

Korean Peninsula – Prevailing Imbroglio: Quest for Strategic Equilibrium

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Introduction

Given the geostrategic location, Korean Peninsula has been the fulcrum in the North East Asia's balance of power dynamics. Post the Korean War 1950-53, due to the existing parity of forces, North and South Korea despite being in possession of massive conventional arsenal and potential to engage in high intensity conflict, remained constrained, thus avoiding any form of misadventure.

The line of Armistice running along the 38th Parallel, one of the most fortified defence lines in the world has held on, in the wake of 'eye ball to eye ball' situation, while the opposing forces technically still remain in a state of war. The strategic equilibrium that had existed in the Peninsula for over last six decades is under extreme stress today, due to intense geopolitical turbulence as the key stakeholders are feverishly engaged in pursuing their strategic national interests.

The Korean Peninsula today is an antidote to its earlier name 'Chosun – the land of morning calm' given by local tribals over two millennium BC. There are numerous factors which have led to current state of instability in the region. The salient ones are; increasing frequency of missile testing by North Korea, recent joint US-South Korea military exercises – unprecedented in scale and intensity which included strategic assets like the B-52 Bombers and Aircraft Carrier USS Carl Vinson, deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea by the US and ouster of South Korean President Park Geun-hye. The Peninsula due to the heightened state of tension has turned into a potential flash point – a tinder box.

State of asymmetry which is manifesting due to North Korea's rapidly growing nuclear-cum-missile capabilities coupled with lack

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of cogent response from the opposite side has encouraged Pyongyang to indulge in the provocative actions. The current crisis situation has almost reached the tipping point. Option of altering aggressive behaviour of the North Korean regime through the use of kinetic force carries a major risk. The challenge before the US and its allies is how to bring about moderation so that the situation does not spin out of control. This demands employment of all the tools of national power by the US and South Korea; including diplomacy, economic, financial, legal and military.

In the succeeding paras, a brief review has been undertaken of the prevailing situation alongside a critical analysis of the moves underway in the quest for restoration of strategic equilibrium by the involved stakeholders.

Prevailing Imbroglio – An Overview

There are two key developments which have led to the present state of imbroglio. First, the rapid rise of People's Republic of China (PRC) and relative decline in clout of the US, Russia and Japan, leading to state of disequilibrium. Second, the persistence of North Korean Regime in development of viable nuclear capability as a security guarantee. Five nuclear tests and series of missile launches it has undertaken offer strong evidence of North Korea's strategy to mitigate the perceived existential threat.

The recent missile launch on 22 May 2017 by North Korea is of enhanced calibre capable of carrying large size nuclear warhead with a range of 3000-4000 km.¹ It signifies quantum leap in Pyongyang's capability. Unchecked nuclear weapons development by Democratic Republic of North Korea (DPRK) poses growing security threat to South Korea, Japan and even to the US mainland, resulting in the possibility of conflict in the region.

The present state of affairs can be largely attributed to US failure to recalibrate its policy to check DPRK's nuclear-missile programme and increasing influence of China in the North East Asia. US's prolonged commitments in West Asia also contributed to the present situation. Sanctions imposed by the UN and the US to cripple North Korean Regime economically have largely proved ineffective. Absence of channels for dialogue has further added to the trust deficit between the belligerents, thus further escalating the tension in the region.

President Trump's policy of 'America First' implies reluctance to be a security guarantor by limiting its global role. At the same time, he has promised to act tough with DPRK, indicating the end of 'strategic patience' era. Even Admiral Harry Harris, Head of the US Pacific Command has called North Korea a 'clear and dangerous threat', stressing the need for greater cooperation amongst the allies and for all countries to implement stronger sanctions against Pyongyang. "Combining nuclear warheads with ballistic missile technology in the hands of volatile leader like Kim Jong-un is a recipe for disaster" added Harris.² Glaring dichotomy in Washington's policies of 'sanctions and subsidies' gives an impression of its half-hearted efforts to shape the regional security architecture.

