

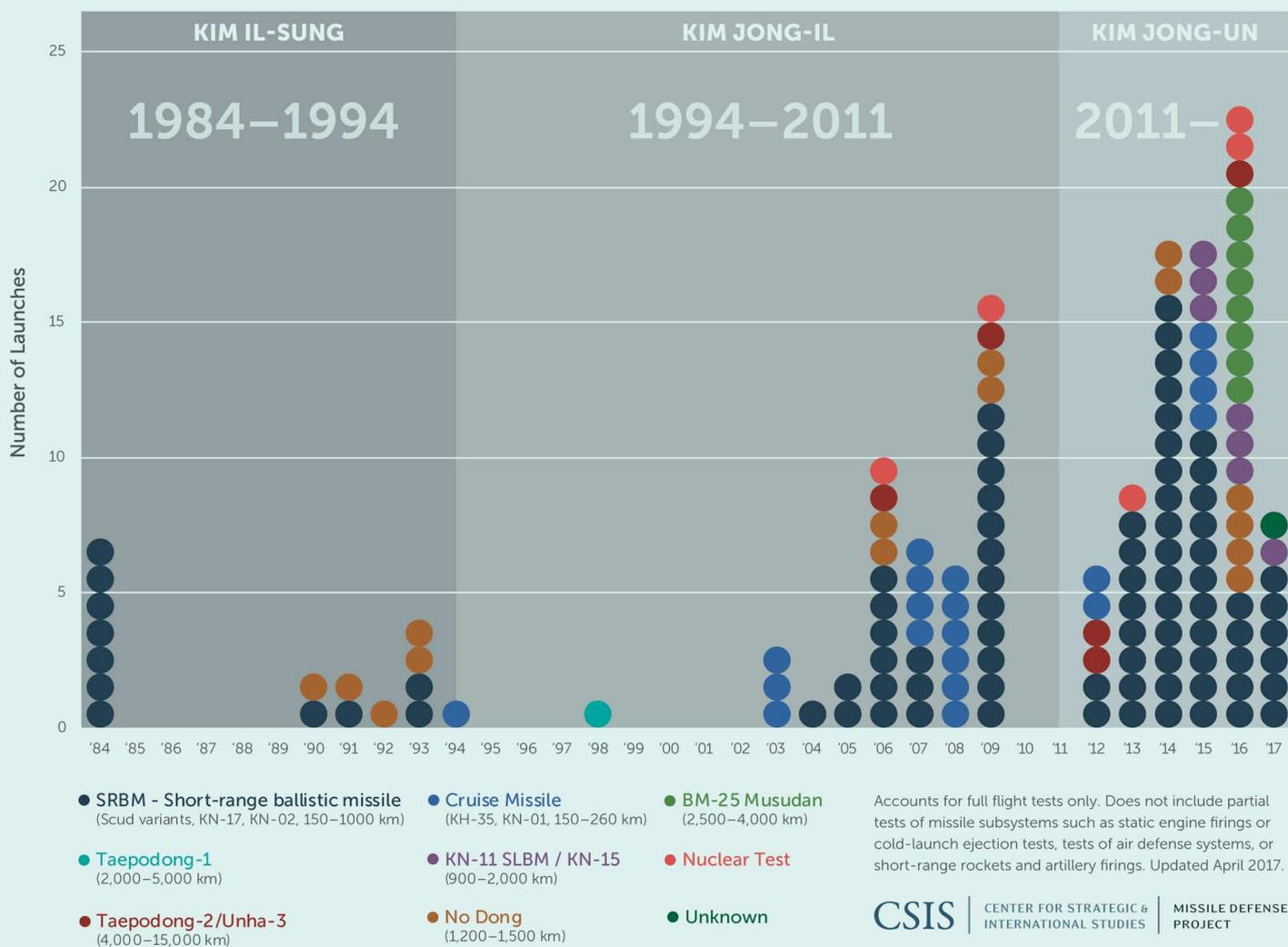


Vivekananda International Foundation

Threat of Military Conflict on Korean Peninsula

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NORTH KOREAN MISSILE LAUNCHES



About the Author



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Threat of Military Conflict on Korean Peninsula

Introduction

The threat of another military conflict has always existed on Korean peninsula since the Korean War of 1950 ended without a peace treaty in 1953. However, rather than a direct North and South Korea confrontation, the latent possibilities of a conflict have now moved into the direction of a US-North Korea conflict. The increased pace of nuclear and missile testing under Kim Jong-un's supremacy has sought to hasten North Korea's surge of being able to field a nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Certain successful tests in the latter half of 2017 have closed the credibility gap of North Korean threat. This had made terminating its nuclear weapons program now a strategic matter interspersed with an aggressive military posturing by the US. While the earlier Obama administration in the US had sought not to give any public credence to North Korea under its 'Strategic Patience' policy, the new Trump administration has been vocal of all cards including military ones being on the table.

