



## **Round Table Discussion on Recent Developments in the Korean Peninsula**

**Speaker:** Amb. Rakesh Sood  
Amb. Vishnu Prakash

**Chair:** Amb. Ashok K Kantha

**Date:** 18 April 2018

**Venue:** Conference room II, IIC, Delhi

In this round table discussion, the two speakers tried to analyse the recent developments in the Korean Peninsula. From being a highly strenuous situation in December 2017 to the prospect of summit level diplomacy in early 2018, the political scenario in the Korean Peninsula has changed dramatically. This discussion focused on analysing the implications of the two upcoming summits and the dynamic shift it might cause in the ongoing transition of the geopolitical scenario in the Asia-Pacific region.

Amb. Rakesh Sood in his talk focused on the key differences between the expectations of the major players, USA, North Korea, South Korea and China from the two upcoming summits. For the US, the main objective will be “complete, verifiable and irreversible disarmament”. However, Kim has not followed this aggressive nuclear testing in the past years to give up its nuclear arsenal at the outset. He has mentioned that denuclearisation is possible but, in a ‘phased and synchronised manner’. The deciphering of the meaning behind this ‘phased and synchronised steps’ that Kim Jon-Un expects others to take is therefore very important to understand the North Korean leaders intention. The speaker also pointed out that as far as Kim Jong-un’s objective is concerned, he is seeking his regime acceptance by the US along with the regime security assurance. By regime acceptance, Kim means certain legitimacy in the form of setting up of embassies in North Korea by US or something to that effect. He would also like some diminution of criticism pertaining to North Korea’s human right records. Other than this, Kim would expect relief in economic sanction under which the economic situation of North Korea has turned worse. Eventually, the de-nuclearisation would imply

questions about US security umbrella over South Korea and, presence of American soldiers in the Korean Peninsula. For South Korea, the major objective would be to freeze the North Korean testing program. Along with that, Moon Jae-in would want to maintain its alliance with USA, lower the tension in the Peninsula and, manage a complex diplomatic exercise in which they keep all the involved party in balance.

In terms of China, the speaker believes that Xi Jinping has his own motives for the summit. China is looking to capitalise on these recent developments to take the centre stage in the negotiations. The centrality in the Korean Peninsula issue would assist China to play the larger geopolitical game of strengthening its role in the region as well as globally. Also, the speaker pointed out that Xi Jinping would want to lower the tension in the Peninsula because if the tensions rise, the South Koreans might feel pressurised to employ another THAAD battery which would make Chinese extremely uncomfortable. In terms of de-nuclearisation, China would not be worried as long as the freeze on nuclear testing is continued.

Amb. Vishnu Prakash discussed about the developments keeping the North Korean perspective in focus. North Korea by the end of 2017 had become an international pariah. More than ten rounds of ever tightening sanctions were put into action which had almost dried up export revenue of Kim Jong-un. The international opinion was coalescing against Kim's adventurism and threats and, its supposed benefactor, China was also supporting sanctions in New York resulting in the decline of Chinese exports by around one third in 2017. Also, the speaker mentioned that, few nations like Kuwait, Mexico, Peru, Spain had begun to withdraw their ambassadors. All of this made Kim to shift gears dramatically and propose the possibility of denuclearisation. He manoeuvred the entire front by proposing a summit level diplomacy in order to achieve his own objectives of finding a breathing space from all the strangulating economic sanctions. Kim Jong-un has also managed to sideline Japan and, initiated efforts to improve relations with China as well as Russia to strengthen his position.

In terms of North Korean's expectations from the upcoming two summits, the speaker's view resonated with the opinions of Amb. Sood. He agreed that both US and North Korea have different expectations in terms of the pace and sequence of denuclearisation. The USA and South Korea wants complete denuclearisation of North Korea without removing the US military umbrella over South Korea. North Korea does not trust anybody, especially the United States as they feel that US is transitional and cannot be taken at face value. Therefore, complete denuclearisation will never be accepted by Kim Jong-un as he sees the weapon of mass destruction as an insurance and key to regime survival. Amb. Prakash also briefly touched upon the role of India in the Korean Peninsula.

He stated that India has no role to play in the Peninsula simply because India has no leverage. India can let her views known in the International platform about the development in the Peninsula but, other than that has no role to play in the Korean Peninsula.

Both the speakers agreed on the fact that the advent of the two summit is a positive aspect in terms of the political development in the Korean Peninsula but, how the summit will pan out is still ambiguous. In the past, although there has not been any summit between United States and North-Korean leaders, there were two summits between North Korean and South Korean leaders in 2000 and 2007. Neither of the two summits could materialise into anything substantial as the parties could not agree on the process. So, for the upcoming summits to be considered successful, there should at least be an initiation of a process.

### **Discussion**

In the Q&A session, on the question of can Japan also withdraw from NPT like North Korea, Amb. Sood asserted that Japan can withdraw legally but since the process requires a really long time, it is unlikely to happen in the near future. Amb. Prakash replied that technically they can but it is highly doubtful as Japan had a strong peace constitution and US would also not let Japan opt out of NPT. For the question on the possibility of the revival of six party talk, Amb. Prakash stated that this is something China, Russia and North Korea would like but, US wanted results immediately so would not be keen on the revival. On the query of the possibility of armistice treaty being unfrozen, both the speakers pointed out that the peace treaty would be in the summit talks but, at what rate the thawing of the armistice treaty would take place was something to observe. Amb. Prakash added that the challenge was not the treaty but the trust deficit which is unlikely to be bridged in a short time.

*Report Prepared by Divya Tyagi, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.*

### **About the Speaker**

**Ambassador Rakesh Sood** is a Distinguished Fellow at ORF. He has over 38 years of experience in the field of foreign affairs, economic diplomacy and international security issues. He joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1976 He then served as India's first Ambassador — Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament at the United Nations in Geneva.

**Ambassador Vishnu Prakash**, a Law Graduate (Gold Medalist), joined IFS in 1981. After postings in Moscow, New Delhi, New York and Vladivostok (Consul General) he returned to MEA as Director looking after Nepal and Bhutan (1994 – 1997). In August 08, he was appointed Official Spokesperson of MEA. In January 2012, he took over India's Ambassador to Seoul. Presently he is

a columnist on foreign affairs (The Hindu, Hindustan Times, India Today, WION News etc) and regularly participates in TV debates.

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