the team. Should the offer be refused, "the planet Earth would have to be – eliminated."

The United States has taken a hard rhetorical line against Pyongyang in the past. For many years, it was U.S. policy that it would be ["unacceptable" for North Korea](#) to possess nuclear

capability. However, once Pyongyang began testing nuclear weapons, we accepted it. Yes, there have been sanctions and statements and bluster, but North Korea's weapons program has continued, even accelerated. The 21st century lesson learned by the Kim dynasty is, if you don't want to wind up like deposed and deceased WMD-seekers Saddam Hussein or Moammar Gadhafi, keep building nukes.

Past U.S. policymakers may have comforted themselves with the notion that it didn't matter if they bowed to Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, since North Korea lacked delivery systems that could threaten the United States and the globe. Yet now the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is accelerating the pace of its missile program and has tested an ICBM, which Kim called "[a gift](#) for the American bastards." Simply proclaiming this "unacceptable" lacks credibility; Pyongyang has heard that one before.

We are now in the analogous position of the aliens represented in the film 66 years ago. We are saying, or should be, that the risk is too great for rogue states and other proliferators to possess the awesome power of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them worldwide. We have a superior civilization, and countries like North Korea are welcome to participate.

But if they continue to put the world at risk, they will have to answer to our version of Gort. President Trump and the international community could deliver to Pyongyang Klaatu's final words before leaving Earth: "Your choice is simple. Join us and live in peace. Or pursue your present course – and face obliteration. We will be waiting for your answer. The decision rests with you."

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