However, any lasting solution to increasing tensions on the Korean peninsula will require a regional consensus. This has unraveled a situation of *strategic chaos* as Asia-Pacific region is home to major power rivalries with each power having varying stakes on the Korean peninsula. The earlier 'six-party' grouping—US, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and North Korea—that held six rounds of talks in the 2000's regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons program remain the primary players here again. But with North Korea's

steadfast determination to continue its pursuit of nuclear weapons, the role of the US and China has assumed larger significance as they are the chief enemy and chief ally of North Korea. Japan, by virtue of its geographical location in easy range of North Korea's current missiles, and being US alliance partner remains major stakeholder.

Russia, with Soviet Union's legacies, has managed to maintain diplomatic leverage in North Korea, but present ties are not as robust as Soviet Union-North Korea relations. South Korea's expansive integration into international society and its flourishing economic exchanges with all major powers bears stark contrast to North Korea's self-imposed global isolation. Thus, South Korea inherently gets support from even China and Russia (who are considered to be North Korea's allies) along with being a US security alliance partner. But, with its capital city Seoul being only 57 kilometers away from the North Korean border, all primary players are aware that any level of conflict will be devastating for South Korea.

There is regional consensus on maintaining de-nuclearization of the Korean peninsula, but North Korea's progress in its clandestine nuclear weapons program has reduced the space for diplomatic maneuvering this time. International efforts to check North Korea's nuclear program since the 1990's in form of concessions for giving up, and then through sanctions post its first nuclear test in 2006, have all failed. Rather than discouraging North Korea, these have only strengthened its quest for a nuclear-tipped ICBM. In this paper we will examine how the threat of a military conflict plays for each of the primary players, ending with a short note on implications for India and

what are the future possibilities of resolving the situation. The questions we will explore are:

- Why the Threat Of Military Conflict in North Korea?
- Why North Korea wants to acquire nuclear-tipped ICBM?
- Is North Korea only about being a buffer state for China?
- How credible does US consider the North Korean threat?
- What future does South Korea see for itself?
- Will Japan militarize / nuclearize to strengthen its security?
- How far will Russia go in patronizing North Korea?
- What are possible implications for India?

Why North Korea wants to Acquire Nuclear-tipped ICBM?

Legacy of Korean War

In the first and only attempt at military unification, North Korea-led effort was nearly successful until the intervention of US forces. Arrival of US forces changed the ground realities and in turn pushed North Korea to the brink of collapse, which survived only by China's counter-intervention. Following the ensuing stalemate, an armistice was signed and the US stationed permanent troops in South Korea. In its security guarantees, the US also extended its nuclear umbrella to South Korea and stationed its tactical nuclear missiles there in 1958. This became a source of big contention as the two US Presidents during the Korean War, Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower, had made no secret of the fact that they were willing to use nuclear weapons in order to achieve peace on Korean peninsula.

Meanwhile, lack of unity in the communist bloc and discordant relations of Kim Il-sung with Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev steered North Korea to seek greater self-reliance in its security matters. Though North Korea went on to sign 'Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty' with China and 'Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance' with Soviet Union (both in July 1961), the military assistance clauses did not alleviate North Korea's sense of insecurity concerning the US.

Beginning of Xenophobia

The ensuing Sino-Soviet split led both countries to compete for influence in North Korea and left Kim Il-sung with a free hand to chart North Korea's course and strengthen his personality cult. His violent purging of pro-China and pro-Soviet factions too incurred him very limited rebuttal. Kim Il-sung's 1962 statement that "whole nation should be turned into a fortress... as a guarantee against nuclear attack" indicated his continued belief of an imminent nuclear attack by the US. By mid-1960's, he issued directives to develop indigenous missile and nuclear capabilities. Motivated by his desire to rely less on Chinese and Soviet support, Kim Il-sung also formally proclaimed his *Juche* ideology in 1965.

The *Juche* ideology enunciated the three principles of political independence, economic self-sustenance and self-reliance in defense that till today breeds a strong xenophobic nationalism in North Korea. Though, Mao Zedong refused North Korean request for atomic bomb, North Korea joined Soviet bloc in its joint nuclear research. Regarding missile technology, North Korea started its acquisitions from both Beijing and Moscow in late 1960's. In 1971, North Korea went on to sign an agreement with China to acquire, develop, and

produce ballistic missiles and other weapon systems. By late 1980's, North Korea had rapidly built proficiency in ballistic missile technologies and began exporting them to earn foreign exchange.

While China would go on to renew its treaty every twenty years (in 1981 and 2001) with North Korea, Russia adopted a revised treaty in 2000 after the treaty fell through in 1991. However, after the fall of Soviet Union, neither China nor Russia have offered a nuclear umbrella to North Korea as the US does to South Korea. China, by virtue of its 'No First Use' policy, is constrained to interfere in any attack that did not happen on its mainland. Russia has sought to expand ties with South Korea and made military assistance to North Korea conditional in case of their not being the aggressor in any conflict. Thus over the years, North Korea has focused on building a self-reliant steady base in nuclear fundamentals.

