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Korean crisis reaching the eye-ball to eye-ball stage

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North Korea's deployment of two additional short-range scud ballistic missile launchers in its eastern coast has strengthened speculations in the South that Pyongyang might launch a missile on April 25, the anniversary of North Korean army. According to South Korean media, the latest deployment was in addition to the seven mobile missile launchers already in place on the coast.

Coupled with the two Musudan intermediate range missiles already deployed at a place 180 km from the South Korean capital Seoul, has compelled South Korea and the U.S. to take the North Korean bluster a little more seriously. Although, South Korean's Chief of National Security Kim Jang-soo had recently said DPRK was not capable of conducting a full-scale war on the Korean Peninsula he did not rule out localized 'provocations.'

North's National Defence Commission's (NDC) in strong statement on against the U.S has said if the U.S. and "the puppet South" truly wish dialogue and negotiations, "the sanctions resolutions by the UN Security Council that were fabricated with unjust reasons must be withdrawn." It also wanted the U.S. to promise not to engage in 'nuclear war practice' with the South, an apparent reference to the joint exercises between the two nations.

The enhanced North Korean deployment of missiles could be to give credibility to the NDC's statement. Of course, a charitable view is to consider NDC statement as a response John Kerry's February 12 statement rejecting any talks between Washington and Pyongyang unless North Korea took tangible steps to abandon its nuclear weapons programme. He subsequently strengthened it further saying the U.S. would

not return to past cycles of “Here's a little food aid, here's a little this, then we'll talk.”

A minor sidelight in the ongoing confrontation was the participation of a small Australian army unit of 18-men joining a landing drill held as part of the *Foal Eagle* US-South Korea joint military exercise, near the south eastern city of Pohang. The Australian participation at their own request is minuscule it underlines the international military ramifications of a conflict between the two Koreas. This the first time Australia is taking part in an exercise in Korea, since the end of Korean War in 1953. Seventeen thousand Australian troops participated in the Korean War under the UN command in which 340 Australian soldiers lost their lives.

Military dimensions

An analysis of terrain, army strength and weapon holdings of North and South Korea give some indication how the two countries would conduct their operations in war. Firstly, South Korea's population is double that of North, while the land mass of North is one fifth higher than the South. South Korea's GDP is 40 times more than that of the North, which means it can bank roll a war for a longer duration than the North. North cannot sustain a protracted conflict due to acute financial crunch and the adverse impact of economic sanctions. So its aim would be to inflict high casualties in a short war inside South Korean territory. Translated in military terms this means North Korea would target densely populated cities of the South closer to the DMZ with massed fire to demoralize the population. Industrial hubs which sustain South's vibrant economy could become targets of missile attacks.

As Korea's eastern coastal region is mountainous, major cities and economic activity is along the tank country in the western half of South Korea. Focus of North Korean missile and artillery strikes would be largely biased to these cities in the West.

As North holds Soviet designed weapons, its tactics would be to use massed artillery in initial stages to take the offensive into the South. North Korea holds over 10,000 pieces of artillery - double the number of 5000 pieces held by the South would facilitate this. North Korea's employment of over 50 percent of the forces along the DMZ would indicate that there would be little reaction time for the opponents when it launches the offensive.

On the other hand, South has near parity in combat aircraft held by North. Qualitatively, strategic analysts rate South Korean air force as superior in air combat. In the sea, North Korea enjoys a five-fold superiority in submarine holdings, three fold in surface war ships.

Northern forces' ten-fold superiority of its 200,000 strong special forces has the potential to be a game changer. These forces are likely to be inducted in depth to strike at the rear if Southern forces to destabilize them. North's naval superiority in submarines could come in handy in achieving surprise for such operations. However, the looming question is how serviceable are North's weaponry, aircraft and ships in comparison with the more modern weapons of its prosperous enemy.

Of course, involvement of the U.S. in early stages of the war could cripple North Korean plans given the U.S.' massive superiority in sea and air power applied in tandem with its military assets in Japan and Guam. With real time command and control systems and target acquisition capability, the U.S. has enormous ability to turn the tables. But the U.S. intervention will have far reaching implications in the region as North Korea had been a steadfast ally of China. With Sino-US suspicions over each other's strategic role in the region already causing enough strategic problems, will the U.S. bite the bullet in favour of South Korea? However, the pointed use of special forces to neutralize North Korean capability probably remains an attractive option for the U.S.

