

Nuclear Danger in Asia: How North Korean and Pakistani Nuclear Programs Benefit China

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If there was any doubt that Asia has become the most dangerous place on earth, with the prospect of a nuclear exchange, then recent events provide ample evidence that the region has attained this dubious distinction. Additionally, a new UN report, which went practically unnoticed, revealed that North Korea has not only continued its proliferation activities but also that these are growing in sophistication. Moreover, while China's proliferation activities vis-à-vis Pakistan and North Korea have been unmasked on several occasions both before and after Beijing joined the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1992, they have been largely ignored. Consequently, the rise in global nuclear disorder and its increasing disconnect from world order is epitomized in the nuclear weapon programs of two weak and potentially failing states—Pakistan and North Korea. While both these countries might understandably perceive some advantage to having acquired nuclear weapons, the real beneficiary is China.

practice for nuclear war.

The stated objective of the joint exercises is to “preemptively ‘detect, defend, disrupt and destroy’ North Korean nuclear and missile facilities when an attack is imminent, in addition to defending South Korea”. North Korea's multiple launches of nuclear-capable missiles were intended to signal to Washington and Seoul that Pyongyang would retaliate with a first strike designed to pre-empt any such attempt and to overwhelm the Thaad system, which is designed to intercept single missiles. This is not unlike Pakistan's strategy vis-à-vis India.

The Thaad deployment has also caused perturbation in Beijing. While China is less worried that the system will intercept its long-range missiles, it is deeply troubled with the X-band radar that accompanies the Thaad system and has the ability to look deep into China and detect missiles in flight. Beijing disingenuously suggested that the US and South Korea call off their exercises in return for a promise

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North-East Asia goes dangerously ballistic

Following an unprecedented two nuclear and multiple ballistic missile tests in 2016, North Korea has upped the ante even further this year. A high-profile political assassination in Malaysia – using a deadly nerve agent – coincided with yet another missile test and the threat of an intercontinental ballistic missile test capable of striking the US. Then, on 7 March 2017, in a dramatic show of force, Pyongyang simultaneously launched four missiles, which landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone. Although this latest missile salvo was partly in response to the biggest annual joint military exercises of the US and South Korea being conducted in the region and partly in response to the impending deployment of the US Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (Thaad) system, it nonetheless signaled, according to one observer,

that North Korea will not launch additional missiles or conduct nuclear tests. Predictably, this proposal was rejected resoundingly by Washington.

Even as nuclear tensions rise and attract global concern, Pyongyang's proliferation activities continue unabated. According to the latest report of the panel of experts established pursuant to UN Security Council resolution 1874 on North Korea, the state is “flouting sanctions through trade in prohibited goods with evasion techniques that are increasing in scale, scope and sophistication.”

The report reveals that North Korea's Reconnaissance General Bureau uses foreign nationals as facilitators and relies on many front companies in several countries. This modus operandi was evident in the assassination of Kim Jong-nam. For instance, North

Korea has allegedly been selling battlefield radio systems (banned under UN sanctions) through a front company called Global Communications in Malaysia. In 2014, three North Koreans were reportedly detained while trying to smuggle nearly half-a-million dollars in cash at Kuala Lumpur airport. Malaysia was a favorite country for their operations because, until the assassination of Kim Jong-nam, North Koreans were allowed to travel visa-free. Interestingly, Malaysian citizens are the only ones allowed to travel visa-free to North Korea; even the Chinese need visas (except for a couple of tourist locations).

The UN report warns that North Korea's "ability to conceal financial activity by using foreign nationals and entities allows them to continue to transact through top global financial centers" (like Malaysia, Singapore and China). This is not dissimilar to Pakistan's proliferation network led by A.Q. Khan, which, curiously, also used Malaysia.

The UN report lamented that "implementation (of sanctions) remains insufficient and highly inconsistent." Given the present nuclear imbroglio in North-East Asia involving China and the US, both permanent UN Security Council members, the implementation is likely to remain ineffective.

Indeed, resolving the confrontation between China, the US and North and South Korea is a priority but so far the way ahead is not clear. The relationship between Pyongyang and Beijing (which is North Korea's biggest trading partner) is key to a resolution. While China has recently banned the trade of some items, the list is still not exhaustive. Here the US Thaad deployment might convince Beijing of Washington's impatience and frustration and force it to do more.

The Thaad deployment also poses a dilemma for China: Should it stand by its ally at the cost of its own deterrence vis-à-vis the US or should it ensure its own deterrence even as it jettisons its ally? China's instinctive approach is to do both by targeting bans on South Korean companies and political leaders who are in favor of the Thaad deployment while supporting those opposed. The fact that China is also South Korea's biggest trade partner does give Beijing leverage, as does the ignominious dismissal of President Park Geun-hye, a Thaad supporter.