China enjoys considerable leverage with North Korea as it is the only major power that extends political and economic support to Pyongyang's authoritarian regime. 90 per cent of DPRK's trade is with PRC.³ Beijing has cleverly manipulated Pyongyang to regulate tension in the Peninsula. China is known to have supplied nuclear material and know-how to DPRK including the missile launch vehicles. Over a period of time, its soft approach and unwillingness to apply pressure has emboldened the North Korean leadership. Somehow, the US has always believed that China can rein in DPRK, given its clout with the latter. The recent actions of Kim Jong-un tantamounting to defiance indicate limitations of Chinese influence.

With regard to Republic of Korea (ROK), PRC has two key security concerns. These are : to maintain peace and stability on the Peninsula and prevent South Korea from getting too entrenched into the US security framework. China has come out strongly against South Korea in allowing the US to deploy THAAD System on its soil. China had persistently warned South Korea against agreeing to such a move. Beijing sees it as a provocative act of Seoul crossing the redline; its own policy failure notwithstanding.

There have been reports of China resorting to impose sanctions on South Korea to pressurise Seoul into reversing its decision on THAAD, as a punitive measure. Coercive diplomacy is part of Chinese tactics. The process entails initially integrating neighbours into the ambit of Chinese driven 'East Asian Economic Order' and thereon exploiting them to gain political advantage. South Korea has a trade surplus of US \$ 73 billion with China as

per 2015 figures. Hence, Beijing has the capability to hurt Seoul economically.

Major General Cai Jun from the Joint Staff Department of 'Central Military Commission' PRC commenting upon the impact of THAAD System had recently stated; "This will further tighten the Asia-Pacific anti-missile barrier enclosing China and Russia, weakening their strategic capacities, something we adamantly oppose".⁴ Elaborating further, he said that American anti-missile plans seek absolute military advantage which will exacerbate regional tensions, triggering an all-out arms race.

President Putin, given his disillusioned vision of Cold War symmetry marked by 'zero sum' mentality alongside rising Russian nationalism, is unlikely to cooperate with Trump in reduction of tension in the Peninsula. Putin believes that constructive engagement with Pyongyang provides Moscow leverage over the conduct of North Korean Regime at a crucial time when PRC's hold over DPRK is waning and US-North Korean tension is at an unprecedented level. In all probability, Moscow is likely to subtly oppose US designs in the region.

Contrary to the general image of violent brash youngster, Kim Jong-un has been successful in safeguarding regime's legitimacy since he assumed power in December 2011, after the demise of his father Kim Jong-Il. He has consolidated his position without confronting any serious opposition. Kim Junior has gone about methodically strengthening DPRK's defence capability along with economic growth. He has introduced reforms to move away from central planning to market based economy while maintaining tight political control. He is well entrenched for a long haul to carry forward the reign of Kim Dynasty.

Quest for Strategic Equilibrium

It is the disproportionate accretion in the North Korean military potential alongside its nuclear capability which is destabilising the regional strategic balance. Pyongyang is estimated to possess enough nuclear explosive material for at least 10 nuclear warheads. Experts believe that by 2020 it will have enough fissile material for 100 warheads. In all likelihood, DPRK already has capability to deliver some of these weapons by the short and medium range ballistic missiles it has in the arsenal.⁵

The American and Chinese camps are engaged in classic 'balance of power' game. American quest is to maintain the *status quo* as the sole superpower. As a Pacific power, Washington is resolved to maintaining influence in the Asia-Pacific as part of its 'Pivot to Asia' strategy. China as a rising power seeks bipolar world with unipolar Asia. It considers the Asia-Pacific as sphere of influence and is aiming at diminution of US influence in the region alongside containing Japan. The stakes are rather high for the US and its allies. For DPRK, the key issue is survival of the regime.

