

North Korea Blinks: Is it Real or a Ploy to Minimise Sanctions?

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The news of Kim's invitation for talks to President Trump and its acceptance by US President besides surprising the world (including some key US officials), may have generated hopes of positivity amongst the affected parties, but the crisis is far from being over. The talks are scheduled to be held in May 2018, after China failed to get North Korea to the negotiation table, South Koreans came forward to soften up North, being the most affected party and historical brothers. After the niceties of sports diplomacy, the South Korean officials met North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on 05 March, 2018, wherein he conveyed his willingness to denuclearise the Korean peninsula, if his country's security is assured.¹In exchange, Kim wants an end to military aggression and a guarantee of his regime's safety. He also offered to suspend nuclear and ballistic missile tests while dialogue is underway. This may be attributed to a mix of tough sanctions imposed by the US in February 2018, in addition to the UN sanctions imposed earlier, international pressure and fear of domestic turbulence.

The first meeting between North Korean and South Korean leaders scheduled at Panmunjom in April 2018, is the first such instance since 2007. Looking positively, it seems to be a welcome step generating positive hopes in the US, North and South Korea, China and Russia. Japan diplomatically welcomes the step, but continues to bat for tougher actions, being skeptical about the games which Kim can play to ensure his regime's survival. He could be temporarily blinking to avoid disastrous effects of sanctions. While it may be good news for the region, it seems too good to be true; hence, the suspicion that it could well be a ploy of Kim to reduce and escape sanctions temporarily and restart business as usual later at an appropriate time, when the going gets easy for him.

The South Korean National Security Adviser Chung Eui-yong, briefed President Trump on 08 Mar 2018, at the White House about his meeting with Kim in Pyongyang on 05 Mar 2018, when he conveyed the invitation from Kim to him, to which President Trump agreed promptly. President Donald Trump may have felt that North Korea seems “sincere” in its apparent willingness to halt nuclear tests if it held denuclearisation talks with the US,² but it seems to be a step to salvage the pride of the US as a super power. The US, otherwise, is no less skeptical about Kim’s action than Japan hence, it will continue with all sanctions and application of maximum pressure, besides demanding verification of the denuclearisation efforts of North Korea. Notwithstanding the above, the diplomacy of South Korea, including the ‘Sports Diplomacy’ of Koreans is first step to break the deadlock to have some face saving move forward and needs to be appreciated in such a trying time, when fierce war of words between adversaries had taken place and rhetoric was on high note between the US and North Korea.

What Justification North Korea has for its Actions?

When North Korea surprised the international community by claiming to have successfully tested a hydrogen bomb in January 2017, many were skeptical about its truthfulness expecting it to be one more fission bomb similar to what it had tested earlier. Later, North Korea launched a long-range missile that put a satellite into orbit in February 2017, to demonstrate its ballistic missiles capability to the rest of the world. Its actions were criticised not only by the West, but also the regional players as everyone was concerned about the instability attached with such an act. Amidst the criticism, Kim continued with his tests, which irked the US and its regional allies. North Korea justifies these acts purely as defensive measures against the US threat of forcing regime changes in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and other countries, which did not follow its dictate. The threat from the US regional allies has also been given as an excuse. The Korean War is also an unforgettable historical event when the US might was used against them. Convincing the domestic population with “America threat theory” and propaganda that North Korea stands surrounded by the US troops stationed in South Korea and Japan

has been a major factor to keep domestic opposition under control, and to continue with Kim's autocratic regime.

