



**INSTITUTE OF  
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

**web:** [www.issi.org.pk](http://www.issi.org.pk)  
**phone:** +92-920-4423, 24  
**fax:** +92-920-4658

## Issue Brief

# North Korean Nuclear Programme and Increasing Tensions in the Region: A New Powder Keg?

**Ghazala Yasmin Jalil**, Research Fellow, ISSI

April 12, 2017

**Tensions are simmering over North Korea's nuclear programme and its ballistic missile tests which it has been conducting with increasing frequency in the last few months. In the month of March alone, North Korea has conducted 5 ballistic missiles tests. The tests followed the start of US-South Korea joint military exercises on March 1. North Korea claims that the joint exercises are a preparation for attack on the country.**

Pyongyang periodically conducts missile tests when it feels threatened or wants to send a tough message to its opponents. This, in turn, heightens tensions further rendering neighbouring countries like South Korea and Japan insecure. North Korea's nuclear programme is a source of concern not only in the region, but globally. The US has been toughening its stance against North Korea in the past few months. China, which is the only country that may hold influence over the reclusive country, has also been toughening its stance against North Korea.

North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003 and conducted its first nuclear test in 2006, followed by four more tests in 2009, 2013 and in January and September 2016. It has conducted scores of ballistic missile tests. In 2016 alone, Pyongyang conducted 20 ballistic missile tests. This has threatened its neighbours and has elicited a strong response from the international community in the form of UN Security Council Resolutions that make it obligatory for North Korea to halt and roll back its nuclear programme.

In order to urge North Korea to give up its nuclear programme, several rounds of Six-Party talk were held from 2003 to 2007 which produced little result. In 2007, North Korea agreed to shut down its nuclear facilities in exchange for fuel aid and steps towards the normalisation of relations with the United States and Japan. However, talks process broke down in April 2009, when following a condemnation by the UNSC of North Korea's failed satellite launch, Pyongyang declared that it would pull out of Six-Party Talks and that it would resume its nuclear enrichment programme in order to boost its nuclear deterrent.<sup>1</sup> The talks have not resumed till to date.

---

<sup>1</sup> "The Six-Party Talks at a Glance," May 2012, Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/6partytalks>

North Korea deploys short and medium range ballistic missiles and successfully launched long-range rockets in 2012 and 2016.<sup>2</sup> North Korea claims it has successfully miniaturised nuclear warheads enough to mount them on a ballistic missile. But some experts have cast doubts on the claims. However, North Korea is fast moving towards developing long range missiles that may be operational within a decade and would be able to reach US mainland. It already has operational missiles that can hit US allies like South Korea and Japan. The US and North Korea's neighbours see it as a tremendous threat to their security.

The latest heightening of tensions began with the start of US-South Korea military exercises 2017 called Foal Eagle on March 1. South Korea and the US have strong military ties and Seoul hosts 28,000 US soldiers. The joint exercise is meant to show clear demonstration of the US commitment to the US-South Korea alliance and is designed to increase readiness to defend South Korea, to protect the region, and to maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>3</sup> North Korea criticises the annual exercises calling them preparation for war against it. The 4 missile tests North Korea conducted in March 2017 were in protest and warning against the military exercise Foal Eagle. Japan also hosts 50,000 US soldiers. North Korea severely criticises US presence in both South Korea and Japan as well. Among heightened concerns with North Korean missile and nuclear tests, there are reports that an influential group of politicians in Japan is arguing for pacifist Japan to acquire the ability to strike North Korea instead of having to rely on the US for defence. There are also talks of amending Japanese laws (which presently only allow war in self defence) allowing the country to launch pre-emptive strikes after North Korean missiles tests have heightened threats in the region.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, the US has toughened its stance against North Korea. During a visit to Asia, the new US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson warned that regional tensions had reached a "dangerous level". He said that Washington would drop the "failed" approach of "strategic patience" with Pyongyang, and that US military action was an "option on the table" if necessary.<sup>5</sup> This is a sharp divergence from China's insistence on a diplomatic approach to North Korea. US President Trump said in early April 2017 that the

---

<sup>2</sup> North Korea, CountryProfile, Nuclear threat Initiative, <http://www.nti.org/learn/countries/north-korea/>

<sup>3</sup> Terri Moon Cronk, "U.S., South Korea Launch Annual Foal Eagle Exercise," <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1102331/us-south-korea-launch-annual-foal-eagle-exercise>

<sup>4</sup> "As North Korea fires missiles, some in Japan want the ability to launch strikes," Washington Post, March 27, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/as-north-korea-fires-missiles-some-in-japan-want-the-ability-to-launch-strikes/2017/03/26/a9568dd8-11f9-11e7-b2bb-417e331877d9\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.4844621a70d2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/as-north-korea-fires-missiles-some-in-japan-want-the-ability-to-launch-strikes/2017/03/26/a9568dd8-11f9-11e7-b2bb-417e331877d9_story.html?utm_term=.4844621a70d2)

<sup>5</sup> "Rex Tillerson on North Korea: Military action 'an option,'" BBC News, March 17, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39297031>

country is ready to act alone against North Korea's nuclear programme if China does not take a tougher stance. This may not be rhetoric alone, since the US is sending the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Carl Vinston with its roughly 6,000 crew members and 85 warplanes, to patrol off the Korean coast. This indeed is a worrying development, it may just be a show of power on the part of the US, or it might also be meant to put US threats into action. This indeed is a significant development that may take the tensions on the Korean Peninsula to an entirely new level. Some analysts are calling the situation to be as dangerous as the Middle Eastern powder keg. What is of concern is the unpredictable nature of US actions since the new president took over. Few expected the US to order a strike on a Syrian military air base on April 7, 2017. It may be hard to predict what might transpire on the Korean Peninsula.

China, on the other hand, has been an ardent follower of the diplomatic approach. It has repeatedly called for a Korean Peninsula that is free of nuclear weapons. It has also toughened its stance against North Korea and backs the sanctions, tightened as recently as November 2016. It has again warned of fresh sanctions if Pyongyang carries out further nuclear and missile tests. China is faced with a dilemma: while it does want North Korea to terminate its nuclear programme, it does not support a military solution to the problem. It fears that the collapse of the regime in Pyongyang would result in millions of refugees, and possibly, US troops right on its borders.

Tensions are further heightening in the Korean theatre. However, the US needs to tread with caution. A military solution may not be the answer to the North Korean nuclear conundrum. North Korea already has ballistic missiles and a nuclear capability. Even if it cannot strike the US mainland at present, it can strike targets in South Korea and Japan which are close allies of the US, as well as thousands of US troops that are stationed in the two countries. Engagement and diplomacy have more merit than a military solution vis a vis North Korea. China can play a constructive role in engaging with North Korea and help bring about a peaceful solution to the issue of the country's nuclear programme.