

THE NUCLEAR CHALLENGE: ON NORTH KOREA'S ECONOMIC WORRIES

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

President Joe Biden's call for "stern deterrence" in response to [North Korea's nuclear programme](#) and Pyongyang's angry reaction, accusing the Biden administration of being "hostile", suggest that both countries are headed towards a diplomatic showdown. In his first congressional address last week, Mr. Biden said the nuclear programmes of Iran and North Korea posed a "serious threat to America's security and world security" and promised to respond through "diplomacy and stern deterrence". His administration has also completed a review of the U.S.'s North Korea policy. Mr. Biden is likely to steer between Barack Obama's "strategic patience" and Donald Trump's top-level summitry in dealing with the North Korean nuclear challenge. North Korea has remained an unresolved foreign policy puzzle for all post-War American Presidents. In recent times, U.S. Presidents have shown a willingness to diplomatically engage with Pyongyang. The Clinton administration had signed a framework agreement with Pyongyang to halt its nuclear programme. Mr. Obama had initiated talks with North Korea in 2012, which collapsed after Pyongyang launched a satellite. He then adopted a wait-and-watch approach, which came to be called "strategic patience". Mr. Trump altered his predecessor's North Korea policy by reaching out to the regime and meeting its leader, Kim Jong-un, thrice, but without a breakthrough.

In theory, the Trump administration and North Korea had agreed to a complete de-nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, but failed to agree on its formula. In the 2019 Trump-Kim summit at Hanoi, the U.S. proposed removal of sanctions for de-nuclearisation, but North Korea rejected it. Pyongyang had taken a phased approach and sought sanctions removal in return. Ever since, there has been no improvement in ties. After Mr. Biden assumed office, North Korea had conducted short-range missile tests, which the U.S. saw as a provocation. Mr. Biden does not have many good options in dealing with North Korea. The U.S.'s key goal in northeastern Asia is the de-nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. And the only practical way to achieve this is through diplomacy as a military strike on North Korea, a nuclear power, is out of the question. Though the Trump-Kim summits did not lead to any breakthrough, they have still created a diplomatic momentum for engagement. Despite its threats to expand its nuclear programme, North Korea sticks to the self-imposed moratorium on nuclear and long-range ballistic missile tests. The North, as acknowledged by Mr. Kim recently, is going through a tough economic crisis and is open to talks. Mr. Biden should seize this opportunity and try to reach common ground with Mr. Kim that addresses both North Korea's economic worries and the U.S.'s nuclear concerns. That should be the focus of the Biden administration's new North Korean strategy.

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