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Issue Brief

Mounting Tension on the Korean Peninsula

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Introduction

The strategic situation on the Korean Peninsula is highly tense mainly because of the nuclear and missile tests conducted by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the past three months. On 6 January, DPRK tested a nuclear hydrogen bomb. This hydrogen bomb was hundreds of times more powerful than the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. This was fourth nuclear test conducted by the DPRK since 2006. It announced its capability of devising miniature hydrogen bombs. On 7 February, the DPRK launched a satellite called Kwangmyongsong-4 in the orbit for obtaining scientific and information data. On 21 March a short-range missile was launched. On 9 April it launched long-range ballistic missiles with a capacity of carrying more powerful nuclear warheads to hit Washington, New York, and Miami.

DPRK's Stance

Why the DPRK conducts nuclear and missile tests is an important question to be posed. The purpose of test and missile launch is scientific as well as military and political. For the DPRK these tests gave them a "sense of security". "If there's no invasion on our sovereignty we will not use nuclear weapon," the state news agency, KCNA, stated soon after the test. It further said that "test brings us to a higher level of nuclear power." A long statement issued by the DPRK Government confirmed "pursuant to the strategic determination". The KCNA quoted DPRK's leader Kim Jong-un as saying the test "provided a firm guarantee for mounting another form of nuclear attack upon the US imperialists and other hostile forces."

The DPRK feels insecure because of lack of a peace treaty between the two Koreas and the presence of 28,500 American troops on South Korea soil. The 1953 armistice did not end the war between the two Koreas. The DPRK insists on the withdrawal of US troops as a pre-condition to peace. The DPRK proposed that the inter-Korean disputes should be settled without foreign interference and neither side shall enter into alliance with any power. Pyongyang proposed direct negotiations in 1974 on the question of replacing the outdated armistice with a peace agreement.

The DPRK Government strongly opposes economic sanctions that are detrimental to its economic development, trade, investment, and diplomatic activities. These sanctions include universal inspections of all cargo/shipment to and from the DPRK, and a ban on buying coal and raw mineral export, and banning aviation fuel. Sanctions also prohibit nations from providing training to the DPRKs nationals in

fields that could advance its missile and nuclear programs, such as aerospace engineering and advanced computer simulation. UN member states should expel diplomats of the DPRK engaged in illicit activities and ban the DPRK from opening banks, and to close any banks believed to be associated with its nuclear and missile programs. Selling of small arms to the DPRK is also prohibited. Furthermore, sanctions ban member UN states from allowing the DPRK to charter foreign vessels or aircraft, and ban all nations from operating any vessels that display DPRK's flag.

These sanctions could make life more miserable for North Koreans who already live under extreme poverty. Children have malnutrition and shortage of food. Recently some people from the DPRK defected to South Korea and China to earn their bread and butter. Humanitarian consequences, especially food shortage, should also be kept in mind by the United Nations while imposing sanctions. Famine might hit the DPRK as it happened in 1990s, killing half a million people.

Implications for South Korea

Reacting to DPRK's latest nuclear test, South Korea announced to close down the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a symbol of goodwill between the two Koreas established in 2004 across the 38th Parallel Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) inside DPRK to address its poverty and provide jobs to workers under Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine" policy. South Korea recently complained to the United Nations about jamming of the GSP signal system by the DPRK that undermines public transportation, shipping, aviation, navigation, cellular, and internet signals. To South Korea, this was a clear violation of the constitution of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

The United States and South Korea have been keeping a close contact on these developments with each other. They jointly drilled military exercises in March in South China Sea in order to respond to the North's actions. Japan is also on board with South Korea and the United States. On 31 March - 1 April, South Korea, Japan, and the United States convened a state-level trilateral summit on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) in Washington. Denuclearisation of the DPRK is their foremost aim, which the DPRK is unwilling to pursue. These consultations remained unproductive and prospects of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula seem as distant as ever because the DPRK is not engaged in talks. There is an urgent need to engage the DPRK in the consultation process to denuclearise the Korean Peninsula.

China's Position

Under tremendous global pressure, it seems that China has been drifting away from the DPRK in the past few years. The DPRK provocations deeply challenge China's security policy. The fall out of the DPRK would make China difficult to maintain stability in North East Asia; and such a scenario would have economic and security consequences for China. In the process, the DPRK does not appear to be China's strategic ally for whom it vigorously fought in 1950-53 and many Chinese laid down their lives in the Korean War. China does not want North Korea to become a liability for it. China has strongly opposed the potential deployment of the THAAD anti-ballistic missile system and nuclear brinkmanship by the DPRK. China, however, insists on the resumption of the Six-Party Talks (DPRK, Republic of Korea, China, United States, Japan, and Russia) process as a way forward to denuclearise the Korean Peninsula. The Six-Party Talks have been stalled since 2008. However, under prevailing situations, the prospect of the Six-Party Talks looks bleak.

The US Role

There is a dire need to bring back dialogue especially between the DPRK and the United States. The US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's undertook a landmark visit to Pyongyang in October 2000. This momentum needs to be revived. After increasing nuclear and ballistic missile tests, the United States cannot leave South Korea in lurch. The DPRK's actions are continuously pushing the United States to increase its military presence in Asia-Pacific under its Asia rebalance policy and strengthening of alliances with South Korea and Japan.

UN Actions

The UN Security Council closely monitors the developments taking place on the Korean Peninsula. The DPRK's nuclear tests and ICBMs are a challenge for the UN Security Council. For it, these launches and tests were "unacceptable" and the DPRK should refrain from such violations and comply with these resolutions. UN resolutions, however, have not been effective. Imposing a raft of sanctions is the policy adopted by the United Nations, which has been repeatedly violated by the DPRK. Controlling these violations by resolutions and sanctions has proved counter-productive. The UN has often asked the DPRK to exercise restraint. Reacting to UN sanctions, DPRK says that these sanctions are "anachronistic and suicidal".

Option for Pakistan

Pakistan is not a player in disputes confronting the Korean Peninsula. Pakistan determined its position *vis-à-vis* the Korean Peninsula on the basis of the Joint Communiqué signed on 4 July 1974 between the two Koreas in which they agreed to abide by reunification. As Pakistan maintains formal diplomatic channels with both Pyongyang and Seoul, it supports the efforts to promote dialogue in order to create conditions for peace and security on the Korean Peninsula. In the presence of the US and China there is little space for such a role. Pakistan, for its part, wants peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and encourages return of the key stakeholders and the resumption of talks. Finally, Pakistan is likely to defer to the Chinese approach of restraint and engagement.

Conclusion

There is no easy solution to end the crisis confronting the Korean Peninsula. The issue is a legacy of the Cold War, which deeply divides the two people of the same ethnic origin. Strategic interests of the major powers have intensified the conflict over the years. The humanitarian approach to the conflict should not be abandoned as underlined in the “Sunshine” policy for creating the inter-Korean harmony. The dialogue process under 1972 Joint Communiqué for unification and the Six-Party Talks must be resumed keeping in mind the interests of primary stakeholders and the international community.