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North Korea increases the pressure

Through targeted provocations, Pyongyang wants to strengthen its position and achieve a relaxation of sanctions

Last week, North Korea put an end to the rapprochement with South Korea. It blew up the Joint Liaison Office of both states in the North Korean border town of Kaesong and cut off all direct channels of communication with Seoul. The liaison office had been a symbol of cooperation between North and South Korea and was opened in September 2018 as part of the process of détente between the two countries.

North Korea now described South Korea as an 'enemy' and announced that it would once again increase its deployment of soldiers in Kaesong and Mount Kumgang. Guard posts in the demilitarised zone, which had been withdrawn under an earlier agreement with South Korea, are to be re-occupied. The pretext for the obviously carefully planned provocations was a flyer campaign by South Korean activists and North Korean refugees who had sent regime-critical flyers with balloons from South Korea across the border to the north.

The main role in the aggressions against the South was not played by the North Korean ruler Kim Jong-Un, but by his younger sister Kim Yo-Jong, who has already gained more political influence in Pyongyang over the past months. In the spring of 2020, Kim Jong-Un didn't appear in public for several weeks, which caused speculation about his health. During this time, foreign observers already considered his sister as a new central figure in the leadership or even a possible successor to Kim Jong-un. In her new role as spokeswoman vis-à-vis the South, she can now demonstrate strength and further consolidate her position in the North Korean power apparatus.

The failure of the Hanoi summit and its consequences

North Korea's provocations are a bitter setback for South Korean

President Moon Jae-In, who has been working for reconciliation and communication with North Korea since his election in 2017. Moon's efforts had initially been successful. He had mediated in the escalating conflict between the US and North Korea in 2017 and was instrumental in the first summit between US President Trump and Kim Jong-Un in Singapore in June 2018. There was also progress in inter-Korean relations. A total of three summit meetings between President Moon and Kim Jong-un were held in 2018, at which confidence-building measures and enhanced cooperation between the two countries were agreed.

However, the major setback came in February 2019 with the failure of the second summit between President Trump and Kim Jong-un in Hanoi. The summit was broken off prematurely because no agreement could be reached on the denuclearisation of North Korea and on the relaxation of sanctions demanded by Kim Jong-un. However, the failed Hanoi summit was not only a setback in the relations between the US and North Korea, but also prevented further progress in inter-Korean rapprochement. Joint economic projects between North and South Korea (e.g. infrastructure projects or trade agreements) could only have been implemented if international sanctions against North Korea had been relaxed accordingly.

It is true that the South Korean government has made several proposals to North Korea in recent months for sanction-compliant cooperation projects, e.g. humanitarian aid deliveries or confidence-building measures in the border region. However, Pyongyang has made clear that it has no interest in projects that do not have any direct economic benefit for North Korea. North Korea had hoped to receive mainly economic and financial aid from the South. However, from North Korea's perspective, under the current sanctions regime there are no substantial projects that South Korea could offer the North – and consequently no reason to cultivate relations with the South.

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Pyongyang is disappointed that South Korea was unable to persuade the US to relax its sanctions. Its hope that it could persuade South Korea to withdraw from the international sanctions regime in order to promote joint economic projects with the North ended equally disappointing, as South Korea was not prepared to take such a step. Pyongyang's attempts to drive a wedge between the US and South Korea were unsuccessful. With the latest aggression, Pyongyang now wants to send a clear signal that it has lost patience with the South.

North Korea also sends a signal to the US

However, the real addressee of the provocations against South Korea is the US. By fomenting tensions with South Korea, Pyongyang wants to ensure that the US pays more attention to North Korea again. After the failed summit in Hanoi, North Korea had slipped down the US government's list of priorities. US President Trump emphasised that North Korea does not pose a threat to the US because Kim Jong-Un does not cross the red lines drawn by Trump (nuclear tests and intercontinental missile tests). Trump played down the importance of the numerous tests of North Korean short-range missiles. Otherwise, he tried to ignore North Korea as far as possible. The most important thing for Trump is that North Korea does not cause any problems in the upcoming US election campaign.

For Kim Jong-Un, the failure of the Hanoi summit meant a loss of face. As a result of the summit, he initiated a change of course in his policy towards Washington and resumed the technical development of his nuclear and missile programme. In May 2019, North Korea resumed testing of short-range ballistic missiles, and in early 2020 Kim Jong-Un announced the development of a ‘new strategic weapon’. Against this background, the recent provocations against South Korea should be seen as a further signal to the US that Pyongyang will not accept the existing sanctions. An early relaxation of sanctions is also important for North Korea because the country's economic situation has deteriorated as a result of the corona pandemic. In order to stem the spread of the virus, North Korea temporarily closed its border with China, through which most international trade in goods passes. This severely weakened the economy.

North Korea's recent aggressions against South Korea have been orchestrated. There is much to suggest that Pyongyang has thus set in motion a new cycle of provocations and that it will continue to escalate in the coming months. North Korea's goal is to relax sanctions. Through creating a crisis situation and a threatening backdrop, North Korea wants to strengthen its position to achieve appropriate concessions in future negotiations with the US. It is unclear how far North Korea will go in this regard. At present, the actions are directed exclusively against South Korea. Pyongyang has so far avoided directly provoking the US. However, the rhetoric towards Washington has already become sharper. A few days ago, North Korea warned the US to ‘stay out of inter-Korean relations if they want to ensure a smooth election process’ – a threat that North Korea could escalate the situation in the run-up to the US elections.

However, at present it seems unlikely that North Korea will cross the red lines drawn by the US. The test of an intercontinental missile or even a new nuclear test in the run-up to the US elections would be risky for Pyongyang, as it would undoubtedly provoke a determined counter-reaction from the US. Moreover, it would cause lasting damage to the personal relationship between Trump and Kim Jong-un. North Korea has other options to gradually increase the pressure. For example, a satellite launch or the testing of a submarine-supported ballistic missile would be possible. There are many indications that North Korea will focus on South Korea for the time being. After the US elections at the latest, however, Pyongyang is likely to increase the pressure on Washington to ensure that North Korea is high on the political agenda of the next US president.



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