

United States-North Korea Rapprochement: Averting a Nuclear Holocaust



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Abstract

The situation in the Korean Peninsula has generally remained uncertain since the time of the Korean war. President Trump's proverbs of fire and fury, Rocket Man and now a valuable partner are gradual transformations, which have been appreciated by the world at large, yet fragility and lack of trust among the key contenders North Korea (DPRK), USA and South Korea may lead to strategic miscalculation and undo the process of confidence-building. The efforts of Russia and China are commendable as these are contributing to a stable environment; however, the world is witnessing these developments with cautious optimism due to the impulsive nature of opposing leaders. On an optimistic note, Chairman Kim and President Trump want to move forward for a reasonable settlement. The leadership on both sides, the global players and regional organizations will have to work for hand in gloves for sustainable peace as failure is the worst option.

Introduction

In his New Year's speech, Chairman Kim Jong Un expressed his desire to send a team to Pyeong Chang for Winter Olympics, a golden opportunity that South Korea did not waste a moment to grab (BBC News, 2017). The Southern host decided to let them take part despite being late; which demonstrates the earnest desire for peace and stability on the part of Moon Jae-in who since his assumption of the office has been making sincere efforts. Through this, the Republic of Korea (ROK) has demonstrated its preference for diplomacy and peaceful means of resolution. On the other hand, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has been successful in projecting itself as moderate and peace-loving country, who despite sanctions, isolation, provocations, and warmongering has still maintained peaceful posturing and conciliatory approach, thus, want to be mainstreamed in the community of nations and taken out of the sanctions regime and prolonged isolation period (BBC News, 2017). President Trump's harsh posturing towards DPRK during his initial days of Presidency and speech at 72nd session of United Nations General Assembly dubbing Chairman Kim as rocket man on a suicide mission (White House, 2017) created tense global security environments in Korean Peninsula. However, the mature response by Chairman Kim altered the paradigm overnight and possible collusion course was averted.

Chairman Kim's Mature Posturing

Soon after coming into power in 2011 the supreme leader, Kim Jong-un has used aggressive posturing to satisfy domestic audiences and impose caution on the US and its allies' policy towards DPRK. While the development of nuclear and missile programs has been successfully projected as only means for the survival of state and regime in the face of US threats and military drills right on its borders. For this, he developed strategic military competencies to discourage foreign attacks besides challenging South Korea (ROK) and its

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alliance with the US. Hence, by following the development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, DPRK monitors a “provocation cycle”, challenging behavior such as initiation of missiles, followed by appeal incursions for many years. Therefore, this cycle endures swirling dangerously under the supreme leader’s administration. On the other hand, DPRK has demonstrated responsible posturing during six-party talks, interaction with USA, DPRK, Russia, and China. While President Trump who initially labeled him as Rocket Man has transformed gradually to a reliable partner, who can make peace a possibility.

Byungjin Policy (State and Regime Survival)

The byungjin line also known as the dual policy of North Korea. The Party Central Committee (PCC) of North Korea held a session in March 2013, in which the “Byungjin” line of parallel development refers to economic growth and advancements of nuclear armaments were implemented (Global Security, 2013). Throughout his rule, Kim Jong-un has treated the “Byungjin” approach as a lawful precondition for revolutionary development. The byungjin policy was aimed at creating a deliberate procedure to build a well-off nation which can be able to appreciate socialist order, through strengthening the defensive capacity and concentrating on economic progression. It was designed to develop a coherent guideline to deal with an independent nuclear energy industry, and hence to solve the energy problems of the state. Besides emphasis on the nuclear and armaments build-up, the parallel development also involves the advancement in electric power, transport sectors and the introduction of new scientific methods and technology. Thus, North Korea’s prominence on its economic progress may also help its government to survive as a nuclear weapons state. North Korea emphasized the policy as a pioneer to the decisive success. After three years of byungjin policy implementation in 2016, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) did self-evaluation of this strategy and claimed that it has elevated North Korea to a prosperous country of the people with nuclear power (NCNK, 2016) The purpose of prioritizing the byungjin policy was to depict that government by ensuing the path to affluence primarily focus to hold its political power and nuclear capability. The North Korean government’s quest towards the “parallel development approach” has created hurdles in the way of the international community who made efforts on denuclearization of North Korea.