Given the Donald Trump administration's anti-

trade instinct, China's will might just prevail. Besides, resolving this crisis requires greater focus than the Trump administration appears capable of even when they are seriously engaged.

China benefits from nuclear disorder

But North Korea is not the only state in which China emboldens a nuclear program, Pakistan, too, is a recipient of Chinese "goodwill." Beijing's acts of commission and omission in enabling both these crises-instigating states to build nuclear arsenals pose twin threats to the post-Cold War nuclear order. First, the proliferation activities of these countries present an existential challenge to the tottering nuclear non-proliferation regime. Second, these actions in turn also challenge the status of the US as the traditional custodian of the nuclear order; by enabling two weak states to acquire nuclear weapons, the Washington-led regime has been thrown into disarray.

While it could be argued (as non-proliferation purists are prone to do) that New Delhi's arsenal is equally culpable in creating nuclear disorder, India, as the world's largest liberal democracy, the fifth largest economy, and a member of every existing and emerging global regime, has more stakes in upholding and enhancing the evolving liberal world order.

Besides, in the process of accomplishing the 123 agreement for civil nuclear cooperation with the US (and similar agreements with Canada, France, Japan, Russia and the UK), separating its military and civil nuclear facilities, and signing an additional protocol for inspection of its declared civil nuclear facilities with the International Atomic Energy Agency, not to mention attaining a hard-fought waiver from the Nuclear Suppliers Group, India has undergone a gruelling agni-pariksha to prove its commitment to upholding the non-proliferation regime.

In contrast, China's proliferation activities vis-à-vis Pakistan and North Korea have been unmasked on several occasions both before and after Beijing joined the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1992. In the most recent revelation, the Institute for Science and International Security alleged that China had allowed the export of material (in violation of UN sanctions) to North Korea, which would enable Pyongyang to build hydrogen bombs.

China's active and tacit support of the nuclear programs of Pakistan and North Korea respectively might be considered a form of extended deterrence (as the US has done by ensuring that its nuclear arsenal also covers its allies). However, China, by enabling the nuclear arsenals of its two neighbors, has not only violated the non-proliferation regime but also created two nuclear-armed states that refuse to adhere to the traditional rules of deterrence.

Classic nuclear deterrence is premised on the basic assumption that nuclear weapons will only be used to deter other nuclear weapons. However, Pakistan has

responsibility in the imbroglio and deftly presented itself as a responsible custodian of the nuclear order.

By the time Tillerson arrived in Beijing he had fallen for the Chinese ploy (despite an unsolicited cautionary tweet from President Donald Trump warning: "North Koreans are behaving badly and China has done little to help").

In Beijing, Tillerson shocked seasoned observers when he made no mention of the crisis with North Korea (let alone the "all option" statement) and described the relationship with China as "very positive"

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used its nuclear umbrella to instigate conventional conflict (in Kargil in 1999) and sub-conventional attacks with non-state actors (in Mumbai in 2008). North Korea has similarly used its nuclear shield to conduct provocative acts (such as the assassination of Kim Jong-nam) and to proliferate (as the recent UN report notes).

Apart from the unorthodox use of their nuclear capabilities, they also pose new threats for the US and India—the two-leading democratic established and emerging powers—while allowing China to present itself as a peacemaker and upholder of the new nuclear order.

This has become evident in the latest confrontation on the Korean peninsula, where the US has been pitted against North Korea, and China has eagerly donned the mantle of a mature mediator. When Rex Tillerson, the neophyte US foreign secretary, arrived on his first trip to the region, he pronounced that the era of "strategic patience" was over and warned that "all options (including military action) are on the table". In a telling response, the spokesperson for the Chinese foreign ministry chastised both the US and North Korea, asking them not to "escalate towards conflict and potential war" and patronizingly suggesting they "cool down" and seek a political and diplomatic resolution. In doing so, Beijing absolved itself of any

and "built on non-confrontation, no conflict, mutual respect, and always searching for win-win solutions". While these catchphrases have echoes of the China-India Panchsheel agreement, they are entirely alien to the US vocabulary in dealing with China. If former president Barack Obama was accused of bowing too low on his first visit to Beijing in 2009, then Tillerson is guilty of bending over backwards.

If the Trump administration is keen to seek a new approach to deal with the nuclear dangers posed by North Korea and Pakistan, then the first step is to recognize that China is part of the problem, not the solution. The second crucial step would be to develop a backbone to stand up to Beijing. US experts like Robert Blackwill have recognized this imperative and suggest a policy of "engage and contain" towards China. However, it is uncertain that the Trump administration is capable of implementing it.