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Resuming the Six-Party Talks?: Bleak Prospects

By Tan Ming Hui

Synopsis

The Six-Party Talks to resolve North Korea's nuclear crisis continues to be stalled after nearly seven years. China's favoured diplomatic approach to deescalate regional tensions temporarily will do little to resolve the crisis if Beijing hesitates to wield a firm hand and rein its neighbour in.

Commentary

NORTH KOREA has violated multiple United Nations resolutions again by conducting its fourth nuclear test on 6 January 2016, and launching a long-range rocket on 7 February in defiance of international sanctions.

The Chinese foreign ministry has responded negatively to the provocative actions of its neighbour despite the two countries' long-standing relationship that has often been described "as close as lips and teeth". Beijing has warned that it would support a new United Nations Security Council resolution to make Pyongyang "pay the necessary price". At the same time, China continues to urge the United States and North Korea to resolve the issue peacefully by returning to the negotiating table.

Can the Iran Nuclear Deal be Replicated?

Multilateral negotiations, known as the Six-Party Talks among the US, China, Japan, Russia, North and South Korea have been stalled since 2009 when Pyongyang walked out of the talks in response to condemnation from the UN over a rocket launch. Since then, Pyongyang has revised its constitution in 2012 to proclaim itself a nuclear state.

However, the relative success of the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal, whereby the Iranian nuclear programme is temporarily halted in exchange for gradual lifting of sanctions on the country, may give rise to some optimism for the relevant stakeholders to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis in a similar fashion.

Nevertheless, the resumption of the Six-Party Talks is highly unlikely because of the diametrically opposed preconditions attached by the stakeholders. The US wants North Korea to return to the talks and commit to denuclearisation before the removal of sanctions and a peace treaty could be on the table; Pyongyang wants the sanctions to be first removed and a peace treaty negotiated before it is willing to return to the talks.

Even if China can persuade all the major stakeholders to reach a compromise and return to the talks, it will only deescalate regional tensions temporarily as it is almost impossible that Pyongyang will ever agree to abandon its nuclear ambitions. The North Korean regime has followed a military-first policy since former leader, Kim Jong-Il's reign, placing a special emphasis on the development of nuclear arsenal and ballistic missiles.

Unlike Iran which does not have sufficient fissile material stockpiles to create a nuclear weapon, Pyongyang has already obtained several nuclear weapons and declared itself a nuclear power. Its nuclear arsenal is seen as the security guarantee and an effective bargaining chip to achieve the regime's political goals.

Also, while the Iranian government depends heavily on energy exports, welcomes foreign investments, and faces significant pressure from its people to end its decades of international isolation, North Korea is a lot more autarkic and less reliant on foreign trade and access to the international financial system.

China's Dilemma

In fact, being its only ally, its largest trading partner, as well as its main source of food and energy, China is the only country that has any degree of influence over the hermit kingdom. If China has the political will to punish North Korea for its belligerent behaviour, it certainly can do so.

Realistically, Beijing has two options. First, it can continue to insulate North Korea from the international community and learn to live with a nuclear armed ally and in the process, lose its recent budding friendship with South Korea and be confronted with a potential regional arms race in the future. Second, China can choose to cooperate with the rest of the international community to rein North Korea in with tough actions, but potentially losing its influence over the regime.

Despite displaying increasing annoyance with North Korea's decisions, it is more likely that China will continue to endure its neighbour's provocations. China has traditionally seen North Korea as a buffer zone and hence, it is not in its immediate interests to allow the collapse of the Kim regime as this may result in a unified Korea that is democratic and pro-US. Also, the collapse of the North Korean regime would

lead to a refugee crisis on China's borders, potentially triggering economic and social chaos.

Tough Road Ahead

Nonetheless, getting China on board may not be a lost cause yet. There are signs that China is already gradually losing its influence over North Korea. Kim Jong-Un's unexpected execution in 2013 of his uncle Jang Song-Thaek, who was regarded as pro-Beijing, has raised its concerns over the hermit kingdom's unpredictability.

Furthermore, when China sent a diplomat, Wu Dawei in early February to dissuade Pyongyang from the rocket launch, it went unheeded and the latter even brought forward the launch to the Lunar New Year's Eve, a major Chinese holiday.

This is perceived by some analysts as a sign of disrespect, and there may be a limit to China's patience if its advice continues to be ignored. In fact, Kim Jong-Un has already expressed his intention to launch more satellites into space. Thus, even though it would be an extremely challenging task, the US and its allies may still be able to persuade Beijing to wield the stick eventually.

Tan Ming Hui is an Associate Research Fellow at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg