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Issue Brief

The Malaysia-North Korea Diplomatic Meltdown

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The diplomatic rift has been escalating between Malaysia and North Korea nowadays with no point of return. Malaysian authorities expelled the ambassador of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Kang Chol, on March 4, 2017, declaring him "*persona non grata*", and asked him to leave the country



within 48 hour.¹ In a tit for tat response, North Korea ordered the expulsion of Malaysian ambassador, Nizan Mohamad, on March 6 from Pyongyang, who had already been recalled by his Government for consultation earlier on February 22, 2017. It seems that the diplomatic row would continue for quite some time between the two countries.

The Death of Kim Jong Nam

Ambassador Kang Chol's expulsion is deeply associated with the mysterious death of 46 years old, Kim Jong Nam, alias Kim Chol, estranged elder half-brother of the Supreme Leader Marshall Kim Jong Un. Kim Jong Nam was murdered at the Kuala Lumpur Airport on February 13, 2017 when he was about to board a flight to Macau where he lived in exile.² His murder raised many questions.

Upon his death, North Korean authorities rushed to call heart-stroke being the reason of his sudden death.³ Malaysian authorities found deadly VX compound that was smeared on the face of Kim Jong Nam by two women at the airport⁴ and ordered an investigation. Some arrests were made by Malaysian authorities including investigation of a North Korean official of Air Koryo.⁵

Malaysian authorities believed that three suspects have been hiding inside the compound of the embassy of the DPRK in Kuala Lumpur.⁶ This is a serious allegation if the suspects were hiding inside the

¹ "Malaysia declares N. Korean ambassador persona non grata, gives him 48-hours to leave country", *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur), March 4, 2017.

² See Dr Ahmad Rashid Malik, "The Mysterious murder", *Pakistan Today* (Islamabad), March 4, 2017.

³ "Pyongyang blames S. Korea for saga of death of national in Malaysia", *Xinhua* (Beijing), February 23, 2017. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-02/23/c_136080120.htm

⁴ "North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's half-brother Kim Jong Nam 'poisoned' in Malaysia: Reports", *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur), February 14, 2017.

⁵ "Jong-nam murder: Arrest warrant issued for Air Koryo staff", *Ibid.*, March 3, 2017.

⁶ Balvin Kaur, "Wanted N. Koreans hiding in embassy will be compelled to come out: IGP", *Ibid.*, March 7, 2017.

embassy premises and raises questions on the Geneva Protocol for diplomats. Malaysian authorities have given the indication of raiding the embassy if their demand was not fulfilled.⁷ They have sealed off the embassy to find out the exact identity of people inside the compound.⁸ Four North Korean citizens had immediately flown out of Malaysia after the murder of Kim Jong Nam.⁹ There were some other arrests too. North Korean authorities asked for the immediate return of the body of Kim Jong Nam without any post-mortem, autopsy, and forensic examination and the release of all “innocent suspects”. Malaysian authorities reiterated that they will not return the body without the DNA test, of which North Korean authorities have been refusing.

Later on, North Korean authorities accused South Korea and the United States for the murder of Kim Jong Nam and denied all charges regarding the use of chemical.¹⁰ As Malaysian authorities were keep investigating into the cause of Kim Jong Nam's death, the differences between Malaysia and the DPRK resulted in a total diplomatic rift.

Ambassador Kang Chol was asked by the Malaysian Foreign Ministry to appear in connection with the murder of Kim Jong Nam, but he did not appear. Malaysian authorities asked him to offer apology as the DPRK authorities accused Malaysia for “conspiring with hostile forces” for the murder of Kim Jong Nam.¹¹ Malaysian authorities could not tolerate such a claim and asked Ambassador Kang Chol to apologise but as he did not appear before the Foreign Ministry, which prompted Malaysian authorities to take a drastic action by asking him to leave the country.

In a further retaliatory measure, North Korea has not been allowing the staff of the Malaysian embassy in Pyongyang to leave North Korea and put a temporary ban on them.¹² This is tantamount to taking Malaysian citizens as hostage and has raised worries in Malaysia for the safety of its citizens stranded in North Korea. Around 170 North Korean labourers also work in Sarawak in Malaysia besides a number of students, and one can see how the diplomatic row could unfold.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sameer Ahmed Shaikh, “Tantamount to ‘taking hostages’, says Khairy on Pyongyang move”, Ibid.

⁹ “Four DPRK suspects related to death of DPRK man fled Malaysia”, *Xinhua* (Beijing), February 19, 2017. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-02/19/c_136068061.htm

¹⁰ The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), “U.S., S. Korea’s Absurd Sophism against DPRK over Its Citizen’s Death abroad Blasted”, March 1, 2017.

¹¹ “Malaysia summons envoy as North Korea’s Kim killing row deepens”, *The Express Tribune* (Islamabad), February 20, 2017.

¹² The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), “DPRK FM Temporarily Bans Exit of Malaysians”, March 7, 2017.

Diplomacy

Both countries set up a special, broad, and deep relationship recently against the prevailing ground realities. They established diplomatic ties in 1973 and set up embassies in Kuala Lumpur and Pyongyang respectively in 2003. Both countries signed a visa-free entry agreement for their citizens in 2009 and Malaysia became the first country allowing North Korean citizens to come to Malaysia without seeking visas. Malaysia offered employment facilities to North Korean workers. Both countries opened an air route in 2011 and allowed Air Koryo to operate flights. But under pressure from the United Nations, these flights were banned in January 2017. With such a robust diplomatic relationship, the murder of Kim Jong Nam was a very unfortunate development as ties have been severely damaged by this incident.

Trade

Trade between the two countries is rather insignificant, comprising only US\$ 5.7 million, as recorded in 2016 that mainly consisted of Malaysian palm oil and natural rubber export to North Korea. Malaysia had sourced electrical, chemicals, iron and steel products from North Korea. Malaysian effort was to integrate North Korea into the fold of ASEAN to some extent. Following the murder of Kim Jong Nam and the expulsion of the DPRK ambassador, Malaysia has not imposed any trade embargo on North Korea as mentioned by the Malaysian Trade Minister Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed.¹³ He was of the view that Malaysian trade is being pursued by the private sector and it would assess the risk factor. There are reports that two North Korean firms, International Global System and International Golden Services are involved in arms trade with Malaysia. This might negatively impact trade relations between the two countries.

Conclusion

The death of Kim Jong Nam developed into a full-fledged diplomatic spat between North Korea and Malaysia on many fronts. The already isolated DPRK regime also lost the diplomatic sympathy of Malaysia and further isolated itself in the larger Asia-Pacific context. Malaysia was known as one of the very few countries that was having friendly and diplomatic ties with North Korea. Nevertheless, the DPRK regime has been prying with the investigation carried out by Malaysian authorities instead of cooperating to find out the real cause of the murder of Kim Jong Nam.

¹³ "No trade embargo on North Korea - Mustapa", *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur), March 2, 2017.