



### RECENT NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR ADVANCEMENTS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR PRESIDENT BIDEN

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



On March 25, 2021, North Korea fired two ballistic missiles, which it claimed were new ‘tactical guided’ missiles and could carry a payload of 2.5 tonnes,<sup>1</sup> in the country’s first major display of power since Joe Biden became the US President. A few months earlier, in January, they had unveiled a new Submarine-launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM), among other missiles and conventional forces, during a military parade marking the end of the 8th Congress of the Workers’ Party. They had also displayed a new, larger Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) during a similar military parade in October 2020. These displays are a continuation of North Korean nuclear advancements which have increased exponentially since Kim Jong-un took office in 2011. Although the former US President, Donald Trump,<sup>1</sup> showed early promise in 2018 by meeting with Chairman Kim several times, his efforts ultimately bore no fruit. President Joe Biden will now have to face a North Korea that has grown more confident and has a greater nuclear capability than ever before.

<sup>1</sup> “North Korea Claims ‘New Tactical Guided’ Missiles were Launched,” *BBC*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56533260>

## Recent North Korean Nuclear Advancements

The North Korean nuclear capability has expanded to new levels in the past few years, as was displayed for the world to see during the recent military parades. The new SLBM, labelled as the *Pukguksong-5*, was declared the “world’s most powerful weapon”<sup>2</sup> by state media. This SLBM was displayed just days after Kim Jong-un said that North Korea was making improvements with regards to nuclear-powered submarines, tactical nuclear weapons and advanced warheads designed to penetrate missile defence systems.<sup>3</sup>

The new ICBM which was unveiled in October, unofficially dubbed the *Hwansong-16*, was the latest in a list of North Korean ballistic missiles that can reach the US mainland. Although North Korea already possessed this capability, experts say that this new ICBM was likely designed to carry Multiple Independent Re-entry Vehicles (MIRVs), allowing it to attack more targets and make interception more difficult.<sup>4</sup> Such developments, although worrying, were not surprising by any means. Supreme Leader Kim had promised a “new strategic weapon”<sup>5</sup> as early as January 2020. Although these new missiles won’t be deployed by North Korea for years to come, the message being sent is clear.

North Korea has made considerable nuclear advancements. It now possesses an extensive ballistic missile programme, giving it the potential to reach South Korea, Japan and the US. According to a UN report, North Korea also now possesses the ability to miniaturise its nuclear warheads to fit inside its ballistic missiles.<sup>6</sup> In terms of nuclear missile testing, North Korea has conducted over a hundred missile tests since 2014. Despite a lack of testing in 2018, a return to normalcy was seen the following year. In March 2020, North Korea conducted a record nine missile tests in a single month.<sup>7</sup> These advancements pose a serious threat to any hope of North Korean nuclear disarmament.

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<sup>2</sup> “North Korea Unveils Submarine-launched Ballistic Missile at Military Parade,” *CNN*, January 15, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/14/asia/north-korea-military-parade-intl-hnk/index.html>

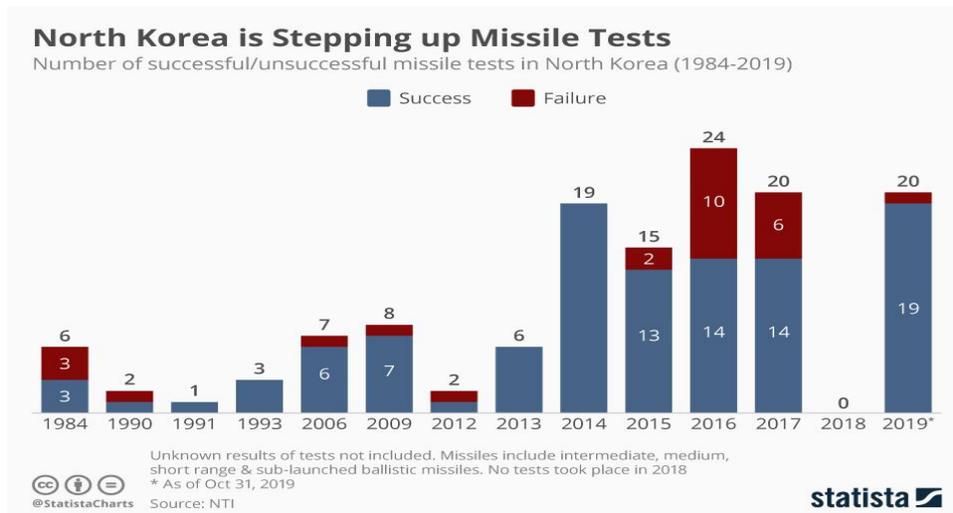
<sup>3</sup> “Kim Jong Un says North Korea is Developing Tactical Nukes, New Warheads and a Nuclear-powered Submarine,” *CNN*, January 9, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/09/asia/north-korea-nuclear-development-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> “North Korea Unveils ‘Monster’ New Intercontinental Ballistic Missile at Parade,” *Reuters*, October 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-idUSKBN26V01K>

