

NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM: A CONUNDRUM FOR THE GLOBAL SECURITY

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North Korea occupies a very significant geo-strategic position in the global geopolitics. Any anomalous activities on or around North Korea have potential to jeopardise peace, harmony and security of the region in a very wider area of this region as well as in other parts of the global arena. The advancements of nuclear arms and missile technology of North Korea and its continuous provocations have created a serious turmoil not only for the regional countries but also for its enemy countries. North Korea's posture has been persisting as a serious threat along with high degree of enmity to South Korea in particular. The North Korean nuclear weapon program has defied the efforts of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. This activity poses a serious threat to the world community. Therefore, it has been a serious concern for the world countries to resolve North Korea's nuclear issue by all possible means and in particular, it directly challenges western countries led dominance and its status quo. The development of nuclear weapons by North Korea is seen as representing power challenge to the United States' primacy and western dominance in the international order. Till now, the United States' unilateral intervention on the Korean Peninsula was delivering neither stable circumstances nor inspired other regional players to undertake serious concern over North Korean nuclear issue. On the contrary, many predicts that it might the US unilateral intervention and sluggish attitude of regional players towards North Korea may create a conundrum for global security.

North Korea's Nuclear Capability and its dissonance with Safeguard Agreements

After the Korean War, North Korea made several attempts to destabilise South Korea. It also aspired to have nuclear weapons so that it could secure its territory from the foreign invasions. In this quest of North Korea, it got some important initial supports from the Soviet Union. In 1952, both the countries signed agreement for the training of North Korean nuclear specialists for the peaceful use of nuclear energy. In 1956, North Korea also joined the United Institute for Nuclear Research, which was established in Dubna, Moscow. North Korea has a long-standing aspiration for nuclear arms, but when the United States placed its tactical nuclear weapons in southern part of the peninsula in 1957, North Korea was compelled to focus either on developing nuclear arms as a deterrence mechanism. By concluding a nuclear collaboration treaty with the USSR in 1959, North Korea advanced its nuclear program. The treaty was signed with Soviet Union's technical assistance in order to establish a nuclear research centre in North Korea and to create facilities for the training of the North Korean nuclear specialists. In the year of 1961, North Korea started construction of a nuclear research complex in Yongbyon. It managed to procure an IRT-2000 research reactor from the Soviet Union in 1962, and by the year of 1964, the construction of nuclear complex in Yongbyon area was completed. North Korea joined the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1974 and signed the trilateral safeguards agreement with the IAEA and the Soviet Union in 1977 and agreed to accept the norms of international inspections. Even though North Korea was not a signatory to the NPT, the reactor was placed under IAEA supervision after the pressure of the Soviet Union.

In the beginning, there was some ambiguity about the purpose of North Korea quest for nuclear reactor. whether they want it for civil purpose or military purpose. Kim Il-sung decided to build nuclear weapons and grew the network area of the research institute in the 1970s. North Korea also suspected that even China and the Soviet Union, despite being close allies, may betray her at any point of time in the future. Ultimately in 1980, after lots of persuasion of North Korea, the Soviet Union started building nuclear research reactor in Yongbyon in North Korea with the capacity of 5mw. This reactor one of the most important bones of contestation during the 1994 nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. In mid 1980s, it was confirmed that North Korea is making a large-scale nuclear research complex in Yongbyon. By that time, the United States requested the Soviet Union for persuading North Korea to

join the NPT. After the request from the Soviet side, North Korea joined the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1985. Although it was the treaty's mandatory provision to sign a safeguard agreement with the IAEA within eighteen months of signing of the NPT, North Korea did not sign it in the stipulated time. These inconsistencies of North Korea got attention of the world community when a French satellite revealed the picture of Yongbyon nuclear site in the public domain with suspicion that North Korean nuclear reactor's capacity appeared to be more than it had promised. After this the international community stepped out to pressurise North Korean leader to abandon its nuclear program by using means of both carrot and stick.

Based on the photographs taken by the satellite by the Central Investigation Agency (CIA), on 26 February 1993, the IAEA Director General Hans Blix wrote a letter to the Department of Foreign Minister of North Korea citing that international agency must be allowed to inspect the undisclosed two nuclear sites at Yongbyon. On March 12, 1993, North Korea stated that it was leaving the non-proliferation pact in response to increase international pressure. North Korea's decision to withdraw from the NPT and the persistent pressure from the world community further engraved the crisis on Korean Peninsula.

The Korean Peninsula was experiencing unsettling circumstances during this time, and it was worried that a war may break out at any moment. The United States was unwilling to permit North Korea to develop nuclear weapons by isolating more plutonium and North Korea was adamant to do so. With the horizon of battle clouds, the US Embassy in South Korea began the process of evacuating its citizens and the citizens of South Korea started stockpiling the emergency and essential items. However, amid intensifying tension, the visit of Jimmy Carter (the former President of the United States) to North Korea somehow averted the war-like situation.

North Korea's Dissonance with Safeguard Agreement

North Korea joined the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in September 1974, but it did not sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) until December 12, 1985. It has also delayed signing the full-scale Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA for the 6 years, despite the fact that it was supposed to be completed within the next 18 months as an NPT signatory. North Korea's behaviour has been the subject of criticism and mistrust for a long time. According to IAEA regulations, non-nuclear countries that signed the NPT are supposed to conclude full-scale safeguard agreements. According to the agreement, North Korea was obliged to submit an Initial Report to the IAEA related to the detail of nuclear material complying with safeguards standards. Although it submitted its reports on 4 May 1992 but contained some inexplicit matters which became the contentious issue later. Even though international community and the US tried to bring North Korea under the NPT and IAEA safeguard provisions, North Korea used loopholes in the provisions as well as other tactics to maximise its gains. The United States has had serious concern about the security of South Korea.

