

The Resumption of Inter-Korean Talks

While viewing positively the resumption of the Seoul-Pyongyang dialogue, the United States and Japan should also provide a congenial environment for peace on the Korean Peninsula rather than doubting the peace efforts



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The inter-Korean relations are improving with new enthusiasm and persistence. Seoul and Pyongyang are embracing each other. Not to the much expectations of the world, Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are on the negotiating table once again. It is not merely a symbolic gesture but a real breakthrough.

A high level talk was held at the Peace House in Panmunjom in the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) between them on 9 January, making a dent in troubled ties between the two rival neighbours and opened up a new channel of communications suspended for two years.

This was the first meeting between the two Koreas after December 2015. Pyongyang had cut off the communication channel in February 2016 following then, South Korean President Park Geun-hye's closure of the jointly operated the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

Both sides sent a delegation of five members. The North Korean delegation was led by Ri Songwon, Chairman of the North Korean Committee for the Peaceful Reunification. The South Korean side was led by Cho Myoung-Gyon, the head of the South Korea's Unification Ministry. Both neighbours agreed to shun military tensions, to promote reconciliation, to create environment for peace on the Peninsula, to initiate families' reunion, to engage in cooperation in various fields and to prevent accidental conflicts at the de-militarised border. Both countries also resumed hotline communication. In an Olympic diplomacy, North Korea would also take part in Pyeong Chang Winter Olympic Games in South Korea.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in is the ardent supporter of peace talks with North Korea and he differs with President Trump's approach of military action against the north. He avoided putting maximum pressure on Pyongyang unlike Trump did last year. Moon followed an olive branch policy toward the north. Washington appreciated the two Korea's talks but with scepticism and reservations. The talks have also opened up the possibility of negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang. "President Trump expressed his openness to holding talks between the United States and North Korea at the appropriate time, under the right circumstances," the statement said from Washington.

Japan supported the resumption of talks between North and South Korea. Ahead of talks, Japan sent its top envoy to Seoul. Kenji Kanasugi, Japan's chief negotiator for the Six-Party Talks who arrived in Seoul. Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono said on January 9 at a press conference that "North Korea's intent to participate in the Olympics is welcoming."

Japan found engagement with North Korea as a step toward denuclearisation on the Korean Peninsula. Japan also expressed its concerns. Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said the north still presents a 'grave and imminent threat' to regional security with its ballistic missiles and nuclear development programme, and that it was crucial to continue cranking up the pressure on Pyongyang.

Amid talks, the sales of American weapons to Japan worth US\$ 133.3 million has the potential to jeopardise the inter-Korean talks. Both the United States and Japan want to continue pressure tactics against North Korea. These efforts could prove detrimental for peace at this crucial time. While viewing positively the resumption of the Seoul-Pyongyang dialogue, the United States and Japan should also provide congenial environment for peace on the Korean Peninsula rather than doubting the peace efforts and adopting a 'wait and see' approach, a cool response, and watching the developments as a silent spectator. The United States and Japan need to balance their interests in North East Asia and should appreciate the inter-Korean peace talks that aims to promote stability on the Peninsula. The United States and Japan should get actively involved in the inter-Korean talks.

Russia also welcomed the move. A statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia stated, “we hope that their implementation will serve to de-escalate tensions on the Korean Peninsula and foster stability in this region.”

China expressed satisfaction over the inter-Korean talks. Chinese Foreign Ministry said, “China welcomes and supports the recent positive initiatives taken by both sides to ease their mutual relations. We also hope that the international community can fully support and encourage this.” Talks would release pressure on China mounting for years over its ties with North Korea.

The inter-Korean move is a positive breakthrough. It is opening up channel of communications and removing ambiguities prevailing since February 2016 between the two Koreas and other countries like Japan, China, Russia, and the United States. The new move is considered a rapprochement based upon the spirit of the Sunshine policy of President Kim Dae Jung.

This might also lead toward the resumption of the six party talks suspended since 2008 to resolve the North Korean crisis. More than the six party talks, the inter-Korean interaction is most pivotal to create prospects of peace on the Korean Peninsula. The present move is considered crucial to help resolve the outstanding disputes between the two neighbours living across the most fortified militarised zone of the world.

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