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*US Presidential Election 2020*

## **North Korea: Instability under Biden?**

*By Liang Tuang Nah*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*With the incoming Biden administration, Pyongyang will likely remind Washington that the Kim regime will not be ignored or underestimated. The region should brace itself for North Korean destabilising action meant to communicate this.*

### **COMMENTARY**

BY NOW, the reality that Joseph Biden has been chosen as the president-elect of the United States should be an accepted fact amongst governments and capitals worldwide, even as the incumbent Donald Trump is refusing to give way. Biden's inauguration in January 2021 should bring forth changes in US foreign policy which raises much hope in Asia.

While many would congratulate Biden on his win, keen observers of North Korean affairs and Northeast Asian security, might predict pending instability on the Korean peninsula from provocative actions taken by Pyongyang. Even as Kim Jong-un had a de facto working relationship with the now outgoing President Trump, such a familiar interactional dynamic no longer exists with the incoming President Biden.

### **Strategic Signalling Options for the DPRK**

From Kim's perspective, Trump viscerally understood what the former was capable of, but Jong-un cannot be certain that Biden and his advisors appreciate the importance the Kim regime places on not being disregarded or downplayed.

Hence, after the White House welcomes its new occupant next January, Kim might well order a demonstration of resolve that North Korea be respected as a peer in the eyes of America's executive leadership.

In order to unequivocally communicate to the new Biden administration that the DPRK must be cautiously dealt with, that US-DPRK relations must not be allowed to fade into obscurity, and to encourage Washington to negotiate with sincerity, four options for communicative national aggrandisement present themselves.

From the least to most probable, they are: a nuclear warhead test, military adventurism targeting South Korea, testing an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), and firing short ranged missiles.

### **Kim's Four Options**

Firstly, a nuclear detonation will surely elevate North Korea to the top of the Biden administration's foreign policy priorities. However, it is also impractical and extremely costly. To begin with, an underground nuclear test cannot be safely done as the Punggye-ri nuclear test site is geologically compromised from the earlier six underground nuclear tests conducted from 2006 to 2017.

Since South Korean and Chinese scientists predict that a seventh nuclear test would cause the mountain above the site to collapse, thereby venting radioactive contaminants throughout the region and into China, which is the North's only ally, consequently angering Beijing, such a test is politically infeasible.

Moreover, the resultant additional UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions (comprehensive and painful sanctions have already been imposed from 2016-17 from previous nuclear and missile antagonism) from a seventh test, would result in drastic economic shrinkage, inducing near-complete dependence on Chinese support or charity, which proud North Korean leaders find humiliating.

Referencing provocative action which is doable and tolerable in terms of strategic costs, there is small-scale military aggression against South Korea's (ROK) military. Such antagonism includes shooting at South Korean outposts across the DMZ, planting landmines on ROK Army patrol routes, or even bombarding Southern rural residents with artillery. All this is feasible as they have been historically done.

With South Korea being an American treaty ally, any cross-border military tensions would attract Washington's attention. However, since these do not imperil US vital interests, and do not seize American media headlines as no Americans are hurt or killed, the DPRK's military adventurism would fade from the Biden administration's list of priorities, even as Pyongyang's misdeeds trigger immediate retribution from the conventionally superior ROK military.

Therefore, even if limited military action is more implementable and likelier than nuclear testing, the former's strategically unpalatable cost-benefit ratio makes it unattractive for highjacking President Biden's foreign policy priorities.

### **No Strategic Cost for Kim**

Third on the list of increasingly probable crisis incidents is the “limited” test of an ICBM. In this case, an ICBM is launched on a lofted trajectory or an extremely steep angle, causing the missile to soar into space but limiting the range of the test to 1000 km or less.

Consequently, the missile will not transit Japanese airspace, thus inducing less international anxiety but still illustrates North Korean technological capability, since US missile experts can calculate the missile’s true range when fired at an optimum angle, placing the mainland US within striking range.

The Kim regime’s deterrence message against the new Biden administration would be obvious: Washington would be compelled to prioritise North Korean affairs, and the relatively bearable cost for the former is being referred to the UNSC for violating earlier resolutions prohibiting North Korean ballistic missile activities.

Realistically shouldering this cost could be manageable if Pyongyang appeals for Beijing’s protection as a permanent UNSC member with veto rights, arguing in mitigation that the ICBM travelled a relatively short distance, thereby not harming or threatening anyone.

Lastly and most likely, Kim could order a series of short range missile launches calculated to show that all South Korea-based US military facilities are within range. In reality, this was repeatedly done from May 2019 until March 2020, and although such actions are technically violating UNSC resolutions, neither China nor the US had the inclination to punish the DPRK. Hence, for the low yield benefit of reminding Biden that the Kim regime is not to be forgotten, Pyongyang pays no strategic cost.

## **So What Then?**

Predicting the future is a fickle art, but if Kim wants to show Biden why Trump took him seriously, Jong-un might decide to begin on the lower rungs of the escalation ladder with short ranged missiles, later graduating to limited range ICBM tests if improvements in US attitude are not seen.

How Washington will react is unknown at this point. But since the policy of “Strategic Patience” involving deterrence and isolation under the Obama administration, and Summit diplomacy without tangible quid pro quo compromises under the Trump administration, have failed to advance North Korean denuclearisation, we can only hope that the Biden administration will derive an effective new strategy which will trump—pun intended—the efforts of his two predecessors.

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