



North Korea's Latest Salvo: How Much is Too Much?

Speaker: Prof. Sandip Kumar Mishra

Chair: M V Rappai

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North Korea tested its fifth nuclear weapon on 9 September 2016. It's propensity to acquire nuclear weapons has baffled the media as well as the academia. However, Prof. Sandip Kumar Mishra's presentation was an attempt to discuss issues that are less talked about regarding North Korea's foreign policy behaviour by giving primacy to domestic politics of North Korea and keeping away from the tendency to focus on whether North Korea is a 'good' or 'bad' country. The speaker provided detailed information and in depth analysis of North Korea's nuclear and missile tests in the past three to four months. In June, North Korea launched Musudan 1; in August, the SLBM launch (solid fuel rocket), the core launch technology in search for second strike capability; nuclear tests on 5 and 9 September on the 68th anniversary of the country's foundation day. Drawing attention to charts and figures, he exhibited the striking capability of North Korea's nuclear programme geographically. Prof. Mishra drew audience's attention towards the fact that North Korea, in less than 9 months had conducted two nuclear tests and twenty-three missile tests. Thus, the situation is alarming and there is a need to deconstruct the rationale behind such actions in greater detail.

According to the speaker, there are three presently distinct lens from which North Korea is perceived. The first kind of understanding is to 'ridicule' the state behaviour. This group questions the credibility of North Korea's nuclear capability and doubts its technological claims. They see nuclear weapons as a *bargaining* tool used by North Korea. The second type of

understanding sees it as a 'rouge' state. Highlighting the immorality of rulers and their insane domestic politics, this group focuses on the unpredictability and provocative nature of North Korea. Thus they predict the start of a nuke war in the regional theatre and consequently the end of North Korea. Finally, the third proposition attempts to explain 'why North Korea has been able to continue its nuclear programme'?

They mention two basic reasons. First, they blame China for not putting enough pressure on North Korea, which in the speaker's opinion is not much of an argument. Out of 8 billion US\$ of its overall trade with the world, North Korea had almost 7 billion US\$ of trade with China in 2014. Thus, this group expects China to utilise its leverage. And second, the existing sanctions are not stringent enough to control North Korea's behaviour.

Next the speaker problematized the various propositions and proposed an alternate way understanding the issue. In his view, the credibility arguments do not hold as it is evident that North Korea possesses a sophisticated nuclear programme compared to 2006. Owing to his fluency in Korean language and personal experience of having carried out discussions with North Korean scientists, Prof Mishra was able to grasp a sense of transformation in the language of North Korea in describing its nuclear capability from a language of propaganda to something that is more technical and sophisticated. He encouraged the need to be open to all possibilities owing to the lack of accurate data. The North Korean nuclear programme is primarily a plutonium based nuclear programme but according to some sources they have some amount of uranium too, which could be utilised to make more nuclear warheads. Thus, one needs to be quite concerned about what is happening in North Korea.

Interrogating the question of rationality, speaker found North Korea to be quite a rational actor in world politics, keeping the domestic politics aside. Although it is not considered to be a moral state but they have all the right to survive as a state with their limited resources. According to the speaker, they had shown the best possible foreign policy conduct in the last two to three years. North Korea has a basic desire of security, prosperity and survival, and seeks atleast some attention in the world politics. In the face of a lack of infrastructure and basic facilities, North Korean nuclear programme serves as a handy tool to satisfy the domestic population despite the existing reality. On the request of the chair, the speaker provided an update on the progress of THAAD in South Korea, pointing to the successful installation of the system in the Korean

peninsula despite the wishes of China and the opposition party in South Korea. In his view, North Korea believes that this act of South Korea would annoy China which will in turn redirect China towards North Korea as there has been no high level talks between China and North Korea in the past three years. On the question of China's role, the speaker argued that China has put its best foot forward as far as North Korean nuclear programme is concerned. There is no single evidence that China supported North Korea's nuclear programme from the 1960's upto now. Secondly, during North Korea's third nuclear test, China cooperated with the international community inputting sanctions on North Korea in a very *unprecedented* way. Thus, North Korean programme is not in conjunction with China's response. The speaker also pointed out that China would not prefer North Korea to nuclearize as it militarises the Korean peninsula and increases American presence in the region.

Thus, the need of the hour is to engage in more constructive and creative diplomacy than the policy of arm-twisting that has been the preference since years. The speaker observed that engagement works in the case of North Korea and he drew his conclusions from the 1994 Nuclear Accords and six party talks. After the agreement with US during the leadership of President Jimmy Carter, North Korea did not develop any nuclear programme for almost nine years from 1994 to 2003. He also highlighted the hypocrisy of the US in engaging with North Korea, as it flouted the terms of the accord. Even during the six party talks, the mutual non-aggression policy was not agreed upon by the US. Thus, it was more an unfair bargain on the part of the US to stabilise the Korean peninsula. The speaker asserted that the idea that North Korea should denuclearise first in order for any negotiation to take occur between itself and the US is 'a misguided form of diplomacy'. The speaker concluded his remark on the note that diplomacy should be given a chance.

Discussion

A lively discussion followed primarily on the positions of China, Japan and India on the issue. Questions were asked about North Korea's interest and calculations with regards its nuclear programme. For one, the speaker identified the history of humiliation and threats faced by North Korea during the Korean War. Secondly, to assert North Korea's importance in the world politics and also to its population. Thirdly, to wield the deterrence value of nuclear weapons. The speaker firmly held the opinion that China is not responsible for North Korean nuclearisation. China

would really prefer South Korea and North Korea to become its client states, at least in the security sphere. It will never support the nuclearisation of North Korea and South Korea as it would create further instability in the region. North Korea also plays China and Russia against each other in order to deal with the complicated situation. He also discussed how Japan, the US and China, for their own national interests, do not actively pursue the issue of unification of the two Koreas at this stage as it would hurt their economic interests.

As far as Indian role in solving the issue is concerned, the speaker began by recalling the cordial relations between India and North Korea during the cold war period and moved on to discuss how as a result of India's liberalisation in the 1990's India moved closer to South Korea. The current government, in his view, seems to be interested in engaging with North Korea. This he felt may be a step for India to reach out for greater involvement in East Asian security issues via North Korea. From his personal experience, he shared that North Korea prefer a more neutral India similar to that of the Nehru era. The discussion came to end with the remark that since India is not keenly welcomed in the East Asian political stage, thus, keeping in mind these limitations, India needs to keep its options open and prioritise national interest while engaging with issues pertaining to the Korean peninsula.

Report prepared by Naina Singh, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Sandip Kumar Mishra is Associate Professor at Centre for East Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. He is also an Adjunct Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS), Delhi and a Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), New Delhi. He writes a monthly column named East Asia Compass at the IPCS website. He completed his Master degree in International Politics from Jawaharlal Nehru University and obtained his M.Phil. and Ph.D. degrees from the same university working in the field of Korean Studies. He studied Korean Language in South Korea and has been Visiting Fellow and Visiting Scholar at many South Korean research institutes and universities. He also had a unique opportunity to visit North Korea on a research trip in 2013. The areas of his research interests are Inter-Korea Relations, North Korean Nuclear Issue, International Relations of East Asia and Korea, East Asian Security, and India-Korea Relations.

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