Solving the North Korean Puzzle

What is the issue?

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- North Korea’s new Hwasong -15 missile can travel 15,000 Kms, which brings its principle adversary ‘USA’ within striking range.
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- Considering, the delicate situation, only a comprehensive diplomatic solution will work.
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What is the history of the conflict?

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- North Korea withdrew from the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003.
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- This led to the Six-Party Talks (North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China Russia & USA) to diffuse tensions in the Korean peninsula.
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- But all along the talks, the North Korean regime had outwitted the big powers and went on to conduct several nuclear tests, leaving the world perplexed.
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- As all options (from imposing sanctions to isolating North Korea) have currently been exhausted, none of the major powers have a solution thus far.
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What is the current political setting?

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- North Korea is now in procession of nuclear capable intercontinental ballistic missiles and there are currently no workable military options to disarm it.
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- Lessons from the tragic end of Saddam Hussein and Qadhafi would weigh high on North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-un's mind.
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- This would certainly dissuade him from giving up his weapons at any cost.
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- But Japan, South Korea, USA and the international community are yet to reconcile to this reality.
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What are the major stress points in the Korean neighbourhood?

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- **Nuclear proliferation -** Kim sees Japan and South Korea as arch rivals.
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- They are currently facing the heat in the backdrop of an increasingly unreliable security commitment from the Trump administration.
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- This might forced to start developing nuclear arsenal of their own, which won't be difficult considering the technological capabilities that they have.
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- This could have a domino effect for the region and the rest of the international system, thereby effectively ending the NPT regime.
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- **China's case –** The risk of a lethal nuclear fallout in its neighbourhood and the potential rush of North Korean refugees into its territory worries China.
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- But notably, at odds with the other powers, China is also uneasy about the possible reunification of Korea, which it believes would undercut its influence.
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Is there any rationality to Kim's actions?

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- Kim has been branded 'mad' for his seemingly univocal provocations.
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- But his strong hold over North Korea and clear focus on developing strategic arsenal is actually very rational politicking.
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- **Kim's Politics -** Importantly, his policy is premised on the classical military

strategy of escalating to de-esclate.
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- This involves rising the costs of a possible conflict to unacceptable levels.
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- The rationale is that as stakes get very high, the enemy would be dissuaded from taking to active confrontation.
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- This would consequently force out some concessions from the adversary in difficult areas and thereby help in de-esclation.
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- **The Objective –** Getting North Korea recognised as a nuclear weapon capable state and ensuring survival of his regime.
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- The eventual removal of sanctions as a natural consequence of the former.
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- Notably, with the Trump administration's indicisiveness, Kim seems to be winning this gambit.
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How does the current global political framework look?

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- The falling apart of the multilateral diplomacy even in a crisis situation like North Korea is an apt reflection of the contemporary world order.
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- This has been mainly due to the arrival of Mr. Trump and the increased assertions of China and Russia in the international arena.
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- Isolating states that "misbehave" has proved to be ineffective from experiences with Pakistan, Iran and North Korea's case.
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- On the contrary, the P5+1 initiative (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, plus Germany) was successful in reaching a deal.
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- Subsequently, the deal has also withstood harsh political storms and restrained Iran's nuclear quest (thus far), without damaging coercive action.

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What is the way forward?

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- As the nuclear threshold has been crossed, international sanctions and the use of force against North Korea will not yield the desired results.
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- It will rather lead to immeasurable human suffering within North Korea and its neighbourhood.
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- While a diplomatic solution will work, the outcome is uncertain. The intent for such a solution is also not there among the great powers at this point.
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- Hence, the best way ahead is initiate talks by recognizing for now - the fact that North Korea has nuclear weapons and its delivery mechanisms.
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- Reviving the dormant Six Party Talks at the earliest and taking note of the historic grievance of North Korea would be paramount in this approach.
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Source: The Hindu

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