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Missile Tests and Pyongyang's Impatience at the Biden Administration's "Strategic Patience"

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US and ROK Marines in joint artillery exercises—a constant sore point for the DPRK.. *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

SYNOPSIS

North Korea's recent series of missile tests highlight the diversity and increasing sophistication of its heavily-sanctioned ballistic missile weapons program, as well as the inadequacy of the U.S.' current approach to Pyongyang. A phased approach to DPRK's denuclearization and the revival of the Six Party format may be the U.S.' least-worst option given the rapidly deteriorating status quo.

COMMENTARY

With the United States seemingly preoccupied with a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine, January witnessed the busiest ever month of missile tests by North Korea, the incoming chair of the UN Conference on Disarmament. The first launch of a Hwasong-12 intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) since 2017, on 30 January, marked the culmination of seven tests that included hypersonic missiles (5 and 11 January), long-range cruise missiles (25 January), as well as short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) launched from a railcar (14 January), an airport (17 January) and a wheeled launch-vehicle (27 January). The DPRK's tests highlight the diversity and increasing sophistication of its heavily sanctioned ballistic missile weapons programme, as well as the inadequacy of the United States' current approach to North Korea.

The Biden administration predictably condemned the missile tests as "dangerous", "profoundly destabilising" and in contravention of UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. It also imposed its first economic sanctions on the DPRK and asked the UNSC to follow suit. However, more than nine months after the administration's policy review and the announcement of its new "calibrated and practical" approach to North Korea, the impasse over Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and missile programmes remains.

Strategic Patience in All but Name

While the Biden administration maintains that its North Korea policy is different from the Obama-era policy of "strategic patience" — doing nothing significant while waiting out Pyongyang — it has been evident that the administration has devoted its available bandwidth towards managing the US-China competition, and more recently Russia and the Ukraine crisis, while sticking its DPRK policy on "cruise control" — repeating the mantra that the United States harbors no "hostile intentions" towards Pyongyang and is committed to talks "anytime, anywhere, without preconditions", but failing to offer any tangible proposals to entice North Korea to restart negotiations.

Chairman Kim Jong Un blames the United States for the failed summit in Hanoi in 2019 and insists that Washington first end its "hostile policy" — support for sanctions and joint military drills with, and the US military presence in, South Korea — as a precondition for negotiations. The Biden administration would not be able to fulfil such preconditions without seriously undermining America's alliances with South Korea and Japan as well as the credibility of its extended deterrence. However, the United States could have better supported President Moon Jae-in's proposal for an "end of war declaration" as a means to break the diplomatic logjam with Pyongyang.

The US response to Moon's proposal was tepid at best, with National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stating in October that Seoul and Washington "have somewhat different perspectives on the precise sequence or timing or conditions" of Moon's peace declaration. Last December, South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong said both his country and the United States had "effectively" agreed on a draft text of an end of war declaration but it was obvious that the allies were not in sync on the issue. Whereas the Moon administration views the end of war declaration as a means to restart negotiations with the DPRK and advance the inter-Korean peace process, the Biden administration would link it to concrete steps towards North Korea's

denuclearisation, as laid out in the US-North Korea Joint Statement signed at the Singapore Summit in June 2018.

However, the missile tests indicate that the situation on the Korean peninsula is shifting even further away from the United States' desired end-state — a denuclearised DPRK — and leaving Washington with fewer palatable options as Pyongyang threatens to resume nuclear weapons and ICBM testing that were temporarily suspended in 2018. The resumption of such tests will invariably result in the imposition of more US sanctions and threats of military action and regime change from hawks.

The Futility of Even More Sanctions

Resorting to even more sanctions in an attempt to shore up a deteriorating status quo is unlikely to be effective. Given Russia and China's reticence to even support a Security Council resolution condemning the latest missile tests, there is little likelihood of additional multilateral sanctions. Further, the DPRK has already demonstrated that it can withstand "maximum pressure" sanctions without capitulating to American demands. Pyongyang's self-imposed COVID-19 economic "quarantine" has arguably been even more punishing than any sanctions. Imposing additional sanctions would also serve to further entrench and legitimise Pyongyang's US-hostile-threat narrative and rally domestic support for the regime.

Further, although it is generally accepted that the North Korean economy is reeling from the effects of the pandemic and natural disasters, if the Kim regime is prepared to resume nuclear weapons and ICBM testing it would also have calculated that it can withstand Beijing's economic wrath, just as cross-border trade has tentatively resumed. As for military action, it is a political and diplomatic non-starter. A Brookings Institution report indicates that although the United States has military options available to ostensibly neutralise the DPRK nuclear programme, none of them is realistically feasible, given the risks of collateral damage and escalation.

A Phased Approach to Denuclearisation: The Least-Worst Option

Pyongyang's latest round of sabre-rattling could be a means to catch the Biden administration's eye even as the latter's attention is drawn towards other, more pressing geopolitical concerns. In this vein, the missile tests and the threat to resume nuclear weapons and ICBM tests could be bargaining chips to trade for denuclearisation and sanctions relief. However, the issue of DPRK's denuclearisation has vexed the four previous administrations since no one actually believes that Pyongyang is sincere about ridding itself of its hard-won nuclear weapons.

Even if denuclearisation is a practical impossibility, the Biden administration cannot concede the point and formally recognise the DPRK as a nuclear state. It would be a serious domestic political liability, would possibly trigger a regional nuclear arms race, not to mention emboldening other countries to seek nuclear capabilities and unravel the global anti-proliferation regime.

The Biden administration's least-worst option may now be to adopt a phased approach seeking the DPRK's eventual or partial denuclearisation in place of an unrealistic complete, verifiable, and irreversible disarmament (CVID) approach.

A logical place to start would be to revisit Kim Jong Un's offer at the Hanoi Summit to shut down the Yongbyon nuclear facility, which processes plutonium and highly enriched uranium for the DPRK's nuclear weapons, in exchange for the lifting of all UN sanctions since 2016. The United States should use a UN report's finding of North Korea's worsening humanitarian situation as well as the regime's own admission of a "persevering struggle" to start talks to increase humanitarian assistance as a confidence-building measure preparatory to a resumption of negotiations for trading a phased easing of sanctions for the closure of Yongbyon.

It is understandable that the Biden administration is hesitant to adopt a "radical" DPRK strategy for fear of appearing to cave in to Pyongyang's "blackmail" and being labelled "appeasers" by the Republicans in a mid-term election year. However, the United States can minimise the risks of unilaterally bearing the responsibilities and costs of any concrete actions by multilateralising the process and reviving the Six-Party framework.

Conclusion

A lasting solution for the Korean peninsula will require buy-in and agreement from all the interested powers, and reviving and working through the Six-Party format — which is suitable for providing the necessary guarantees regarding monitoring and coordinating denuclearisation and sanctions relief — provides the best hope for that.

The administration's current trajectory and devotion to the status quo is unsustainable and it needs to recalibrate. Unlike the case of the Vienna talks to salvage the Iran nuclear deal — the Joint Comprehensive Plan of action (JCPOA) — the United States confronts a fully mature DPRK nuclear programme, which a joint report by the Rand Corporation and South Korea's Asan Institute of Policy Studies estimates could number over 200 nuclear weapons by the end of this decade. Further, the recent missile tests demonstrate that these weapons have the potential to be paired with increasingly sophisticated and survivable missile systems. Continuing with "strategic patience" — doing nothing — by any other guise is no longer a viable policy.

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