

North Korea crisis: What will Russia do?

“It smells of freshness, and of our deep respect for our leader,” the woman declared, smiling to the Russian TV camera.

A North Korean, she’d just sniffed a big red flower named after the country’s former leader Kim Jong-il.

Part of a series of glowing reports on everyday life in the secretive state, covering topics from fashion to food, the moment was broadcast to millions of Russians watching state television over their breakfast.

The coverage suggested Russia was taking a rather different approach over North Korea’s nuclear programme and its missile tests, two weeks after Donald Trump tweeted that the US military was “locked and loaded”, primed to respond with what he called “military solutions”.

Vladimir Putin has underlined those differences many times this week, warning against whipping up “military hysteria”, and insisting that North Koreans would rather “eat grass” under more sanctions, than give up their weapons programme.

And while he has criticised recent missile tests as “provocative”, he’s also taken pains to explain them.

North Koreans remember the 2003 US invasion of Iraq over Saddam Hussein’s alleged weapons programme, Mr Putin reasoned.

So the country sees becoming a nuclear state as its only sure-fire guarantee of self-defence.

‘Paranoid’

“Russia believes that Pyongyang’s aim is not to bomb anyone, that its [nuclear programme] is a deterrent against South Korea and the US,” explains Alexander Gabuev of the Moscow Carnegie Centre.

“Russia understands that because it is just as paranoid about American ‘democracy promotion’ as North Korea is,” he adds.

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