Shifts in US Policy on DPRK

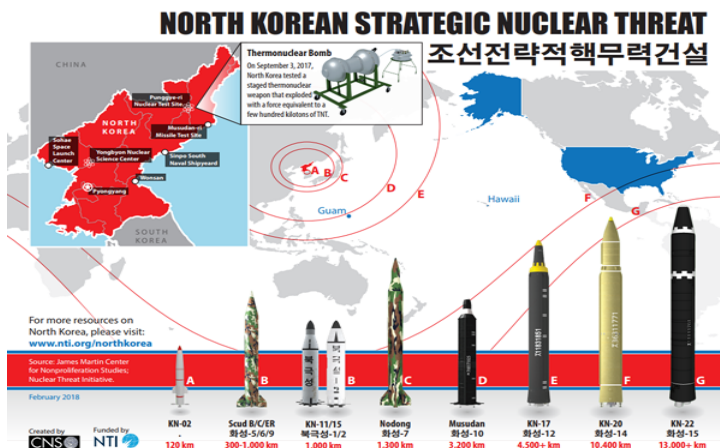
Since assuming office, the Trump administration has constantly articulated its aspiration to discredit the “strategic patience” policy of the Obama administration, which aimed at dealing with North Korean as an irritant in international security and a potential hotspot for a nuclear showdown. The economic sanctions further enhanced the provocation cycle to pursue and concentrate byungjin policy objectives of parallel development. However, the U.S.A has criticized that policy, assuming Kim cannot have both prosperity and nuclear weapons and has imposed many sanctions to reverse the process. Correspondingly, the US, through different approaches encompassing diplomacy, defense, and deterrence, has continued to engage with DPRK.

Kim Jong-un - A Potential Peacemaker

In order to sustain his power, Kim Jong-un has transformed North Korea into a nuclear power with a reasonable degree of internal cohesion despite international isolation and demonstrated remarkable statecraft in his peace overtures since new year’s speech and willingness to meet US President Donald Trump during a proposed Summit at Singapore in 2018. The world at large has appreciated the step by step approach towards confidence-building and ice breaking, which has changed the atmosphere of animosity to gradual peace by the continuation of dialogue and constructive engagement as viable options for enduring stability in the Korean Peninsula. It is appreciated that Kim Jong-un would negotiate for a peace agreement and security assurance with the U.S, coupled with the reciprocal lifting of sanctions and withdrawal of U.S. based forces in South Korea along-with with strong international guarantees.

DPRK Nuclear Compulsions

The history of North Korea shows interest in the development of a nuclear program which goes back to the Cold War era, during which the then leader of North Korea Kim Il Sung was convinced that they need to develop nukes for state security against looming US threats. North Korea commenced its nuclear program in the 1950s despite sanctions and international isolation, has successfully conducted nuclear tests in the years 2006-2017 to



join the nuclear club. The nuclear and missile capability acquired by DPRK includes Scud-B (range: 300km), Scud-C (range: 500km), and Scud-ER (range: 1,000km) bought from Russia. And Nodong (range: 1,300km), Pukguksong-2 (range: 2,000km), Musudan (range: 3,200km), Hwasong-12 (range: 4,500km) and Hwasong-14 (range: 10,000+) developed by North Korea itself which have been tested. In 2017, North Korea successfully tested the Hwasong-14 and Hwasong-15 which according to some experts equips North Korea with the capability to deliver a nuclear payload anywhere in the United States (NTI, 2017).

Prospects of Peace amid Perpetual Alert State in Korean Peninsula

While nuclear and missile program of North Korea is aimed at deterring the U.S.A, but since December 2017, the world has witnessed a dramatic change in the policies of Kim Jong Un. The initial years of Trump administration were rather difficult, with both the leaders exchanging threatening tweets, and it seemed that both states were on the verge of a nuclear war with Kim threatening to use its nukes against the United States and Trump vowing to rain down fire and fury on North Korea if it posed a threat to the United States. Trump even warned North Korea before the United Nations General Assembly that he would, “totally destroy North Korea” if it threatened the U.S or its allies” (Peter & Micheal, 2017). However, suddenly the dynamics of North Korea and USA relations changed when North and South Korea sent their teams under one flag to the Winter Games in Pyeongchang. Since then, North Korea is trying to do its best to pursue its international relations in a peaceful and cooperative manner, not only with South Korea but also with the United States.

