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North Korea: Why it is Unlikely to Denuclearise

By KB Teo

SYNOPSIS

After two summits with Trump, there are reasons to believe that North Korea's leader Kim Jong-Un is having the last laugh on the American president.

COMMENTARY

IT IS very unlikely that North Korea will denuclearise. There are three factors: the persistence of the US threat to North Korea's survival; Pyongyang's failure to keep its promises to denuclearise; and the serious weakening of North Korea by more than three decades of US economic sanctions.

The first factor is what Pyongyang regards as the persistence of the US threat to North Korea's survival. Since the US intervention in the Korean War (1950-53), North Korea sees Washington as hostile. The US has a string of military bases in East Asia, targeting North Korea and China.

US Seen as a Threat

The US also has 30,000 troops in South Korea under the September 1953 ROK-US Mutual Defence Treaty. Additionally, under the October 1951 Japan-US Mutual Security Treaty, the US stations 80,000 troops in Okinawa.

In April 2019, Kim Jong Un, just 36 years old, said that Pyongyang must deliver "serious blows" to those imposing economic sanctions. It was the first time that Kim stated North Korea's position after the Hanoi Summit's collapse in February 2019.

Pyongyang's commitment to the "denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula" includes "eliminating the US nuclear threat to North Korea". North Korea says the US threat

has forced it to strengthen its defences: Pyongyang spends an estimated 25% of its GDP on the military. In contrast, most states spend about 5%.

Different Interpretations of Denuclearisation

Kim's understanding of "denuclearisation" is different from that of President Donald Trump. The US wants the "Complete, Irreversible, Verifiable, Disarmament" of Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal, held under UN auspices. At the Singapore Summit in June 2018, Kim reiterated a vague commitment to denuclearisation.

He warned in his January 2019 New Year Day's address that he would change course if Washington continued its sanctions. Two months after the Hanoi Summit's failure in February 2019, North Korea tested an improved short-range missile with a 500-km range and rebuilt the nuclear testing facilities at Tongchang-ri.

In July 2019, North Korea again tested short-range missiles which can hit South Korea and Japan. Instead of denuclearisation, it is clear that Kim is enhancing his nuclear capability. During the Kim-Putin summit in Vladivostok on 25 April 2019, Kim reiterated he wanted "security guarantees".

Bargaining Chip

The second factor is that North Korea had promised many times over the past 25 years to denuclearise but did not carry them out. Nuclear weapons are North Korea's only bargaining chip: Pyongyang has spent a lot of resources, time, and effort to acquire a nuclear deterrent. They would not be given up easily, if at all.

From Kim's viewpoint, having nuclear weapons makes good sense. First, regime survival. Second, national pride. Third, coercive diplomacy to get benefits from Washington, especially diplomatic recognition and financial aid.

Fourth, undermining the US-ROK Security Alliance, by sowing doubt that Washington would come to Seoul's defence once the US itself is under threat of Pyongyang's nuclear missiles.

North Korea has an estimated 60 nuclear missiles. The US has more than 7,000 nuclear missiles. In November 2017, North Korea tested a Hwasong-15 ICBM missile: it has a 13,000-km range and can hit continental US.

It would show to Washington that North Korea is not easily toppled by outside powers, unlike Libya (Gaddafi), Iraq (Saddam Hussein), or the Balkans (Slobodan Milosevic).

Spurring Economic Growth

The third factor is that Kim wants faster economic growth for North Korea. Between 2010 and 2016, the economy stagnated at 0.5% growth p.a. In 2018, the North Korean economy shrank 4.1%, the slowest growth in 20 years. With a GDP per capita of less than US\$2,000 per annum, North Korea is one of the poorest countries on earth.

An estimated 20% of North Korean children are malnourished. Faster economic growth would boost Kim's political legitimacy. In 2013, Kim announced his "Byungjin" policy of both nuclear development and economic growth.

Since taking power in 2012, Kim has focused on reviving the economy. Between 2012 and 2015, North Korea grew at an average of 1.8% p.a. It slowed to 1.7% in 2017.

China's Role in the Korean Peninsula

The China-North Korea relationship has been marked by ups and downs. Under the 1961 Sino-North Korea Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, Beijing is committed to helping North Korea if an outside attack occurred.

North Korea is China's backyard. Beijing has also strengthened its ties with South Korea. China was South Korea's largest trading partner in 2018, and the destination for 75% of Seoul's exports.

North Korea is economically very dependent on China: China is North Korea's largest trading partner, accounting for 90% of its external trade. North Korea exports almost all of its coal and textiles to China. Bilateral China-North Korea trade increased ten-fold between 2010 and 2017. China is North Korea's largest trading partner, especially food, machinery, and oil.

President Xi Jinping made his first official visit to North Korea in June 2019, ahead of the G20 Osaka Summit. It restored warmer Sino-North Korean relations. The Korean Peninsula has become an intense diplomatic battleground in the strategic rivalry between Beijing and Washington.

China's Worry of Regime Collapse

Beijing supports a stable and peaceful North Korea. But China is ambivalent about a nuclear-armed North Korea: it is worried about regime collapse in North Korea and a massive refugee influx if war breaks out between Washington and Pyongyang. A reunified Korea would mean the presence of US troops just outside China's border. This is unacceptable to Beijing.

Kim is seeking more Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments from China. But Kim is careful not to become too dependent on Beijing, amid fears of 'debt traps' experienced by other states. Kim visited Russia in April 2019, for his first meeting with President Vladimir Putin.

In making this move, Kim showed his desire to lessen his unhealthy dependence on Beijing. For Putin, it showed that a resolution of the North Korean issue requires the Kremlin's participation.

Kim is concerned with the poor state of the North Korean economy. He is considering setting up South Korean-style industrial conglomerates, or 'chaebols'. With more capitalist-style economic reforms, North Korea could become the next 'Asian tiger economy'.

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