Solving the North Korean Puzzle

What is the issue?

- North Korea’s new Hwasong -15 missile can travel 15,000 Kms, which brings its principle adversary ‘USA’ within striking range.
- Considering, the delicate situation, only a comprehensive diplomatic solution will work.

What is the history of the conflict?

- North Korea withdrew from the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003.
- This led to the Six-Party Talks (North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China Russia & USA) to diffuse tensions in the Korean peninsula.
- But all along the talks, the North Korean regime had outwitted the big powers and went on to conduct several nuclear tests, leaving the world perplexed.
- As all options (from imposing sanctions to isolating North Korea) have currently been exhausted, none of the major powers have a solution thus far.

What is the current political setting?

- North Korea is now in procession of nuclear capable intercontinental ballistic missiles and there are currently no workable military options to disarm it.
Lessons from the tragic end of Saddam Hussein and Qadhafi would weigh high on North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-un’s mind. This would certainly dissuade him from giving up his weapons at any cost. But Japan, South Korea, USA and the international community are yet to reconcile to this reality.

What are the major stress points in the Korean neighbourhood?

- **Nuclear proliferation** - Kim sees Japan and South Korea as arch rivals. They are currently facing the heat in the backdrop of an increasingly unreliable security commitment from the Trump administration. This might forced to start developing nuclear arsenal of their own, which won’t be difficult considering the technological capabilities that they have. This could have a domino effect for the region and the rest of the international system, thereby effectively ending the NPT regime.

- **China’s case** - The risk of a lethal nuclear fallout in its neighbourhood and the potential rush of North Korean refugees into its territory worries China. But notably, at odds with the other powers, China is also uneasy about the possible reunification of Korea, which it believes would undercut its influence.

Is there any rationality to Kim’s actions?

- Kim has been branded ‘mad’ for his seemingly univocal provocations.
- But his strong hold over North Korea and clear focus on developing strategic arsenal is actually very rational politicking.
Kim’s Politics - Importantly, his policy is premised on the classical military strategy of escalating to de-escalate.

- This involves rising the costs of a possible conflict to unacceptable levels.
- The rationale is that as stakes get very high, the enemy would be dissuaded from taking to active confrontation.
- This would consequently force out some concessions from the adversary in difficult areas and thereby help in de-escalation.

The Objective - Getting North Korea recognised as a nuclear weapon capable state and ensuring survival of his regime.

- The eventual removal of sanctions as a natural consequence of the former.
- Notably, with the Trump administration’s indicisiveness, Kim seems to be winning this gambit.

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How does the current global political framework look?

- The falling apart of the multilateral diplomacy even in a crisis situation like North Korea is an apt reflection of the contemporary world order.
- This has been mainly due to the arrival of Mr. Trump and the increased assertions of China and Russia in the international arena.
- Isolating states that “misbehave” has proved to be ineffective from experiences with Pakistan, Iran and North Korea’s case.
- On the contrary, the P5+1 initiative (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, plus Germany) was successful in reaching a deal.
- Subsequently, the deal has also withstood harsh political storms and restrained Iran’s nuclear quest (thus far), without damaging coercive action.
**What is the way forward?**

- As the nuclear threshold has been crossed, international sanctions and the use of force against North Korea will not yield the desired results.
- It will rather lead to immeasurable human suffering within North Korea and its neighbourhood.
- While a diplomatic solution will work, the outcome is uncertain. The intent for such a solution is also not there among the great powers at this point.
- Hence, the best way ahead is initiate talks by recognizing for now - the fact that North Korea has nuclear weapons and its delivery mechanisms.
- Reviving the dormant Six Party Talks at the earliest and taking note of the historic grievance of North Korea would be paramount in this approach.

**Source: The Hindu**