North Korea's nuclear misadventure seemed to have gone beyond a reasonable limit of its own defence. It continued to work on its underground nuclear testing site, saying that it would 'redouble the efforts to increase its strength to safeguard the country's sovereignty and right to existence' and establish "practical equilibrium with the US." This, as *Sputnik News* alleges, is because 'Pyongyang appears to utilise the "Bluff and Bluster" strategy.³ It means to create a geopolitical crisis and request compromise from opposing forces, assuming they can be rewarded since other nations want to prevent war'. This kind of nuclear blackmailing is being used as a weapon by their leadership.⁴ Kim is ready to endanger lives of its own people, by continuing with nuclear tests (presently suspended till conclusion of their proposed talks) to save its autocratic regime (accused of killing his own half brother to eliminate any contender), using 'Hate America' theme as rallying point. By doing so, Kim expects that the world should behave on his terms to save lives of people of other countries, despite risk of suicidal destruction of their own country, like a *fidayeen* mission. While all these actions of Kim may sound illogical to any sane mind, but for an analyst, they are well thought out strategic moves by Kim to consolidate his personal leadership from any domestic or external threat, igniting pro-regime nationalism, and tightening his grip on power. To achieve it, he is ready to antagonise world community along with his long-time allies and suffer international sanctions hoping for deliberate leakages in sanctions by his allies to avoid war.

What are the Stakes for the US? What are their Red Lines?

When President Trump used the phrase 'America First' and indicated Japan to pay for its security, the confidence of its allies like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan went all time low. The credibility of the US as their 'Net Security Provider' came under criticism and serious doubt. A few months later, his administration realised it to be a retrograde step. During visits of President Trump, Rex Tillerson and Defence Minister Mattis, it became evident that the US is trying to restore the confidence of its allies, as well as regaining its shrinking strategic space, which came under threat and encroachment due to aggressive design of China

in South and East China Sea, and irresponsible threatening behaviour of North Korea in the region. This was followed up by missile and nuclear testing by North Korea, and boycott of the International Court of Arbitration (ICA) decision regarding South China Sea by China, after converting atolls into military bases, thus encroaching on the US strategic space.

The threat of missile attack on Guam by North Korea (later called off), and renewal of missile attack on 15 Sep 2017 over Japan, indicated that North Korea is going well beyond the justification of its survival need. Kim's fantasy, of seeking 'Military Equilibrium with US', seemed to be driving him crazy. The US then started off with military posturing exercises with South Korea, deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) and came out with threatening statements like "If forced to defend itself or allies, it will have no choice but to destroy North Korea completely" (President's speech in UNGA on 19 Sep 17). It started seriously examining all options including military options to deal with North Korea.

An analysis of options from an all out war with North Korea, to *status quo* has been carried out. The end result is that the practical and realistic option is to negotiate diplomatically, impose strict sanctions, till redline is crossed or first shot is fired. In the meantime, the use of covert means for regime change by increasing domestic pressure due to shrinking resources by sanctions cannot be ruled out. In my opinion, redline for the US is any missile or nuclear attack on its base or mainland or allies including accidental fire on any of its vessels. The desirability of the US in these negotiations is to denuclearise North Korea completely. The compromising limit will be to ensure that North Korea does not reach a capability to be able to deliver nuke on its mainland. If complete denuclearisation is not achieved, Japan may nuclearise, and tactical nukes may be deployed in South Korea along with full deployment of THAAD system. This may not be to the liking of regional players like China and Russia.

Is China Double-Gaming or its Leverages on North Korea are Overhyped?

When President Trump tried to outsource the problem of resolving North Korean crisis to China, presumably in exchange of some

trade concessions, his administration deliberately overlooked the fact that China was part of the problem. It was obvious at that point of time that they will be disappointed, because North Korea has always been nurtured by China to be used as a 'Frontline State' against the US and its ally South Korea. This strategy dates back to Korean War of 1953, when China entered the war to avoid the US or its ally South Korea to be its continental neighbour, and a permanent continental military threat. This deep rooted strategy helped North Korea to become a militarily strong nuclear state, even if the US does not recognise its nuclear status. There being no change in geography and alignment of South Korea towards the US, the same strategic scenario still exists, hence, the same strategy is still applicable, with China's overt and covert support to North Korea. It is suspected that the missile technology was shared with North Korea and some irresponsible power transferred nuclear technology to Pakistan. Later, as per media reports, both exchanged these technologies with each other and went towards a path of nuclear and missile test misadventures, posing a threat to their greatest competitors. While Pakistan focused more on developing tactical nukes to blunt conventional superiority of India, North Korea went a step ahead to develop long range arsenal to threaten the US mainland, which it sees as the biggest and most powerful threat for its regime protection.