Being an adjacent country, South Korea also evolved some mechanism to safeguard the Korean Peninsula such as trying to establish direct contacts with North Korea. Both countries issued joint statement for peaceful reunification of the Korea in early 1990s. However, the inter-Korean relations deteriorated on an unprecedented level amid the presence of coercive external pressure on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's stubborn attitude towards international agencies put the Korean Peninsula on the verge of war. Its non-compliance with IAEA and several provocative actions endangered the Korean Peninsula at one hand. On the other side, the entire Northeast Asian region became unstable as a result of North Korea's adamant determination to build nuclear weapons. On January 20, 1992, both Koreas signed an agreement called Joint Declaration on the Denuclearisation of Korean Peninsula in order to foster the idea of denuclearisation and disarmament of Korean Peninsula. South Korea even developed and participated in multilateral mechanisms such as Four-party talks and Six-party talks to resolve North Korean nuclear crisis but North Korea's non-compliance with those mechanisms left the Korean Peninsula in unresolved nuclear situation.

A Conundrum for the Global Security

In relation to North Korea's nuclear development, there has been a lot of secrecy. In the early 1990s, the quest to acquire nuclear weapons by North Korea got enough attention to the world's political and military leaders. Although there were doubt about the actual North Korean nuclear capability, there has been a kind of certainty that North Korea is not fulfilling the statute of United Nations since early 1990s.

Due to the North Korea's provocative behaviour, the Korean Peninsula faced nuclear crises which endangered the regional peace and stability. A strong quest to pursue nuclear weapons by North Korea could lead to a dangerous nuclear arms competition among the regional countries which may result into pilling up of nuclear weapons or spread of nuclear weapons materials. More than that, one of the main frightening developments could be availability of nuclear arms in the hand of a secret and isolated country that has an unpredictable regime with a shady record of enormous terror activities, and it would prove to be a nightmare for the world countries and thus nuclear issue of North Korea became a conundrum to the world security. Although from North Korean side, it is always illustrated that the pursuance of nuclear weapons was the need of the deterrence against any possible United States' invasion. Secondary reason could be need for energy sources and fear of abandonment by its allies such as China and the Soviet Union as by that time the Soviet Union had decided to remove its missiles from Cuba in 1962.

The Cold War's conclusion and the shifting power dynamics against the North Korea in the late-1980s brought a period of diplomatic isolation of North Korea, both contributed to the increased threat perception of North Korea and the advancement of nuclear weapons programme. In the 1960s and 1970s, the economic development of North Korean was much faster compared to South Korea. Later in 1980s and 1990s the pace of economic development marked almost none or negative but on the other hand South Korea's economy grew exponentially in the 1980s onwards. North Korea faced food shortages and extreme economic deprivation in the 1990s. On the other side, South Korea normalized diplomatic relationship with Soviet Union in September 1990 and with China in 1992. North Korea suffered greatly from South Korea's normalisation agreements with the Soviet Union and China. North Korea even released memorandum against these normalisation treaties, but it was not able to stop rapprochement between South Korea and China or South Korea and the Soviet Union (later Russia). This situation hampered the North Korea's relation with its close allies and compelled North Korea to take some risky strategic measures about its relationship with other communist countries as well as its survival in this realist world and it moved ahead on the path of being nuclear powerful country.

Putting all these together, the memories of unfinished Korean War possessed by continuous military confrontations and provocations on Peninsula, the fear of nuclear war throughout the Cold War, lagging behind in economic competition with South Korea, North Korea's compulsion to survive and negotiate with the regional powers along with United States contributed to North Korea's desire to pursue nuclear weapons. The nuclear weapons of North Korea served even as a bargaining chip with its rival countries. At least it guarantees North Korea's regime survival whenever negotiations failed. According to an interview with Dr. Siegfried S. Hecker, who is a well-known expert on North Korea's nuclear development and a senior fellow emeritus at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, North Korea has around 25 to 48 nuclear weapons against the prevailing assumption of 67 to 116. Hecker also estimated that North Korea's capacity to produce bomb is 12 to 18 per year. His estimated data about nuclear weapons is based on North Korea's capacity to produce fissile material that is plutonium and highly enriched uranium (HEU). He also estimated that North Korea's capacity to produce HEU for bomb fuel is around 175 kg per year. His team also assumed that by the end of 2020, North Korea would be able to produce around 600 to 950 kg of HEU. Citing this, he also emphasised that all estimates of North Korea's uranium enrichment capacity are highly ambiguous. Additionally, he claimed that based on their lengthy track record of short-range missile testing as well as their nuclear test history, North Korea is already capable of deploying nuclear warheads on short-range SCUD and medium-range Nodong ballistic missiles, respectively. In other words, they already have nuclear-tipped missiles with the capability of reaching the entire South Korea

and the majority of Japan. These warheads are almost certainly powered by HEU. He further added that North Korea already has enough HEU to build several dozen short-range tactical nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

The development of nuclear weapons by North Korea has jeopardised the regional peace and security framework in East Asia. The international agencies including the United Nations have also failed to check the development of North Korea's nuclear program. Now the situation is that North Korea has developed nuclear bombs and long-range missiles that challenges directly to the US led international order and defies the process of non-proliferation policy led by regional mechanism and the world superpower countries. And thus the nuclear issue of North Korea has really become the conundrum for the global security.

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