

The North Korean Crisis: A Geopolitical Analysis

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Introduction

North Korea has been under the dictatorial regime of the Kim dynasty since the end of the Second World War. Currently under Kim Jong-un, it is considered a pariah state which pays no heed to democratic values, prioritises military build-up at the cost of starving its citizens, has a closed Stalinist economy, and has the dubious distinction of being the only country to perform nuclear tests in the twenty-first century. North Korea has conducted more than a hundred missile tests from the 1980s until the time of writing¹. This includes two Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) tests. North Korea has also conducted six nuclear tests. The situation has intensified with the ICBM tests in July 2017 and the nuclear test on 3 September 2017². North Korea's relations with the United States have had a very rocky history. Every successive US president has tried to reign in North Korea without much success.

North Korea has been testing missiles since the late eighties. Hence, Kim Jong-un is not doing anything new every time he tests a missile. He uses it as a leverage mechanism to extract concessions from the international community. North Korea's weapons capability provides it with effective deterrence and ensures the stability of the regime. The change has also happened in terms of the improved range and capability of the missiles, but this was expected. It was widely believed that if it goes unchecked, North Korea would soon test an Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile and may soon arm one with a nuclear

¹ "North Korea's Missile Tests: By the Numbers",
<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/29/asia/north-korea-missile-tests/index.html>

² Statement of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on 3 September, 2017.
http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201709/1224276_11585.html

warhead³. However, the international community is a lot more concerned this time about the likelihood of a conflict breaking out in the region. This concern arises from the fact that North Korea has been confronted by another unconventional and unpredictable leader—US President, Donald J. Trump.

This paper examines whether there has been any change in the American policy towards North Korea under the Trump administration. The paper first analyses the American policy towards North Korea under successive US presidencies. Thereafter, it briefly looks at the role of other stakeholders in the region—China, Japan and North Korea. Finally, the paper examines the implications of the North Korean missile crisis for India.

American Policy towards North Korea

Upon a cursory glance, Trump's approach towards North Korea would seem naive and bereft of any understanding of the situation. It merely looks like the unnecessary chest thumping of a populist leader. He has not been consistent with the chest thumping either. One can see a lot of contradictions in the American policy towards North Korea with President Trump saying one thing and the Secretary of State and the Defence Secretary saying quite another, and President Trump contradicting himself at other times. On closer examination, however, a clear pattern emerges in the US approach towards North Korea. But, before looking at Trump administration's policy, there is a need to briefly examine the history of the US policy towards North Korea.

Bill Clinton (1993-2001)

Bill Clinton's Presidency is a good starting point. This is because North Korea successfully tested a missile in 1993⁴. Bill Clinton wanted to rein in a North Korea that felt increasingly threatened after the dissolution of the Soviet umbrella. Clinton got North Korea to sign the Agreed Framework in 1994. As part of the Agreed Framework, North Korea was to shut down the Yongbyon nuclear reactor in exchange for the US providing oil deliveries,

³ Niksh, L.A.(2011), "When North Korea mounts Nuclear Warheads on its Missiles", *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, 25(2): 1-20

⁴ While North Korea started its missile programme in the 1980s, it could successfully test a missile only in 1993.

cutting down on sanctions and providing proliferation resistant light water reactors to meet its energy needs⁵. This was successful until 1998 when America failed to follow up on its commitment towards the Framework, and began dilly dallying on the oil shipments and the light water reactors⁶. This caused the regime to restart the reactor leading up to the breakdown of the Framework. While failure of the Agreed Framework is often cited to point out the flaw in appeasement as an approach towards North Korea⁷, it was American hesitation to honour the terms of the Agreement that led to the failure of the Agreement⁸. It must however be conceded that North Korean demands are not always reasonable. But this is a concern that must be addressed before committing to them.

George W. Bush (2001-2009)

George Bush, who took over from Clinton in 2001, followed a diametrically opposite policy compared to his predecessor which was called “Anything But Clinton Approach (ABC)”⁹. He designated North Korea as part of what he called “The Axis of Evil”¹⁰. He squeezed North Korea the tightest in terms of sanctions and coercive diplomacy. He made not just denuclearization, but the reduction of even conventional weapons as a precondition for negotiations¹¹. The strategy did not work very well as North Korea

⁵ The Yongbyon Nuclear Reactor is North Korea’s indigenous graphite moderated nuclear facility situated in the county of Nyōngbyōn in North Pyong'an Province, about 90 km north of Pyongyang. It was shut down as part of the Agreed Framework and later restarted in 2003 following the breakdown of the Agreed Framework in 2002.

⁶ In 1998, US officials testified to Congress that there had been no violations of the Agreed Framework by North Korea.