The continuation of nuclear misadventure by North Korea exposed to the world that, either China does not have enough leverage on North Korea or China is deliberately not putting enough pressure on them. In either case North Korea seems to have become a liability for China, with its irresponsible actions despite the UN sanctions which Russia and China have supported (at least on paper). It is surprising as to how North Korea is managing to get so much of weapon grade nuclear fuel to be able to sustain so many nuclear tests. This has invited deployment of THAAD in South Korea, which makes China and Russia extremely uncomfortable as they apprehend that the system could be used to spy on Chinese and Russian missile flight tests. In the war of rhetoric and provocative statements, when Kim threatened to attack the US bases, Beijing announced that 'If North Korea invades another country, China will not defend them'. North Korea is unlikely to listen to any country to roll back its nuclear ambition, because every country which has nuclear weapons cites it to be

its insurance for defence and peace ever since these weapons were invented. In this context, China has no moral right to stop North Korea from developing it because it itself went nuclear citing it as protective arsenal against the US threat, which North Korea is emulating.

In my opinion, China or Russia may not be keen to invite and support a nuclear war by North Korea and would be looking for a peaceful solution, but may not be in a position to address the insecurities of North Korea (especially their leader). The other danger is that, if a war does take place and China does not enter the war directly like 1950-53, but decides to give moral and material support to North Korea from outside, someone else will gain control of North Korean nuclear and missile assets; and if China wants to get it, it will amount to being dragged into fruitless war, despite trying to avoid it. In the given circumstances, the best option for China is to prolong the *status quo* by keeping North Korea under some pressure by implementing sanctions already imposed. How sincerely would China implement the UNSC resolution, and additional global and US sanctions is anyone's guess, but it will redefine its credibility, global image and its future dream of being a responsible world power, more so now as Xi Jinping has become undisputed, autocratic ruler of China for life.

The Other Stakeholders

Russian position, with respect to North Korean crisis, is not much different from Chinese, except that their degree of involvement is far less than them. They also do not want a nuclear war in their backyard, nor do they want the deployment of THAAD in South Korea. They have generally followed Chinese line and will be happy with *status quo* (no further tests by North Korea and no war in Korean peninsula), with no disturbance to them.

Japan has a precarious position which forces it to make hard choices. Japan would like the threat from North Korea to be resolved forever, which is not possible without complete denuclearisation of North Korea. Its strategic interests coincide with the US because North Korea has already achieved the range required to strike Guam. Japan is already disturbed by the varying statements from the US President expecting them to pay for their security on one occasion and swearing by his allies on another. It

is leaving them with very little choice to raise their own defence capabilities, and go nuclear if Korean denuclearisation does not take place. The capacity building for defence is a long process, more so when Japan has been under the US defence umbrella for so long. It also involves convincing the population, a segment of which is strictly opposing nuclearisation after bearing scars of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, making decision to do so that much more difficult.

In any conflict in Korean Peninsula, South Korea has a lot to lose irrespective of the outcome. It is the most affected country by Korean crisis and out of proportion growth of North Korean arsenal. While the US and North Korea can make provocative statements challenging each other for war, South Korea has to bear the brunt of it being the geographical neighbour of North Korea. Any war in Korean Peninsula means that Seoul will have to be vacated to minimise casualties, being in range of long range artillery of North Korea. The threat of destruction of manufacturing hubs and an economic holocaust, besides heavy casualties is too big a risk to take. Even after the deployment of THAAD, the chances of some of the missiles of North Korea to pass through are possible, and that is good enough to cause unprecedented damage to South Korea. South Korea, therefore, has every reason to try for peaceful resolution of the crisis including establishing of hotline between Pyongyang and Seoul as confidence building measure to prevent escalation. In fact, it is a diplomatic achievement for them to convince the US and North Korea to talk at apex level, something which even China could not achieve for whatever reasons.

Will the Talks Succeed?

