

Institute of Chinese Studies

# WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Conundrum of Inter-  
Korea Dynamics:  
Historical and Structural  
Context*

## REPORT

Speaker :

**Sandip Kumar Mishra**

*21 February 2024*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Ambassador Tayal set the tone for the seminar by providing a comprehensive contextual background for the speaker's analysis. Dr. Mishra argued that South Korea is actively shaping its foreign policy to align with the broader strategic framework of the Indo-Pacific, which is characterised by geopolitical competition and economic integration.
- The speaker highlighted that South Korea's participation as an observer in NATO Summit meetings, indicates a potential expansion of its engagement in international security affairs beyond its immediate neighbourhood. This also represents a notable shift from its traditional alliances. Concurrently, there is a concerted effort to refrain from developing nuclear capabilities.
- The United States, South Korea, and Japan have been enhancing their trilateral security cooperation to address common regional challenges, particularly North Korea's nuclear and missile threats. Dr. Mishra highlighted that this cooperation involves intelligence-sharing, joint military exercises, and coordination.
- Delving into North Korea's changing priorities, especially with regard to its national interests and security, Dr. Mishra argued that the country has sought to redirect attention away from the long-standing issue of reunification.

## REPORT

### CONUNDRUM OF INTER-KOREA DYNAMICS: HISTORICAL AND STRUCTURAL CONTEXT

**Speaker: Dr. Sandip Kumar Mishra**, Associate Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi; and, Visiting Fellow, Korea National Defense University, Seoul.

**Chair: Amb. Skand Ranjan Tayal**, Chairman, India-Republic of Korea Friendship Society; and, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.

**Date:** 21 February, 2024

**Venue:** Zoom Webinar

Amb. Tayal, began by providing an overview of the complexities pertaining to the existing situation on the Korean peninsula. He highlighted the escalating tensions between North and South Korea, which have been exacerbated by North Korean belligerence and missile tests, and the Yoon Suk-Yeol administration's tit-for-tat approach. Despite the apparent trajectory towards a catastrophic situation in inter-Korea relations, the speaker emphasised the importance of discerning historical trends and regional dynamics in East Asia in order to better comprehend events as they play out in the Peninsula. In keeping with this, Dr. Mishra argued that while the possibility of conflict cannot be ruled out entirely, inter-Korean dynamics must be viewed within the broader context of historical legacies and external influences.

Dr. Mishra argued that “the cyclical nature of tensions and reconciliations between North and South Korea” throughout history is crucial for interpreting current events accurately. While the existing tensions may appear severe, the speaker noted, they are not necessarily unprecedented and may be part of a broader historical pattern of fluctuations in inter-Korean relations.

The speaker also delved into the regional dynamics in East Asia and their impact on inter-Korean relations. This included an examination of the role of neighbouring countries such as China, Japan, and Russia, as well as the United States, in shaping the geopolitical landscape

of the Korean Peninsula. Understanding these regional dynamics is essential for comprehending the broader context in which inter-Korean relations operate and for identifying potential areas of cooperation or conflict. Each of these nations has had a profound impact on the history of the Korean Peninsula as well as on the trajectory of inter-Korean relations in the past several decades.

Discussing the role of external powers, such as the United States and China, in influencing inter-Korean relations, Dr. Mishra highlighted the predicament faced by the two Koreas. Whereas the North aligns with China, the South maintains a military alliance with the US. Inter-Korean relations therefore, become even more important especially in the context of the US-China rivalry. Taking this into account, understanding the interests and motivations of these external actors is critical for interpreting the actions and behaviour of North and South Korea. Dr. Mishra argued that navigating the complexities of inter-Korean relations requires a nuanced understanding of the geopolitical dynamics at play, including the competing interests of major powers in the region.

Despite the current tensions, the speaker highlighted the potential for reconciliation and cooperation between North and South Korea. By exploring historical precedents of periods of outreach and *detente* between the two Koreas, Dr. Mishra underscored the importance of maintaining channels of communication and diplomatic engagement in order to capitalise on opportunities for peacebuilding on the Korean Peninsula.

Amb. Tayal concluded with a set of recommendations for fostering dialogue and cooperation between North and South Korea, as well as strategies for managing the involvement of external powers in the region.

*This report is prepared by Khan Farah, Research Intern at the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.*

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