

North Korea restarts its nuclear facilities

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According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), there are indications that North Korea has restarted its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon and associated facilities. The moves highlight the continuing tensions on the Korean Peninsula as well as with the US where the Biden administration has maintained the crippling sanctions imposed on North Korea under Obama and Trump.

In its latest annual report released last week, the IAEA stated that there were no signs that North Korea had operated its Yongbyon reaction between December 2018 and July 2021. “However, since early July 2021, there have been indications, including the discharge of cooling water, consistent with the operation of the reactor,” it stated. The UN nuclear agency has no direct access to North Korea.

Moreover, for five months to early July, the IAEA reported that steam coming from the reprocessing plant at the complex pointed to the extraction of plutonium from spent reactor fuel rods. North Korea has a small arsenal of nuclear weapons based on plutonium and has conducted six nuclear tests, most recently in 2017.

In the same year, President Trump issued a series of bloodcurdling threats to North Korea including a declaration on the floor of the UN that the US could “totally destroy” the country. Trump abruptly changed tack to hold a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore in June 2018. Pyongyang put its testing program on hold and in return the US halted its annual war games with South Korea rehearsing for conflict with the north.

A second summit in Hanoi in March 2019, however, ended without any agreement. North Korea had offered to permanently halt nuclear and ballistic missile tests and to dismantle its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon in return for a limited lifting of sanctions on items connected to civilian needs. Trump, however, insisted on an all or nothing approach, demanding full, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation before any sanctions would be lifted.

While the nuclear issue was the public purpose of the

summits, Trump’s underlying aim, amid a dramatically escalating confrontation with China, was to draw North Korea, China’s only military ally, away from Beijing and into Washington’s orbit. However, with its economy heavily reliant on China, North Korea was clearly not prepared to turn on its ally without guarantees from Washington that were not forthcoming.

An uneasy standoff has ensued over the past two years with North Korea conducting limited tests of short-range missiles, while the US recommenced some joint military exercises with South Korea.

Tensions have not eased under Biden. After a lengthy review of US policy towards North Korea, the Biden administration in May announced a broad strategy that differed only cosmetically with the confrontational approach of Trump and Obama. Biden officials have appealed for talks without preconditions but have offered nothing to North Korea that would lead it to believe the outcome would be any different from previous negotiations and failed agreements that demanded a great deal from Pyongyang in return for limited promises.

North Korea reacted angrily to nine-day US-South Korean joint war games held last month. While the military exercises were computer-simulations, there was no doubt that North Korea was the “enemy” being targeted. Kim Yo-jong, the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, branded the military drills as an “act of self-destruction” and warned that North Korea would step up its pre-emptive strike capabilities.

North Korea’s decisions to restart nuclear facilities and boost military capabilities are aimed at pressuring the US to make concessions. The current UN sanctions, imposed at the instigation of Washington, along with unilateral US sanctions, have cut off virtually all North Korean exports as well as sources of foreign exchange and severely limited imports of critical items such as oil and petroleum products.

The country’s economic and social crisis was further exacerbated last month by heavy flooding, which forced thousands of families to flee and destroyed vital crops.

This came on top of a lengthy heat wave that also damaged the country's agricultural output. In June, Kim Jong-un acknowledged that the food situation in North Korea was "getting tense."

While the Biden administration has offered limited humanitarian aid to North Korea, the US strategy towards Pyongyang is basically aimed at using sanctions to cripple the economy and starve it into submission.

Biden's special envoy for North Korea, Sung Kim, was in Seoul Korea last week for talks with top South Korean officials including the country's lead nuclear negotiator Noh Kyu-duk. After meeting Noh, Kim reiterated the call for talks with North Korea and claimed that joint military exercises with South Korea were routine and defensive in character.

Kim absurdly told reporters that the US does not have any "hostile intention" towards North Korea. As well as maintaining a paralysing sanctions regime, the US has never formally ended the 1950–53 Korean War and has repeatedly refused to normalise relations with Pyongyang by concluding a peace treaty. The US military continues to maintain 28,500 troops along with major bases in South Korea.

Kim's visit to Seoul has been followed by a trip to Washington by Noh Kyu-duk this week to discuss ways of restarting talks with North Korea. South Korea's foreign ministry indicated that Noh will meet with officials from the US State Department, as well as the White House National Security Council during his trip, which ends today.

The flurry of diplomatic activity between Seoul and Washington points to renewed efforts to bully and threaten North Korea to fall into line as the Biden administration ramps up the US confrontation with China.



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