

Why North Korea's nuclear bombs matter

North Korea's nuclear weapons programme is no longer the joke it once was thought to be. The estimates so far of Sunday's sixth nuclear test by North Korea suggest an explosive yield that could run into hundreds of kilotonnes. This is sufficient to decimate a major US city. Earlier, on 4 July—US independence day, no less—North Korea first tested an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that is capable of reaching American territory.

Why is North Korea doing this? It has three main objectives. One, the nuclear capability is primarily meant to ensure the survival of the regime. Two, it wants to break the US' alliance with South Korea and Japan. Three—and this is a more distant goal—North Korea, like the South, desires the reunification of the Korean peninsula but on its own terms. Its most recent demonstrations of nuclear capabilities are more in line with its first two goals. With the impressive detonation on Sunday, Kim Jong-un has more or less ensured that he will not meet the same fate as Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi. The ICBM capability is a credible tool to “decouple” the US from its allies. South Korea and Japan have every reason to doubt whether the US would risk its major cities in order to come to their rescue against North Korea.

With its enhanced capabilities, North Korea is bound to become more assertive. This is already evident in its demand that the US cease flying bombers over the Korean peninsula. Should the dialogue process resume, North Korea will have greater leverage this time around and can demand further concessions with the aim of unravelling America's security alliances in East Asia. If US President Donald Trump does not engage North Korea in a dialogue process and continues to sound military threats, as he has been doing, there are three distinct possibilities: a) Trump will execute his threat and potentially trigger a nuclear war; b) Trump will execute the threat and fail—or attempt to intercept a North Korean missile test and fail—thus ending up with a huge embarrassment for America's security guarantees; or c) Trump will not execute his threat and weaken the security alliances as Japan and South Korea may assume that North Korea's ICBMs held the US back.

The more honourable option for the US then is to accept mutual vulnerability, resume dialogue with North Korea and examine which of the latter's demands can be conceded without significantly affecting the US presence in South Korea and Japan. But the logic of decoupling will nevertheless continue to worry Seoul and Tokyo. The only other option then is for the US to allow Japan and South Korea to develop their own nuclear weapons. While this option may yield the maximum strategic stability with North Korea, it may set off another set of unintended consequences. China will not like the prospect of so many nuclear powers around it, and, specifically, a nuclear-capable Japan, leading it to alter its own nuclear strategy, posture and doctrine. It may also accelerate the build-up of its nuclear arsenal. All this will have profound implications for India in particular and the Asian security architecture in general. And one is not even counting the desire for nuclear weapons—and the legitimization of such desires—that this will fuel in countries ranging from Taiwan to Iran.

Even though China has upped its rhetoric against North Korea in recent days, it should shoulder some of the blame for North Korea's nuclearization in the first place. Even at this moment, its political objective of reducing the US role in Asia resonates with North Korea's aim of decoupling America's alliances. It is, therefore, not surprising that China, along with Russia, has been putting forward a “freeze for freeze” proposal which will entail North Korea freezing its nuclear programme in exchange for the US and South Korea suspending their joint military exercises. China is also banking on the assumption—not an unreasonable one—that a proliferation-obsessed Washington will not allow South Korea and Japan to have their own nukes. Beijing, therefore, hopes to come out on top after the crisis is over even though it too does not like a North Korea whose missiles

can reach all corners of China.

One hopes that the defence and foreign affairs establishment in New Delhi is carefully examining all the scenarios and thinking deeply about the changes in Asia's security architecture that North Korea's nuclear capabilities may bring. For India, the most immediate concern will be any possible diminution of the US role in Asia, which is crucial to meeting the China challenge. Both the eventuality of a North Korean-induced decoupling and the more distant prospect of South Korea and Japan developing their own nuclear weapons have the potential to significantly alter the security role that the US plays in the region. Given the history of proliferation networks, some Indian analysts are also concerned about advanced nuclear technology finding its way from North Korea to Pakistan.

All things considered, the joke will now be on those who are not seriously thinking about the consequences of North Korea's nuclear capabilities.

Will North Korea's strategy of unravelling America's East Asian alliances succeed? Tell us at views@livemint.com

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