

Tensions in the Korean Peninsula: A Threat to Regional Peace

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Introduction

North Korea is probably the only country in the world that continues to remain an enigma, unaffected by the geopolitical and geo-strategic churning taking place in breath-taking rapidity outside its geographical boundary. Mired in poverty, North Korea has few friends barring China, though it maintains low-key diplomatic ties with many countries. It is ideologically poles apart with its immediate neighbour, the severed southern wing of what once was a unified peninsula. The love-hate relationship between the two Koreas is further exacerbated by the huge gulf in the economic domain that is unlikely to be bridged even if both unify one day. Different presidents in South Korea have at different times, adopted either hard-line or accommodative conciliatory approaches to its northern neighbour. No conciliatory approach has worked though several modalities were constructed, as North Korea, soon after agreeing to such mechanisms seeking peace, reneged on such offers. Hard-line measures by South Korean leaders and outside powers have also made no impact on the North Korean regime.

North Korea as a nation has survived and probably may survive for long, though no expiry date can be given. The latest in this narrative is the demolition of the Inter-Korean Liaison Office

in the border town of Kaesong industrial complex on 16 June 2020, built with much fanfare in 2018 by North Korea. The provocation for doing so was preceded by warning against South Korea that sheltered defectors to desist from sending propaganda leaflets and floating balloons inside North Korea's territory with messages critical of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un and human rights abuses by his regime.

The four-storey structure was closed since January 2020 over fears of the novel coronavirus. The large explosion that brought the structure into rubble also damaged partially the neighbouring 15-storey high-rise residential facility that housed officials from both sides working at the liaison office. The facility was effectively working as an embassy and its destruction is a major setback to efforts assiduously being pursued by the liberal South Korean President Moon Jae-in to draw the North into cooperation, and to draw down its nuclear weapons programme.

North Korea is extremely sensitive to any criticism of its leader and considers any insinuation as a huge insult. A veritable personality cult akin to a demi-god has been built for its leader since the time of its founding by Kim Jong-un's grandfather, Kim Il-sung, when the peninsula was divided on ideological grounds more than 70 years

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ago. No wonder, the state-controlled KCNA spewed venom, saying that the building was blown up for “human scum and those, who have sheltered the scum, to pay dearly for their crimes”. North Korea refers to defectors as “human scum”.

The Inter-Korean Liaison Office was established in 2018 as part of a series of projects aimed at reducing tensions between the two Koreas and also to manage operations at the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a joint venture between the two Koreas that was suspended in 2016 amid disagreement over the North’s nuclear and missile programs and when South Korea had a hardliner President. In 2018 when the office was reopened, South Korea spent USD 8.6 million to renovate the same.

What was behind the decision to blow up the structure and what does North Korea aim to achieve from such an act? As expected, the demolition sent alarm and shockwaves around the world, including in the US, Russia and China. The demolition, coming soon after the 20th anniversary of the first-ever inter-Korean summit, is a stark reminder of the complex and fragile inter-Korean relations and of how the initiatives renewed in 2018 had started losing salience, barely two years since it restarted. Kim Jong-un’s sister, Kim Yo-jong, the next most powerful person in the country, had warned about the activities of the defectors in strong language, which unless stopped forthwith could result in severe consequences. The execution of the demolition act was a consequence of such threat.

Provocations for what?

With this, Kim Jong-un has again provoked a

crisis when there was no real casus belli. So, what can we expect next from Kim? In the coming days and months, it would not be surprising if Kim starts provocative military exercises, live firing of artillery shells towards South Korean territory or even take steps to reverse the accomplishments of the September 2018 inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement. Though the strategic purpose behind these provocations would remain unclear “Pyongyang may be seeking to create a crisis to encourage South Korean President Moon Jae-in, now with a super-majority in parliament following the April mid-term elections, to push forward with inter-Korean economic co-operation projects”, observes Ankit Panda of *Diplomat* magazine.¹ Also, Kim might use this strategy to build further legitimacy for his sister, possibly also linked to his suspected failing health, so that there is no threat to the regime’s continuity.

