Biden steers toward confrontation with North Korea

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After conducting a lengthy review of US policy on North Korea, the Biden administration has signaled a strategy that, despite minor tactical differences, is essentially the same as the failed approaches of previous American administrations toward the dangerous flashpoint in North East Asia.

The review was dominated by top-level officials of the US military and intelligence apparatus, including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Mark Milley, along with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

While President Biden has been briefed on the result, no details have been released. However, it is clear from the remarks of White House press secretary Jen Psaki last Friday that the White House intends to try to bully and starve North Korea into submission, all in the name of "diplomacy."

Psaki told reporters: "Our policy will not focus on achieving a grand bargain, nor will it rely on strategic patience. Our policy calls for a calibrated practical approach that is open to and will explore diplomacy with the DPRK [North Korea], and to make practical progress that increases the security of the United States, our allies and deployed forces."

The "grand bargain" is a reference to Trump's policy of opening up direct talks between himself and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The stated aim was to reach a deal whereby Pyongyang dismantled its nuclear and missile programs, facilities and arsenal in exchange for a normalisation of relations and an end to the crippling sanctions imposed by the UN and unilaterally by the US.

Trump's unstated objective was to shift North Korea's alignment away from its formal ally, Beijing, and toward Washington, under conditions where his administration was ramping up its trade war measures and military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific against China. Angry that Beijing had supported the UN sanctions, Pyongyang signalled that it might be open to such a shift.

After threatening North Korea in 2017 with "fire and fury" like the world had never seen, Trump abruptly switched tack in 2018 and held a face-to-face meeting with Kim in June in Singapore. While Trump hailed the summit as a triumph and praised Kim effusively, the only result was a vaguely worded joint statement committing the two sides to the "denuclearisation" of the Korean Peninsula. As a first step, North Korea froze its testing of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles, while the US halted major war games with South Korea.

Despite Trump's grandstanding, further talks aimed at pressuring North Korean to dismantle its nuclear arsenal foundered on the failure of the US to offer anything in return. Above all, the US refused to provide any significant relief from punishing sanctions until Pyongyang had completely given up what it has always regarded as its chief bargaining chip—its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

"Strategic patience" is the phrase used to describe the previous strategy of the Obama administration, in which Biden was vice-president. Obama made no effort to resurrect the deal that the Bush administration had earlier reached with North Korea, and then sabotaged, for it to denuclearise in return for sanctions relief and normalised relations. "Strategic patience" was simply the continual ratchetting up of sanctions on North Korea in a bid to force it to accede to US demands.

One American official told the *Washington Post* that the Biden administration was proposing a "careful, modulated diplomatic approach, prepared to offer relief

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for particular steps" with an "ultimate goal of denuclearisation." The official said: "If the Trump administration was everything for everything, Obama was nothing for nothing. This is something in the middle."

This so-called middle course is nothing new. Rather it is a repackaging of the "carrot and stick" strategy of the past four US administrations, starting with Bill Clinton—the main differences being, as time has gone on, larger sticks and far smaller carrots. The fundamentals remain the same—no end to sanctions until there has been "complete, verifiable denuclearisation." Or, as a senior US official told the *Washington Post*: "We fully intend to maintain sanctions pressure while this plays out."

The Pyongyang regime already confronts a deep economic and social crisis, in large measure due to the sanctions regime, which has now been compounded by the coronavirus pandemic and flooding. Last month, North Korean leader Kim likened the present situation to the famine in the 1990s that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, on which North Korea was heavily dependent economically. Estimates of the death toll range from hundreds of thousands to several million.

While the Russian ambassador to North Korea, Alexander Matsegora, denied that there is a new famine—at least in the capital Pyongyang—the situation is obviously dire. UN and US sanctions have blocked or heavily restricted most of North Korea's exports of minerals and agricultural products, and many key imports, including of oil and oil products.

As a result of the pandemic, North Korea has shut its border with China—by far its largest trading partner, accounting for roughly 90 percent of total annual trade. North Korean trade with China last year fell by 75 percent, according to Chinese figures. By one recent estimate from South Korean economics professor Kim Byung-yeon, economic output fell by 10 percent last year.

The Stalinist regime in North Korea, which rests heavily on its large military, has little room to manoeuvre. It has taken steps to open up to foreign investors with the enticement of ultra-cheap, heavily disciplined labour. However, without the normalisation of relations with the US and a lifting of sanctions, such steps do nothing to relieve the economic crisis.

Incapable of making any appeal to the international working class, Pyongyang resorts to sabre rattling and bloodcurdling threats in a desperate bid to force a deal with Washington. The two countries are still formally at war, as fighting in the 1950-53 Korean War ended only with an armistice. A peace treaty was never signed and the US has maintained sanctions on North Korea ever since. The result is an explosive situation on the Korean Peninsula that the Biden administration intends to intensify.

Reacting to Biden's speech to Congress last week, in which he branded Pyongyang as "a serious threat," North Korean official Kwon Jong Gun declared the comments to be a "big blunder" and warned that the US could find itself in a "very grave situation." Biden's statement "clearly reflects his intent to keep enforcing the hostile policy toward the DPRK (North Korea) as it has been done by the US for over half a century," he said.

The prospect of any talks is limited. US Secretary of State Blinken declared on Monday that it was up to North Korea to make the first move. After making clear that the objective of any talks would be complete denuclearisation, he said: "It is, I think, up to North Korea to decide whether it wants to engage or not on that basis." Meanwhile all of the sanctions will remain in place—a recipe not for diplomacy, but for a potentially explosive confrontation.

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