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COMMENTARY / INSIGHT

Trump's Visit to South Korea

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In an extremely positive and highly constructive development on the hot skies on the Korean Peninsula, US President Donald Trump discussed with the South Korean President Moon Jae-in a negotiated deal for the diffusion of the North Korean crisis. "I believe it makes sense for North Korea to do the right thing, not only for North Korea but for humanity all over the world," Trump told at a news conference at the Presidential Blue House in Seoul. He urged Pyongyang to 'come to the table' and 'make a deal.' No comments were readily available from Pyongyang. The message is upbeat.

Trump visited Seoul on 7-8 November as part of his 12-day long Asian tour. Seoul is a vital ally of the United States. Pyongyang is completely muted over Trump's visit to Seoul. The whole focus of Trump's Asian tour was on the settlement of the North Korean issue. The US-South Korea alliance has protected the security of the latter since 1950. With all its military preparations, North Korea remains unable to invade South Korea but threats keep continuing.

Trump's visit to Seoul was highly symbolic and figurative to strengthen the bonds of the traditional military alliance between the United States and South Korea. Trump gave a clear cut message, warning, and reminder to Pyongyang from the door-step of South Korea, but his tone was not as harsh as it was in Tokyo a day ago. He rather went on for a negotiated settlement.

Trump even praised China for being 'very helpful' and 'trying very hard to solve the problem' – a day before his visit to Beijing. It looks like Trump is serious about the resolution of the North Korean problem. A unilateral approach has been beaten up and the views of South Korea and China have taken over the thoughts of Trump.

He met with South Korean President Moon Jae-in and exchanged views on the developing situation in North Korea besides meeting US troops at Camp Humphreys, some 100 km from Seoul. South Korea hosts 28,500 US troops. Trump dropped a visit to the De-Militarised Zone (DMZ) due to heavy fog.

The left-leaning Moon is a reconciliatory toward the North Korean issue. He does not agree with a unilateral military action against Pyongyang taken by the United States. Trump was confrontational, harsh and he closed all doors for a negotiated settlement, calling it waste of time. The tone of Trump in Seoul, however, also caught Moon's reflection. Trump adopted a reconciliatory tone in Seoul. Earlier, he criticised Moon for 'appeasing' North Korea.

At the press conference Moon said that Trump's "visit to Korea and to the Asia-Pacific region will serve as an opportunity to relieve some of the anxiety that the Korean people have due to North Korea's provocations and also serve as a turning point in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue."

Trump changed his mind and approach in Seoul and said, "we hope to God, not to have to resort to the use of full US military might". This appeal was somewhat different from what he said in Tokyo and what he often used to remark in Washington. Moon wants diplomatic outreach to Pyongyang. Trump adopted less confrontational approach toward North Korea and asked Pyongyang: "It really makes sense for North Korea to come to the table and make a deal," Trump told reporters at a joint news conference with Moon.

With this new emerging situation between the two staunchest allies, one has to see how Pyongyang would react to create space for a negotiated settlement. Addressing the National Assembly in Seoul on November 8, Trump warned North Korea not to miscalculate American restraint as weakness and underestimate the American strength. On the top, one has to see how Pyongyang would respond to Trump's offer of peace deal. It is the biggest development in many months to diffuse tension on the Korean Peninsula.

The economic development comparisons drawn between South and North Korea were revealing. With US\$ 1.4 trillion GDP, South Korea ranks as the 11th largest economy while North Korea's GDP is US\$ 17 billion. Their economies were almost similar in 1950. North Korea needs to focus on its economic development and overcome its poverty and other economic worries.

Besides security, Trump has issues of trade with South Korea. He also wanted equitable trade. The US-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which is in place for five years and was enacted under President Obama, worries the US trade interests and increasing of the US trade deficit. The agreement removed trade barriers and gave an upper-hand to South Korean manufacturers and exporters.

South Korea is the six largest trading partner of the United States. Bilateral trade between the two countries reached US\$ 112.2 billion in 2016 with US\$ 42.3 billion US exports to South Korea and US\$ 69.9 billion imports from the country, making a trade deficit of US\$ 27.6 for the United States. Now, Trump wants to decrease trade deficit with South Korea, which is Asia's fourth largest economy.

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