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North Korea in 2021: Need for New Nuclear Diplomacy

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Nuclear dangers are hovering around North East Asia, where Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) or North Korea is indulging in a show of its nuclear strength and strong polemics. On January 05 2022, it fired a ballistic missile¹ into waters off its east coast between South Korea and Japan. Reportedly, the missile flew about 310 miles and landed outside of Japan's exclusive economic zone. Also, in December 2021, North Korea had lambasted Group of Seven's (G7) statement for meddling in the internal matters of DPRK. It had stated "rather than fomenting distrust and confrontation, the G7 should focus more on its original mission of addressing their economic issues"². The past year has seen a number of events which included North Korean sabre-rattling, even as the approach of world leaders kept oscillating between the hope of striking a grand bargain and strategic patience.

What are North Korea's nuclear capabilities?

North Korea remains a poor country but it spends around a quarter of its GDP on its military. The appropriate size and strength of its nuclear arsenal remains unclear. Many military intelligence communities and strategic experts struggle to assess the characteristics and capabilities of North Korea's nuclear program³. But there are various estimates which put the number of nuclear warheads around 55⁴. Pyongyang supposedly produces enough fissile material for twelve additional weapons every year. Meanwhile, a report⁵ by the RAND Corporation has cautioned that it might have 200 nuclear weapons and hundreds of ballistic missiles stockpiled by 2027.

North Korea has conducted six nuclear tests to date. Interestingly, the nuclear program experienced acceleration when Kim Jong- Un assumed power in 2011. Kim has directed four nuclear tests. As per one report⁶ of Nuclear Threat Initiative, more than 125 missile tests have been conducted, exceeding the number of tests conducted under Kim's father. North Korea's guiding philosophical principles remains *juche* (self-reliance) and *songun* (military-first politics). Therefore, military plays a central role in political affairs and its position has been steadily elevated through the Kim dynasty. In Pyongyang's eyes, the only way to guarantee national survival is to develop military capabilities.

North Korea's nuclear activities in 2021

North Korea mainly hones its nuclear capability⁷ through cyber security program⁸. The cybercrimes have provided a lifeline for the Korean economy, which has been hobbled by sanctions. Money from the offensive cyber capabilities represents about 8% of country's economy. According to a US Cyber security Agency⁹, North Korea's State backed malicious activities targets banks around the world, hijack digitally mined currency, steal defence secrets, extort money through ransom ware and launder ill-gotten gains through crypto currency exchanges.

December 2021 marked a decade of Kim Jon Un as Supreme Leader. Through the year, new developments continued, in January, Pukkuksong-5, a missile with a range of around 3,000 kilometres¹⁰ which would allow it to strike US's external territory Guam in the western Pacific was unveiled.

In August, it was reported by IAEA that North Korea had resumed its five-megawatt reactor, which it has, historically, used to produce plutonium to support its nuclear weapons¹¹ program. The reactor had remained inactive from December 2018 to July 2021. The information gathered from the satellite imagery and other technical means indicated discharge from the cooling water from the reactor, thus suggesting its resumption of operations.

Moreover, on September 11 2021, with a view to prepare for “both dialogue and confrontation” with the US, DPRK tested two nuclear capable missiles which displayed new capabilities¹². They described them as a “strategic weapon”¹³ that had been developed over two years. One of the missiles flew 1500 kilometres. North Korean state media also reported that “an effective deterrent ensuring the security of our state more firmly and overpowering powerfully the anti-[North Korean] military moves of the hostile forces,”¹⁴

On September 15, North Korea conducted the maiden test of a rail-mobile ballistic missile or the Railway Mobile Missile Regiment, a ballistic missile delivery system, which state media reported could travel 800 kilometres¹⁵. Pyongyang released photos that showed the launch vehicle near a tunnel opening out from a mountain. A North Korean official has mentioned this test to be as “an intensive blow to the menacing forces in many places at the same time.”

Pyongyang is playing a smart game, but too much of anything could harden position and makes nuclear diplomacy difficult.

Way Forward with a New Nuclear Diplomacy

Since 2006, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has adopted nine major sanctions resolutions on North Korea in response to the country's nuclear and missile activities. Each resolution condemns its nuclear and ballistic missiles activities and calls on the country to cease the activities which violate previous resolutions.

USA's Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), a part of former US president Donald Trump's maximum pressure campaign has also done significant damage to Pyongyang's economy. On the 10th anniversary of Chairman Kim's exercise of power, he indicated that faltering economy will be the national priority as the country faces a¹⁶ "great life-and-death

struggle” This might be an indication that the Supreme Leader is ready to join the negotiating table.

A new nuclear diplomacy may be the need of the hour. At the end of the Cold War, through a Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR)¹⁷ program, the US had helped eliminate weapons of mass destruction in former Soviet states. This program targeted to dismantle strategic assets by providing transport, storage and safeguards for the ultimate disposal of relevant material and facilities. Taking this example, a holistic CTR program with the reinvigoration of the Six Party Talks could be a positive way forward. A diplomatic engagement in the past has not resulted in denuclearisation¹⁸. Therefore, to mitigate nuclear risks; the focus should now shift towards resolving the nuclear issue and ironing out the hostility persisting between US and DPRK. To reanimate nuclear diplomacy, a new consensus must also be rebuilt among the contracting parties and DPRK. As the North’s economy is in doldrums, the world leaders could use economic incentives to steadily bring Pyongyang into deliberation and consultation and thereby alleviate the nuclear dangers in North East Asia.

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