

US, Japan, South Korea agree to keep up pressure on North Korea



North Korea has long sought a lifting of international sanctions over its weapons programmes.PHOTO: REUTERS

WASHINGTON (REUTERS) - The United States, South Korea, and Japan agreed in high-level security talks on Friday (April 2) to work together to keep up pressure on North Korea to give up its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

In a joint statement after a day of talks, new US President Joe Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, and his Japanese counterpart, Shigeru Kitamura, and South Korea's national security adviser Suh Hoon reaffirmed their commitment to address the issue "through concerted trilateral cooperation towards denuclearisation".

The three countries also agreed on the need for full implementation by the international community of UN Security Council resolutions on North Korea,

“preventing proliferation, and cooperating to strengthen deterrence and maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula”, the statement said.

The national security advisers also discussed the value of working together to address other challenges such as Covid-19, climate change, and promoting an immediate return to democracy in Myanmar, the statement said.

The talks held at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, were the most senior-level meeting between the three allies since Mr. Biden took power on Jan 20 and came against a backdrop of rising tensions after North Korean missile launches last week.

Mr. Biden, whose administration is finalizing a review of North Korea policy, said last week the United States remained open to diplomacy with North Korea despite its ballistic missile tests, but warned there would be responses if North Korea escalates matters.

The White House has shared little about its policy review and whether it will offer concessions to get Pyongyang to the negotiating table to discuss giving up its nuclear weapons.

However, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Thursday that denuclearisation would remain at the centre of policy and any approach to Pyongyang will have to be done in “lockstep” with close allies, including Japan and South Korea.

Mr Biden’s Republican predecessor, Donald Trump, held three meetings with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un but achieved no breakthrough other than a pause in nuclear and intercontinental ballistic tests.

Mr Biden, a Democrat, has sought to engage North Korea in dialogue but has been rebuffed so far.

Pyongyang, which has long sought a lifting of international sanctions over its weapons programmes, said last week the Biden administration had taken a wrong first step and revealed “deep-seated hostility” by criticising what it called self-defensive missile tests.

A US official briefing before the talks said the North Korea review was in its final stages and “we’re prepared now to have some final consultations with Japan and

South Korea as we go forward.”

Joseph Yun, who was the US special envoy for North Korea under both former President Barack Obama and Trump and is now at the United States Institute of Peace, said the policy options were obvious: “You want denuclearisation and you want to use your sanctions to get to denuclearisation.”

“But how to make the first step, so that at least North Korea is persuaded not to do anything provocative. That’s the challenge.” he said.

Some proponents of dialogue are concerned that the Biden administration has not highlighted a broad agreement between Trump and Kim at their first meeting in Singapore in 2018, and warn this could make it difficult to build trust.

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Asked whether that agreement still stood, the official said: “I understand the significance of the Singapore agreement,” but did not make clear to what extent the issue would be part of the Annapolis talks.

The three officials were also expected to discuss a global shortage of semiconductor chips that has forced US automakers and other manufacturers to cut production.

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