

## **North Korea's Missile Launch and East Asian Security**

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The recent launch of Taepodong-2 missile by North Korea on April 5 has once again catapulted East Asia into global flashpoint. The launch, officially claimed by North Korea as a 'peaceful expedition' to the space through the launching of a satellite called 'Kwangmyongsing-2 into orbit by the carrier rocket 'Unha-2. Most Western capitals, including Washington, suspected that it was a cover-up of a long-range missile which can hit the west coast of the United States and should be considered a serious security matter. The North American Aerospace Defence Command, a Colorado-based military organisation monitoring the rocket said later that 'no object entered the orbit' after the launch. In a similar fashion, North Korea test-fired what it claimed was a satellite in August 1998, but turned to be the 'Taepodong-1' missile with a range of 1500 km.

It is reported that the April 5<sup>th</sup> launch could be that of the Taepodong-2 missile with a range of over 3000-6000 km, thus reinstating Pyongyang's ability to deliver a warhead to distant targets. North Korea first tested a Taepodong-2 in July 2006 but failed its mission less than a minute after the lift off. Three months later, Pyongyang carried out a nuclear test. The Six Party talks involving US, South Korea, Japan, Russia and China on an aid-for-disarmament deal were stalled in the aftermath of the nuclear test, though was subsequently revived and was moving smoothly with the North Korea consent for a disarmament process. However, the April 5<sup>th</sup> launch has changed this scenario.

The missile test naturally invited criticism as well as demand for restraint from different quarters. Japan, a key US ally in the region, views North Korea as a security threat. It had responded strongly to the launch by terming it as 'extremely regrettable' and condemned the act an abject violation of the UN resolution 1718 adopted in October 2006, which bans North Korea from carrying out ballistic missile activity. Japan had, in fact, prepared to face any eventuality rising out of North Korean missile test, including a prospective interception plan, for which it had readied with batteries of Patriot Advanced Capability-III (PAC) theatre defence systems if at all debris from the rocket launch had fallen into the Japanese territory.

Soon after the tests, on Japan's request, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was convened, though it failed to reach any consensus on taking remedial action against Pyongyang. A conclusive decision at the UNSC did not happen as the house was divided over punitive actions against North Korea with both Russia and China arguing that it could derail the peace process. The UNSC had to contend with a unanimous condemnation of North Korea's suspected missile launch, along with a presidential statement on 13<sup>th</sup> April, which is a step below a formal resolution.

China, the closest ally of North Korea and economic partner, had urged 'calm and restraint' to the international community, particularly to those who demanded strict action against Pyongyang. China is worried about the stability of North Korea given the risk of refugees flooding across its border if the underdeveloped state were to collapse. At the same time, a larger US involvement either through militarily means or diplomatic offensive would minimise Chinese strategic leverage in the region. China has covertly and overtly supported North Korea's nuclear ambitions and its missile programme, which in turn was used as a political strategy to keep the Kim Jong Il regime intact. Similarly, China wants North Korea as a bulwark against any sort of possible anti-China rhetoric by the West. In fact, Kim Jong Il's sabre-rattling eventually helps China to evade of criticism against its human rights record particularly when Obama administration has started a new approach in its policy towards East Asia.

Significantly, it is assumed that a strong UN action is not possible as a veto member of the UNSC is a closest ally of the offender. However, stringent bilateral sanctions are on the anvil by those who fears such tests pose a serious security threat, such as Japan and the US. Japan is thinking of increasing the quantum of its existing sanctions which had been imposed after the 2006 aborted test launch. Japan's economic sanction on Pyongyang for six months was to end by April 13, but extended it from six months to one year period lately.

Japan fears that even though UN condemned the North Korea's action, but minus a legally binding resolution, Pyongyang would continue its missile programme without disruption. Ever since Obama took charge in Washington, he is keen to strengthen the U.S. relationship with China. This could, at the same time, add costs to any U.S. decision to take stringent action against Pyongyang as the US will not prefer to confront China, especially because its Asia policy is more or less China-centric. Similarly North Korea's nuclear programme is now not a high priority for the Obama administration since it is entangled in Afghanistan and the safety of the Pakistan's nuclear bomb.

It is more concerned about whether Pakistan's nuclear weapons would fall into the hands of al Qaida than the 'rogueness' of North Korea. Instead, the US prefers a diplomatic settlement for Pyongyang's

nuclear programme through the Six-Party Talks. But the latest revelation by Pyongyang that it has decided to withdraw from the Talks after the UN condemnation has triggered uncertainty in the region. In this scenario, Japan would like to enhance its own defence capabilities and North Korea's action may also be strengthened the demand for changes in the pacifist character of the Japanese constitution.

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