

The global nuclear cloud is darkening

The word 'historic' is appropriate to describe [the April 27 summit](#) between South Korean president Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. While there is considerable optimism that this meeting will mark the beginning of the long-awaited rapprochement in the Korean peninsula, the nuclear domain remains opaque.

When U.S. President Donald Trump announced that the U.S. and North Korea were in diplomatic contact and that denuclearisation was on the table, there was a flurry of activity. However, in recent weeks, though Pyongyang has announced that it is suspending further nuclear/missile tests and shutting its test site, there has been no indication that it intends to give up its nuclear arsenal.

The term 'denuclearisation' in relation to North Korea is being selectively approached for its semantic exactitude. While the U.S. and Japan seek the equivalent of complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement, South Korea appears to be prioritising the rapprochement and normalisation of inter-Korean relations even while keeping the nuclear strand on the agenda. China and Russia, which are regional stakeholders, will be monitoring the summit for its outcome.

Going by the past, road to North Korea's denuclearisation is littered with failure

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Mr. Kim has played his relatively weaker cards in an astute manner and the very fact that the Korean summit will be followed by a similar meeting with Mr. Trump later in May or in early June marks the end of the U.S.-led political and diplomatic ostracism.

Mr. Kim would be cognisant of the global nuclear trajectory and the manner in which the U.S. has dealt with the weapons of mass destruction issue in Iraq, Libya and Iran. Thus, while verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation is a desirable objective for South Korea, Japan and the U.S., it is the critical survival shield for the Kim regime.

Koreas to talk peace

More recent developments in relation to the Iran nuclear deal and Mr. Trump's determination to jettison it since it is a "bad deal" have led to a darkening of the global nuclear cloud. As per the original 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, the U.S. President has to certify every 120 days that sanctions need not be enforced against Tehran and that the nuclear weapon programme rollback compliance undertaken by Iran is proceeding satisfactorily. United Nations-led external inspectors have certified that Iran's compliance has been in keeping with the 2015 accord. The last such U.S. waiver was approved reluctantly by Mr. Trump on January 12. He had warned then that that would be the final endorsement by him of the deal, for he wanted more stringent conditions to be added to the current Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. In short, the U.S. is changing the goalposts and the May 12 deadline is looming large.

The last year has seen bilateral relations between the U.S. and Russia on the one hand and between the U.S. and China on the other becoming increasingly brittle. This has also affected the weapons of mass destruction domain. Consequently, many of the major (nuclear-missile) arms reduction treaties and verification protocols between the U.S. and Russia that go back to the Cold War decades and the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union have become moribund, and the subtext is causing the global nuclear cloud to become even darker.

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More specifically, both the U.S. and Russia have embarked upon major nuclear weapon modernisation programmes and the decision to resurrect the nuclear-tipped cruise missile at sea has very destabilising implications. This capability had been buried given its inherently deterrence destabilising characteristics. The nuclear-tipped cruise missile that can evade current missile detection systems has also been embraced enthusiastically by India and Pakistan. Collectively viewed, this trend is a disturbing augury.

India has urged nuclear restraint and universal disarmament since the 1950s and has been relatively muted after its May 1998 nuclear tests and the rapprochement with the U.S. over the nuclear issue that began in mid-2005. Given that it aspires to a seat at the global high table, India ought to make a credible and objective intervention that will burnish its profile as a 'different' nuclear weapon power – one that remains committed to restraint and the elusive Holy Grail of nuclear zero. The Xi Jinping-Narendra Modi informal summit may be an opportune moment to bring the darkening nuclear cloud back to the global political agenda.

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