Role of Pakistan

From late 1960's to 1970's, North Korea acquired sensitive technologies from Europe taking advantage of lack of adequate nuclear safeguards at the time. During this period, North Korean agents went to a conference in Vienna and chatted up Belgian scientists who had designs for plutonium separation plant and later acquired them. Later in 1990's, North Korea shifted to uranium from plutonium with substantive help from Dr. AQ Khan (who led Pakistan own nuclear program) through clandestine transfer of uranium centrifuges, enrichment machines and technical data. Though Pakistan vehemently denied any state role in Dr. Khan's activities, later reports indicated that Prime Minister Bhutto had herself carried sensitive material during her trip to North Korea in 1993 for exchange of information on missile technologiesⁱ.

In a book by noted journalist Shyam Bhatia, *'Goodbye Shahzadi: A Political Biography of Benazir Bhutto'* (2008), the barter took place in 1993 citing the information as revealed by Bhutto herself during a conversation with him. As secret services of India, Russia and some western countries were closely monitoring every move on Pakistan's military research, Bhutto had decided to herself carry the sensitive material to Pyongyang to avoid detection, the book says. "As she (Bhutto) was due to visit North Korea at the end of 1993, she was asked and readily agreed to carry critical nuclear data on her person and hand it over on arrival in Pyongyang," the book claims. Bhatia, who cites his close association with Bhutto since their Oxford days, quoted the former Pakistan Prime Minister as saying, "You know I cannot take credit for our nuclear program that goes to my father but I am the mother of the missile program." However, the book points out that the cost of purchasing the first dozen *Nodong* missiles was estimated at a massive US \$ 3 billion, and with Pakistan short of cash the speculation at the time was that Islamabad and Pyongyang had agreed a barter deal to exchange uranium enrichment technologies for missilesⁱⁱ.

Failing Economy and Instituting of 'Songun' Policy

North Korea had enjoyed strong economic growth till late 1960's, when the Oil Crisis in 1973 disrupted North Korea's balance of payments. Prices of its imports rose while prices of its main exports metals such as lead, zinc etc. plunged. Soon after, North Korea began defaulting on its payments and halted all its payments in 1985, the same year it signed Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Its declining economic condition worsened with the fall of Soviet Union which had served as its main aid donor and trading partner till then. 1994 to

1998 saw the worst famine in North Korea where 2-3 million of its population was wiped out. Yet, it was around this time that North Korea under Kim Jong-il formally instituted the *Songun* or 'Military first' policy and continued with its fervent pursuit of nuclear weapons.

After Soviet Union's downfall, a lot of nuclear and missile scientists were left without jobs which led North Korea to scout them. In 1992, Russian police detained 60 scientists going to North Korea along with their families at Moscow's Sheremetyevo-2 Airport. However, numerous other Soviet era scientists did go to North Korea in the 1990's, taking with them decades of experience, as well as parts and blueprintsⁱⁱⁱ. In the 2000's, US's wars in Middle East and downfall of regimes classified as 'axis of evil' (along with North Korea such as Iran and Iraq) that pursued a nuclear weapons program served to convince North Korea that a nuclear-tipped ICBM would be the only deterrent to prevent a similar fate for the Kim regime and North Korea.

Ironically as world economy became more globalized, North Korea found willing foreign vendors for many dual use technologies such as electronics that were needed for modern missile guidance systems. A recent interview by the German Domestic Intelligence Chief in February 2018 brought out that North Korea had been acquiring equipment and technology for its nuclear and weapons programs through its Berlin embassy. "We have noticed that so many procurement activities have taken place from the embassy," said Hans-Georg Maassen, head of the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV), or Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. "From our point of view, they were for the missile program but also partly for the nuclear program," Maassen added^{iv}. Ironically, despite its stated xenophobia, North Korea has

extensively capitalized on globalization through the oil supply chains, complicit foreign nationals, off-shore company registries and the international banking system to pursue their weapon programs. United Nations revealed North Korea earned almost \$200 million from exporting banned commodities in 2017, in violation of severe international sanctions.

Though most new missiles developed by North Korea can trace their design to Soviet legacy systems, North Korea's efforts to accumulate know-how for ballistic missiles and nuclear technologies since 1960's has begun to pay off now. From 2013, missile and nuclear tests have shown a rapid improvement as an indigenous scientific and technological capability has been built up. While analysts speculate on North Korea's actual ability to deliver a nuclear-tipped ICBM, there is growing consensus on credibility of North Korean capability. Miniaturization of nuclear weapon into a warhead was achieved by the US and Soviet Union in 1950's, so North Korea is not practically very far off in its claims. Vipin Narang, an associate professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology also said not much inference should be made on North Korea's failure of re-entry vehicle (RV) of the missiles, stating that *"First, the steeply lofted trajectory alone puts such different stresses on an RV than a normal trajectory, that it would be downright terrifying had this RV actually survived reentry. Although this may have broken up, we should not assume that it necessarily would on a normal trajectory. Second, it may have been a shroud or a mock RV that was not designed to withstand reentry at all. Third, it might have self-destructed. These latter two points are because North Korea may not want us to recover any real reentry debris for analysis."*