Denuclearization- Sticking Point in the Way of Durable Peace

North Korea has indicated a willingness for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula in the preparatory exchange of good wishes prior to the Singapore Summit between Kim Jong-Un and Donald Trump. The United States and North Korean officials have also been working behind the scenes secretly in contact with one another, in which Pyongyang has shown the intention to conduct a summit. President Trump, despite the exchange of hostile threats over tweets with Kim, agreed quickly to meet Kim to discuss the crisis over North Korea nuclear weapons that are capable of hitting the US, stunned the world. Questions about what North Korea means by denuclearization remains a big problem for Washington who considers that by denuclearization Pyongyang means Kim would willingly hand over his nuclear weapons and missile systems. To Kim, it means that mutual steps would be taken to do away with the nuclear weapons, including requiring the withdrawal of the United States from providing the nuclear umbrella to Japan and South Korea.

This divergence of the definition of denuclearization can toll a death knell for the summit before it even starts. The danger is entering into negotiations with unrealistic expectations that Kim is just going to hand over the keys to his nuclear kingdom. Another major thing that can prevent North Korea from opting to denuclearize is the condition of states which have willingly given up their nukes, for example, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Ukraine has been divided and has become an irrelevant state in international scenario after giving up its nuclear weapons. Similarly, Kazakhstan is also sidelined and doesn't play a major role in world politics even though it gave up its nuclear weapons only to get support and attention of major power but in return ended up becoming an insignificant state. Similarly, in the Middle East, the fate of Iraq and Libya is also the testimony of the fact that weakness invites foreign powers in invading and destroy the regime and the country at large.

Pyeongchang Winter Olympics 2018 -A Possible Road to Peace

The Olympics games have been playing a significant diplomatic role in the relations between two Koreas. Whenever the Olympics comes to the Korean peninsula, the hope of reunification can be seen in the hearts of the divided nation. A look back at history, when after WW-II, Korea was left divided under the influence of the USSR and USA after the ending of Japanese Colonial rule, the strong sense of nationalism was observed for the reunification process. This reunification process of north and south in a single Korean body has always been induced by the stimuli of sports and games both in an intensely positive and severe negative way, these games have not only affected the peace and stability of peninsula but also changed the dynamics of events such as Olympics. For instance, the Olympics in the Korean peninsula always brought the games under the spotlight of international politics. The Winter Olympics of 2018 in Pyeong Chang can be used to understand whether this holds true or not. In, 1988 Seoul Olympics, North Korea showed its interest and campaigned to co-host the event, but South Korea denied this request. This dispute became tragic and South Korean flight 858 with 115 passengers on board was bombed by a North Korean agent (Rupert, 2013). Later in 1988 before the winter Olympics North Korea charged the South for bombing the plane but the North's government denied this as blame and attempted to boycott the games. On the other hand, South Korea continued with the Olympics. After the cold war, it was the first time for the rivals to become face to face opponents in sports, South Korea provided a platform for diplomatic and cultural trade. This reshaped the situation of Seoul and made it a dynamic modern capital of an emerging country. These sports of 1988 made a solid membrane on the 38th parallel, both South and North slipped away from unification reality while highlighting the myth of the idea. But things got better with time. In 1991, the games again played a significant role in the Korean peninsula but now it was positive in nature. That year a joint Korean table tennis team became a part of the Olympics in Japan.

For the proposed Winter Olympics 2018, if the two teams compete under a single flag it may be considered a warm move by the political elite interested in long-term peace but the general south Korean public isn't so interested in making sacrifices. Extremists in the south staged a protest where they expressed their hatred for Kim's regime, burned the north's flag and expressed feelings over how players from the north received preferential treatment as they are born with a nuclear spoon. Another major, step taken by the southern leadership was first, postponing the joint ROK-US annual military drills, which would have overlapped with the winter Olympics.