Sino-U.S. relations

The North Korean crisis thrust upon China and the U.S. comes at a time when both the countries are trying to strengthen their relationship after the new leadership took over in China. US Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew, acting as President Obama's special envoy, visited China in March, followed by the maiden visit of John Kerry to Beijing after becoming Secretary of State in the same month. Tom Donilon, the US National Security Advisor, is scheduled to visit China in May. So both countries have a convergence of interest in defusing the Korean situation. This has become more urgent than ever as North Korea is expected launch its rocket on April 25.

During the two-day visit, John Kerry met with the Chinese President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang, and State Councillor Yang Jiechi and discussed a whole range of issues, well beyond the Korean crisis. Agency reports said President Xi called upon both sides to promote dialogue, respect each other's core interests and properly handle differences. China and the US must pave the way for the development of a new type of relationship between the two countries.

According to agency reports, after meeting with the Chinese leaders, Kerry in a press briefing on February 14 said the U.S. wanted "strong, normal and special" relationship with China because it was a great power with the great ability to advance the world. Speaking at the Tokyo Institute of Technology Kerry said he had "constructive and productive" talks with Chinese leaders. Underlining the U.S. desire to build a win-win relationship, he added, "We all have a stake in China's success, just as China has a stake in ours." Terming the North Korean nuclear issues as a short term issue, Kerry emphasized the "long term relationship between China and the U.S. is more important."

A joint statement issued after Kerry's meeting with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang announced the two countries would set up a climate change workforce under the framework of the China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue. China and the US would be holding the fifth China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue in July 2013.

The Chinese Premier had called for closer economic ties, and a "shared responsibility" for maintaining peace and stability apparently referring to the U.S. strategic moves relating to China's power assertion in South China Sea. Li's request to the US to take "substantial actions to lift the ban on the export of high-tech products to China" referred to yet another contentious issue between the two countries.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi said China and the US should also engage in calm and objective dialogue about cyberspace referring to a sensitive issue on which they have been trading accusations. State Councilor Yang Jiechi said China was committed to "advancing the denuclearization process on the Korean Peninsula" and "will work with the parties concerned, including the US, to play a constructive role".

During John Kerry's visit, China could have given some hope to the U.S. expectations from China in reining in North Korea from taking precipitate action. But due to strategic reasons, China would find difficult to do so as North Korea has been its client state for the last six decades.

So far China does not seem to have not made up its mind on how to defuse North Korean crisis. Its dilemma is evident from the topics relating to Sino-North Korean relationship listed in the CCP's Global Times website. They included "NK albatross around China's neck," "Outrage won't make China abandon NK," "Is China-NK friendship still alive today?", "China living in denial of NK's status as an ally," "Pyongyang seeking real sense of safety", "China's choice is to unleash or reel in a nuclear North Korea," and "Will the China-NK alliance remain stable?".

Perhaps it would like to buy time to ease the situation from building up to the crisis point. The planned visit of Beijing's special representative on Korean affairs, Wu Dawei to the U.S. next week to exchange views on the maintenance of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula as well as the denuclearization of the Peninsula is part of this exercise.

According to the media already some 10,000 US troops and 200,000 South Korean soldiers in the peninsula are primed for war. The US has deployed its B-2 stealth bombers, F-2 fifth-generation fighter jets, the destroyer USS Fitzgerald, equipped with an Aegis counter-ballistic missile system in South Korea. With forces deployed eye-ball to eye-ball, the key question is how serious is the North Korean threat? Is it going to be bluster or bomb?

Both China and the U.S. need to work together in the larger interest of their enlarging relations which are stymied by territorial disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea, Internet security, climate change and many other international issues, besides attracting Chinese investments to the U.S. So probably China would try and delay North Korea's rocket launch to reinforce China's increasing desire to be recognized as a responsible international power. At least this is what probably China, the U.S. and South Korea would be hoping.

Written on April 22, 2013

This article includes comments shared with the press on the looming Korean crisis

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