

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

North Korea's Isolation Will Likely Lead to More Missile Tests

The pandemic has only deepened North Korea's isolation, leading to a famine in the country and difficulty for the Kim regime.

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North Korean leader Kim Jong-un continues to focus inward. The widespread expectation is that he will eventually return to negotiations with inflated demands. However, isolation might be the new normal. That would mean a less prosperous, less worldly North Korea. It would also mean a stronger military, and likely a more dangerous one.

The year began with a striking run of seven missile tests. The final test, of an intermediate-range missile (IRBM), was particularly notable. It was the longest launch since 2017, when President Donald Trump spoke of “fire and fury” in response to North Korean threats.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in said the recent test “means that North Korea has come close to abandoning its moratorium” on nuclear and long-range missile tests. The launch may also end Moon’s hope for diplomatic progress with the North before he leaves office. Moon seemed irritated with Kim, telling North Korea to “stop raising tensions and pressure” and return to negotiations.

The latest test also puts Washington on notice to expect another round of brinkmanship by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). The Biden administration added new sanctions in response to the North’s short-range tests, causing Pyongyang to warn: “If the U.S. adopts such a confrontational stance, the DPRK will be forced to take stronger and certain reaction to it.” The IRBM test came just two weeks later.

More ominously, Kim has suggested previously that he is prepared to test intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). At the December party plenum he declared: “The military environment of the Korean peninsula and the trend of the international situation getting instable day after day demand that bolstering the state defense capability be further powerfully propelled without a moment's delay.”

The North Korean Politburo said in January it would “strengthen and develop without delay more powerful physical means to definitely overpower the daily intensifying hostile moves of the United States.” How better to do so than test nuclear weapons or missiles capable of hitting America? The party leadership also instructed “the field concerned to reconsider all the confidence-building measures previously and voluntarily taken by our state and rapidly examine the issue on resuming all actions which had been temporarily suspended.” This is assumed to mean long-range missile and nuclear tests.

The North Korean people are surely expected to glory in these grand military achievements. Yet they might find that hard to do on less-than-full stomachs. Kim publicly addressed the food situation in the country last year, calling it “tense.” He also referred to an “arduous march,” a term used to describe the deadly famine of the late 1990s.

The regime has also acknowledged a “food crisis” cited in a new propaganda film entitled “2021, A Great Victorious Year.” According to NK News, the video’s narrator said that “Kim presented ‘important policy ideas in order to urgently stabilize the people’s lives and the tense food distribution situation and overcome the current food crisis with an emergency policy’.”

But these expressions of concern won’t relieve hunger pangs of the North Korean people. The regime has put forth some unusual propaganda themes to buttress the Kim dynasty after two years of near-total isolation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. One such theme is that Kim is suffering greatly for the people, evidenced by his recent weight loss.

Kim is believed to have shed around forty-four pounds. Some have suggested this was the result of an illness, came from doctor’s orders, or was done for political purposes. The latter theory is the most interesting, suggesting that with the steady economic tightening, Kim’s access to abundant calories posed a political problem. It may have even undermined support among less fortunate party loyalists. Dropping weight was supposed to reduce evidence of this glaring inequity.

The new propaganda film implies that his weight loss reflects suffering on behalf of the people. For instance, as Kim struggled down makeshift stairs at a construction site, NK News reported that the narrator explained Kim “showed us his fatherly side by doggedly braving snow, rain and wind while taking on the fate of the nation and people like his own children.” Moreover, “His body completely withered away, and he showed his motherly side by greatly suffering and worrying to realize the dreams of the people.”

The film included footage of Kim galloping on his white horse and leading North Korean officials on a ride. The snippets are dramatic but may not resonate with the North Korean people as in the past. Regime mythmaking has grown stale and is incongruous with popular awareness of the state's limitations. Too many North Koreans have seen too much of South Korea via smuggled media.

This awareness increases the importance of Pyongyang's attempt to eradicate foreign cultural influences. Kim's shift has been dramatic. He went to school in Switzerland and demonstrated a surprising interest in foreign characters and celebrities, such as Disney characters and Dennis Rodman. The DPRK hosted a gaggle of South Korean musicians four years ago that included K-pop group Red Velvet. Kim and his wife attended their concert.

However, much has changed. Kim and Trump were exchanging "love letters," and the North treated the South with a modicum of respect. After the collapse of the February 2019 summit, Kim largely ended contact with the United States and South Korea. Other nations reported that the DPRK halted or restricted diplomatic engagement.

The isolation deepened in 2020 as Kim sought to battle the COVID-19 pandemic. Two years later, the process is almost complete. North Korea has no meaningful contacts with either Washington or Seoul, no embassies operating in Pyongyang, no NGOs doing humanitarian work in the DPRK, and virtually no trade with anyone, though commerce may resume with China soon.

Perhaps the most important impact of the North's self-quarantine was to make possible a return to the past policy of highly limited access to foreign, and especially South Korean, culture. After expanding international contact, Kim appeared to worry that his regime had lost the young, or at least the offspring of urban elites. While it is possible that he saw COVID-induced isolation as an opportunity to toughen ideological controls, a temporary campaign doesn't seem worth the effort. Limits on foreign contact, including diplomatic, humanitarian, and economic connections, will have to be permanent to be effective.

That would complement an aggressive campaign to enhance the North's deterrent capabilities. The Carnegie Endowment's Ankit Panda argued that Kim "doesn't just want more missiles, he wants better missiles." To do this, however, Kim appears to have accepted the continuation, at least in the near- to mid-term, of sanctions. To accomplish Kim's military objectives, sanctions will not be lifted, the economy will be hobbled, and the people will be hungry. This means greater ideological controls are required to preserve the regime.

The prospect of accelerated North Korean arms development, including renewed testing of ICBMs and nukes, should move Northeast Asia onto the Biden administration's priority list. But Washington faces a world of trouble, starting with Russia and Iran. Relations with China

appear to have stabilized in a difficult place, but most policymakers agree that great power competition in Asia remains the primary challenge today.

It will be only too easy for the Biden administration to largely ignore North Korea, much like the Obama administration did. However, neglect is no solution. Pyongyang will continue expanding its arsenal. The United States will have to face this fact eventually. The likely result is the de facto acceptance of North Korea as a mid-level nuclear power.

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