



Kim not just a comic cut-out

**Tim Lindsey and
Jeremy Kingsley**

NORTH Korea likes to boast that it has nuclear military capability and when it test-fired nuclear-capable missiles into the Sea of Japan the uproar was predictable.

The tension has increased with the United States successfully testing a ballistic missile defence system from California.

Was this the Bush Administration's response to North Korea's missile tests?

The North Koreans think it is. President Bush named North Korea part of his "axis of evil" and its leaders are described as "paranoid" and "mad".

The North Korean dictator, "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il, is easy to ridicule, with his penchant for dining on donkey meat, his platform shoes and bouffant hairdo.

Television's *South Park* team made a meal of him in their cheeky cartoon, *Team America — The World Police*.

But, far from being a crazy caricature, Kim Jong-il is a leader who, as former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright, noted is "very much on top of his brief".

That doesn't mean he is a nice guy and it doesn't mean he isn't weird, it just means he is not stupid or irrational. Neither was Stalin.

In fact, what Kim Jong-il's regime is doing makes sense if you see it through North Korean eyes.

They feel isolated and trapped. Their economy is failing because of US-led sanctions and this has led to millions starving, surviving largely on international food-aid.

And they feel besieged by the 600,000 South Korean and 30,000 American troops in South Korea.

Centuries of occupation by hated Mongol, Chinese and

Japanese overlords seemed to end when the Japanese left the peninsula in 1945, but then came the Americans.

Today, more than 50 years after armistice brought an end to the Korean War, a conflict that created three million casualties, Washington and Seoul are still officially at war with Pyongyang.

You can understand that North Koreans might have historical reasons to fear another conflict on the peninsula and that they plan on winning the next one.

Pyongyang's edge is its nuclear arms and its colossal standing army. At 1.1 million, it is one of the largest in the world.

It sees these as political bargaining points to protect North Korean sovereignty.

The regime in Pyongyang has plenty of political reasons for being nervous about the future. The dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union left North Korea feeling lonely.

The sudden demise of the Romanian regime and the execution of dictator Nicolae Ceacescu gave the North Korean elite another nasty fright, were they next?

They feel their back is to the wall and maybe it is. After all, US officials have openly and repeatedly called for regime change.

So, can this mutual misunderstanding and distrust be resolved without a nuclear war? Leading Korea-watcher Dr Paul Monk thinks it might be possible, identifying four possible solutions to the North Korea problem.

HE first is to massively increase diplomatic and economic pressure on the regime. The problem is this would not necessarily lead to Pyongyang reconsidering its position. The regime already feels isolated and further isolation will increase the percep-

tion that nuclear and military self-reliance is essential.

Economic pressure will only hurt the long-suffering North Korean people without affecting the military and political elite.

The second option is simply for the rest of the world to back off. This requires ignoring missile testing and the development of nuclear capacity.

Bad idea, says Monk. All this would do is delay the crisis and allow each side more time to dig in.

The third option is to return to the Agreed Framework initiative of the Clinton administration. This would be a positive step, but it wouldn't go far. The framework has already been rejected by North Korea and is clearly limited.

The last option is a "grand bargain". This would be a massive reconfiguration of the international community's relationship with North Korea.

It would involve a comprehensive peace agreement, the end of the state of war and engagement with North Koreans, politically and economically.

It could start with a thaw on the frozen North Korean regime bank accounts in Macao and getting funds moving again in North Korea's paralysed markets.

With luck and a lot of patient diplomacy, it could go a long way to removing the need for missile and nuclear programs.

So, what's the catch? It would require the US to back down and cross Pyongyang off its "axis of evil" list.

But, can you see George Bush doing that?

Prof TIM LINDSEY is director of the Asian Law Centre at the University of Melbourne where JEREMY KINGSLEY is a principal researcher