



## From the Archives

# The Ticking Region of Korean Peninsula: A Playoff between Deterrence and Détente

Reviewing “*The Korean Nuclear Imbroglia: Can India be a Muted Spectator?*”

Mishra, S. (2018). The Korean Nuclear Imbroglia: Can India be a Muted Spectator? *Artha- Journal of Social sciences*, 17-34.

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### Abstract

The article in review, “The Korean Nuclear Imbroglia: Can India be a Muted Spectator?”, written by Sitakanta Mishra, brings to light the strategic environment of the region of North Asia and the Korean Peninsula. The region in question is increasingly characterised, for good reasons, by the impact it has to endure due to the nuclearisation of North Korea. Efforts to denuclearise North Korea has only, till now, achieved nothing more than a stalemate. This has raised concerns all over the world as North Korea progresses in the path of nuclearisation under the direction of an authoritarian regime to which the world has limited access. At a time, such as this, it is impractical to focus on approaches to manage the crisis without properly understanding and recognising North Korea’s security concerns which prompted it to become a nuclear power. Only after

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grasping the full picture should the focus be on how to contain North Korea when it is engaging in activities which reflects an increase in its nuclear capabilities, thereby challenging the preservation of stability in not only the region of North Asia but the whole of Asia and the world. The strategic environment in the region is largely dictated by the dynamics of deterrence employed by both U.S-ROK and North Korea, which may have contributed to the ongoing crisis. The article then proceeds to highlight the need for a reevaluation of the Korean crisis from a non-western standpoint. Sitakanta Mishra attempts to usher in an Asian nation's perspective by raising an important question as to what role should India, being a nuclear power itself and an aspiring superpower, play in this strategic narrative to resolve the worrisome nuclear crisis of North Korea.

**Keywords:** Nuclear Weapons, Nuclear Deterrence, Nuclear Proliferation, Nuclear Strategy, Denuclearization, Détente, North Korea, Korean Peninsula

## **Introduction**

With secrecy clouding the North Korean regime in general and its role in enhancing deterrence vis-à-vis nuclear weapons program in any nascent nuclear weapon state, it is quite difficult to assert the accurate nuclear capability of the country. However, going by the sources, it is believed that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea still appears to be a meagre nuclear power, with approximately 20 to 30 warheads and enough fissile material to construct further 30 to 60 nuclear weapons (Bandow, 2020). Even though North Korea displays a moderate nuclear capability, its nuclearisation has brought several implications for the region and the world in general. Two immediate concerns emerge out of Pyongyang's arming. First, North Korea's nuclear development undermines the state of deterrence and stability in the Korean Peninsula, with the risks of North Korea, emboldened by its possession of nuclear weapons, to launch an attack on the Republic of Korea (ROK), which will then put USA's concept of extended deterrence to the test (Lee D. S., 2008). The need to strengthen the

alliance in the region to counter North Korea's crisis is not new. Simultaneously, the nature of extended deterrence itself is a highly contested topic. There have been no such grave scenarios where it has been put to use. Hence, one does not know whether it will be rightly followed as proclaimed. This then brings added complications to the region. The second concern flows from the first, i.e. the more North Korea arms itself alongside the concern of growing disbelief in extended deterrence, ROK and Japan may try to obtain their own nuclear deterrents. This will only set off a chain of proliferation, leading to a new set of concerns (Lee D. S., 2008)(Mishra, 2018).

A longstanding approach to the North Korean crisis has been to pressurise the state through economic sanctions and by refusing to accept it as a nuclear-weapon state. This was only done keeping in mind one objective that is of denuclearisation. However, to understand if North Korea is at all ready to accept this process, the article focuses on a historical exposition to highlight a fundamental question as to why North Korea needs its nuclear arsenal.