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-105shrg50815/pdf/CHRG-105shrg50815.pdf>

⁷ Kim, Hyung-Kook(1999), “U.S. Policy Toward North Korea: From Positive Engagement To Constructive Containment”, *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, 13(1): 111-130

Hwang, Jihwan(2004), “Realism and US Foreign Policy Towards North Korea: The Clinton and Bush Administrations in Comparative Perspectives”, *World Affairs*, 167(1): 15-29

⁸ Seo, Jungkun (2015), “Agreements without Commitments: The US-Congress and the US-North Korea Agreed Framework”, *Korean Journal of Defence Analysis*, 27(1): 107-122

⁹ Moore, G.J.(2008), “America’s failed North Korea Nuclear Policy: A New Approach”, *Asian Perspective*, 32(4): 9-27

¹⁰ “Axis of Evil” was a phrase used by the US President George W. Bush to describe governments that were accused of sponsoring terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction, namely, Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

¹¹ Yun, Duk-min(2001), “US proposals for Resuming Talks with North Korea”, *Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security Weekly Report*

conducted its first nuclear test in 2006 and proliferated nuclear technology and material to Iran, Syria and Pakistan¹².

Barack Obama (2009-2017)

Obama's leadership was one of experimentation with both the Bush strategy and that of Clinton's i.e. both carrots and sticks. While it has been described as "Strategic Patience" by the administration, it can be argued that the phrase is a misnomer. This is because Obama's policy became very harsh towards North Korea after the nuclear test in January 2016. He imposed unilateral sanctions on North Korea, and he got the United Nations Security Council to issue tough sanctions against North Korea¹³. During Obama's tenure North Korea conducted three nuclear tests and a lot more missile tests than during the predecessors. However, this statement must be appended with an important consideration. The North Korean leadership changed during Obama's tenure¹⁴.

Donald J. Trump (2017-)

Donald J. Trump took over as the President of the United States in January 2017. Up till the period of writing, there has not been any clearly laid out strategy towards North Korea. In order to understand the US foreign policy, therefore, this paper has tried to analyse each tweet and statement made by the current US administrators on North Korea in the past eight months. Based on this, the paper tries to look for patterns or the lack of it.

The Trump administration began with very hawkish views by the President towards North Korea. It must be noted that Trump had a favourable view of Kim Jong-un during his Presidential Campaign. However, immediately after he assumed leadership, the US Secretary of State declared the "End of Strategic Patience" towards North Korea,

¹²Moore, G.J.(2008), "America's failed North Korea Nuclear Policy: A New Approach", *Asian Perspective*, 32(4): 9-27

¹³ Obama enacted the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016. The UNSC resolutions 2270 and 2321 were passed in 2016.

¹⁴ Kim Jon-un took over as the Supreme Leader of Democratic People's Republic of Korea in December 2011 following the demise of his father Kim Jong-Il.

indicating a shift away from Obama's approach¹⁵. This has been followed by a series of seemingly confusing and contradictory statements by President Trump and other American office bearers. But, on closer examination, one could find a clear pattern in the administration's approach towards North Korea.

There are small cycles of aggression and abatement visible in the US administration's views towards North Korea. Based on this analysis one could argue that Trump's policy towards North Korea is not very different from Obama's "Strategic Patience". However, it is also not the same. Trump's policy can be called "Strategic Impatience". This policy can be described as one that makes overt displays of "impatience", but this is part of the strategy, and hence the term "strategic". The businessman in Trump comes to play here. He passes aggressive statements towards North Korea on the one hand, but after a period of time passes conciliatory remarks. His hawkish statements are also abated by the dovish statements made by the other office bearers.

This pattern of aggression and abatement is also visible in Trump's approach towards China with respect to North Korea. A very tough stance towards China is visible in the first few weeks of April 2017. This view changes a few days after the Mar a Lago meeting with Xi Jinping¹⁶. One could argue that this is simply a reflection of Trump's ignorance of the larger geopolitics of the region. But, this argument would not explain why Trump resorts to an aggressive stance towards China once again¹⁷.

The Council of Foreign Relations' Task Force Report argues that North Korea follows a predictable pattern of behavior towards the United States too. The report talks about this pattern as having three stages — Provocation, Intensification and Abatement¹⁸. One could argue that the 2017 cycle is also a reiteration of the pattern which has repeated

¹⁵ The US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared the end of Strategic Patience towards North Korea on 17 March, 2017 while in South Korea. The end of this policy has been repeatedly declared by the Vice President and President himself on several occasions later.

¹⁶ US President Donald J. Trump met with the Chinese President Xi Jinping in April 2017 in a Summit level meeting at Mar-a-Lago Estate.

¹⁷ This second cycle is visible in the month of July 2017.

¹⁸ "A Sharper Choice on North Korea Engaging China for a Stable Northeast Asia", Task Force Report No 4, Council on Foreign Relations.

itself for decades. This cycle started with the period of provocation from February to July 2017 with the very frequent missile tests. This cycle witnessed its peak with the July ICBM tests and climaxed with the sixth nuclear test on 3 September 2017. The strategic community believes that the second ICBM tested in July has the ability to reach the US mainland¹⁹. If the pattern is to be believed North Korea will show abatement behavior after this as the peak of the cycle has been reached. North Koreans have mastered the understanding of this cycle based on which they seek concessions from the United States.

