



JAPANESE RESERVATIONS ON A POSSIBLE US - NORTH KOREA RAPPROCHEMENT – UNFOUNDED AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE

Anushree Dutta
Research Associate, CAPS

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North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has announced that "under the proven condition of complete nuclear weapons, we no longer need any nuclear tests, mid-range and intercontinental ballistic rocket tests, and that the nuclear test site in northern area has also completed its mission".¹ The announcement received mixed responses from the world leaders. US President Donald Trump took to the social media to express, "North Korea has agreed to suspend all nuclear tests and close up a major test site. This is very good news for North Korea and the World - big progress! Look forward to our Summit."²

However, it is pertinent to note that the announcement does not include a commitment to scrap existing nuclear weapons and missiles. This has created doubts whether Kim would ever give up the nuclear arsenal his country has been developing for decades. This obviously is a matter of concern for Japan given that in the last

missile test by North Korea in 2017, the missile travelled a distance of 950 km to fall in the Economic Exclusive Zone of Japan.³ It is hardly surprising therefore that Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has said North Korea must take concrete actions to achieve what it has announced.⁴ Japan is clearly not comfortable with the nuclear capability of North Korea. It is also sceptical of the Chinese support to the country despite sanctions. China being the traditional old friend of North Korea feels that more stringent sanctions could result in making Pyongyang even more adventurous and unpredictable. But, Japan believes that DPRK has always capitalised on this sentiment and won generous financial and technological concessions while surreptitiously continuing to develop its nuclear and missile programmes. Japan, is focusing its primary attention on the abduction of its citizens by North Korea, and has asked for the issue to be raised during the South Korea-

North Korea and US-North Korea summits Domestic politics and a sense of being left out in dealing with North Korea, a trend referred to as 'Japan passing' appears to be the drivers behind the current reaction to the developments taking place in the Korean peninsula.⁵ Shinzo Abe sees, 'Japan passing' as detrimental to Japan's regional standing. If relative peace arrives with North Korea nuclear issue and establishment of a US-China modus vivendi in dealing with the issue in a consensual framework, Japan would lose its relevance⁶ In a conference in Manila Japan's deputy foreign ministry spokesman Toshihide Ando said, "Now is not the time for dialogue but the time to increase effective pressure on North Korea so that they will take concrete actions towards de-nuclearisation".⁷

The Japanese attempt to raise the abductee issue in dealing with North Korea will not contribute in any positive way to international attempts to deal with North Korea's nuclear weapons. This move of Japan will be creating a negative impact on the positive momentum established in recent months.

Japan appears desperate, and from the very announcement of an important breakthrough during the South Korean envoys' visit to North Korea in early March, Japan has strategically and recurrently expressed its apprehensions. Japan may be able to persuade Trump against a give-and-take deal with North Korea since there is a history of mistrust when it comes to North

Korean peace offers, and there may also be doubt regarding South Korea's capacity to achieve anything substantial.⁸

Japan on the another hand can also try to remind the USA about its Nuclear Posture Review, which the Japanese Foreign Ministry strongly endorsed, and which includes promises to increase the role of US nuclear weapons in Asia. They could be trying to prevent any weakening of those promises from becoming part of an agreement with North Korea on denuclearization.

In fact, with the changing strategic approach of North Korea, the world needs to evolve a balanced and unified stand to deal with the Korean nuclear impasse. Keeping the door open for talks along with stringent sanctions will result in an optimum, mutually acceptable solution which could ensure regional and global peace and security, and also guarantee North Korea's liberty, territorial integrity and economic development. But to achieve this and make North Korea's upcoming meetings with US and South Korea a success requires mutual trust in each other's intentions, along with the support of its allies. North Korea announcement has opened the stage for some constructive talks between the different protagonists. Japan should not be an insecure protagonist but also open its stage for North Korea and others to move ahead.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily

reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Kim Jong Un: North Korea no longer needs nuclear tests, 22 April 2018, Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/20/asia/north-korea-closes-nuclear-site/index.html>, accessed on 24 April 2018

² Ibid

³ North Korean missile lands in Sea of Japan, Pentagon says, 28 November 2017, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/28/north-korea-fires-ballistic-missile-report.html>, accessed on 24 April 2018

⁴ Japan calls for North Korean steps toward denuclearization, 13 March 2018, available at <https://nypost.com/2018/03/13/japan-calls-for-north-korean-steps-toward-denuclearization/>, accessed on 25 April 2018

⁵ Regional Stability and Japan's Irresponsible Political Gambit, 6 April 2018, available at http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=5456, accessed on 26 April 2018

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Japan welcomes tougher UN sanctions on North Korea, hopes for quick denuclearisation, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/japan-welcomes-tougher-un-sanctions-on-north-korea-hopes-for-quick-denuclearisation-3901569.html>, accessed on 26 April 2018

⁸ Ibid