

Engaging Pyongyang

Why in news?

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The tragic death of Otto Warmbier, the 22-year-old American student is a huge setback to hopes for dialling down tensions between Washington and Pyongyang.

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What is the issue?

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- The Korean crisis has worsened since President Donald Trump took office early this year.

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- North Korea test-fired a number of missiles in defiance of international pressure, while the United States issued repeated warnings.

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- Mr. Trump had put pressure on Beijing to rein Pyongyang in, and even praised it for its efforts.

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- But the pressure does not seem to be working, with North Korea continuing with its nuclear missile programme.

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- Warmbier was arrested in Pyongyang in January 2016 while visiting as part of a tour group and later sentenced to 15 years of hard labour for the “hostile act” of trying to steal a propaganda poster.

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- Within a few days of his release he died.

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What is USA response on the issue?

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- The Trump administration has accused the North Korean regime for Warmbier's death, but stopped short of calling for more sanctions or issuing new threats.
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- This may be because three other Americans are still imprisoned in North Korea, and Washington's priority for now is to secure their release.
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- It is worthwhile for Washington to ask whether its hostile policy towards North Korea has produced any positive result.
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- The sanctions-only approach has not helped change Pyongyang's behaviour.
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- In fact, the longstanding hostility and Washington's repeated threats have turned the Kim dynastic regime so paranoid that it doesn't spare even American tourists visiting North Korea.
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- Attempts to put pressure on Pyongyang through Beijing have also failed — either because China is not completely on board or it is simply reluctant to use its leverage over North Korea.
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- Using force or attempting a regime change, a strategy that has not worked for the U.S. elsewhere, will be far more dangerous in the Korean Peninsula given that the North is an unpredictable nuclear power.
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- This situation leaves Mr. Trump with only one viable option: to take the lead in a new diplomatic offensive with both carrots and sticks.
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- Officials from Washington and Pyongyang had already established low-level contact for the release of Warmbier and the other three Americans who are still in North Korean custody.
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- Mr. Trump could use the crisis as an opportunity to expand the engagement, get the Americans freed and then gradually start discussing more complex issues.
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Source: The Hindu

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