## **2. Going Back to the Base**

The article highlights that the fundamental cause of the problem can be traced back to the days of the Cold War and the Korean War (Mishra, 2018). America's enthusiasm toward intervention appears to be a significant trigger to the North Korean crisis that followed. Following the North's invasion of the South in 1950, only immediate intervention by the U.S. was able to bar further conquest by Kim Il Sung (Bandow, 2020). China, in response, sent help in the form of hundreds and thousands of troops to assist its neighbour (Bandow, 2020) and the war came to an end with an armistice agreement and not with a peace agreement in 1953 (Bandow, 2020) (Mishra, 2018)(Waxman, 2018). The Korean War was the first event that sowed the seeds in the North Korean leadership's mind of the need to possess nuclear weapons. The news of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki reached the North by the returning Koreans who survived the attack and the U.S. nuclear threat that was employed to end the war with North Korea which for a fact

did not possess any appropriate defence against these highly destructive weapons made the North Korean leadership feel the first blow of security deficit in the region (Bermudez Jr., 2015). This, in turn, contributed to the decision to take the necessary actions to develop its own nuclear deterrent. Alongside military security was the problem of economic security that grappled North Korea (Bermudez Jr., 2015) (Bandow, 2020). The end of the Cold War, North Korea found itself in several changes to the security environment. At the same time, North Korea faced a new set of security concerns generated by the loss of its major military backers (Bandow, 2020). The circumstances generated by a post-Mao transformation of China and the collapse of Soviet Union (Bandow, 2020), together with DPRK's economic stagnation compelled the North to resort to a self-help strategy by introducing the Songun 'Military First' policy during the 1990s (Mishra, 2018) and by taking steps to exploit the political and diplomatic benefit of nuclear weapons to protect its sovereignty (Bermudez Jr., 2015) (Vaddi, 2018).

Another major issue during the Cold War that contributed to the North's need to possess nuclear weapons was the thousands of U.S. nuclear weapons stationed in South Korea and the joint military exercises that the allies paraded in the region (Vaddi, 2018) (Mishra, 2018). Although North Korea's nuclear ambition was set in motion by the 1990s, North Korea indulged in certain diplomatic ventures to stabilise the crisis in hand. The first of such was an attempt made by the then Korean leader, Kim Il Sung, to introduce the idea of a nuclear-weapon-free zone on the Korean peninsula (Mishra, 2018). This attempt did not receive deserving attention at the time. It was only until U.S. President George W. Bush withdrew all U.S. nuclear weapons from South Korea (Mishra, 2018). The step forward for denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula was undertaken in the form of signing the 1992 Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. However, it failed due to North Korea's loss of confidence on South Korea as the latter still enjoyed security assurances under the U.S. nuclear umbrella and a disagreement between the North and the U.S. over the scope of the IAEA inspections (Mishra, 2018). Another attempt was made by signing the Agreed Framework with North Korea in 1994, under

which North Korea decided to renounce its nuclear ambition in exchange for aid U.S., Japan, South Korea through the KEDO project (Mishra, 2018). However, that too failed as post 9/11 the U.S. released its annual Nuclear Posture Review in which North Korea was grouped with other states under the category 'axis of evil' (Mishra, 2018). Not only did the 1994 diplomatic step fall through, but a significant diplomatic set back also emerged as North Korea withdrew itself from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003 (Mishra, 2018)(Khan, 2016). Bilateral diplomacy with the U.S. did not seem to pay off that well, and neither did multilateral initiatives as was witnessed in the Six-Party Talks negotiations (Khan, 2016)(Mishra, 2018). What followed then was a series of provocative events initiated by an autocratic North (Mishra, 2018), which can be viewed through the lens of stability-instability paradox, inviting economic sanctions for itself.

North Korea's need to possess nuclear weapons is majorly driven by the situation it finds itself in. Failed diplomatic ventures, struggling economy coupled with a superpower presence (Mishra, 2018) in the Korean peninsula contributed to the security deficit experienced by North Korea. Not only did South Korea's economy surged ahead, the security guarantee it enjoyed from the U.S. characterised a major section of the regional security dynamic. The justification employed for the U.S. extended deterrence provided to South Korea was to stop South Korea from considering having its own deterrent to prevent proliferation, which would have had a more destabilising impact on the region (Mishra, 2018). In contrast, the intensity of the alliance between North Korea and China was not enough to balance the US-ROK alliance in the region (Mishra, 2018). Alongside these triggers, the prior examples set by U.S. interventions in other states that (Mishra, 2018) appeared to be at odds with it guide the North Korean regime to seek refuge in the utility of nuclear weapons for regime survival. This line of thinking is born out of awareness on North Korea's part of the conventional imbalance it faces to prevent any U.S. intervention or preemption. Also, a fear that renouncing nuclear weapons would generate the same result as Qaddafi's renouncement did make North Korea believe that it could not be safer without nuclear weapons (Bandow, 2020). Another event that shapes North Korea's