Other Actors in the Region

There cannot be a discussion of North Korea without factoring in China. It has been dominantly argued that China has heavy interests in maintaining the North Korean regime's survival to ensure a strategic buffer between the United States and itself²⁰. China also does not want the regime to collapse as this would mean heavy immigration into China and instability in the region²¹. China is blamed for the failure of sanctions against North Korea as 85 per cent of North Korean trade is with China. Sanctions by no other country against North Korea would be effective. However, it is also important to point out that China has increasingly been keen to curb North Korea in the recent past, and there are several examples to prove this. China has been voting in favour of most UNSC resolutions against North Korea²². The first nuclear test by North Korea in 2006 went against the Chinese wishes. The Chinese state media has been increasingly critical of the North Korean regime, there have also been reports of China's PLA having deployed Light

¹⁹ Ellemen, M (2017), "Early Observations of North Korea's Latest Missile Tests"
<http://www.38north.org/2017/07/melleman072817/>

²⁰ Feng, Zu (2009), "Shifting tides: China and North Korea", in Huisken Ron (ed.) *Architecture of Security in the Asia Pacific*, ANU Press

²¹ Speech Made by Katsuyuki Kawai , Special Adviser to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, on 5 September 2017 at IHC, Delhi.

²² Feng, Zu (2009), "Shifting tides: China and North Korea", in Huisken Ron (ed.) *Architecture of Security in the Asia Pacific*

Armoured Formations in its border with North Korea²³. This Chinese dilemma must be suitably exploited by the international community.

An escalation in the Korean peninsula will quite obviously have a direct effect on Japan and South Korea. The direct effect involves attack by North Korea on Japan and South Korea, primarily due to the US bases in both these countries. But, the indirect consequences are also plenty. A conflict in the peninsula would finally expedite the increasing “normalisation” of Japan’s security policy. It would provide the Japanese government a valid reason to convince the pacifist opposition to amend the constitution. This would also have larger consequences on India’s defence and security cooperation with Japan. South Korea is the prime reason for the US restraint in acting towards North Korea. South Korea will be the biggest casualty of a conflict in the region²⁴.

Implications for India

Most countries have been condemning the North Korean missile mania but India’s silence on the issue until recently has been very loud. India’s Ministry of External Affairs released a statement in July 2017 after the ICBM test asking North Korea to refrain from such activity. After the North Korean nuclear test India issued a more strongly worded statement. Although on the right track, India’s response is still reactive and not proactive, and is too little too late. While the stakes for India might not be so direct in the region, but instability in the region will have immense geo-economic repercussions for India. Another reason for India’s silence could be the need to stay out of the mess of a country outside the Non Proliferation Treaty regime. But this should hardly be a concern for India. The track record of India and North Korea with respect to nuclear and weapons proliferation cannot be compared²⁵. India should condemn North Korea proactively and use this as a strategic communication to the international community on India’s clear stand on the issue. The Pakistan-North Korea nuclear nexus is another reason India should be more enthusiastic in its condemnation. Pakistan’s relationship with North Korea is also a powerful indicator of its loyalty towards China. China has always defended

²³ “A Sharper Choice on North Korea Engaging China for a Stable Northeast Asia”, Task Force Report No 4, Council on Foreign Relations

²⁴ About 15000 North Korean cannons and rocket launchers remain aimed at Seoul at all times.

²⁵ Moore, G.J.(2008), “America’s failed North Korea Nuclear Policy: A New Approach”, *Asian Perspective*, 32(4): 9-27

Pakistan's nuclear and non-proliferation record. In exchange China uses Pakistan as the intermediary funnel for supplying North Korea with nuclear materials²⁶.

Conclusion

Going back to the American policy towards North Korea, one can clearly see that Donald Trump is quite intentionally cultivating a culture of his seeming unpredictability. On paper, however, American policy towards North Korean remains the same. In America's relations with North Korea the cycle of provocation, intensification, and abatement from North Korea is nothing out of the ordinary, and this cycle would live itself out irrespective of Trump's approach. It is not that there is no peaceful solution to the North Korean problem. The Agreed Framework as mentioned earlier is a good example of the success of engagement. However, the approach has to be a mixture of engagement and containment. And the trick to containment is not more and more rigid sanctions, but the successful implementation of these sanctions. In this regard China's gradual change in stance towards North Korea must be used favourably. India should see this situation as an opportunity to come across as a responsible nuclear power which is not insecure of its position in the international community.

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Notes and References

²⁶ Ramani, S. "The Long History of the Pakistan-North Korea Nexus"
<http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/the-long-history-of-the-pakistan-north-korea-nexus/>