

NORTH KOREA MAY END UP CREATING A GLOBAL DISASTER

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

The South Korean intelligence agencies, according to media reports, have discovered activities that indicate that North Korea might be restoring part of the Tongchang-ri missile launch site it had earlier dismantled. The discovery — and not the actual work at the site — follows the failed Hanoi summit where the US President Donald Trump and North Korean dictator Kim Jong un could not bridge the differences between the respective positions of the two countries. It is difficult to tell whether North Korea was restoring the missile launch site in anticipation of a failure in Hanoi. However, the restoration work does indeed provide Mr Kim with a great signalling device to reveal his displeasure.

The Hanoi summit was based on three flawed premises. One, the US did not see that Mr Kim was primarily interested in loosening economic sanctions. No other measure like declaring an end to Korean War, setting up of liaison offices and selling the dream of a prosperous North Korea was going to work. Two, Mr Trump overestimated his abilities of achieving denuclearisation in one go. A step-by-step approach of freezing nuclear weapons programme followed by a pragmatic arms control programme could have worked better. Three, Mr Trump thought that he could control the sequencing. Denuclearisation, he assumed, would precede sanctions relief.

According to Mr Trump, Mr Kim has still committed not to resume missile and nuclear weapons testing. The restoration of the missile launch site doesn't mean that testing will ensue immediately. It could just be a bargaining chip by which North Korea could get Mr Trump to be less rigid on economic sanctions. However, if testing resumes, the tensions between the two countries could rise significantly. It will embolden those in the US who have advocated a military solution to the North Korean proliferation problem. An isolated dictator with a small (and vulnerable) nuclear arsenal might feel pressed to reach for the proverbial nuclear button should he fear a military attack from the world's sole superpower. It is time to take these developments seriously.

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