reliance on nuclear weapons is the U.S.intervention in Iraq. Had Saddam Hussain possessed nuclear weapons would the U.S.still proceed with the intervention? For North Korea, nuclear weapons provide them with a sense of security under the dynamics of deterrence which was not enjoyed by the regimes of Saddam and Qaddafi.

An over-emphasis on denuclearisation of the peninsula until the 2018 Singapore summit between President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un did not procure any productive result. Grappling with economic sanctions and isolation, facing constant criticism of the North Korean state and its regime, and encountering a situation of security dilemma characterised by a sense of security deficit catalysed by a display of the US-ROK military alliance, are reasons used by the negotiators to validate that nuclear weapons feature as a necessity for the regime's survival in North Korea's security rhetoric. Deterrence plays a vitalrole in the manner in which it has shaped the region's strategic environment. Even after diplomatic ventures, the strategic environment seems to be unpredictable due to North Korea's history of duplicity and USA's presence, characterised by the fact that this region features a rogue nuclear weapons state and the shadow of USA's nuclear umbrella.

### **3. The Centrality Assigned to Deterrence in the Region**

The article rightly captures the regional security environment, which reflects a state of predicament due to a North-South hostility, the dominant presence of the United States, China's growing influence all of which became more complicated due to an added nuclear angle. Although mentioned briefly, the article could have highlighted the root cause of the problem in the region, i.e. an innate tendency to view every security aspect through the lens of deterrence in a better and a more in-depth manner. The concept of deterrence indicates the use of a threat, explicit or otherwise, by one party to convince another party to uphold the status quo- is a phenomenon that is not bound by the confines of time and space (Zagare, 2006). This indicates that it is the use of threats to manoeuvre behaviour to prevent something unwanted from materialising. “. . . the prevention from action by fear of the

consequences. Deterrence is a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction” (Defense Dictionary, 1994). When analysing the role assigned to deterrence in the region, one particular thing becomes evident: deterrence is practised in both directions. In fact, from the very beginning, a US-ROK alliance has largely shaped the region’s security environment, which in itself is based on the very concept of deterrence.

The article argues that the region of the Korean Peninsula got introduced to nuclear weapons by the USA during the Cold War (Mishra, 2018) as an effort to bolster deterrence. Although all U.S. nuclear weapons were removed from ROK after the Cold War ended, ROK still enjoys a military security assurance from the USA as part of the latter’s extended deterrence scheme as part of its efforts to prevent ROK from gaining its own nuclear capability and to curtail further proliferation in the region. Another explanation that can be employed to assess the USA’s dominant military and nuclear presence in the region is that the USA has its own strategic agenda in the region to balance China’s growing influence where China shares an alliance with DPRK and Russia, as well, happens to be a bordering nation. The United States and ROK sought to deter any North Korean assault on the former and also to deter lower-level provocations initiated by the latter (Roehrig, 2016). The United States’ obsession with deterrence is to the point, as rightly indicated by the article, that it readily disregarded any efforts made by North Korea in the direction of turning the region into NWFZ (Mishra, 2018) has largely contributed to the instability that this region currently demonstrates. In turn, Pyongyang’s deterrence strategy reflects an effort to deter a possible US-ROK (Roehrig, 2016) invasion or compliance to force regime change. Had this remained at the conventional level, DPRK did have the capability to deter a ROK invasion by maintaining a large conventional force that would have inflicted severe damage and increase the cost of an attack by the latter. However, since the inception of nuclear weapons and induction of them in the region, there has been a constant effort on North Korea’s part to expand its nuclear capability that can by now, reach all of South Korea and Japan, with continued efforts to reach the United States (Roehrig,

2016). In contrast, efforts have been made to strengthen the United States' concept of extended deterrence in the region and to put 'maximum pressure' on DPRK to abandon its nuclear program.