President Trump's Cautious Approach towards Peace in the Korean Peninsula

The advancement of North Korea's missile and nuclear program is threatening for the US. Donald J. Trump is quite concerned about the problem in the Korean peninsula, and as compared to the previews Obama he tends to have different policies, especially when it comes to the measures to get North Korea in giving up its nuclear capabilities. After North Korea's successful tests of ballistic missile (ICBM) Trump warned Pyongyang would be "met with fire and fury like the world has never seen before" (Jacob, 2017). The North Korean leader and Trump exchanged aggressive comments. Trump on several occasions has

recommended the “Military Option” to deal with North Korea. However, the South Korean President Moon Jae has shown concerns to avoid another war with North Korea and seem to be in favor of a more liberal approach. However, Trump has managed to get the public’s expectations more. And he is occasionally appreciated by President Moon for his policies of putting sanctions and considerable pressure on North Korea to bring it to negotiations. While, on the other hand, Trump keeps on boasting about the military capabilities of the US and how much advanced and updated their nuclear arsenal is currently. His statement “My first order as President was to renovate and modernize our nuclear arsenal. It is now far stronger and more powerful than ever before” is the testimony of this fact (Press TV, 2017).

President Trump as a Peacemaker

One of the most significant steps taken by President Trump in peacemaking that changed the course of the history of the US is the acceptance of North Korean, invitation to discuss denuclearization. Trump was heavily criticized for his aggressive measures and threats to North Korea. Trump has elevated the high reward high-risk situation. The imposed sanctions have created an impact on North Korea to move towards the negotiating table. Another remarkable step taken by President Trump was to pressurize China to help in resolving the issue of North Korea. As a consequence, China also joined the US in imposing sanctions against North Korea. North Korea agrees to conditionally denuclearize and pursue the US to end the Korean war. The leaders vowed to negotiate a peace treaty. US President Trump can be given due credit for taking a diplomatic turn towards solving the issue.

Analytical Debate on Prospects of Enduring Peace in the Korean Peninsula

Chinese Perspective

The crisis on the Korean Peninsula increases anxieties in China. The People Republic of China does not want another Korean war as stability is a compulsion for Chinese peaceful rise. China condemns missile and nuclear tests which North Korea and wants table talks to resolve this issue and support UN-imposed sanctions. The aggressive actions of Kim Jong-un’s leader of North Korea pose a threat to regional security. These actions weaken China’s position as a global power which is the aim of Xi-Jinping. In recent times, China-North Korea relations have visibly declined. Its reality we can find in the Chinese authorities’ intolerance with the North Korea aggravations and Kim’s daring activities, apparently without attention to China’s anxieties. Tensions on the Korean peninsula, China treats these tensions as the joint United States and North Korea problem in which the hostile policies of America towards North is the main source of catastrophe. In this scenario, missile and nuclear programs of North are treated as self-protective actions. Chinese authorities take a very serious perception about it that the US together with Japan and South Korea would use these problems and will establish a strong military alliance to contain China. There is an opinion of Chinese that the US president has not changed the policies of his ancestors especially in terms of security and military arrangement in the region. Justification of this point of view is found in the placement of US THAAD anti-missile system to South Korea, mutual military exercises and recurrent U.S. aircraft visits to the Korean peninsula. China believes that the US would like to create a strategic vacuum and wants to worsen the security situation in the region because it is way to justify its military presence in the Asia (Ethan & Nargiza, 2017). U.S. has not stopped the THAAD placement to South Korea and also encouraged its Asian allies to enhance their military abilities. This is being followed by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who plans for amendment in the constitution to send its Self-Defense Forces in foreign countries. China is the North Korean’s ally under the treaty of Mutual Assistance and this treaty bans alliances against the other. Bilateral relations with China are conventionally defined as “lips and teeth.” This explanation is narrowly linked with Chinese strategic goals. The Chinese government uses North Korea as a buffer state to the U.S. presence in this region along with its allies Japan and South Korea. The main aim of the Chinese is to maintain the status quo. China does not want the North Korea administration to end, which could mean a flood of refugees from North Korea to northern Chinese provinces and East Asia could go into chaos.

