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The North Korean Threat More Bark than Bite



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In a sign of reversal of its belligerent rhetoric and saber-rattling in the past few weeks, North Korea is scaling back its threats and hinting to ease tensions with South Korea and the US. This assessment, gaining credence among policymakers in recent days, does not mean that North Korea will soon agree to talks or that the long-term threat posed by its weapons program has been reduced. But the shift in Pyongyang's rhetoric, though venomous, now includes hints about reconciliation. This is a welcome prospect for the return of peace, how uneasy that may be, for the region.

The heightening of tension on the Korean peninsula reached this time the crescendo when the young leader Kim Jong-un openly threatened the US and South Korea to hit with missiles. All these started after Pyongyang tested a nuclear device in February 2013 for the third time, prompting the United National Security Council to impose further sanctions on Kim's regime. In response, Pyongyang declared the 1953 armistice agreement, which brought the Korean War to a close, null and void.

Diffusing the heightened tensions emerged as the biggest diplomatic challenge for not only the US but also to China, Japan and South Korea because an accidental incident contained the potential for developing into a major conflagration. Such a perception emerged following Pyongyang's strident rhetoric against South Korea and the US on 30 March that there now exist a "state of war" between the two Koreas.

When tensions escalated, the US responded to these alarming events by dispatching nuclear-

capable B-2 stealth bombers on a training mission over the Korean peninsula and to reinforce the ongoing annual US-South Korea military exercises, as a part of underscoring the US commitments to its longstanding regional allies. The US also wanted to intimidate Kim Jong-un and his advisors.

WHAT DOES KIM JONG-UN WANT?

The question that arises is, what is that Kim Jong-un wants to achieve? There could be several explanations, though all may not be credible. Perhaps, he is simply attempting to secure his power base by standing up to the "imperialists" in Washington. There are reports that the young leader is guided by his aunt and uncle and is not really in a position to take control of the state and therefore wants to establish his credibility. Also, the disparate elements within the 1.2 million-strong army could be a potential threat to his authority and therefore he has to prove a point. But in an opaque state, no such speculations could be near accurate.

Secondly, his worry could be how to address to the monumental task of solving the country's chronic economic problems. Thirdly, the junior Kim perhaps wants to project an impression that he is capable of doing anything, including using nuclear weapons, in the hope of winning concessions at the negotiating table. Fourthly, Kim Jong-un probably feels that he can win a confrontation with South Korea and therefore it is appropriate to provoke a military clash. That route will be suicidal as North Korea is no match to US and South



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Korea's combined military might. Fifthly, Pyongyang's timing for upping the ante is important as South Korea has a new leadership under Park Geun-hye, whose mettle Kim Jong-un probably wanted to test. But Park has already promised a measured response if the North goes berserk. Sixthly, this is a typical North Korean tactic to heighten threats of war and regional tension with a view to extract concession from the West. Seventhly, Kim Jong-un wants to prove that his leadership is bold and forceful and therefore does not hesitate to challenge the US to make himself as a legendary figure for North Koreans, if not same as his father and grandfather, at least nothing less than their achievements.

II DIPLOMATIC RESPONSES

When things seemed to be spiraling out of control, President Barack Obama dispatched Secretary of State John Kerry to the capitals of the three Northeast Asian countries to confabulate with his counterparts and work a way out of this mess. Kerry visited Seoul, Beijing and Tokyo in that order. The question is: was his trip to China a 'face saving' measure by the US?

Whilst Kerry reassured Seoul and Tokyo, both allies, the US commitment to defend in case North Korea attacks, Kerry obtained Beijing's commitment to uphold peace and stability and advancing the denuclearization process in the Korean peninsula through dialogue. Beijing's agreement for further discussions was interpreted as a major achievement. Was this really the case?

Though North Korea hinted at openness despite venomous rhetoric, dialogue could be difficult as Washington and Pyongyang are fundamentally at odds over what must happen first. Kerry has gone on record saying that Pyongyang's preconditions are "unacceptable". Yet, given that Pyongyang is even opening the door for talks despite its pledge of nuclear annihilation of the US, and Guam,

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coupled with its renewed efforts to reproduce weapon-grade plutonium and temporary suspension of the Kaesong Industrial Complex is a welcome sign, which the US must not overlook.