Stability of Kim Jong-un Regime

Kim Jong-un, since his ascendancy in 2011, has put paramount importance on developing a nuclear-tipped ICBM and has shown no signs of slowing down despite several famine warnings for North Korea every year. In 2013, Kim Jong-un enunciated a policy of *Byungjin* or 'Parallel Development' which seeks simultaneous small scale market-oriented economic reforms and the development of a full-scale nuclear strike force. This has served to prevent a widespread famine similar to the 1990's, thus incurring him larger public support. There is now emergence of nascent market forces and initial signs of consumerism in North Korea, evident through growth of advertising that were virtually nil even in Pyongyang. However, how stable is the Kim Jong-un regime remains a mystery.

The Institute for National Security Strategy, a South Korean think tank, in a report in December 2016 mentioned that Kim Jong-un has ordered 340 people to be executed since he came to power in 2011. Of those killed, about 140 were senior officers in the country's government, military and ruling Korean Worker's Party. This constant crackdown on top officials may lead to a gradual splinter between the higher ups of the North Korean political and defense establishment and Kim regime. Defectors' stories from North Korea bear common mentions of the control of flow of information by the Kim regime. Thus many work to try and smuggle in information about the difference between the prevalent narrative and actual reality through covert channels back into North Korea.

Thae Yong-ho, the former North Korean deputy ambassador to the UK and the highest-ever diplomatic official to defect from North Korea (in 2016), in an

interview to a South Korean Daily mentioned that though executions and purges were common place under Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, they never killed their family members. This is in stark contrast to Kim Jong-un who publicly executed his uncle Jang Song-thaek which may not have sat well with the Confucian ideals of North Korean society. Yong Ho also talked about legitimacy fears of Kim Jong-un who has still hasn't revealed any of his background information such as age, his place of birth, where he spent his childhood and the name of his mother to the North Korean public^{vi}.

Overall Scan

To understand the inner mind of a ruthless dictator is more than guesswork. Kim Jong-un's actions since his coming to power have shown that he places prime priority on his survival. But how strategic is his long term outlook remains a mystery. With a fledgling economy and newer sanctions every time, pursuing a belligerent route to get a much stronger adversary to negotiate on your terms is evidently tactless. Further, the US military, along with its nuclear and missile capability, is far too advanced when it does not even have to station nuclear missiles in South Korean territory to hit North Korea. In an interview in January 2018, US CIA Director Mike Pompeo asserted that Kim Jong-un's end goal of pursuing nuclear weapons may not just be regime survival but a guaranteed extortionist relationship with South Korea to seek eventual unification under a nuclear threat^{vii}.

Thus one can largely speculate the reasons of North Korea's vehement pursuit of nuclear weapons as: Continued threat perception from the post-World War II US; no real allies to rely on after ideological distortion and xenophobia; regime survival through war mentality in the face of a struggling economy and

difficulties in maintaining control over a brutalized population; and overvalued ambitions to re-pursue a military unification of the Korean peninsula by nuclear blackmailing.

Is North Korea only about being a Buffer State for China?

Every now and then, questions are raised on the seven decade longevity of Kim regime despite its brutal totalitarian nature and being under UN sanctions for more than a decade. Though the Kim regime since Kim Il-sung has managed to craft a perpetual war mentality and galvanize the population towards obedience, China has been the mainstay of its existence. China places greater concern on US security strategy in the region than North Korea's nuclear program. Chinese support towards North Korea is geared towards protecting Chinese national interests. It would not be an understatement that more than it protects North Korea, China actually protects Chinese interests in North Korea.

In early 1990's when the first crisis regarding North Korea's incomplete declaration to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Jiang Zemin outlined three principles for de-nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula: non-intervention, non-sanction and resolution through dialogue approach. However, after the collapse of China-mediated Six Party Talks and North Korea conducting its first nuclear test in 2006, China has voted in favour of UN sanctions on North Korea. But it has consistently designated caveats on UN sanctions that the sanctions are merely a way to resume dialogue. An interesting point to note is China has never pursued unilateral sanctions of its own against North Korea.

Chinese core interests with regards to North Korea include strategic military balance in the region, border security, and the stability and safety of its northeast provinces. With a US military presence in South Korea, China has kept the Kim regime propped up to ensure a strategic buffer for itself and prevent a US-allied unified Korea. But right from Kim Il-sung not agreeing to take orders from Chinese General Peng Dehuai during Korean War to Kim Jong-un never holding a summit with Xi Jinping, the relations between the two allies has not always been smooth. China's perception of North Korea has vacillated between its position as a 'strategic asset' and 'strategic liability'. In a departure from precedent, China has also allowed its media, academia and civilians to criticize Kim Jong-un and North Korean policy^{viii}.