<sup>5</sup> “North Korea’s Leader Promises ‘New Strategic Weapon’, Leaves Room for Talks,” *Reuters*, January 1, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-idUSKBN1YZ1DX>

<sup>6</sup> “North Korea ‘Probably’ has Mini Nuclear Warheads: UN Report,” *DW*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/north-korea-probably-has-mini-nuclear-warheads-un-report/a-54430331>

<sup>7</sup> “Expect a Surge in North Korean Missile Tests, and of Greater Range,” *Defense News*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/04/10/expect-a-surge-in-north-korean-missile-tests-and-of-greater-range/>



**Source:** “The Worrying Escalation of North Korea’s Missile Tests,” Statista, November 20, 2019, <https://www.statista.com/chart/9172/the-worrying-escalation-of-north-koreas-missile-tests/>

### Former President Trump’s Approach

Despite his best efforts, the former US President, Donald Trump, encountered the same problem that many of his predecessors faced, namely that North Korean nuclear diplomacy has proven to be quite volatile.

The former President Trump went to great lengths to achieve meaningful disarmament with North Korea. Indeed, he went to lengths that no previous US President had. He was the first US President to set foot on North Korean soil, and meet with Kim Jong-un. He met with Kim during the Singapore Summit in 2018 and initially, seemed to make a considerable amount of progress when North Korea agreed in principle to the “complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, North Korea carried out no nuclear tests in 2018, the first time this had happened since 2011. The Trump administration also promised to cancel US-South Korea joint military exercises, although it later back-tracked. The White House also blocked a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting on North Korean atrocities,<sup>9</sup> a move which was seen as appeasing North Korea.

Ultimately, however, President Trump’s North Korean nuclear diplomacy was not successful. His demands for complete denuclearisation in exchange for sanction relief and economic aid were not accepted by Kim Jong-un. Despite his self-proclaimed good relationship with Chairman Kim, he had

<sup>8</sup> White House, *Joint Statement of President Donald Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit*, White House, June 12, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump- united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/>

<sup>9</sup> “Desperate to Save Diplomacy, White House Blocks UN Meeting on North Korean Atrocities,” *Foreign Policy*, December 9, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/09/white-house-blocks-un-meeting-north-korea-atrocities-trump-kim/>

also imposed 'maximum pressure' sanctions against them. The combination of high sanctions and increasing ties with South Korea upset Kim Jong-un. In his 2019 New Years' speech, he said, "...if the United States persists in imposing sanctions and pressure against our Republic, we may be compelled to find a new way for defending our sovereignty."<sup>10</sup> After their Singapore Summit, former President Trump said that North Korea was "no longer a nuclear threat."<sup>11</sup> That, however, is clearly not the case.

### Challenges and Prospects for President Biden

The North Korean nuclear diplomacy will certainly be a complicated matter for President Joe Biden to face. This is a nuclear-capable state that has grown substantially in recent years, and now poses a direct threat to the US.

Going on the words and previous actions of President Biden, one would assume that he would rely on economic sanctions and international cooperation in dealing with North Korea. President Biden has made clear how he felt about the former President Trump's meetings with Kim, saying that he won't go down the same route of sharing 'love letters' and that Trump had effectively 'legitimised a thug.' President Biden feels a return to pre-Trump policy is required when it comes to North Korea, i.e., sanction relief in return for steps towards denuclearisation, all without giving North Korea the legitimacy it wants.

Historically speaking, the use of sanctions and economic aid has been successful in the US-North Korea nuclear diplomacy, but only temporarily. Indeed, despite tough international sanctions on North Korea, their defence spending has remained steady since 2016 (at about 15.8 per cent of GDP<sup>12</sup>). A recent report showed that sanctions imposed on North Korea are failing to advance denuclearisation prospects while causing harm to the civilian population.<sup>13</sup> It is clear that sanctions are not the solution to denuclearisation, but rather can be used as leverage in bringing North Korea to the negotiating table.