There seems to be a contradiction in the US position in dealing with Pyongyang. The US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel is on record saying that the regime in Pyongyang is "reckless" and "bent on a nuclear war" and therefore presents a "a real and clear danger and threat". This means building up of defensive missile systems on Guam, Alaska and on the West Coast of the US to counter the "grave threat". When the issue of funding was raised within the US Congress, the US backtracked and Obama then spoke of calming down the situation through winding back the military exercises with South Korea to lower tensions. Then came Kerry's visit to the three Northeast Asian capitals.

Does this mean that the US capitulated? Though this is not the case, there are distinct sign that Obama has changed his strategy for dealing with North Korea's saber-rattling. From the initial high-profile deterrence to flying nuclear-capable stealth bombers over the peninsula and speeding up the deployment of a missile defense system to Guam, now he seeks to limit military force and break the cycle of past negotiations.

Kerry's visit to Beijing to seek support to rein in on Pyongyang demonstrated that the US cannot afford military action against North Korea as it would not be in the US interest. On the other hand, it would prefer to have the North as a "good enemy" as that would serve its strategic objective and a good excuse to increase its military presence close to China in the East Asian region. The US would not want North Korea to collapse either, as a unified Korea would not warrant a good excuse for the US to keep a strong military presence and may even lead to a conflict between the US and China as both would compete to install some form of order in the vacuum. Pentagon may have miscalculated the potential irrational response by Pyongyang in defence as tensions heightened and dispatched Kerry to Beijing in an attempt to de-escalate and take no military response without being seen backing down.

The strategy seemed to work as Beijing sent its special envoy on North Korea, Wu Dawei, to Washington in the last week of April to hold talks with US officials. The trip is part of a flurry of diplomacy centered on North Korea as the US and South Korea increasingly focus on trying to set up talks with the North to cool down fevered

tensions. Such moves have coincided with a noticeable drop in pointed threats from North Korea, raising tentative hopes for a way out of one of the worst crises over North Korea in years.

III THE CHINA FACTOR

As it transpires, the strategic dimensions are playing out and serious attempts are being made by the concerned stakeholders to diffuse the situation and restore order. Besides Kerry's visit to the three Northeast Asian capitals and Wu's visit to Washington, South Korea's foreign minister Yun Byung-se met with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Beijing in April to discuss North Korea.

Dialogue is the best option if tensions have to be de-escalated. Even security meetings are also planned. Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, confabulated with top US and South Korean military commanders in Seoul on his way to Beijing and Tokyo to hold talks with his military counterparts. Regional security issues were on the agenda, including North Korea. The focus of Dempsey's discussion with Army Gen. James D. Thurman, commander of US forces in South Korea, and South Korean chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Jung Seung-jo were on US-South Korea alliance, intelligence gathering, the maritime domain, ballistic missile defence and counter-battery artillery fire.

In particular, Wu's visit to Washington is significant. He is one of China's senior diplomats and this was his first visit to the US since 2010. Wu's visit was on the invitation of Glyn T. Davies, the State Department's special envoy on North Korea, with whom he had "an in-depth exchange of views" on the "denuclearization of the Korean peninsula". Wu was the chairman of the six-party talks on the North's nuclear program, which remains suspended after the North walked out in 2008.

While in Beijing, Kerry offered to talk with North Korea on the condition that the latter promises to give up its nuclear weapons, which Kim Jong-un has rejected. The North has announced categorically to the world that it would not barter its nuclear weapons even for billions of dollars. Its utter sense of insecurity remains and thinks keeping nuclear arsenals is the only deterrence that will prevent the big powers from gobbling it up. Pyongyang is quite alive to what happened to Afghanistan and Iraq in recent times and would not allow things to precipitate to such a messy situation in the North. North Korea's condition is

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that if the US wants dialogue, it must end economic sanctions against North Korea and stop current and future joint military exercises with South Korea, conditions tricky for the US to consider given its treaty obligations to the South. While in Seoul and Tokyo, Kerry reassured both its allies.

How does China respond to the US stance on this? The first word of 'negotiation' or thought of that from Pyongyang, however conditional that may be, seems to be an encouraging sign. Though the US is not likely to reward North Korea for merely agreeing to return to the negotiating table, the US has to show some flexibility and accommodate Pyongyang's concern. The US was happy that China supported stiffer economic sanctions imposed by the UN after the North detonated the third nuclear bomb in February. Yet, the US is frustrated by the seeming unwillingness or inability of China to clamp down on the North's nuclear weapons program, though China seemed to be unhappy with Pyongyang's latest belligerent rhetoric.