In recent years, China has also never reiterated its security treaty with North Korea. In August 2017, an editorial in China's state-run daily Global Times suggested that China should make clear that if North Korea launches missiles that threaten US soil first and the US retaliates, China will stay neutral^{ix}. Chinese analysts mention that since the bilateral treaty with North Korea holds clause that both nations should safeguard peace and security, North Korea's development of nuclear weapons in violation of the UN treaty on non-proliferation has rendered the treaty void^x. Thus by denying North Korea allied assurance in the case that it could start a conflict, China aims to deter Pyongyang from taking the initiative. Ideological consideration for a fellow socialist regime has also taken a backseat as China sees rapid modernization with a reformed economy.

Fallout of North Korean Crises on the East Asian Region

While China would support the strain in US alliance system in its neighborhood owing to North Korean provocations, it is also aware that the North Korean nuclear crises could become a pretext for a nuclear or arms race in the region. A nuclear South Korea or Japan would freeze the status quo for China making all its present strategic gains superfluous. Also, though China may account for North Korea's 90 percent trade (US \$ 5-6 billion), China's economic and political relations with South Korea (trade around US \$ 200 billion) assume similar if not higher significance. To add, China would not want South Korea to be drawn more strongly into the US alliance system in the region. The contention over the deployment of a US ballistic missile defense (BMD) system in South Korea reflects this concern of China.

The new Moon Jae-in administration in South Korea (that inaugurated in May 2017) had halted the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system which was sanctioned by earlier Park Geun-hye administration. But following a barrage of missile tests by North, South Korea hastily accepted the installation of all remaining batteries. The radar AN-TPY 2 accompanying the THAAD has strong monitoring capabilities ranging from 600 miles for a Terminal Mode (TM) to 3000 miles in a Forward Deployed Mode (FBM). However, THAAD will be used to track ballistic missiles in their terminal phase in South Korea^{xi}.

The US already has a THAAD battery deployed in Guam, two AN-TPY 2 radars deployed in Japan (at Shariki and Kyogamisaki), space-based assets, plus a range of ship-borne radars and larger land-based radars in other parts of the Pacific theatre. A THAAD deployment in South Korea could offer US advantage

of early tracking of Chinese missiles as THAAD surveillance data could be transferred to other US BMD assets. Also, the change in mode from TM to FBM takes only four hours, thus vastly expanding the radar's range^{xii}. Though China considers the US narrative of 'China's Responsibility Theory' regarding North Korea as burdensome and excessive, it understands that China would be a greater loser in any conflict scenario than the US.

Proximity of China's northeast provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning, which were the forerunners of China's industrialization, raises huge concerns. There were strong concerns over radiation leak from Punggye Ri Mountain site where North Korea has conducted all its six nuclear tests owing to the tied mountain syndrome^{xiii}. Further, trade with North Korea forms a mainstay for China's northeast provinces, with Jilin's largest trading partner being North Korea^{xiv}. In fact, it is not surprising that most Chinese firms under US unilateral sanctions regarding North Korea are based in its northeastern provinces. Ryonbong, a North Korean corporation that came under UN and US sanctions, specializes in acquisition for North Korean defense industries and support to Pyongyang's military-related sales, is located near the China-North Korean border.

Relations between China and North Korea have also become frosty due to North Korea timing its nuclear and missile tests with important strategic events in China such as the Belt and Road Forum and BRICS Summit, thus creating huge embarrassment for China. Kim Jong-un's purging of key government figures with close ties to China (such as his uncle Jang Song-thaek) along with the assassination of Kim Jong-nam, his older half-brother in Malaysia who had been living in Macau, is likely to have soured ties between

Pyongyang and Beijing. Chinese media has constantly mentioned fears of North Korean regime collapse leading to huge outpouring of refugees, a situation similar to earlier 1994-1998 North Korean famine. Despite being party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, China has no domestic definition of 'refugee', thus reflecting its dread regarding refugees^{xv}.

Summing Up

Xi Jinping formally proposed the 'Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics' during the 19th Party Congress in October 2017. This has led to more proactive and assertive policies against Deng Xiaoping's adage of 'hide your capabilities, bide your time'. Thus even though China has time and again supported UN sanctions, it has sought to not tighten the leash beyond a point. China has pressed for the sanctions to avoid creating a humanitarian crisis and arrest the tensions from going over a certain threshold while giving it maneuverability with Trump administration. But the trouble with sanctions is that unless they make life tough for the North Korean leadership they will be ineffective. And if they make life tough for the leadership, there is all probability of regime collapse in North Korea.

How Credible does US consider the North Korean Threat?

From a narrow US perspective, North Korea's belligerent actions seem almost suicidal. North Korea is creating a threat to the US that could lead the US into preventive strikes against North Korea and either force it back down or trigger a conventional war that it would lose catastrophically—albeit at immense cost to South Korea. Or, if the US does not respond with effective preventive strikes or diplomacy, actually North Korea will acquire a nuclear capability to strike at the US, which if ever exercised, would trigger a level of

massive US nuclear retaliation that much- or most - of North Korea would not survive^{xvi}.