The talks between North and South Korean leaders scheduled in April will set the tone for possible talks between the US and North Korea. In my opinion there may be a chance that despite President Trump's acceptance, the talks may still not take place due to unacceptable stance of the US or North Korea. Some ground realities which make the situation complicated are:-

- (a) The US-North Korea talks without South Korea, China, Japan and Russia will not lead to any lasting solution. The date and place has been left vague, perhaps to accommodate this requirement. The fact that Kim had

consultations with President Xi Jinping last month and his high officials are consulting Russia justifies the argument.

(b) It is too late to convince North Korea to completely denuclearise. A nuclear-tipped-missile capable North Korea is a reality, and North Korea is unlikely to give away the only instrument of its regime survival.

(c) Strict sanctions are showing some pressure on North Korea, but suspected leakages are also taking place ensuring minimal sustenance for them. These leakages will continue, even if the countries doing so do not own up as was the incident of ships allegedly delivering resources to them from Hong Kong under Maldives flag.

(d) No one will deliberately like to initiate war, but it will continue to be a flashpoint prone to accidental triggers.

(e) The North Korean strategic assets and critical arsenal are well tucked in mountains. They are unlikely to be destroyed in any conventional attack including Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB). North Korea will, thus, retain a second strike capability.

(f) US technological capability to make nuclear arsenal of adversary malfunction or possibly destroying it, will be under test. Presently it is doubtful.

(g) Providing protective hardware, technology, fighting capability to its allies is a must for the US to ensure credibility to its military alliance.

(h) Further misadventures of North Korea may encourage other neighbours to go nuclear. This may start a chain reaction starting from Japan followed by Iran, Saudi Arabia and South Korea redeploying tactical nukes. This will lead to a dangerous nuclear world.

Considering the ground realities mentioned above, in my opinion, the chances of talks being successful are minimal. The US is unlikely to settle down for anything short of snatching away North Korean's capability to attack their mainland with nuclear tipped missiles; and North Korea is unlikely to give away the only leverage it has for its regime survival. If the talks take place at apex level and fail, Kim will come out much stronger, having

convinced his domestic constituency of being capable of making the US President talk to him. Prolonging strict sanctions is a must to crack the will of the North Korean people and Kim.

How does it Affect India?

Although India had reasonably good relations with North Korea in the past and still maintains its embassy at a small scale, but suspected proliferation of missile technology by North Korea to Pakistan has never been appreciated by India. India is following all sanctions imposed by the UN on North Korea. It is seen that North Korea is blatantly blackmailing the US and its allies by its missile and claimed nuclear capability for its survival, even at the cost of risking lives and prosperity of its countrymen. The world cannot afford *status quo* ante in this case, because if no action is taken against North Korea, the world will have to live with the problem of nuclear blackmailing. Other countries like Pakistan are also working on similar philosophy, wherein it is propagating Proxy War on India through militants and threatening to use nukes if Indian Defence Forces cross Line of Control or International border to chase militants or use conventional forces. It may lead to a situation where humanity suffers from a threat of nuclear blackmailing by states, as well as militants, if tactical nukes accidentally fall into their hands. This is not in the interest of humanity. The tendency of nuclear blackmailing should not go unpunished.

Conclusion

The uncertainties will continue till Kim meets South Korean President in April and President Trump in May this year. Expecting that North Korean Dictator will abandon his nuclear ambition sounds unrealistic, although it may be most desirable to bring peace in the Korean Peninsula. This seems to be a beginning of a very tough and hectic diplomatic exercise, as few in the US feel that the Trump administration lacks an experienced team of diplomats. The fact that President Trump has been personally ringing up President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Abe, after taking the decision, shows some hesitation and after thoughts about its implications. The possibility of talks getting scuttled cannot be ruled out even before the meet at diplomatic level, if the hardened stance of both sides leaves little chance of reaching a meeting point. If the world succumbs to nuclear blackmailing, the

nuclear states will tend to use this tool more often, and the non-nuclear insecure states will tend to go nuclear. The disclosure of unstoppable nuclear missile by Russia just before elections is a case in point, even if it was for domestic consumption, it can be construed as a signal to the West.

Endnotes

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLVIII, No. 611, January-March 2018.