China supports the Kim regime in terms of the economy for the development of its northern provinces. This is one of its opinions against North Korea's economic separation. Chinese authorities want North Korea without nuclear weapons. They claim that control of them may lead to the downfall of the non-proliferation administration, for example, by bringing Japan and South Korea to attain nuclear weapons and the result of this attainment may lead to a miscalculated adventure by either state. China believes that the sanctions should not be too severe and should not affect normal citizens but promote extreme pressure on the Pyongyang government. For its own economic benefits, China has been applying the sanctions within a very restricted scope. China has political interests in North Korea but the possession of nuclear weapons is the major threats to its interest. China believes that the United Nations is the only forum that can resolve the crisis and bring peace in the peninsula. China demonstrates itself as a state that has the capacity to resolve the issues between states or at least decrease these problems. It proposed the term "Double Suspension" which assumes that a stop to the U.S. - South Korea mutual military exercises to satisfy Kim to hold the nuclear or missile tests, which could create favorable environments for peace talks.

South Korean Perspective

Both the leaders of the Korean peninsula, Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in first time they met and agreed to end the Korean War, 65 years after the armistice. At Kim's beckoning, President Moon briefly stepped over into the Northside, in a highly symbolic moment. The leaders agreed to the Panmunjom declaration committing to seek "complete denuclearization" of the peninsula. "South and North Korea confirmed the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean peninsula, and durable peace working towards the common goal of raising people's living standards and economic prosperity along with national rejuvenation.

US perspective

Commencing from fire and fury to destruction of North Korea to dramatic changes of diplomatic overtures, confidence building, peacemaking and enduring peace in the Korean peninsula, such a huge journey has been traveled in a matter of few statements. The US wants to denuclearize North Korea but has realized that it can happen overnight. However, cautious optimism prevails, and the US wants to break the ice by making a historic summit in 2018 a reality. That will surely lead to subsequent agenda setting tones and timelines. Many analysts say that while sanctions may be hurting North Korea, Kim may believe he has the upper hand and is unlikely to give up his full nuclear capability, considering it vital to the survival of his family dynasty. In past negotiations, North Korea has demanded the United States withdraw its troops and remove its "nuclear umbrella" of support for the South. On step by step denuclearization and reduction of US forces and alliance shield all toll orders, however, promise for pragmatic solutions based on changed geopolitical realities on the regional and global order.

Recipe for Enduring Stability in the Korean Peninsula

North Korea is the most difficult and dangerous challenge for peace on the Korean Peninsula. Its supreme leader Kim Jong Un follows his grandfather's (Kim Il-Sung) policy of "Byungjin Policy" which emphasizes the development of nuclear technology and economic development and considers them necessary for the regime's survival. Therefore, North Korea shows no sign of abandoning its nuclear program, which poses a great threat to the Asia-Pacific region. And the only possible way to the denuclearization of North Korea is the need of all stakeholders in Northeast Asia i.e. South Korea, Japan, USA and especially China, to cooperate that could help bring back Kim Jong Un on the negotiating table. But for North Korea to talk about denuclearization agreement willingly, sanctions would need to be very tough to make Kim believe that they would soon end up in isolation, and indeed this strategy is not without risks as North Korea's reaction could be more devastating, as they can trigger a war especially a nuclear war rather than coming to the negotiations table. The US leader is expected to meet his counterpart in late May or early June 2018,

people in the White House believe that the chances of getting a breakthrough for the US are low, but they hope that peace shall prevail in the Korean Peninsula.