Yet, despite the evident rationale, the North Korean nuclear crisis is hard-hitting for the US. Though, the US may have the most sophisticated military arsenal in the world, North Korean artillery units along the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ) deter it to initiate any military attack owing to Seoul's proximity to DMZ. The US is at crossroads today where its escalation dominance is capsized. The issue of dissuading and deterring North Korea from seeking any capability that would threaten continental US is directly linked to security of its allies South Korea and Japan where the cost of conflict is very high. Presently, the US military is extensively preparing for all contingency scenarios with live-fire exercises both with its allies and standalone exercises. The exercise at Fort Bragg in December 2017 was part of one of the largest air assault exercises in recent years^{xvii}.

The trouble regarding the preparedness of North Korean artillery units became evident in November 2010, when the North conducted a surprise artillery attack on the southern island of Yeonpyeongdo. In preparation for the attack, a battalion of twelve 122-millimeter Multiple Rocket Launchers was believed to have been moved onto the Kangnyong peninsula near Yeonpyeongdo. On November 23, the island was hit by two barrages totalling 170 rounds of 122-millimeter rockets—and possibly some rounds from nearby 76.2-millimeter coastal artillery units. South Korean return fire was limited by in-operative counter-battery radar, which was repaired in time to direct a strike on North Korean rocket launcher units. Two civilians and two South Korean marines were killed in the attacks. North Korea also has a

massive stockpile of chemical weapons (CW), much of which can be used in conjunction with its artillery forces, or delivered by air or ballistic missiles^{xviii}. According to the Nuclear Threat Initiative, North Korea may possess between 2,500 tons and 5,000 tons of CW agents^{xix}. North Korea is also has an active cyber warfare program with both its military and clandestine organizations gaining the ability to conduct cyber operations.

US's Current Course of Action

At present, the US has focused on maintaining a combat-ready posture through numerous military exercises and war games. It has also beefed up the missile defense systems for South Korea and Japan. There are also unsubstantiated reports in US media that US, through a cyber-program, has also been targeting North Korea's missile testing, leading to their high rates of failure. A Washington Post report mentions that though North Korea's missile infrastructure lacks the competence of Russia's, Russians using the same type of missiles had achieved a 13 percent failure rate while North Korean attempts failed a whopping 88 percent of the time^{xx}.

Maintaining the *status quo* through coercion and denuclearizing the Korean peninsula would require a deal with China and Russia, North Korea's biggest backers. Owing to the US's tense relations with both, finding middle ground would require striking a mutual bargain. China and Russia have proposed a "double-halt" program in which US ceases its military exercises with South Korea to get North Korea to halt all its testing. The US has mentioned there is no moral equivalency between its defense exercises with South Korea and North Korea violating UN Security Council resolutions. An unofficial proposal mentions of a grand bargain wherein US could vacate South Korea in exchange

for China and Russia instigating regime change in North Korea. In its turn, the US has sought to use its financial supremacy through sanctions on Chinese companies and banks (Russia is already under US economic sanctions) to get them to assume responsibility and resolve the ongoing crisis. The US has kept a keen watch over North Korean procurements from abroad to detect and characterize North Korea's expanding nuclear programs. One of the unsubstantiated reasons cited for North Korea's high failure rate in missile testing was also US having penetrated North's procurement network.

Massive procurements sufficient for thousands of P2-type centrifuges throughout 2000's has raised suspicion that North Korea may have more than one centrifuge plant at Yongbyon complex that it had declared in 2010. This has led to varying estimates of nuclear stockpile sufficient for about 30-60 nuclear warheads^{xxi}. Through a 'North Korea Uncovered' project initiated in 2007, the US also has a comprehensive set of mappings with in-depth coverage of North Korean buildings, roads, palaces, mass graves, military facilities etc.^{xxii} However, most of North Korea's military bases are buried deep underground while extensive tunnel networks for Kim Jong-un's escape make a US direct assassination extremely difficult.

Anthony Cordesman, a highly noted US strategic veteran, very succinctly summed up North Korea's current nuclear and missile capability. He states that "Firing an unproven missile with an unproven warhead in an unproven re-entry vehicle with unproved accuracy and reliability at these ranges against a major nuclear power goes from stupidity to insanity". However, he further goes on to mention that North Korea can probably field an uncertain initial nuclear armed missile threat against South Korea and Japan within a

year if it rushes to do so, and field a proven ICBM capability with a boosted nuclear warhead within two to three years – depending on how demanding are the size, vulnerability, accuracy and reliability, and lethality of the force that one calls ‘credible’^{xxiii}. This gives US a small time-window to deal with North Korea’s nuclear provocations. The US is in a Catch-22 situation where pushing into larger deployments of theatre missile defenses systems - the kind China and Russia have already protested about - may in turn lead Chinese and Russian efforts to increase their nuclear strike forces. Strikingly, though US has conducted tests of its anti-ballistic missile defense system recently, it has not used it even once to bring down any North Korean missile. Thus the credibility of US’s extended deterrence in the region has already come under strain.

