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Trump-Kim Summit 2018

Russia's Cautious Response

By Chris Cheang

Synopsis

Russia's relatively cautious reaction to the Singapore Summit's outcome suggests that it seeks a role in the denuclearisation efforts of the Korean Peninsula.

Commentary

RUSSIA has consistently opposed North Korea's nuclear weapons programme and advocated dialogue and negotiations as the only way to resolve the crisis. It had strongly criticised American pressure and what it considers United States threats to resolve the issue by force.

Moscow sees its stance as having been justified, judging by the comments of President Putin's press spokesman, Dmitry Peskov. According to a RadioFreeEurope/Radio Liberty report dated the 13 June 2018, he told journalists that "just the fact that such a meeting took place and direct first-hand dialogue was started, can only be welcomed". While the meeting had reduced tensions on the Korean Peninsula, he added it would have been wrong to expect all the disagreements over North Korea could be solved in an hour.

Lavrov's Cautious Response

The TASS news agency reported on the same day Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's more reserved observations. While describing

direct contact between the US and North Korea as “worth supporting,” and noting that President Trump’s statement “that there is no need for new American-South Korean drills at the specified stage,” Lavrov hinted that Russia had a role to play in the whole denuclearisation process.

He stressed that “regarding the importance of the solution of the problems between the United States and North Korea, including the peninsula denuclearisation stages and security guarantees, it is clear that it will hardly be possible to solve these problems in the bilateral format”. He added that that “all the participants of the six-party talks have always proceeded from the fact that this process has to result in the creation of a system of peace, security and stability across Northeast Asia”.

By emphasising the multilateral nature of the North Korean denuclearisation process and stressing the need for the region’s involvement in it, Lavrov set down a marker for Russia’s participation in the process as well. By extension, this would mean that Russia has influence in Northeast Asia and cannot be left out of the process.

Moscow’s Feelers to Pyongyang

Indeed, Lavrov visited North Korea on the 31 May 2018 and met Kim Jong Un and his North Korean counterpart, Ri Yong Ho. The Moscow Times reported Lavrov as saying that Moscow hoped all sides would take a delicate approach to possible forthcoming talks on a nuclear settlement on the Peninsula and not try to rush the process. He added that “this will allow for the realisation not only of the denuclearisation of the whole Korean Peninsula but also provide sustainable peace and stability across northeast Asia”.

Other cautious voices on the Summit are worth noting. Senator Konstantin Kosachev, head of the Federation Council’s (the Upper House) Foreign Affairs Committee remarked that “...there’s no certainty that both sides will immediately rush to build on the Singapore success. Trump’s words that the process of denuclearisation on the Korean peninsula will begin ‘very very soon’ is more of a wish than fact”.

His deputy, Senator Vladimir Dzhabarov, pointed out that “the denuclearisation issue is unlikely to be on the agenda yet, because Kim Jong-un remembers too well what happened with [Libya’s Muammar] Qaddafi, [Iraq’s Saddam] Hussein, other heads of state. That’s why nuclear weapons is his security guarantee”.

Motivations Behind Russia’s Effort

In the months preceding the Singapore Summit, Russia and China had been leading the effort to bring a resolution to the nuclear crisis between North Korea and the US. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov at

the 8th Asian Conference of the Valdai Discussion Club (VDC, a Moscow-based think-tank) in Seoul in November 2017 had proposed a three-stage plan.

The first step, he said, should be the reduction of military tension. Its starting point is the "double freezing" -- suspension of missile launches and nuclear tests by North Korea. The second stage involves direct negotiations among North Korea, the US and South Korea; the third and final stage would see the launching of a process with all the countries involved to discuss the entire complex of issues of collective security in Asia.

Obviously, Russia now does not want to be placed on the sidelines of the denuclearisation process, after its earlier extensive efforts. As a neighbour of North Korea, Russia cannot help being involved and concerned about the future of that country. Moscow would not look kindly upon a destabilised North Korea if the denuclearisation effort were to fail and tensions with the US were to resume.

Geographical proximity means that political instability could lead to mass refugee outflows into Russia. Russia also would not want to see the replacement of the Kim regime by another government which might seek close links with the South and the US.

Worst-Case Scenario?

The worst-case scenario for Russia would be Korean reunification based on the South's leadership or domination, especially if that were to lead to a strengthened alliance with the US and American military forces being stationed near or on the Korean-Russia border. Russian prestige and international status also come into play--this would increase if Moscow's participation were to lead to denuclearisation of the Peninsula.

Finally, lurking behind the minds of Russian policymakers must be the fear that the US would replace Russia (and China) as Kim Jong Un's foremost partners and interlocutors and by extension, lead to a weakening and worse, a loss of Russian influence in the country.

In any event, there are limitations to Russia's ability to retain its influence in North Korea should Kim implement his side of the bargain with Trump. Russia might not be able to match the US in any economic agreements. Moreover, as a Russian expert on Korea, Konstantin Asmolov of the Russian Academy of Sciences pointed out in a 7 December 2017 VDC article, the following factors limit Russia's ability to influence the situation in North Korea:

Russia has a limited number of levers of influence on Pyongyang despite a high level of political contacts and sound trust-based relations. There is only moderate economic cooperation between Russia and North Korea. Bilateral

cultural ties are not as close as they were under the late Kim Jong-il; Kim Jong-un grew up in a different cultural environment.

In any event, whether Russia can and will play any significant role in the denuclearisation process depends largely on the willingness of North Korea and the US. Given the limited extent of Russia's economic engagement with North Korea and the current tense state of US-Russia relations, the odds are that they would probably limit Russia's role in the whole process.

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