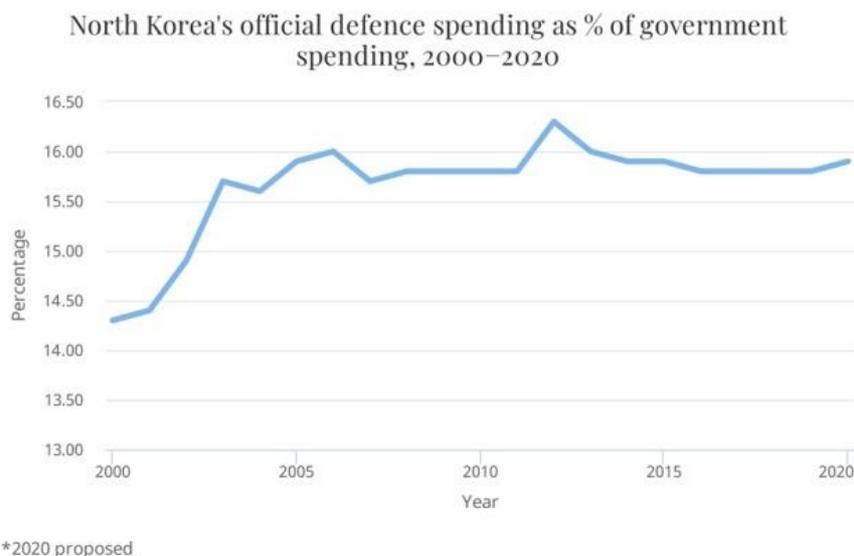
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<sup>10</sup> "Kim Jong-un's New Year Message Warns on 'New Path' if Sanctions Stay," *The Guardian*, January 1, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/01/kim-jong-uns-new-year-message-warns-of-new-path-if-sanctions-stay>

<sup>11</sup> "Trump says North Korea 'No Longer a Nuclear Threat,'" *Reuters*, June 13, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-trump-idUSKBN1J915T>

<sup>12</sup> "North Korea: Sidelining Economic Development to Prioritise Strategic Weapons," *IISS*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2020/07/north-korea-defence-policy-strategic-weapons>

<sup>13</sup> "Report: Sanctions on N. Korea Not Working; Harming Civilian Population," *VOA*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/report-sanctions-n-korea-not-working-harming-civilian-population>



**Source:** “North Korea: Sidelining Economic Development to Prioritise Strategic Weapons,” IISS, July 10, 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2020/07/north-korea-defence-policy-strategic-weapons>

To add to the nuclear advancements made, North Korea’s growing nuclear posturing is another cause for concern for President Biden. Chairman Kim sees nuclear weapons as a necessary part of North Korea’s military capability. He said, “with our reliable and effective self-defensive nuclear deterrent, there will be no more war on this earth and our country’s safety and future will be secured forever.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, with the strong US presence in South Korea, nuclear weapons help North Korea maintain strategic stability and a balance of power in the Korean peninsula.

Any suggestion of complete denuclearisation will be rejected by Kim Jong-un, as seen under the Trump administration. President Biden’s most likely avenue for progress might be North Korea’s ICBMs, which are the only direct threat to the US. Under former President Trump, Chairman Kim had agreed to a long-range missile testing moratorium in 2018, although it was ended the next year. Perhaps focusing on long-range ballistic missiles will be a positive first step, as Chairman Kim has shown willingness to negotiate in the past. Whatever the case may be, President Biden will know that North Korean nuclear capability cannot be allowed to grow further.

## Conclusion

Despite former President Trump’s claims, North Korea is still perceived in the US as a serious nuclear threat. The US believes that the nuclear advancements made under Kim Jong-un in recent years are

<sup>14</sup> “Kim Jong Un says there will be ‘No more War on this Earth’ thanks to North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons,” CNN, July 28, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/27/asia/kim-jong-un-nuclear-weapons-intl-hnk/index.html>

a cause for global concern. President Biden will have his work cut out for him. Historically speaking, North Korean nuclear diplomacy has proven to be quite unpredictable. The easing of sanctions coupled with partial steps towards denuclearisation seems to be President Biden's most likely approach. Whatever the case, one thing is clear; there is no easy fix.