

CRISIS IN THE PENINSULA: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE KOREAS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

By blowing up a joint liaison office on the border with South Korea and threatening to deploy troops along the demilitarised zone, North Korea is back to what it is best at — aggressive posturing with the threat of war. Troubles began in the peninsula early this year after a deadline the North dictated to the U.S. to achieve progress in the denuclearisation talks expired on December 31. North Korea has conducted missile tests this year, sending warning signals to Seoul and Washington. The latest crisis was triggered by anti-North defector groups that sent out propaganda leaflets via balloons across the border. Angered by the South's refusal to crack down on them, Pyongyang has severed hotlines, demolished the liaison office, and is planning to deploy troops along the border. Tensions now risk rolling back whatever little was achieved through engagement over the past two years. South Korea's Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul resigned on Friday and Seoul has also moved to charge the defector groups. But these moves are unlikely to ease tensions as the real problem is the stall in the talks. Two years after U.S. President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un met in Singapore to discuss denuclearisation, little has been achieved in that direction. It is likely that the North is now trying to get back Mr. Trump's attention.

There were no high hopes of a quick solution to the U.S.-North Korean rivalry — it goes back to the 1950-53 Korean war — when Mr. Trump and Mr. Kim met. Still, the summit was an opportunity to open a new direction in relations. Mr. Kim had in principle agreed to denuclearisation in return for the lifting of American sanctions. But talks stalled as the U.S. insisted on “complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization” by North Korea in return for any concession. The North Koreans were wary, particularly because of the U.S.'s history of going after dictators such as Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya or its breaching of the Iran nuclear deal. Mr. Kim's regime offered a staged approach. It put a freeze on nuclear tests and offered to shut its Yongbyon nuclear complex. The U.S. and South Korea could have responded to these measures and kept the talks on track. On less contentious issues, such as declaring a formal end to the Korean war — both Koreas are still technically at war — an agreement could have been achieved as a confidence-building measure. But that road was not taken. Worse, the U.S. and South Korea went ahead with their joint military exercise. Mr. Trump is now grappling with many problems at home — from the coronavirus outbreak and a sagging economy, to anti-racism protests. Still, if he does not want his two summits with Mr. Kim to be mere footnotes of history, he should take measures to revive talks with North Korea and push the peninsula back to normalcy.

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