There could be other reasons that one can conjecture. It is possible that Kim might be trying to put pressure on Moon to reach out to Trump again and then draw him to the table for talks instead of testing a long-range missile or conducting another nuclear test, thereby “create a crisis as a prelude to justifying emergency talks”, opines Professor Andray Abrahamian of George Mason University, Korea. The fact that Kim’s sister was at the centre for taking these decisions might reflect her credentials “as someone who can be tough on the North Korea’s enemies”. In fact, Kim Yo-jong has remained in the forefront, starting from travelling to Seoul for the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics and shaking hands with Moon, to her association with the North-South rapprochement in 2018, thereby conveying a

message both to the domestic and foreign audience about her authority.

Presently, South Korea's Unification Ministry has vowed to stop North Korean defectors from sending anti-Pyongyang leaflets and other materials² such as rice in plastic bottles, dollar bills, etc to North Korea's border areas. This followed Pyongyang's threat to respond to such acts by sending "leaflet bombs of justice" across the inter-Korean border in a bid to "terrorise" the South as a retaliation against Seoul's failure to stop activists from sending anti-regime leaflets into the North.³ The South Korean government fears that the leafleting on the ground could further aggravate inter-Korean tensions and undermine safety of residents near the border. One defector group, Fighters for Free North Korea, planned to send about 1 million leaflets across the border to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Korean War and prepared hundreds of plastic bottles stuffed with rice which they planned to float into North Korea, despite a legal challenge from South Korean authorities and threats from Pyongyang. This has added to the concerns of the Moon government, as such action would infuriate the North Korean regime. The North Korean military is also readying to redeploy troops into the demilitarised zone (DMZ) to support the scattering of leaflets into the South. Thus, no easing of tensions is likely as of now.

Van Jackson, the author of *On the Brink Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War*,⁴ argues that the motivations for the attack could be traced to three converging issues. First: Kim could have felt betrayed that despite two summits with the US President in Singapore and Hanoi, he could

not secure any substantive relief from the punishing economic sanctions. Second, trade with China, its main economic partner and lifeline, was severely constricted because of COVID-19, as the border was sealed, limiting both formal and informal trade with its biggest trading partner. The third reason could be that Kim wanted to establish the bona fides of his sister as a competent successor, as demonstrated by her actions in demolishing the liaison office building. Since Kim cannot afford to attack the US directly for fear of massive retaliation, it finds its southern neighbour a vulnerable target.

Consider Kim's own position at home: At least seen to the outside world as a tough leader firmly under control of a system and with complete restriction on the flow of information outside of the country, his own health seems to be failing and the reality could be different than what is being projected to the outside world. Having spent considerable money for the development of nuclear weapons and missiles, the country's capital base seems to be too weak. By embracing Moon's peace overtures, Kim had two summits with Trump with the hope that he can make the US agree to remove crippling sanctions in return of suspension of nuclear weapons programs and missile firing activities. That did not happen. Now Kim is facing real-world consequences for the failed talks as the sanctions-hit economy is further strained by a border lockdown imposed to prevent coronavirus outbreak. This possibly is threatening now his support base among the elites and military. Though Kim might not be facing immediate threat to his regime, he cannot afford the volatility to develop into a major domestic crisis.⁵

The reason why Kim preferred to target South Korea instead of Trump is to remind the American President of the unresolved issues, with the hope that his actions would compel Trump to intervene. The situation might suit Trump as well for, he can sell to his domestic constituency that he successfully warded off possible military provocations that Kim had threatened, thereby making his re-election bid strong. By heightening inter-Korean tensions now, Kim could have thought of pushing South Korea harder to get some sanctions relief from the US at least for the joint economic projects in the Kaesong Industrial area so that some of his economic woes would have been addressed. After all, he needs money to keep the military, if not the people, happy so that his control remains sustained. Once the election date draws closer, Kim would lose substantial time as Trump's focus on North Korea would have diminished somewhat, which means Kim's troubles accentuate further.