Pyongyang's acquisition of nuclear weapons may indicate its search for international prestige and political leverage. However, North Korea's proclamations reflect deterrence to be the foremost purpose (Roehrig, 2016) (Mishra, 2018) (Bandow, 2020). Every nuclear advancement made by North Korea indicates that its minimal nuclear deterrence (Su, 2020) strategy is based on a more credible assured retaliation capability (Bermudez Jr., 2015).

Credibility assumes the role of being the cornerstone of deterrence. As the question of- what is the use of capability if it cannot perform the function of deterring the adversary from attacking and destroying whole cities? - is raised- the importance of credibility as well as the inherent problem associated with it comes to the limelight. Governments often assumed that if it possessed the right capability and issued threats, the opponent would receive the message that it was trying to send. However, this soon seemed to be futile like several Cold War incidents. The threat the government is believed to be issuing has no credibility if: the other side possesses the same capabilities and is not deterred by the threat; if the other side is believed to be irrational in reading the threat and the will and intent associated with it (Morgan, 2003); or if the other side does not believe that the deterrer will actually implement its threat when the time comes because acting on it will not only begin a conflict but will also render severe fatalities on both sides and the deterrer might choose to concede as would be the rational choice in such situations. These issues highlighted the importance of not only maintaining capability but also of displaying the will and resolve to use them when the time comes. If the challenger is already aware that the deterrer will concede then whatever the threat maybe it will not be credible. This brings out the fundamental tenet that credibility rests on: belief. "Credibility is the quality of being believed" (Morgan, 2003). That is, a threat is indicated to be credible if it is believed (Schelling, 1966) (Quackenbush, 2011) (Morgan, 2003) (Jervis, Lebow, & Stein, 1985). The significance of communication is experienced now when the



need arises to convince the opponent of not only possessing the said capabilities but also of the will and intent to use them if one's interests are challenged. Initially, there was suspicion on both sides about the other's military and nuclear capabilities when they solely relied on the declarations by each side. However, the burden of how much to convey and how much to believe eased but did not disappear with growth in the surveillance capabilities. Alongside, convincing the other side about one's will and intent remained an issue. These concerns provided the basis for deterrence to embody an inherent credibility problem, one with several faces. With a ceaseless advancement in nuclear technology, there happens to be a constant need to take measurements to bolster deterrence by strengthening its credibility. The states then enter a "credibility spiral" by constantly focusing on developing more capabilities, which generates a dangerous tension level (Roehrig, 2016). This particular trend indicates an intrinsic concern of an action-reaction syndrome which then, of course, leads to an arms race between the adversary and the last thing that any region requires for its stability is more weapons. For example, the induction of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) in South Korea by the United States has resulted in North Korea responding by increasing its missile testing pace (Borrie, Caughley, & Wan, 2017). It has also received heavy criticism from China and Russia. Alongside this, is the issue of stability-instability paradox. The need to strengthen deterrence on U.S.-ROK's part is often justified on the grounds that North Korea indulges in lower-level provocations that have the potential to escalate. These lower-level provocations are explained with the help of stability-instability paradox, which maintains that nuclear weapons help to preserve stability at the strategic level, but it liberates the adversaries to engage in lower-level acts of provocation believing that neither side would want to escalate to a level where nuclear weapons might be employed.

According to nuclear deterrence proponents, nuclear deterrence, a Cold War strategy, is still believed to be the only way to contain North Korea's nuclear ambitions, study the security environment, and stabilise the region (Borrie, Caughley, & Wan, 2017). However, to view the region's asymmetric security concerns through the lens of nuclear deterrence, a concept that emerged to study the

