

Pyongyang's next steps: on North Korea and denuclearisation

North Korea and South Korea have [jointly declared that the Korean War will be finally over](#). North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who met for the first time on Friday, have pledged to ensure peace, prosperity and the unification of the Korean peninsula. Optimistic phrases such as “a new history begins now” and “the Korean people cannot remain separated” were used and the mood was one of optimism and restrained joy. In the light of these developments, it seems certain that the summit between the U.S. and North Korea will take place as scheduled.

Pitch for equality

But the differences between Mr. Kim and Mr. Moon on the question of denuclearisation are evident. While Mr. Moon emphasised that complete denuclearisation was essential for peace, Mr. Kim did not utter the “D” word. The unrehearsed gesture by Mr. Kim of inviting Mr. Moon to cross over to the North for a moment in response to the former crossing over to the South (at the Military Demarcation Line which separates the two Koreas) was a clear indication of the need for equality between them. North Korea will seek parity with South Korea in terms of nuclear security and well-being, which is hard to accomplish in the short term.

The Indian template

Denuclearisation is key to the whole process as it means different things to different people. For the U.S., the models are Iraq, Libya and the former republics of the Soviet Union, which surrendered their nuclear assets in return for peace and normalisation. But North Korea seems to have another model in mind; an Indian model nuclear deal in which it gets recognised as a “technologically advanced responsible state” on the basis of certain strategic assurances.

North Korea's neighbours, Trump hail historic summit

But unlike India, the track followed by all the three Kims appeared clumsy and foolish ever since North Korea sought to leave the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) regime. The posture was of threat and arrogance rather than peace or reconciliation. The direct threat that they faced from the U.S., South Korea and Japan must have resulted in the aggressive approach, but now that North Korea has established its nuclear capability, it is inclined to negotiate its way into removing sanctions and shaping its future. In fact, it seems to be following India's choreography in shaping its nuclear policy.

New Delhi's trajectory

India's nuclear test of 1974 was as shocking to the world as the North Korean tests of later years, but India went about it in stages, by serving notice on the world that it was keeping the nuclear option open in the face of a direct nuclear threat from China since 1964 and the danger of China passing on nuclear secrets to Pakistan. But international reaction was fierce, even from Moscow, and no amount of explanation that the explosion was for peaceful purposes cut ice.

No serious discussion had ever taken place with the U.S. or the international community on India's concerns till New Delhi established beyond doubt that India had crashed irreversibly into the nuclear club. The U.S., which initially had refused to be dragged into a discussion and only wanted to punish India, entered into the most detailed and intricate Jaswant Singh-Strobe Talbott dialogue

for two years and ended up in an understanding in 2000 and a nuclear deal in 2005. Mr. Kim is obviously hoping to reach a similar agreement with the U.S. to legitimise his nuclear arsenal and earn a designation similar to India's "technologically advanced responsible state".

In a way, Mr. Kim has gone further than India by suspending all missile tests and taking steps to shut down a nuclear test site, to which the U.S., South Korea and China have reacted positively. The timing is crucial as he is due to meet U.S. President Donald Trump by June.

North Korea must be aware that soon after the Indian nuclear tests of 1998, U.S. President Bill Clinton had made an offer to India that he would refrain from imposing sanctions under the Glen Amendment if India agreed forthwith to sign and ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. Mr. Kim has anticipated the demand and declared cessation of all tests.

Now the only demand that the U.S. can make, apart from verifying Mr. Kim's claims, is to eliminate North Korea's nuclear arsenal. Here again Mr. Kim is likely to use the Indian model to bargain for normal relations with the U.S. on the basis of guarantees such as minimum deterrence, non-first use, no tests and commitment to nuclear disarmament in keeping with global developments. The U.S. has sought to pre-empt such moves by saying there was a "bright path available to North Korea when it achieves denuclearisation".

The big question is whether a moratorium on testing and nuclear restraint will secure for North Korea a place in the nuclear mainstream. Trust and confidence in India as a responsible state, the promise of nuclear trade, close cooperation in defence and a foreign policy consistent with the ideals of the free world were the elements that led to the historic nuclear deal. Even in the case of India, some of these benefits did not materialise for various reasons. With that experience, the U.S. would be far more reluctant to make any concessions to North Korea without an agreement on denuclearisation. The forthcoming negotiations will prove whether the Indian model will help North Korea in restoring peace in the Korean Peninsula and having a cooperative relationship with the U.S. and the rest of the world. Some amount of domestic reform at home, in terms of civil liberties, would help North Korea make its case better.

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