EDDIE MAIR: If the recent rhetoric coming out of North Korea is matched by action, then the world is, in all likelihood, about to experience a nuclear war. Reassuringly for those of us who want to live to see spring again, many experts believe it IS just rhetoric coming out of North Korea. But what do they think at the Foreign Office, especially after the warning from Pyongyang this week that the safety of British and other diplomats in the country might not be guaranteed. The Foreign Secretary, William Hague, is in Yorkshire, where all good people should be. Good morning Mr Hague.

WILLIAM HAGUE: Good morning.

EDDIE MAIR: How worried should we be about North Korea?
WILLIAM HAGUE: Well, we should be worried of course about many of the things that North Korea does. It is developing nuclear weapons, missile technology, long-range missile technology. It’s also engaged in the proliferation of those items, to whenever it can, to other countries in the world and other items of military hardware as well; so we have to be concerned about all of those things and about the danger of miscalculation of course by the North Korean regime, which has worked itself up into this frenetic state of rhetoric in recent weeks and the danger that they would believe their own paranoid rhetoric. But it’s also important to stress that the international response to this, including our response, must be clear and united and calm. You were having a bit of a debate earlier on your programme about whether we should be calm and yes, we should. We should be clear that North Korea has a strategic choice to make between increased isolation or better relations with the rest of the world. At the moment they’re making the wrong choice. We should be united in working with the US, China and other countries on the UN Security Council, on this issue and we should be calm in not responding rhetorically to every rhetorical flourish and announcement from the North Korean regime. So we will continue to work with other countries, to make clear there’s that strategic choice and that the possibility of better relations with the rest of the world is there, if they choose to make a different choice from the one they’re making at the moment.

EDDIE MAIR: But is the threat real do you think? Is there a real danger to us or to our partners?
WILLIAM HAGUE: Well, there’s a threat to the world from any country breaching the non-proliferation treaty, which North Korea is doing; acting in contravention of a whole series of UN Security Council resolutions and setting out to develop more and more, longer range weapons, testing new nuclear weapons, and as I say, indulging in the proliferation of many items to other countries as well. We should be concerned about that. There is a danger in that. But it is important to stress that we haven’t seen in recent days, in recent weeks, a change in what is happening in North Korean society, we’ve not been able to observe that; we haven’t seen the repositioning of forces or the redeployment of ground forces that one might see in a period prior to a military assault or to an all-out conflict, so I think we have to, that’s why I say it’s important to keep calm as well as to be firm and united about this.

EDDIE MAIR: Keep calm and carry on, says Foreign Secretary. I want to ask you about the intelligence you have on North Korea. You’ve talked about, you know, you’re not seeing troop movements and so on. But in terms of what the leadership is thinking and what’s going on at the very top, have you any idea what they’re thinking?

WILLIAM HAGUE: Well, I can’t obviously discuss intelligence that we might have but what is going on here could easily be what we’ve often seen throughout history, among authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. Remember that this is a regime that has to justify the intense militarisation of their society and the development of these weapons and missiles, even though many people in their country are regularly and seriously short, even of food. Now to justify that you have to have an external threat and to justify many of
the other things that such a regime does. You have to have an external threat or danger that you can point to. And so I think this behaviour is consistent with that. I think the announcement last week that foreign embassies couldn’t necessarily be protected after Wednesday of next week, which is what they said to our embassy, is also consistent with that. But I haven’t seen any immediate need to respond to that by moving our diplomats out of there. We will keep this under close review, as I said, with our allies and international partners, but we shouldn’t respond and play to that rhetoric and that presentation of an external threat every time they come out with it.

EDDIE MAIR: There is a gap isn’t there between the country’s military desires and its economic reality. I mean you talked about the lack of food for many North Koreans. Danny Finkelstein told a joke in The Times this week which has Kim Jong Un saying, I demand a telephone call with Obama, but first I demand a telephone.

WILLIAM HAGUE: Yes, there is absolutely an enormous gap. This is a country where many people are working in the fields. It’s a case of manual labour in the fields, without many tractors, so they’re short of tractors. But they do have you know, the machines that carry long range and intermediate range missiles around. So, an enormous gap and I think that if the leadership of North Korea continue on their current path over the coming months and years, they will end up leading a broken country that is internationally isolated. And it’s isolated even more from China and China over the decades has done a lot to sustain and assist North Korea, but China has joined in the latest resolution at the UN Security Council, including the imposition of new
sanctions on North Korea. This is going to be a broken and friendless country unless it changes its path and it’s not too late to change the path. If North Korea opens up more to the rest of the world, encourages economic links with the rest of the world, the rest of the world, including the UK will respond to that and it’s one of the reasons we retain an embassy there.

