Never has world peace depended on two men less suited to keeping it

Terrifying, certainly, but it may be no bad thing that the world is starting to contemplate exactly what a confrontation between the United States and North Korea might look like. Whether via-long range missiles or the very short-range bombardment or invasion of South Korea; whether aimed at the US mainland or a military base such as Guam; whether nuclear or conventional, the consequences of such a
war vary only in the speed at which they would lead to an apocalypse. Millions would die, more would be horribly injured and starve, the environmental damage would be vast and most likely irreparable, the world economy would be driven into depression, and, in fact, it would resolve precisely nothing, unless the view is taken that the only way to preserve stability in North-east Asia is to turn the region into a graveyard.

That, after all, is the logic behind the octane of nuclear deterrence – the credible notion of mutually assured destruction. It has been tested many times before, not least during the periodic flare-ups in the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. More recently it has kept an uneasy peace between the likes of India and Pakistan; Israeli possession of such weaponry may even have stalled any modern pre-emptive war against her by hostile neighbours.

Yet never in history has such a potential scale of destruction been in the hands of two men less suited to the task of keeping the peace. For the other way of contemplating the situation facing the whole world today is to consider that the fate of the planet is in the hands of Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un, their respective bizarre hairstyles symbolising their bizarre world view. Impatient, hypersensitive, insecure, dynastic, bullying, vain... the two men are hardly a mirror image, and there is no moral equivalence between democratic, freedom-loving America and the Stalinist hermit kingdom in North Korea, but the similarities in personality are, to say the least, disturbing.

Nor is there any equivalence about who is now holding the world hostage. It is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that is defying United Nations resolutions in its quest to become untouchable, and, thus, ensure the continuance of Kim’s rule and that of his family. It is North Korea, not America that is setting off rockets to intimidate its neighbours. It is Kim who executes political dissidents, up to and including his half-brother, famously ambushed at Kuala Lumpur airport. And it is Kim, his father and grandfather who has starved, duped and used his long-suffering people for the most cynical of motives.

All that the rest of the world, as near helpless bystanders, can do is to press on President Trump the need for caution, even as Kim is making direct threats to American lives and territory, and to tone down the rhetoric about fire and destruction, which makes little difference to Kim in any case, except perhaps to wind him up. We can also beg China to use whatever leverage it has over its unruly ally, and orchestrate the other powers in the region – South Korea, Japan, Russia, Australia and the smaller ASEAN countries to continue to use whatever diplomatic channels remain.

For now, though, we are staring into an abyss.