

# **Biden administration must rejig its North Korea strategy**

The US preoccupation with sanctions and its rhetoric of protecting its credibility with its regional allies seem rigid and dated

The UN Security Council was to hold an emergency meeting this Friday to discuss North Korea's seven missile tests in the past four weeks. The meeting was requested by the United States, along with Britain and France, and agreed by Russia, which holds the presidency of UNSC for the month of February.

However, given the Russo-American saber-rattling on Ukraine at the Security Council on Monday and especially in view of Sino-Russian history with Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs, one more UNSC meet on North Korea's juggernaut is very unlikely to produce anything substantive.

In fact, anticipating this likelihood of an ineffectual - or worse, divided - UNSC, Britain, France and Germany on Wednesday pre-empted the council by calling on North Korea "to accept the repeated offers of dialogue put forward by the United States," thereby putting the onus exclusively on the US.

Indeed, of these seven missiles tests - which included six ballistic missiles, two of them hypersonic - it was the last one, the Hwasong-12 IRBM (intermediate-range ballistic missile) test last Sunday, that marked the longest-range missile test since 2017.

This is the one that startled US President Joe Biden's administration, obliging it to approach the UNSC for early redressal. On normal apogee, the Hwasong-12 can reach 5,500 kilometers, which covers all of the US military deployments in North Korea's periphery.

Last October as well, the US, UK and France convened a UNSC emergency meeting as North Korea, in defiance of the Biden administration's calls, tested a submarine-launched ballistic missile that, at least potentially, enables Pyongyang to strike anywhere on Earth. Even at that time, the UNSC could not reach any consensus because of open opposition from China and Russia, leaving the US to fend for itself.

## **US taking the lead**

The US track record in taking the lead of course throws up its own puzzles and pitfalls. In 2017, then-president Donald Trump began by name-calling Kim Jong Un as “Rocket Man,” threatening him with “fire and fury,” but soon melted into exploring their “personal relationship” that resulted in two unsuccessful summits.

Other than obtaining a 17-month respite from North Korean tests, those two summits served only to embolden Kim, who has since rejected all US efforts to revive talks, underlining their trust deficit.

While candidate Biden, like Trump, had also begun by calling the North Korean leader “short and fat” and “a thug” and by being highly critical of Trump’s “love” for Kim, he has yet to follow the Trumpian U-turn by offering to hold a direct meeting with Kim Jong Un. This neglect of the “Dear Respected Comrade” by President Biden has since triggered Kim’s ratcheting up of this testing spree.

Also, while Biden continues to pursue the same Trumpian aims of complete denuclearization of North Korea as a precondition to lifting sanctions, his approach in engaging Pyongyang has remained rather subtle and piecemeal, if not insipid and lackluster. The US continues to seek refuge in lofty ambitions but its strategies so far have allowed the North Korean nuclear and missile programs to flourish unabated.

The Biden administration’s preoccupation with sanctions and its rhetoric of protecting its credibility with its regional allies have become increasingly mind-numbing and appear both rigid and dated. Meanwhile, Kim Jong Un has continued building his deterrence capabilities.

## **Unstoppable Kim Jong Un**

In a rare gesture in 2017, the UNSC unanimously slapped sanctions on North Korea’s oil imports and coal, iron, textile and fish exports. These, however, were followed by North Korea precipitously conducting its sixth nuclear test on September 3 that year, followed by Hwasong IRBM tests in November.

Two of those missiles were fired over the Japanese island of Hokkaido and three others demonstrated the ability to reach the US military base in Guam; plus it tested a Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) with a range of up

to 13,000 kilometers, which could potentially hit the US mainland.

There is little doubt that Kim Jong Un's buildup of a nuclear deterrent remains aimed at the United States and that its allies Japan and South Korea remain only a subset of his strategy. But even there, rather abrasively, Kim has called Joe Biden a weak coward and a real thug, while his powerful sister Kim Yo Jong warned the Biden administration that if "it wants to sleep in peace for the coming four years, it had better refrain from causing a stink as its first step."

More recently, Kim Jong Un seems to be taking advantage of Biden being preoccupied with the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis. There are even deeper insinuations of Ukraine having helped North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities.

Meanwhile, South Korean President Moon Jae-in sees that his country's security could become marginalized in US calculations in dealing with the North Korean regime.

After the Hwasong-12 test, he was quick to express his anxieties, warning on Monday how these precipitous missile tests were bound to push Kim Jong Un closer to scrapping its April 2018 moratorium on nuclear and ICBM tests. This was immediately echoed by US officials as they began calling on Pyongyang to revive direct talks without any preconditions.

It is bewildering, however, to see the US repeating the same old rhetoric after the ground realities have changed rather rapidly. If anything, US officials have been urging Pyongyang for direct talks ever since the failed Kim-Trump Hanoi summit of February 2019, but have reportedly been rebuffed by the Kim regime. Understandably, the gulf between the expectations of both sides has expanded with the passage of time.

### **Changed ground realities**

Taking a cue from his interactions with Trump, Kim Jong Un's frequent and longer-range missile tests seem part of his attempt to apply the same maximum pressure "tit-for-tat" strategy to reverse Washington's hostile sanctions policy.

In this context, the US strategy of imposing severe sanctions - which remains equally ineffective in the Ukraine crisis - or worse, posturing a redeployment of

US nuclear forces in South Korea will only egg Kim on to accelerate these tests and eventually breach his April 2018 moratorium.

Kim Jong Un building up his robust nuclear deterrence capability makes denuclearization of North Korea a distant dream. At the most ambitious level, Kim now wants the US to recognize North Korea as a normal nuclear-weapons state - in fact to reward it for being a responsible nuclear state.

He now wants the US to convert its outdated strategy of nuclear disarmament-for-lifting-sanctions into one of lifting sanctions in lieu of suspension of North Korean tests - this swap being his prerequisite for a Biden-Kim summit. Kim aims to sign a much-anticipated peace treaty with the US, extending mutual diplomatic recognition, exchange ambassadors and finally remove US forces from North Korea's periphery.

All this seems way beyond what US is even contemplating. Surely the current format of US North Korea strategy has stopped working and needs an urgent overhaul. Kim Jong Un's increasingly robust nuclear deterrence makes it incumbent on the Biden administration to rejig its North Korea strategy.

Can it begin to think of calibrating incremental lifting of sanctions to buy time with a moratorium on North Korea's missile tests? The US may also need to recalibrate its military deployments in the region to initiate foot-in-the-door diplomacy to hold its regional allies in good stead by redefining its alignments and objectives.

Can the US offer to desist from military exercises, downsize its military presence in North Korea's periphery by potentially inducting its regional allies like Japan, South Korea and other friends into a more dynamic AUKUS-plus security mechanism to broad-base its advantages?

The Biden administration has to begin contemplating such out-of-the-box strategies to incentivize instead of alienating North Korea, an authoritarian regime with robust nuclear capabilities.

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