What Future does South Korea See for Itself?

For South Korea, a Pandora’s Box is almost about to open that would completely change the strategic environment of the Korean Peninsula and East Asia. South Korea sees a very slim chance to accomplish North Korea’s complete and verifiable de-nuclearization. The 1992 Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is largely void, for the multiple factors - such as South Korea’s limited ability, escalation of the US-China global and regional rivalry, domestic political and strategic consideration of countries involved, and North Korea’s tenacious survival strategy - will leave the situation unresolved. Thus it has sought to use every soft-line policy, like aid and connectivity to joint industrial projects, and hard-line policies involving military exercises, to resolve the escalating situation.

Yet, the issue of peace treaty remains a contention^{xxiv}. A peace treaty would mean validating leadership of both sides and giving up claims on lost provinces. This brings the debate on reunification to the forefront. The 1972 North-South Joint Statement announced the Three Principles of Reunification: First, reunification must be solved independently without interference from or reliance on foreign powers; second, reunification must be realized in a peaceful way without use of armed forces against each other; and finally, reunification to transcend the differences of ideologies and institutions to promote the unification of Korea as one ethnic group.

Over the years, any attempts to initiate peace treaty talks have been marred by external changing strategic scenarios or North's provocations. Also, North and South Korea have seen strikingly different trajectories. Today, North Korea is US \$ 29 billion economy with a per capita income of US \$ 1500 compared to South which is US \$ 1.34 trillion economy with a massive per capita income at US \$ 32,000 (2016 figures)^{xxv}. Thus, while the older South Korean generation has emotional and familial links to North Korea, the new generation that has grown under North's constant provocations does not accord reunification a high priority. They view the economic burden involved with reunification to be higher than its benefit costs.

Seoul, the national capital's vulnerability to North Korean artillery from across the DMZ is seen as coexisting with a dysfunctional family member. However, South Korea has worked to fortify its defenses by raising the limitations of its missiles cap under a treaty with the US. President Moon Jae-in has simultaneously sought to open dialogue with North Korea while continuing

military exercises with the US. South Korea has also trained its Special Forces to assassinate Kim Jong-un if the situation deteriorates to a point of no-return.

Will Japan Militarize/ Nuclearize to Strengthen its Security?

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recovered his falling support ratings and won another term as Prime Minister in October 2017 following the North Korean crisis^{xxvi}. Abe's desire to revise the Japanese constitution and seek constitutional legitimacy for Self Defence Forces (SDF) is well known. His strong working equation with US President Trump and Trump's constant reiteration of US's ironclad commitment demonstrates the firm standing of the US-Japan alliance. But for Japan, as to what should be its response to North Korea's rapidly advancing nuclear program, including what role it should play as an American ally and as to what extent it should upgrade its armed forces, have become imminent questions.

While US serves as a guarantor of Japan's security, Japan is aware that any military action by the Trump administration against the North risks a retaliatory missile attack on Japan, where 54,000 US troops are based. Also Japan's position east of North Korea means that missiles fired by the North toward the US, including its Pacific military base in Guam, would (almost certainly) have to fly over Japanese territory. The BMD systems stationed across Japan on mobile launchers are designed only to intercept missiles as they are descending, but not in mid-flight as they are headed to the US^{xxvii}. Recent Japanese media news regarding the revision of National Defence Policy Guidelines in 2019 indicates Japan is working to fortify itself by acquiring the Aegis Ashore BMD system. However, this has unravelled a new series of tensions between Japan and Russia.

While the Japanese public is anxious about North Korea, it is in dilemma about developing the nation's military capabilities. Trump has constantly signalled his desire for Japan and South Korea to bolster arms spending. During his election campaigning he had also mentioned of Japan and South Korea going nuclear. In a way, Japan has nuclear capability which it can weaponized; it has the requisite stockpile and know-how. But the legacies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain strong in public memory and give a strong aversion to seeking any offensive capability.

Thus though Abe's agenda to acquire cruise missiles and more BMD systems for Japan may also eventually be met, even Japanese analysts draw a line regarding Japan going nuclear. Any offensive military build-up by Japan may also be used as an excuse by China for further military build-up and lead to anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea. But if South Korea pursued its own nuclear program, Japan will feel great pressure to follow suit, which in turn will lead to vehement protests from both China and Russia. Thus supporting and enhancing US's extended deterrence remains the best option for Japan right now to deal with North Korean provocations.

How Far will Russia go in Patronizing North Korea?

While erstwhile Soviet Union was North Korea's prime ally, Russia has been relegated to second position after China now. Yet under Kim Jong-un, we see large North Korean overtures to Vladimir Putin. In 2012, Russia wrote off 90 percent of North Korea's Soviet era debt, with 2015 being celebrated as the year of Russia-North Korea friendship. Though Russia has not extended any expansive security guarantees to Pyongyang, Moscow has sought to defend North Korea to increase Moscow's international position as a credible

counterweight to US hegemony. Russia's attempts are focused at showcasing itself as more effective at resolving conflicts in the Korean Peninsula than the US and leading an international coalition against Washington's coercion of North Korea.

