

Time to tap Russia and China on North Korean denuclearisation

15th August, 2015

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Diplomatic engagements between North Korea and Russia have raised the prospect that denuclearisation talks between the Pyongyang regime and the international community will resume. Russian envoy Grigory Logvinov pronounced in June 2015 that Moscow would not support any ‘behind the back’ agreement regarding North Korea’s nuclear program, but it could still play a significant role in getting Pyongyang to address the issue on a bilateral basis.



Two developments encourage this prospect. First, North Korea’s economic ties with Russia have witnessed significant growth. Both countries declared 2015 as the ‘Year of Friendship’. In April 2015 they organised a meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation. Proposals are underway for cooperation in a variety of areas such as agriculture, energy, infrastructure and tourism.

Second, on 21 June, Choe Thae-bok, Speaker of the Supreme People’s Assembly of North Korea, travelled to Moscow, presumably to ask for aid. [Recent reports](#) ^[1] from the (North) Korean Central News Agency, substantiated by South Korean scientists, suggest that North Korea is gripped by a severe drought — a development that is bound to have a major impact on the state’s political economy.

On China’s end, its foreign ministry recently announced that it is willing to provide aid to North Korea in its time of distress, although Pyongyang’s nuclear program has put some strain on their bilateral relations. Given North Korea’s strained situation, this is the ideal time for both China and Russia to utilise their economic linkages with North Korea as a bargaining chip for starting denuclearisation talks.

But the two big powers hold different views on the issue. China has been taking a harder line in regard to North Korea's nuclear program, while also growing closer to South Korea. During China–US talks in May, Beijing agreed that putting pressure on Pyongyang was important. But China's official stance is in favour of denuclearisation of the entire Korean peninsula, including American nuclear weapons on South Korean soil.

Russia's contrary position — as stated by envoy Logvinov — is that Moscow would not support any pact agreed in North Korea's absence.

But North Korea has continued with 'provocative actions' such as firing short-range anti-ship missiles, carrying out live-firing artillery drills and threatening cyber warfare. Speculation over the reason for this show of belligerence focuses on its current economic plight. Kim Jong-un's provocations are part of a larger effort to distract his people from other concerns such as the acute food shortage that is gripping the country.

Kim should recall the 'Arduous March' that North Korea experienced from 1994 to 1998, a period of intense economic distress exacerbated by a severe famine, during which hundreds of thousands of civilians perished. Then, a significant decline in public trust in the Kim regime, alongside the emergence of the black market economy — which gave enterprising North Koreans ways around the established state structure — posed a direct challenge to the government's control. Kim Jong-un cannot afford to have a repeat of that dire situation, nor a mass exodus of desperate civilians.

But, despite, or indeed because of, these internal challenges, the North Korean government seems committed to centring its domestic national identity on its purported progress on the path to becoming a nuclear power 'recognised by the US'. Experts have judged the state's current nuclear capability to be subpar. But North Korea is determined to build up this narrative. This is a dangerous motivation because it closes off avenues for communication such as the Six-Party Talks. North Korea is currently not willing to participate in the talks if the agenda includes denuclearisation. But communication channels need to be kept open.

The time is ripe for actors that have economic influence and open lines of communication with North Korea — in particular China and Russia — to leverage their advantages in an effort to restart serious discussions regarding denuclearisation. But the actors need to bring something to the table in order to disincentivise North Korea from nuclearising. The international community needs to do much more to encourage actors like China and Russia to dissuade the Kim regime from its nuclearisation path.

One prospect for the future of a non-nuclear North Korea would be if it chooses to change its focus with regard to identity building. This would involve the creation of new priorities and a new ideology as the centrepiece of its state identity. Whether this alternative will rely on new economic priorities still remains to be seen.

But with the real presence of North Korea's grey and black markets and the exposure of the younger generation — which accounts for 25 per cent of the population — to non-state media and culture, it is not unthinkable to imagine a state narrative amenable to greater economic growth

and cooperation.

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This article was originally posted [here](#)^[2] as RSIS Commentary No. 151/2015.

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[1] Recent reports: <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2015/201506/news16/20150616-23ee.html>

[2] *here*:

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