symmetric strategic relationship between the USA and the USSR (Borrie, Caughley, & Wan, 2017)(Roehrig, 2016), seems to be a wrong fit which then raises a number of concerns. First, to strengthen deterrence based on the stability-instability paradox argument only points to the direction that it is being employed to assess whether paradox predictions are precise. However, that fails to capture the essence, which is to establish which action meets the requirements of generating instability. The risk-taking behavior of the state happens to be an important variable here specially when talking about asymmetric relationships. In the North Korean case, according to Waltz, “the weaker and the more endangered a state is, the less likely it is to engage in reckless behavior. North Korea’s behavior has sometimes been ugly, but certainly not reckless. Its regime has shown no inclination to risk suicide”(Sagan & Waltz, 2003)(Roehrig, 2016). Therefore, though North Korea engages in provocative actions, its risk-taking behaviour needs to be assessed as to whether it actually generates any form of instability before the United States takes further measures to justify the increase in its capability. Second, the relative lack of predictability of North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong Un, brings to light the contradictions of assuming rationality of the leader on which the concept of deterrence lies (Borrie, Caughley, & Wan, 2017). Third, the lack of transparency is extreme in the case of North Korea (Borrie, Caughley, & Wan, 2017) (Bandow, 2020) (Roehrig, 2016). This reflects a problem when deterrence rests upon assurance and reassurance to maintain stability.

The need to strengthen extended deterrence and alliance between U.S-ROK is not new (Asia, 2019). However, any further step towards this direction will only brew more insecurity in North Korea, compelling it to act in a more destabilising fashion. The need of the hour is to reduce the circumstances under which the North might feel the need to resort to nuclear weapons (Bandow, 2020). The U.S-ROK alliance should now focus less on how to constantly reinforce deterrence and more on how to make the situation such that it would encourage more dialogue and move towards détente. If the crisis continues to follow the same path, then soon faith in extended deterrence would fade, and demands for their own nuclear deterrent would emerge in South Korea and

Japan as they are also facing an existential crisis due to North Korea's nuclearisation. Traces of this demand have already emerged in South Korea (Bandow, 2020)(Lee B. C., 2019).

All diplomatic ventures end in a stalemate because both sides' demands are not being met. To contain North Korea, its demand of a lesser presence of the United States in the region is key. Whereas, the United States is consumed by its objective of initiating denuclearisation in the region. The security rhetoric in the region is largely guided by the presence of nuclear weapons due to the active role played by deterrence, and hence, an over-emphasis on denuclearisation of the North seems futile for several reasons. The need of the hour dictates is to shift the focus from denuclearisation to a way forward in the form of arms control (Bandow, 2020) that would help contain North Korea.

#### **4. India's Role**

The article highlights a very important and necessary discussion that appears much prominently in the recognised Korean Peninsula security narrative. It calls attention to the implications of the ongoing North Korean nuclear crisis on India and argues how India should respond for the benefit of the latter's strategic role. The article fairly identifies the strategic environment in the Korean Peninsula where attempts by the United States at making any diplomatic headway with North Korea has only ended in a stalemate (Mishra, 2018)(Bermudez Jr., 2015)(Bandow, 2020). Once analysed, the situation presents itself as one where a step taken towards détente has only brought more actions to reinforce deterrence. Diplomatic ventures between the United States and North Korea failed partly due to an overplay of deterrence in the region. In such circumstances, the article maintains that India believes that it is vital that India maintain a diplomatic presence in North Korea, which may prove beneficial for the United States to maintain communication (Mishra, 2018).

The nuclear crisis of North Korea may not have a considerable effect on India. However, it links India directly to North Korea due

to the significant concern of proliferation. India maintains an inflexible stance as an advocate of global non-proliferation (Pandey, 2017). Having said that India may choose to engage in the Korean Peninsula security rhetoric. The article argues that “India’s approach towards the Korean issues has been cautious and pragmatic” (Mishra, 2018). Cautious in the sense that India did, up until now, hesitate in assuming a third party role in negotiations (Pandey, 2017). However, it does not necessarily mean that India supports North Korea’s nuclear ambitions (Mishra, 2018). India has religiously voiced its criticism for each nuclear test by North Korea. It remains opposed to the latter’s proliferation activities, especially after acquiring knowledge of Pyongyang’s linkages with the illicit nuclear proliferation network based in Pakistan (Mishra, 2018) (Pandey, 2017). The revelation of the illegal A. Q. Khan network’s involvement in supplying materials for the North Korean nuclear program in 2004 has exposed a major concern vis-à-vis the state’s involvement in Khan’s activities (Pollack, 2012) as this posits a grave threat to non-proliferation initiatives. As mentioned earlier, there is a practical side to India’s relationship with North Korea. While it opposes North Korea’s nuclear ambitions, India has maintained a cordial relationship with North Korea on humanitarian grounds (Mishra, 2018). Although India suspended all trade transactions with North Korea, it has kept the channel of medical and food supplies to the latter open (Mishra, 2018) (Pandey, 2017).

