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## Comments on Korean Crisis

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*[This article includes comments made by Col Hariharan in a TV discussion on April 7, 2013 on North Korean threat to unleash nuclear strike on U.S. bases and South Korea.]*

### **Why the North Korean stand off?**

There are both contemporary and historical reasons behind the North Korean threat to launch an offensive against South Korea and strike at U.S. bases in Guam and Hawaii. North Korea (Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea –DPRK) and South Korea have been having an uneasy relationship since the signing an armistice in 1953 after the Korean War ended in a stalemate. At that time a De-militarized Zone (DMZ) was created along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel between the two countries to prevent breaking out of fresh conflict. However, DPRK has not recognized the maritime boundary between the two countries; this continues to be an irritant in their relations. Annual joint exercise by South Korean and U.S. troops and navy is yet another major source of irritation for the North. The Kim regime has repeatedly used these irritants to whip up anti-U.S. hysteria and talk tough on attacking South Korea.

A contemporary reason could be South Korea's emergence as a democratic nation with strong economic power next only to China and Japan in East Asia, in sharp contrast to DPRK's dismal performance.

During the last six decades, North Korean regime has left the land and people impoverished. Food shortages have become endemic as the

farm productivity is low. Though the regime has achieved moderate success in producing some conventional weapons like multi-barrel rocket launchers, and short range missiles derived from Chinese and Soviet originals, it has made little industrial progress.

The North Korean regime has gained international notoriety for its ruthlessness and insensitivity to international concerns on nuclear proliferation, human rights and governance. It has been branded as one of the rogue states for its penchant to be a clandestine source of weapons to terrorist organizations and nations under arms embargo.

Kim Jong-un succeeded his father Kim Jong-il as the President of DPRK in 2011. The Kim family's maverick style of state craft has made DPRK loose cannon in the East Asian region dominated by the U.S. and its allies for long. North Korea had periodically used the threat to develop nuclear weapons and long range rockets to extract concessions mainly from the U.S. The Yongbyon nuclear site was closed in 2007 after a similar standoff. So many analysts feel the newly anointed Kim was probably trying to establish his leadership credentials by following the time tested method of talking tough to rally the masses in his support.

### **How serious is the North Korean threat to wage war?**

The Kim dynasty has been able to hold on to power due to two factors: the 1.1 million-strong army's loyalty to Kims and China's support. North Korea has close relations with China since the days Korean War. Over two million-strong Chinese Peoples Volunteer Army fought side by side with North Korean troops against the U.S. and its allies during the Korean War. The strategic relationship between the two countries was formalized in 1961 with the signing of a mutual aid and cooperation treaty, which was last renewed in 2001 and valid till 2021. Under this treaty, China has agreed to provide military and other assistance to North Korea against any external attack.

However, there is also a downside to Sino-North Korean relations. DPRK President Kim Il-sung severely criticised the Cultural Revolution in China as a result of which fights erupted between Red Guards and DPRK troops along the border. China had not been very happy with North Korea's conduct in escalating international tension over its nuclear weapons programme since 2003 and provocative actions against South Korea in 2010 when it torpedoed and sank a South Korean war ship killing 46 sailors. In the same year it also engaged in artillery duel with South Korean troops on Yeonpyeong Island off North Korean coast.

Probably China finds North Korea, under the Kim family leadership, a source of increasing embarrassment when it is trying to improve its image as a responsible international power. In particular, China has been unhappy with North Korea nuclear weapons programme. In fact, China's vote in favour of the UN Security Council resolution imposing financial sanctions after North Korean carried out third nuclear test in February 2013 in violation of its 2012 promise to refrain from testing. Even in the present standoff, China has been expressed its concern over and wants it to be resolved through dialogue.

The U.S., a strategic ally of South Korea since the Korean War days, is concerned at the developments after the latest nuclear test. It had

been carrying out joint army and naval exercises near the DMZ with its South Korean ally. North Korea possesses some crude nuclear bombs and has successfully tested Musudan-1 medium range missile with a range of 4000 km. Moreover, a series of North Korean actions like announcing the entry of North Korea into a state of war with South Korea, plan to restart Yongbyon nuclear reactor, moving of medium range missiles to the eastern coast, continuous broadcasting of military rhetoric, suspending the operations of joint Korean Kaesong industrial zone and instruction to the military to be ready for war are all indications of preparations for war.

So the U.S. and South Korea cannot afford to ignore Kim Jong-un's threat as bluster because he could act impetuously in true Kim family tradition. In order to discourage any such adventurism the U.S. flew two B2 stealth bomber sorties over South Korea in a show of force. It has also moved F22 fighters and missile defence systems, naval ships and troops into the region. U.S. missile and missile defence systems in Japan as well as in Guam were also placed on alert.

**Due to the strategic alignment of China and North Korea on one side and South Korea, Japan and the U.S. on the other, any conflict initiated by North Korea has every possibility of enlarging into a much bigger conflict particularly if North Korea uses nuclear weapons. It would definitely affect China's core interest of maintaining harmony in its strategic neighbourhood. It can also complicate the China- U.S. relations already under strain ever since China started asserting its territorial claims in South China Sea.** So probably there is an unstated strategic convergence between China and the U.S. in not wanting to allow North Korea to trigger a war at a time of not their choosing.

**To sum up, North Korean threats and actions have an element of imminence to become a reality. However, Pyongyang's shrill rhetoric on state TV also has a surreal quality as media reports indicate normal life continuing even as threats are reeled out. Seoul continues to maintain equanimity perhaps because like the U.S. it does not want to exacerbate the charged situation, while keeping its powder dry.**

### **Potential impact of conflict on Indian interests**

South Korea can be considered as one of the success stories of India's look east policy. India's economic relations with South Korea have been growing rapidly since 2006. It has become multi-faceted now, buoyed by the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in January 2010. India-Korea trade now around \$ 20 billion is expected to reach \$ 40 billion by 2015. South Korea has also emerged as an important investor in India. It has a healthy share of around 20 percent in Indian automobile industry while most of the Indian IT majors and some of the major industrial houses like Tatas are operating in South Korea.

Growing strategic convergence between India and the U.S. has inevitably brought South Korea also closer to India. Beijing's strong strategic relations with Pakistan and North Korea's transfer of nuclear technology to it have given India a natural convergence of security interest with Seoul. These interests were formalised when India and South Korea signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Defence Logistics

and Supplies in the year 2005. In May 2007, Indian and South Korean defence ministers met for the first time to discuss “matters of mutual interest” and agreed to strengthen cooperation on training of armed forces personnel.

Both countries decided to raise the level of their strategic partnership during the visit of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak to New Delhi in January 2010. His joint declaration with Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh focused on strategic interests and security cooperation between the two countries. Indian Defence Minister AK Antony visited South Korea a few months later to sign two MoUs with his Korean counterpart on experience and information sharing on defence matters and on futuristic joint defence technology development. The visit of Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh to Seoul in 2012 and the proposed visit of South Korea’s newly elected President Park Geun-hye to India are likely to bring the two nations closer.

Considering the growing economic and strategic dimensions of India-South Korea relations, any war involving South Korea would be a matter of serious concern for India. While India may not be directly involved in the conflict, it is likely to use its influence to help out South Korea and contribute to any international initiative to bring back peace in the Korean peninsula.

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