North Korea - South Korea Stand-Off

Why in news?

North Korea blew up the joint liaison office with South Korea in Kaesong, a city in the southern part of North Korea.

What is the liaison office?

- In 2018, North Korea and South Korea jointly set up a liaison office at Kaesong in North Korea.
- The objective was to facilitate communication between North Korea and South Korea.
- It came as a result of a series of inter-Korean summits in 2018.
- The Kaesong Industrial Complex is a joint industrial zone where factories are operated and run by both North Koreans and South Koreans.



Why did North Korea resort to demolition?

- The demolition of the joint liaison office follows a recent deterioration in relations between Pyongyang (North Korea) and Seoul (South Korea).
- Activists and defectors in South Korea were sending anti-North Korean propaganda leaflets, rice and Bibles using balloons across the border.
- Tensions between the two countries had increased after Pyongyang objected to these activities.
- Pyongyang had also cut off communication with Seoul following this.
- These moves are also said to have come after North Korea’s frustrations at South Korea’s inability to revive inter-Korean economic projects.
- South Korea's delay was probably due to pressures from the US, along with UN sanctions.
- The economic projects had, notably, been beneficial to Pyongyang.

What are the other measures by North Korea?

- Following the demolition, North Korean state media KCNA announced that Pyongyang would be deploying troops in demilitarised areas.
- This also includes the Kaesong industrial zone.
- North Korea would be adding artillery units along the border with South

Korea for reinforcement.
- North Korean police posts that had been withdrawn when relations had improved between the two countries would now be instituted once again.

What was South Korea's response?

- South Korea’s President Moon Jae-in called for an urgent national security meeting following the demolition.
- The country’s Unification Ministry called the incident “a senseless act.”
- It is seen to have destroyed the hopes of those who wished for peace on the Korean Peninsula.
- The South Korean government said they would “respond strongly” if the situation worsens.

What is the significance?

- The demolition comes just days after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong had threatened to destroy the liaison office.
- It occurred just hours after Pyongyang threatened to engage in military action at the border with South Korea.
- These actions by North Korea have been the most provocative in recent years.
- It has become one of the most serious incidents to have occurred between the two countries without them actually going to war.

What possibly caused the drift?

- South Korea’s President Moon Jae-in has made efforts over the past few years to improve relations with Pyongyang.
- However, Pyongyang is probably hoping to pressure Seoul into giving it more concessions that would be economically beneficial for North Korea.
- Notably, North Korea has been hit hard by sanctions.
- It is still unclear how COVID-19 has impacted North Korea.
- However, it is expected to have been affected badly, especially China being North Korea’s main trading partner.

What is the U.S.'s role in this regard?

- It has been 2 years after U.S. President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un met in Singapore to discuss denuclearisation.
- But little has been achieved in that direction.
- Mr. Kim had in principle agreed to denuclearisation in return for the lifting of American sanctions.
- But talks stalled as the U.S. insisted on “complete, verifiable and irreversible

denuclearization" by North Korea in return for any concession.

- The North Koreans were wary particularly because of the U.S.'s history of tracking back on its promises.
- Mr. Kim's regime thus offered a staged approach.
- It put a freeze on nuclear tests and offered to shut its Yongbyon nuclear complex.

What were the shortfalls?

- The U.S. and South Korea could have responded to North Korea's measures taken with a staged approach and kept the talks on track, but that did not happen.
- Both the Koreas are still technically at war.
- On declaring a formal end to the Korean war, an agreement could have been achieved as a confidence-building measure.
- Again, this was also not done when U.S. intervened.
- More worse, the U.S. and South Korea went ahead with their joint military exercise.
- North Korea too has conducted missile tests this year (2020), sending warning signals to Seoul and Washington.
- Following the demolition, the US was reported to be coordinating with South Korea.
- Despite all these, now, it is likely that North Korea is trying to get back Mr. Trump's attention.
- But Mr. Trump is now grappling with many problems at home, from the coronavirus outbreak and a sagging economy, to anti-racism protests.
- Nevertheless, if the two earlier summits that Trump had with Mr. Kim were to be fruitful, Trump should now take measures to revive talks with North Korea and push the peninsula back to normalcy.

Source: Indian Express, The Hindu

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