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The US seems to be naïve to believe that Beijing will go along with the US on the North Korea's policy. Beijing is unlikely to abandon North Korea. This transpired when a senior editor of an influential Chinese newspaper, Study Times, was suspended from his job for criticizing China's ties to North Korea and saying that China should abandon its North Korean ally. The editor, Deng Yuwen argued that China's strategic alliance with North Korea was "outdated" and that the wayward ally was no longer useful as a buffer

against US influence. "It is entirely possible that a nuclear-armed North Korea could try to twist China's arm if Beijing were to fail to meet its demand or if the U.S. were to signal goodwill toward it," Mr. Deng wrote. He pleaded that both the US and China should work together on their North Korean strategy as neither can handle by themselves. North Korea, he argued, did not view its relationship with China through the same lens of "friendship sealed in blood" that came from Chinese soldiers' fighting and dying in the Korean War against the US. The official position of China is that sanctions are not the solution to the North Korean problem, though China supported the latest UN resolutions on sanctions.

Pyongyang's somewhat change of heart could have been under Chinese dictation. But it remains unclear if Kerry promised to offer something in return. China always extracts a high price to get its pet to behave. One promise could have been that South Korea would resume aid but a reversal of the US pivot to Asia by giving China a freer hand to deal with its neighbour over those conflicting claims in South China Sea could not be contemplated. If that happens, this would mean a dramatic shift and reorientation of America's global security strategy. It would be foolhardy to speculate that scenario at this moment.

IV CONCLUSIONS

Having rejected Seoul's latest dialogue offer as insincere, Pyongyang demands lifting of UN sanctions and end of joint military drills as conditions for resuming talks with the US meant to defuse tensions on the Korean peninsula. North Korea's official news agency said: "Dialogue can never go with war actions". Pyongyang demands that the US must withdraw all nuclear weapons assets from South Korea and the region before the talks can resume. It also demands South Korea must stop all anti-North Korea talks, such as its recent announcement blaming Pyongyang for a cyber attack that shut down tens of thousands of computers and servers at South Korean broadcasters and banks in March 2013. North Korea has denied responsibility for the cyber attack. South Korea's Foreign Ministry dismissed the North's demand as illogical.

With the US softening its stance and keeping the

door for dialogue open, South Korea too is likely to go similar way. North Korea said it would test fire a medium range missile capable of reaching the American territory of Guam as it saw the joint military drills a rehearsal for invasion. South Korean defence experts initially thought that the North would test fire a medium range missile as part of its drive to raise tensions. The alternative scenario is the North could still shoot the missiles off as a symbolic show of victory to its people, which it could use as a bargaining chip for talks. Fortunately that has not happened but cannot be guaranteed that it will not happen. According to Shin Beom-chul, a senior research fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses in Seoul, the "North can still try to put pressure on the United States by creating an unstable situation on the Korean Peninsula with military provocations if the U.S. chooses not to talk with them".

Now there are reports that North Korea has moved two short-range missile launchers to its east coast, apparently indicating it is going ahead with preparations for a test launch. Satellite imagery showed two mobile launchers for short-range Scud missiles had been moved to South Hamgyeong province. The North moved two mid-range Musudan missiles in early April and placed seven mobile launchers in the same area. A North Korean show of force could be staged to coincide with the anniversary of the founding of its army on 25 April. Since North Korea regularly test-fires short-range missiles in the sea off the east coast, one must not read much meaning to this development.

The ongoing annual drills, called Foal Eagle, are to finish at the end of April, after which one can expect de-escalation of tensions. Though Seoul and Washington officials say they are defensive in nature, and insist they have no intention of invading the North, Pyongyang does not trust. The US has about 28,500 troops in South Korea to help deter potential aggression from North Korea, a legacy of the 1950-53 Korean War. That makes Pyongyang wary and wants to keep nuclear weapons as deterrence. These suggest that a major conflict is not a possibility and while the status quo will be maintained, some minor attacks similar to the two incidents of March and November 2010 could not be ruled out.

Views expressed are author's own