Regional Dimensions

Peace on the Korean Peninsula is of great importance to China. As China is working to gain Superpower status, peace on the peninsula is a must for it, but peace means denuclearization of North Korea as the countries' supreme leader Kim Jong Un runs the system according to his grandfather's (Kim Il-Sung) strategy of "Byungjin Policy", which states that expansion of nuclear capability and economic development is a must for the survival of the regime. And in these terms, peace seems rather vague and difficult for China because the already panicked state of North Korea will incite a nuclear war or even a civil war on the Korean Peninsula if further sanctions are imposed on it. China is concerned about various issues regarding any conflict raised by North Korea and its impacts on her as well as the Peninsula. The Chinese fear that any further tough sanctions on North Korea which would result in the regime's fall can trigger an environment in which there is an increased chance of arm conflict in the Korean Peninsula. It fears that North Korea would invade South Korea rather than giving up peacefully. To minimize the risks of conflict, China, USA, and South Korea should establish mechanisms to coordinate intelligence, capabilities, equipment, and logistics to execute joint missions such as eliminating nuclear weapons, peacekeeping operations, and disarmament, demobilization etc. North Korea acts as a buffer zone for China between US ally i.e. South Korea and China. The fact remains that the collapse of North Korea would cost China this strategic buffer zone because there is no doubt that a unified Korean Peninsula under the jurisdiction of South Korea will eventually tilt towards the USA. China and North Korea share an 880-mile-long border, it is clear that a large amount of North Koreans will migrate to China in any case of conflict, which will contribute to its already growing population and will be a further burden to its economy. One conservative estimate says that it would need more than 24,000 guards to prevent North Koreans from crossing the border. The presence of nuclear materials in North Korea even after if it falls will be another important consideration for China as Yongbyon, a big North Korean nuclear site is just 180 miles from the Chinese Border. But still, this problem can be overcome if the burden of securing WMDs could be share among the Northeast Asian States. The Chinese government is in favor of excellent relations, with a variety of trade, investment and economic contacts. However, China cautions and links UN sanctions against DPRK but does not support full or comprehensive sanctions (UN, 2017). The core interest of China is that peace and stability on this issue are solid. China would like to keep the strength on the ground and in Northeast Asia, so China has still been a priority focusing on national economic development and modernization. Stability does not mean there is no improvement, it just means that the dynamic is strong and quiet. In fact, what China cares about it is that these changes do not threaten peace and stability on the ground in the overall generation and "comply with China's solid support and the willingness of Koreans to achieve peaceful reunification.

Proposed Summit at Singapore 2018

In the backdrop of the US-DPRK summit in Singapore the world appeared to be changing as after the end of the Korean war, this would first time that two leaders will meet face to face ushering a new era of optimism. The agenda items are expected from respective standpoints pointing towards overall stability and denuclearization and confidence-building measures. Both sides are expected to demonstrate restraint and responsibility and avoid any circumstances creating distrust. While a magic breakthrough cannot be expected due decades of hostility and years of rhetoric targeting each other's personalities and policies, however, there is always a first step which is dialogue, that has been proposed. The world is watching with anxiety and cautious optimism, that at least to some degree, such developments will reduce the prevailing tension, ready trigger alert situation and help towards confidence building that will eventually lead towards lasting peace, resolution of disputes through negotiated settlements and usher new era of international cooperation and economic development of the entire region. Both parties should adopt clear goals and

realistic approaches in their ideas and most importantly, mutual coordination and cooperation to deal with the expected criticism. The diplomatic approach should be appreciated as both parties have agreed for table talks instead of threats, counter threats and warmongering, etc. But Kim's confidence should not be underestimated as North Korea has been successful in inter-continental ballistic missiles tests and high yield nuclear tests as well. But for making this attempt of diplomatic relations fruitful, serious hard work is required. Diplomatic talks require tolerance, flexibility, calmness, and an expert and credible negotiating team, therefore, relentless patience is the need of the hour as a failure of these negotiations can result in the worsening of the situation. It should be understood that the denuclearization of the Peninsula will take more than one official meeting. This could be the start of something futuristic, as failure may lead to disaster.

Conclusion

There is no simple solution to the complex situation prevailing in the Korean Peninsula since the Korean War. The harsh posturing President Trump and Chairman Kim have pushed the region into uncertainty and this heightened state of tension has increased the perpetual state of war between the US and DPRK. The peace overtures by Kim and reciprocal response by the USA, South Korea and the world at large have changed the regional dynamics to cautious optimism and gradual step by step confidence building for eventual peace and stability. The proposed summit at Singapore in 2018 is a rare opportunity in which the world is anxiously waiting, which demands an extreme degree of caution, patience, and pragmatism as haste and intolerance would not yield any positive outcome. Constructive engagement by all parties is recommended to be pursued eventual peace and prosperity and saving the world from looming nuclear holocaust.

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