The very fact that neither side is unwilling to concede—North Korea unwilling to discuss abandoning enough of its nuclear program and the US not ready to roll back sanctions—the stalemate in all likelihood will continue. In his New Year address Kim vowed to unveil a “new strategic weapon”,⁶ after the US ignored a year-end deadline he had set for a restart of talks, as Kim felt sidelined by Trump whose domestic priorities took an upper hand. The “new strategic weapon” has not been unveiled, perhaps due to the outbreak of the COVI-19 pandemic. It is possible that what Kim intended to do was to test fire an ICBM. The ensuing political situation in the US has perhaps also made Kim rethink his strategy.

With the competition between Republican Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Joe Biden gathering steam, would Kim be happy to continue dealing with the mercurial Trump or a docile Biden who is expected to adopt a more principled approach and empower seasoned negotiators without summitry extravaganzas? If Biden wins, Kim can have hard time to deal with his style of dealing with foreign policy matters. If Trump is re-elected, Kim could at least feel comfortable dealing with him as he already had two summit meetings with him. Such a calculation could have been behind the reason why Kim did not fire an ICBM as that would have benefitted Biden. Either way, Kim is walking a tight rope. Kim might return to ICBM testing and missile firings to unsettle Biden, should he be elected.

The South Korean Reaction

South Korean President Moon Jae-in acted swiftly as tensions flared up following the demolition of the liaison office. He dispatched his chief nuclear negotiator Lee Do-hoon to Washington to hold talks with officials amidst the North Korean threat of military action following the blowing up of the inter-Korean liaison office.⁷

Lee held talks with US officials, including Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun, who had led denuclearisation negotiations with North Korea in the past to assess the current situation and discuss possible responses.

President Moon remains focussed on securing peace in the peninsula, his efforts leading to two summits between President Trump and Kim Jong-un as part of his engagement strategy. Yet, he is snubbed by Pyongyang as the inter-Korean

economic projects remain stalled due to international sanctions designed to rein in the North's nuclear and missile programs. Moon is also unfairly criticised by Kim's sister Kim Yo Jong for failing to implement a 2018 peace accord. She contemptuously stated that Moon "put his neck into the noose of pro-U.S. flunkeyism."

Moon is also blamed for sheltering the defectors who are active in sending propaganda leaflets into North Korea. Pyongyang takes offence when several defector-led groups regularly send back flyers carrying critical messages of Kim Jong Un, often together with food, \$1 bills, mini radios and USB sticks containing South Korean dramas and news. North Korea denounces the defectors as "mongrel dogs" and "human scum", saying their activities are an insult to the dignity of the country's supreme leader. The *Rodong Sinmun*, the official newspaper of the North's ruling Workers' Party, observed the demolition of the liaison office was the "first stage action" in its "holy war" aimed at punishing Seoul authorities for turning a blind eye to the defector's campaign.⁸

To add further to Moon's woes, his Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul resigned, taking moral responsibility for not been able to ease tensions. Appointed in April 2019, Kim Yeon-chul left office in an unfortunate circumstance without having a single meeting with the North Koreans.⁹ As Kim Jong-un is expected to indulge in skirmishes in border areas in land and sea in the coming days and months, Moon's fresh challenge would be to reorient his engagement strategy with his new team and restore Seoul's fading role as mediator in the nuclear talks between Washington and Pyongyang. After all, Moon was credited to successfully

negotiate a diplomatic push to bring both Trump and Kim to the negotiating table twice, first in Singapore in June 2018 and then again in Hanoi in February 2019. In no measure Moon can be faulted that the summits ended without any positive outcome. He was only the facilitator to the summits. Critics, however, are harsh to fix responsibility on Moon that he misjudged Kim Jong-un's real intentions and was credulous to believe that Kim would be persuaded to agree to some of the terms set by Trump, without realising that Kim would not voluntarily deal away the nukes which he sees as his strongest guarantee of survival.

Kim Jong-un's vitriol against defector-activists this time seems to be just an excuse to indulge in more provocative acts because the activities of the defectors—flying anti-Pyongyang leaflets across the border condemning Kim's nuclear ambitions and human rights record is nothing new. North Korea is however sensitive to any criticism towards its leadership and in order to buttress the anti-South feeling, the military in North Korea has been encouraging the civilians to fly anti-South Korean propaganda leaflets in areas near the land and sea border. Such developments could stir more trouble in North-South relations. The Moon administration took steps to stop the activities of the defectors in order to stem North Korea's ire but with limited success. The security worries in sensitive times of fraying tempers such as that followed the blowing up the liaison office demands quick attention. While the activities of the defectors are an irritant and not conducive to the reconciliation process, the harsh outburst by North Korea this time was probably fuelled by frustration at the lack of progress in denuclearisation talks and the

perception that Moon did not do enough to break the deadlock with the US.