EDDIE MAIR: What about the idea you hear that North Korea has no real intention of attacking anyone and all of this is perhaps quite a clever game to get more aid.

WILLIAM HAGUE: North Korea has under previous leaders, in the same dynasty, has certainly used that tactic, attention seeking if you like. And then in trying to, in some of the efforts with the world to settle these matters has then taken greater aid, including food aid of course. So yes, again, it could be consistent with that. But I think it’s important for us to be firm and united in the international community about that. This line of behaviour on which they have embarked in recent weeks will only lead to more pressure from the world, from the United Nations, as I say, including from China as things stand and so they are going to have to take that into account in deciding what to do next and I hope to calm down the rhetoric, the statements that we’ve seen in recent times.

EDDIE MAIR: Do you think Kim Jong Un is nuts?

WILLIAM HAGUE: I don’t know the man myself of course, it’s not easy, although we have an embassy there, it’s not easy to get face to face discussions
with North Korean leaders, so I’m not going to speculate about the psychology of the leader of North Korea, except in the terms that I’ve already spoken about. But authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, perfectly rationally from the point of view of their own survival, in the short-term, often do this sort of thing, try to ramp up an external threat, but in the long-term, it’s not in their interests, either the regime or the people of that country to do so. And so if they were wise, having played all these statements and having said all these things, they would take stock and say over the long term, it’s necessary to take a different approach and work with the rest of the world, rather than break its treaties, its conventions, its resolutions and just bring more and more pressure upon themselves.

EDDIE MAIR: Turning to domestic politics, do you believe that in welfare, the Conservatives have found a potential election winning issue?

WILLIAM HAGUE: I think it’s an important political issue. You’ve been discussing whether there should be a debate about this. I should think the debate is long overdue in this country. It’s triggered off in the last week or so, not because of what the government has said particularly, because what, what we’ve done this month, some of the important changes in the welfare system are coming into effect or starting to come into effect. I think it will be an issue at the next general election but most important of all, it’s an issue the country has to tackle. Welfare spending ran out of control under the last government and listening to Harriet Harman, I think it would run out of control again under another Labour … (interjection) …
EDDIE MAIR: Let me ask you ....

WILLIAM HAGUE: ... so we have to tackle this.

EDDIE MAIR: Let me ask you, we have a delay on the line, which I apologise for. Let me ask you a little about George Osborne. There were some stories in the papers last week saying Conservative knives were out for him. Some commentators believe perhaps his intervention with regard to Mick Philpott on welfare and so on, has done him some favours in the Party. Do you agree with him on what he’s saying about that?

WILLIAM HAGUE: Well I think the Chancellor does a great job in very difficult circumstances and I don’t think it’s necessary to find favours for him to do for himself. I think his observation was absolutely correct but I think it’s also important to look at everything that the Chancellor is achieving across the board. The raise in income tax thresholds, the increase in the number of jobs in the economy and Harriet Harman earlier was saying there isn’t any job creation. There are a million more private sector jobs in this country since the current government came in to power. The Chancellor is doing a very good job in very difficult world circumstances on all of those things and I support him through thick and thin.

EDDIE MAIR: Would you go, if your driver had parked your car in a disabled bay?
WILLIAM HAGUE: Well I think that, when other people are driving cars, this can happen and I think everybody understands that’s not something the Chancellor goes around doing all the time. Those sorts of things are best avoided. But such things unfortunately do happen.

EDDIE MAIR: Does it play, that story, that photograph, does it play into the perception of the Chancellor, that there’s perhaps a kernel of truth in what people might think about him. Tom Utley in The Mail this week, sighted an observation that George Osborne, quote, ‘always looks like an aristocrat in a powdered wig, peering nervously through his carriage window at the Parisian mob, on the eve of the French Revolution’.

WILLIAM HAGUE: Well look, we all get our share of abuse about our appearance or our voice. Heaven knows, I’ve had more than my share of it, over the last couple of decades. And you know, the Chancellor, I know him well, he used to work for me, he’s one of my closest colleagues in government, he is used to taking all that on the chin and getting on with the job. In fact he’s superb at it, given the amount of abuse that he has to endure and the difficult choices that he has to make. So no, I don’t agree with that, I think the Chancellor and the government should be judged on what we actually do and here is a Chancellor who can now say, Corporation Tax is coming down to 20%, to the lowest of all the major industrialised economies. The income tax threshold is going to be £10,000 but I won’t go on, but you get the point.

EDDIE MAIR: That’s very kind. Thank you very much Foreign Secretary, William Hague, in Yorkshire.
INTERVIEW ENDS