Russia has consistently argued that its strategy of maintaining favourable relations with both North and South Korea is more likely to peacefully resolve the North Korean crisis than Washington's aggressive posturing toward North Korea. According to Russia's official 2030 energy strategy, developing new energy markets within the Korean Peninsula will be at the forefront of Kremlin's effort to diversify its oil and natural gas exports in East Asia. "Stage-by-stage construction of the gas pipeline system in the Eastern Siberia and Far East for the purpose of gas supply to the countries of the Asia-Pacific region ... will be performed in the context of implementing the program of the unified gas supply system formation in the Eastern Siberia and Far East," the strategy states^{xxviii}.

In May 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin told South Korea's special envoy Song Young-gil that he would be willing to dispatch a Russian diplomatic delegation to the Korean Peninsula to mediate between the North Korea and South Korea^{xxix}. Russia has sought extensive South Korean investments in its Far East and also proposed to become a conduit for South Korean merchandise heading to Europe. While Russia has geo-political considerations in North, high value economic projects such as extending a pipeline to South drives it to ensure stability on Korean peninsula and reign-in North Korea from escalating beyond a no return point^{xxx}.

What are the Implications for India?

East Asia has become the center of new power politics. The North Korean conflict has assumed prime significance for the Trump administration. The dynamics of Korean peninsula are going to play a major factor in the future shaping of US-China relations. Will there be a grand bargain of sorts between US and China to resolve the North Korean threat is something India must watch out for. Further, as the credibility of US's extended deterrence gets strained, what steps Japan and South Korea take to strengthen their defenses becomes a matter of great concern to India. Another issue India must look out for is a precedence-making by North Korea's resort to use nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip. Therefore it must fully support South Korea and Japan, and so discourage other rogue states from using nuclear weapons to achieve their interests in the future.

Conclusion

In their first and only meeting, President Obama had explicitly warned President-elect Donald Trump days after the election about the urgency of North Korea's nuclear weapons threat. The early warning in the Oval Office has truly motivated Trump to elevate North Korea as his chief foreign policy concern. Conceding a nuclear weapons status to North Korea will erode US's own dominant status, while emergence of a containment policy towards North Korea will help to ensure the security of its allies - Japan and South Korea. However, a multitude of factors, including no appointment of key diplomatic personnel and advisors, have delayed a comprehensive US policy towards dealing with North Korea.

Conversely, Kim Jong-un's rhetoric of 'suffer now, rewards later' towards his own citizenry ensures that North Korea will continue its rampant progress towards acquiring a nuclear deterrent that will allow it to negotiate on its own terms. There may therefore be three possible scenarios.

Scenario 1 - Accidental Clash: Disregarding the bellicose rhetoric from the US (primarily Trump) and North Korea, the threat of a military conflict remains high by accidental clash or miscommunication on part of any stakeholder, the posturing being presently highly aggressive. This scenario will also test the international stability achieved by nuclear deterrence. The US is at crossroads despite its huge nuclear arsenal because North Korea's maneuvering positions is way below the unacceptable threshold for US to initiate a strike. However, by imposing heavy costs through high international and diplomatic pressure (including multilateral and US-unilateral sanctions) on North Korea against the latter's pursuit of nuclear-tipped ICBM, US has sought to establish its nuclear deterrence stability with North Korea.

Scenario 2 - Negotiated Settlement: The literally hostage city in this conflict, Seoul, shows signs of regular, but watchful life. Surprisingly, amid the continuing threats from Pyongyang, the Korea Composite Stock Price Index, KOSPI, hit a record high of 2,557.97 on November 3, up nearly 200 points from the end of September. The rallies were powered by foreign investors who posted net buying of over Won 3 trillion in October when tensions on the peninsula reached their peak following the North's sixth nuclear test^{xxxii}. Market analysts mention that investors are betting on Korean stocks on the belief there will be no military conflict due to possibility of a paradoxical

engagement in some form of a negotiated settlement to enable a breakout from the current geo-political deadlock.

Scenario 3 - Continued Stalemate: The North Korean conflict will be a defining part on China's path to regional dominance, as enumerated during the 19th Party Congress. However, China will have to balance North Korea's advantage as a buffer with any future threat that could be directed towards its mainland. The US under Trump administration has not backed down and instead signaled, through numerous official statements and military posturing, its desire to keep the military option on the table. In such a scenario, China will have to show its ability to take lead that allays US and other regional countries' perception of China's role in North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons. Russia, by virtue of its mammoth military power, will inevitably see an expansion of its role on Korean peninsula. Japan's changing security debate under Prime Minister Abe's new tenure will also be heavily influenced by the probable emergence of a new nuclear rogue power in its neighborhood. Lastly, President Moon Jae-in's administration in South Korea will witness the most tumultuous time on Korean Peninsula that will simultaneously define South Korean security debate and regional power dynamics for perpetuity.

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