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Denuclearisation Talks with North Korea: Time for China and Russia to Act?

By Akanksha Sharma

Synopsis

Recent diplomatic engagements between North Korea and Russia have raised the prospect of resuming denuclearisation talks between Pyongyang and the international community. What is the prospect of North Korea taking a non-nuclear path?

Commentary

RECENT DIPLOMATIC engagements between North Korea and Russia have raised the prospect of a resumption of denuclearisation talks between the Pyongyang regime and the international community. Although Russian envoy Grigory Logvinov pronounced a month ago that Moscow would not support any “behind the back” agreement regarding North Korea’s nuclear programme, it could still play a significant role in getting Pyongyang to address the issue on a bilateral basis.

Two developments encourage this prospect: Firstly, North Korea’s economic ties with Russia have witnessed significant growth. Both countries declared 2015 as the “Year of Friendship”. Last April they organised a meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission for Trade, Economic, Science and Technology, with proposals underway for cooperation in a variety of areas such as agriculture, energy, infrastructure, and tourism. Secondly, on 21 June 2015 Choe Thae-bok, Speaker of the Supreme People’s Assembly of North Korea, travelled to Moscow, presumably to ask for aid. Recent reports from the KCNA, substantiated by South Korean scientists, suggest that North Korea is gripped by a severe drought - a development that is bound to have a major impact on the political economy of the state.

What about China?

China’s foreign ministry recently announced that it is willing to provide aid to North Korea in its time of distress, although Pyongyang’s nuclear programme has put some strain on their bilateral relations. Given the country’s current strained situation, the time is ideal for both China and Russia to utilise their economic linkages with North Korea as a bargaining chip for starting denuclearisation talks.

However the two big powers hold different views on the issue. China has been taking a harder line with regard to North Korea’s nuclear programme, while growing closer to South Korea. In May this year, during China-US talks, Beijing agreed that putting pressure on Pyongyang was important,

although China's official stance is in favour of denuclearisation of the entire Korean peninsula, including American nuclear weapons on South Korean soil.

Russia's contrary position, as stated by envoy Logvinov, is that Moscow would not support any pact agreed in North Korea's absence.

North Korea, however, has continued with "provocative actions" such as firing short-range anti-ship missiles, carrying out live-firing artillery drills and threatening cyber warfare. Speculation on the reason for this show of belligerence focus on its current economic plight. Kim Jong-un's provocations are part of a larger effort to distract his people from other concerns such as acute food shortage that are gripping the country.

He would recall the "Arduous March" that North Korea experienced from 1994 to 1998, a period of intense economic distress exacerbated by a severe famine, during which hundreds of thousands of civilians perished.

Factors threatening Kim regime

Besides a significant decline in public trust in the Kim regime, the emergence of the black market economy, which gave enterprising North Koreans ways around the established state structure, posed a direct challenge to the government's control. Kim Jong-Un cannot afford to have a repeat of that dire situation, nor a mass exodus of desperate civilians. The declining defection rates in North Korea are at least partially influenced by his strict border security crackdown.

The government is committed to centre its domestic national identity on its purported progress on the path to nuclearisation to become a nuclear power "recognised by the US". At this point in time, experts have judged the state's nuclear capability to be sub-par but with potential for improvement. However, the North is determined to build up this narrative. This is a dangerous motivation, because it closes off avenues for communication such as the 'Six-Party Talks'. As of now, North Korea is not willing to participate in the talks if the agenda includes de-nuclearisation. Nevertheless communication channels need to be kept open.

North Korean identity quest

The time is ripe for actors that have economic influence and open lines of communication with North Korea - in particular China and Russia - to leverage their advantages in an effort to re-start serious discussions regarding denuclearisation. However the actors need to bring something to the table in order to disincentivise North Korea from nuclearising. The international community needs to do much more to encourage actors like China and Russia to dissuade the Kim regime from its nuclearisation path.

One prospect for the future of a non-nuclear North Korea would be if it chooses to change its focus with regard to identity building. This would involve the creation of new priorities and a new ideology as the centerpiece of its state identity. Whether this alternative will be economic in nature still remains to be seen.

But with the real presence of North Korea's grey and black markets and the exposure of the younger generation - which accounts for 25 percent of the population - to non-state media and culture, it is not unthinkable to imagine a state narrative amenable to greater economic growth and cooperation.

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