The North Korea Response

A day after the inter-Korean liaison office was demolished, President Moon offered to send special envoys consisting of Chung Eui-yong, national security advisor, and Suh Hoon, the South's spy chief, to help calm escalating tensions but North Korea angrily rebuffed the offer. In disdain, Kim Jong-un's sister Kim Yo-jong called South Korea's offer as "tactless and sinister and disrespectful". Instead, it threatened to send troops to the demilitarised zone near the border.¹⁰ Shedding any semblance of niceties, Kim Yo-jong directly targeted Moon for expressing his commitment to the 2018 accords, accusing him of "shameless sophistry". Blue House had to respond by commenting Kim's remarks as "rude and senseless".

North Korea's rejection of the special envoy proposal showed that the regime had no intention to defuse tensions through dialogue. On the contrary, it threatened to carry out a series of measures, including sending troops to the shuttered inter-Korean industrial complex in its border city of Kaesong and the Mount Kumgang tourist zone on the east coast – the two key symbols of inter-Korean reconciliation.¹¹ Launched in 1998, the tour program had been put on hold since 2008 when a South Korean tourist was shot dead near the resort for allegedly trespassing in an off-limit area.

North Korea also announced plans to restore guard posts removed from the DMZ and resume "all kinds of regular military exercises" near the inter-Korean border, thereby undoing the 2018 deal

agreed upon to reduce military tensions. Hereafter, Pyongyang would deal with South Korea as an "enemy", and would take military action. Despite Moon's peace moves, South Korea expressed unhappiness that Pyongyang remained unresponsive but warned at the same time it would not hesitate to respond appropriately if North takes more action to escalate tension. The US too cautioned North Korea, urging it to refrain from "further counterproductive actions". China too urged calm and restraint.

When the European Union called for Pyongyang to stop escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula, saying the demolition of the liaison office as "unacceptable", North Korea slammed the appeal as "absurd" and condemned the bloc for siding with Seoul, and urged the bloc to operate on the basis of "impartiality and objectivity".¹²

As regards the possible US response, at the moment it can do little to respond to Pyongyang's provocations, especially when there is a looming election in November. Writing for *NK News*, Mintaro Oba observes that "North Korea has long been the geopolitical equivalent of the boy who cried wolf: it gets much of its leverage from its unparalleled ability to repeatedly generate the same threat perceptions from other countries over and over again."¹³ From all indicators, it suggests that Pyongyang wants to elevate a sense of crisis with South Korea, making it an easy target to achieve its larger goal.¹⁴

Concluding observations

North Korea is unlikely to give up any of its nuclear arsenals in its possession. Kim Jong-un in

all likelihood will continue to bargain hard with the US to get some sanctions relief so that the country's faltering economy is back on track. Kim is unlikely to forget lessons from how the US dealt with dictators elsewhere such as in Iran and Libya and would not allow the same fate to fall on North Korea. Also, by elevating his younger sister Kim Yo-jong to the position of first vice department director of the powerful ruling Workers' Party Central Committee and authorising her to direct the military leaders to carry out the next step of retaliation against the South, Kim seems to have secured the regime's succession in view of his suspected failing health. Being her brother's closest confidant, she is now the most powerful woman in the country and in charge of relations with South

Korea. The Korean imbroglio shall continue and the North Korea is likely to survive despite many pitfalls that might come its way.

What could be India's role in this entire unfolding of events? India has limited role but should not be shy to offer its cooperation and counsel if asked for, if this helps in restoring peace in the Korean Peninsula. After all, India has friendly diplomatic ties with both Koreas and if its good offices are useful in some way, that would be a master stroke for Indian diplomacy and elevate India's stature in the world. With a seasoned diplomat at the helm, South Block might seriously consider this possibility. A back-channel diplomatic initiative to influence policies for the sake of peace could be worth considering.

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