In early May, US Defence Secretary James Mattis, in pursuant to the directions from President Trump and the Congress, formally announced 'Ballistic Missile Defence Review' which will address wide ranging issues related to defence policy and strategy. The review is expected to be completed by the year end. As a sequel to the above review, number of options could be on the table including deployment of additional ground based interceptors and acceleration of missile defence technology.⁶

Despite the mutual defence treaty, Seoul remains skeptical about Washington's constraints to step in, should there be escalation leading to a military showdown. It has taken strategic review entailing several independent measures to scale up its defence preparedness. A sum of US \$ 550 billion has been allocated towards military modernisation over next 15 years. Its defence budget for 2017 was US \$ 34 billion, marking an increase of four per cent over the previous year.⁷ President Moon who recently won the South Korean elections advocating moderate approach towards North Korea has cautioned against high possibility of conflict with hostile neighbour due to recent rapid advances in the nuclear and missile capabilities.

Japan is deeply concerned about China's rapid accretion of military capability and North Korea's nuclear-cum-missile programme. Under Prime Minister Abe's leadership, Tokyo has adopted 'New Defence Policy Guidelines' paving way for re-crafting of its military strategy. It removed one percent GDP cap. Japan's defence budget for the year 2017 registered an increase of 1.4 per cent; pegged at US \$ 43.8 billion.⁸ Mr Abe is also proactively pursuing the process to amend the nation's pacifist Constitution. Tokyo has taken pains to develop new strategic partnerships with

the nations in the Asia-Pacific, while strengthen existing security alliances. In the future, trilateral cooperation between the US, Japan and South Korea is likely to witness significant up swing.

China finds itself in quandary, given Kim Jong-un's provocative behaviour and President Trump's threat to act against DPRK with or without PRC's cooperation. Expressing support for dialogue, it has called both the sides to exercise restraint. Chinese Foreign Minister Mr Wang Yi approached his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov on 15 April 2017, seeking Moscow's help in preventing conflict between the US and North Korea.⁹ Historically, cooperation between the two on Korean crisis has been primarily in the form of multilateral framework rather than bilateral. The sudden surge in bilateral cooperation between Beijing and Moscow is driven by two factors: stringent opposition to the US military unilateral action against North Korea's nuclear facilities and to ensure better diplomatic leverage against Pyongyang.

Chinese and Russian policy makers hold a steadfast belief that any US attempt to completely isolate North Korea from the global economic structure creates a sense of paranoia and siege mentality in Pyongyang. Sense of desperation drives Kim Jong-un to raise the pitch of nationalism and adopt provocative and belligerent stance. Since Kim Junior assumed power in 2011, North Korea has conducted 78 ballistic missile tests; the recent ones were the solid-fuelled Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) capable of reaching the US Military bases on Guam. Hence, the two advocate limited time bound sanctions in consonance with the conduct of DPRK leadership.

Rhetoric and provocative statements notwithstanding, the prudent heads in Washington are strongly in favour of diplomacy and negotiations as the best option to deal with Pyongyang, in order to bring about notion of stability in the region. It may appear unrealistic to set pre-conditions; like US calling for North Korean denuclearisation as Kim Jong-un is not going to give up his nuclear programme and conversely, DPRK seeking embargo on the US-South Korean naval drills is unacceptable to America and its allies. However, during their recent meeting at Mar-a-Lago, President Xi reportedly urged President Trump to accept 'suspension for suspension'; essentially implying Mr Kim's freeze on additional ICBMs tests and in response the US to postpone or modify military

exercises in the region. Mr Xi even proposed that America and China consider new East Asian Security architecture.¹⁰

Ratcheting up sanctions on North Korea will prove to be an exercise in futility as the regime in Pyongyang is highly skilled at skirting these. Option of pre-emptive military strike against DPRK's nuclear installations and missile test sites will be strongly opposed by even Japan and South Korea. Policy of confrontation over dialogue will only result in adding fuel to the fire.

Conclusion

The precarious situation in the Peninsula requires deft handling as resorting to failed policies of the past will only mean hitting the wall. This implies going beyond economic sanctions, six party talks and unilateralism. Bold initiatives like direct talks between Washington-Pyongyang coupled with China's willingness to take the call could help avert the crisis. Given the prevailing gravity of the situation, Peninsula imbroglio merits urgent dialogue to obviate imminent conflict situation and restoration of strategic equilibrium; while resolution of this long lingering complex issue in the coming future remains a remote possibility.

Endnotes

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