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KL's Downgrading of North Korea Ties: More Than Symbolism?

By David Han

Synopsis

Malaysia has downgraded ties with North Korea following the murder of Kim Jong Nam in Kuala Lumpur. Could this symbolically project Malaysia's image as a responsible global citizen that upholds international conventions on non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)?

Commentary

LAST MONTH, media reports citing government sources indicated that Malaysia may consider further downgrading ties with North Korea. If confirmed, this would represent a renewed strain in bilateral relations ever since the public murder in Kuala Lumpur of Kim Jong Nam, half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Nam was killed on 13 February 2017 when two women smeared the lethal VX nerve agent on him at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

As part of this potential downgrade, Malaysia could close down its embassy in North Korea permanently and shift its North Korea services to Beijing, while reducing the staff numbers in North Korea's diplomatic mission in Kuala Lumpur.

A Symbolic Act?

It is widely believed that Malaysia's tougher stance towards North Korea reflects the growing international pressure on North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions. However, Malaysia's heightened disapproval of North Korea could also be linked to Kuala Lumpur's objective of projecting itself as a responsible global citizen that advocates international norms, including a global non-proliferation regime.

Furthermore, Malaysia's increasingly stronger stance vis-à-vis North Korea was

already seeded during the Obama administration, and which has accentuated under the Trump administration.

So far, Malaysia has made several policy changes that are aligned with growing international sanctions, particularly imposed by the United Nations and the United States, against North Korea's nuclear weapons programme. For example, Malaysia has severed all trade and businesses with North Korea.

Whether these international sanctions could effectively persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions remain unclear, as previous sanctions failed to have a significant impact on North Korea's behaviour. In spite of these sanctions, North Korea has remained adamant and refused to budge. Therefore, Malaysia's gesture to further downgrade ties and cut economic links is unlikely to affect North Korea adversely.

However, Malaysia's stance could be a symbolic means to project its image as a responsible global citizen that upholds peaceful usage of nuclear technology and international conventions to prevent the spread of WMD.

US Factor in Malaysia's Posture

This stance could be attributed to Malaysia's desire to be a middle power on the global stage. Middle Powers have been known to play a leading role in supporting multilateralism and international norms with other like-minded countries in shaping global affairs.

Malaysia's desire to be a middle power is evident in its active diplomacy on the international stage, such as its advocacy of the interests of the Muslim world in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and ASEAN multilateralism. Thus, Malaysia's support of international conventions on non-proliferation is an extension of its middle power ambition.

Some observers surmise that Malaysia is seeking to dissociate itself from dealings with North Korea as a result of the Trump administration's strong push on countries in Southeast Asia to cut diplomatic ties with North Korea.

However, during the Obama administration, Malaysia and the US had been strengthening cooperation in promoting the proliferation security initiative meant to curtail the trafficking of weapons of mass destruction and their components around the world.

To support such efforts, in April 2010, Malaysia passed the Strategic Trade Act. This would enhance Malaysia's capacity to curb the illegal shipments of WMD and their components, and ensure that the country does not become a conduit for such exports. Ostensibly, this positive step is aimed at nullifying illegal trading of WMD and parts by countries such as North Korea.

It also served to boost Malaysia's credentials as an advocate of global non-proliferation during the Nuclear Security Summit hosted by President Obama in the United States that same year.

Malaysia's downgrading of ties with North Korea is also an accentuation of an almost-decade long effort by Malaysia to support the US in compelling North Korea to abandon its nuclear programme. It also signals to the Trump administration that Malaysia is a committed partner which shares strategic interests with the US pertaining to the Korean peninsula.

Exceeding Malaysia's Threshold for Flexibility

Malaysia's foreign policy has always sought to maintain friendly and pragmatic relations with as many countries as possible, while seeking flexibility to overcome differences in bilateral ties. North Korea is no exception.

However, North Korea's behaviour in the aftermath of Kim Jong Nam's death was disconcerting to Malaysia. For example, North Korea's Ambassador to Kuala Lumpur refuted Malaysian police's findings that the VX nerve agent was used. Subsequently, North Korea prevented all personnel in Malaysia's embassy from leaving the country.

This was in retaliation to Malaysia's responses in the aftermath of the murder, which included the arrest of a North Korean suspect, cancellation of visa-free travel for North Koreans, the recall of its Ambassador to North Korea, and search for three more North Korean suspects. This saga was quietly resolved after sensitive negotiations between both countries.

While it has not been proven conclusively that the North Korean regime had a role in the Kim Jong Nam murder, the trust between both countries has eroded nonetheless. Malaysia is concerned for the security of its citizens and other nationalities on home soil, and the safety and well-being of its diplomats in North Korea.

Thus, the downgrading of ties by Malaysia sends a low-key but nonetheless unmistakable signal to North Korea that the national interests and security of Malaysia have to be respected. Malaysia is unlikely to cut diplomatic ties with North Korea. But given the aftermath of the Kim Jong Nam saga and mounting international pressure against North Korea's nuclear ambition, bilateral relations are unlikely to recover any time soon.

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