India’s engagement may have certain positive contributions to make in the resolution of the North Korean crisis. First, India is one of the largest trade partners of North Korea (Mishra, 2018) (Pandey, 2017), an argument that India may employ to influence North Korea to curtail further developments in the latter’s nuclear program. India’s participation would also bring in a fresh non-western perspective to the region’s security narrative as it would shift the focus from the United States’ obsession with the agenda of denuclearisation to an Asian country’s attempt at resolving the immediate crisis (Pandey, 2017). There are several valid reasons for India’s involvement. The first concern is that India’s influence in the region is significantly low. Arguing from a strategic point of view, if tensions between the United States and North Korea were

to remain so or if a situation emerges where the influence of the U.S. in the region is diminished then India would have to think hard on what role it would play in reducing tensions in the region. In doing so, the first hurdle that India would have to overcome is to offset China's ever-growing influence on North Korea (Mishra, 2018). China may have a negative response to India's involvement; however, the agenda of curtailing proliferation should act as the guiding force (Pandey, 2017). If the domino effect of proliferation occurs in the region then, as the article precisely indicates, "Asia would be the most crowded nuclear weapons" (Mishra, 2018), which will have implications globally.

## 5. Conclusion

The article accurately suggests that to take any action to resolve the crisis, it is extremely crucial to first understand the root cause of the problem by going back to its historical roots. An authoritarian regime with its nuclear brinkmanship presents a fragile situation which requires an appropriate balance between deterrence and détente. The article highlights, to a reasonable extent, the implications of a dominant presence of the United States in the region for North Korea. An overemphasis on the need to provide U.S. extended deterrence to South Korea has instilled enough level of insecurity in North Korea that it has imbibed nuclear deterrence as the only instrument to guarantee its survival. The article criticises the United States' agenda of denuclearisation as it appears to be misleading. The manner in which the United States is advocating the agenda of denuclearisation displays a lack of seriousness. Had this agenda been a priority for the United States, then much importance would have been given to strengthening détente and not deterrence. Although this article expresses its opinion against denuclearisation, it could delve deeper into the matter and discuss in a more elaborative manner as to why an obsession with this agenda is futile.

An excessive overlap of deterrence in the region has rendered it difficult for denuclearisation to occur given the current circumstances. Any measurement taken to strengthen deterrence presents a scenario where issuing threats, the basic instrument of

deterrence, reflects a dedication to assembling nuclear arsenals, the occurrence of provocative actions taken by an uncertain and unpredictable Kim Jong Un's leadership, and suggests the possibility of U.S. military actions. In such a scenario, nuclear weapons provide a range of incentives to North Korea including its very own survival. Hence, to talk of denuclearisation seems like a vain attempt as North Korea does not seem ready to relinquish its nuclear ambitions. As latest as of May 2020, Kim Jong Un presided over a meeting on "new policies for further increasing the nuclear war deterrence" (Bandow, 2020) where it was discussed that there is a need to increase North Korea's nuclear capabilities (Gamel, 2020). This certainly does not seem to be what Donald Trump believes that North Korea is ready to abandon its nuclear program. A change in the regions security narrative is immensely crucial at this point. As talks of denuclearisation are making no headway, the article argues that going forward the world needs to learn how to live with a nuclear North Korea and importance should now be given to arms control as that seems far more practical than the illusion of denuclearisation. The article rightly indicates that much of the literature and discourse on the security dynamics of the Korean Peninsula has been shaped by the United States' rhetoric. By discussing India's role, this article aims to revive the discourse with regional perspectives. The aftermath of the Korean crisis will have an adverse effect on South and East Asia in which case India cannot remain silent, and its engagement must be encouraged.

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