

War-Weary

by GWYNNE DYER

I have been writing this column twice a week for a long time, so I have a finely developed sense for when the audience is sick of a subject. We have definitely crossed that boundary with regard to the wars currently being fought up and down the strip of land between the longitudes of 40°E and 50°E (Eastern Ukraine/Persian Gulf/Israel, Gaza and Lebanon).

It's not just that they are stupid wars, launched by men who were too ignorant or too arrogant to realize that they could not win them (Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, Binyamin Netanyahu), and it's certainly not because they are harmless wars.

Not only are they killing thousands of people every week, but in every case the country that started the war also has nuclear weapons. In each case there is a small but real possibility that the leader in question might resort to using at least one 'tactical' nuclear weapon as a final warning rather than accept the blame for a humiliating failure to achieve his aims.

Yet nothing much that is new and interesting is happening from one day to the next in any of these wars, and the audience would really like to move on. I have been trying to write about something else at least once a week, so I thought: maybe I could do a piece about Kim Jong Un's teenage daughter's chance of being North Korea's next dictator.

Just fluff, really, but it's better than producing nothing to fill that space.

So I go online to update my limited knowledge of North Korean politics. Surprise! The last time most of them paid much attention to North Korea was in 2017-18, when Donald Trump decided that he would save the world from the threat of North Korean nuclear weapons.

As they used to say about the Roman empire: All Roads Lead to Donald Trump. But it was quite instructive, because it shows just how limited Trump's repertoire of negotiating tactics really is. What can his first-term attempt to stop North Korea from getting nuclear weapons tell us about the likely outcome of his current attempt to bring Iran to heel? Everything.

When he took power in early 2017 Trump seemed obsessed by the 'threat' of North Korean nuclear weapons. He made it the No.1 issue on his foreign policy agenda. He said that North Korean nuclear weapons 'will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.' He promised to 'totally destroy the country', and called Kim Jong Un 'Little Rocket Man.'

All the invective we're now hearing again, almost word for word, but then the big switch. 'I trust him,' Trump burred when the two men finally met in Singapore in 2018. 'He has a great personality. We fell in love through letters.' They met once more on the line dividing North Korea from South Korea (the 'DMZ') in 2019, and that was it.

No treaty, no further discussions, nothing. Within a year Trump had totally lost interest. Meanwhile North Korea's arsenal of nuclear weapons has grown to 60 warheads, according to a new estimate by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, and Pyongyang has recently tested an ICBM that can reach anywhere in the United States.

Will Trump pull the same vanishing act with Iran? Well, he already has with regard to the nuclear weapons issue, which was kicked a very long way down the road in the 'Memorandum of Understanding' he signed last month. That doesn't matter much, because Iran never had any nukes and wasn't even trying very hard to get them.

The current round of fighting is just about who controls the Strait of Hormuz, a huge and previously unexploited strategic asset that Trump's attack brought to the attention of the Iranian regime. With the price of oil going back up and the mid-term election looming near, Trump is quite likely to chicken out again.

So now we can get back to the real question: what will become of sweet little Kim Ju Ae, the 13-year-old daughter of North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un? She is definitely a hit with the masses, even though speculation that she might be his secretly chosen successor is severely discouraged.

While other potential heirs in the three generations of Kims have mostly been kept out of the public eye until the moment they are placed on the dynasty's (invisible) throne, Ju Ae came out four years ago for the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile. She has been at Kim Jong Un's side on dozens of public events since then.

However, her father is only in his 40s and looks fine apart from the world's worst haircut, so she may have to wait for some time.