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Conceptualising the Role of India in North Korea's Denuclearisation

AUTHOR(S): Sher Ali Kakar and Muhammad Adil Khan

Mr Sher Ali Kakar is a Research Officer at Balochistan Think Tank Network (BTTN), Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering and Management Sciences (BUIITEMS), Quetta. Mr Muhammad Adil Khan is an MPhil Scholar (International Relations) at BUIITEMS, Quetta. The author(s) can be reached at sheralikakar28@gmail.com.

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CONCEPTUALISING THE ROLE OF INDIA IN NORTH KOREA'S DENUCLEARISATION

*Sher Ali Kakar and Muhammad Adil Khan**

Abstract

The US and its allies perceive North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons as a significant strategic challenge in the region. Diplomatic efforts have been made to persuade the Kim regime to abandon its nuclear programme, but they have failed. The DPRK considers nuclear weapons capability vital for deterrence against external threats and strategically crucial for national defence. India, a key US ally in containing China, has taken a stiffer stance towards Pyongyang's nuclear programme while enhancing its role in contributing to North Korea's denuclearisation. It represents itself as a staunch opponent of nuclear proliferation and the development of sophisticated weapons. This paper explores India's role in North Korea's perceived denuclearisation. It highlights that India has adopted a dual-standard approach to nuclear proliferation and sophisticated weapons and is also trying to create a technological nexus between Pakistan and North Korea, allegedly to achieve strategic ambitions in South Asia and assert pressure on Pakistan with the help of the US and its Western allies.

Keywords: North Korea, Nuclear Proliferation, Denuclearisation, ICBMs, Nuclear Deterrence.

Introduction

The acquisition of nuclear weapons capability by North Korea and the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) are perceived by the US and its allies, which rely on US Nuclear Umbrella, as a significant strategic challenge. Despite the international community's pressure, the Kim regime has continued to develop nuclear weapons, thus creating tensions on the Korean peninsula.¹ The US and its allies have responded to this perceived strategic challenge by adopting diplomatic efforts to put pressure on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to abandon its nuclear programme. India, which once had close diplomatic and economic ties with North Korea, has shifted its foreign policy and emerged as a forerunner in the US-led global efforts to denuclearise North Korea. India represents itself as a staunch opponent of nuclear proliferation and a potential strategic partner for the US to achieve its broader foreign policy goals.

*Mr Sher Ali Kakar is a Research Officer at Balochistan Think Tank Network (BTTN), Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering and Management Sciences (BUIITEMS), Quetta. Mr Muhammad Adil Khan is an MPhil Scholar (International Relations) at BUIITEMS, Quetta. The author(s) can be reached at sheralikakar28@gmail.com.

In recent years, India has increased its role in DPRK's denuclearisation efforts through a series of diplomatic steps. The Indian government has toughened its policies towards North Korea, asserting diplomatic pressure on the Kim regime and suspending trade ties. As the US relations with North Korea become further strained due to Pyongyang's nuclear activities, India has also responded with a strict diplomatic stance, criticising the Kim regime for its nuclear activities and perceiving them as a threat to regional and international security.² In 2017, the US and India condemned DPRK's nuclear activities and pledged to work together to counter North Korea's nuclear programme.³

India strictly opposes developing Pyongyang's nuclear programme to protect the interests of the US and its regional allies, especially South Korea and Japan, which rely on the US extended nuclear deterrence. Meanwhile, while pursuing its ambitions, India seeks to access modern military technologies and receive the support of the US and the Western world. Through its apparent role in DPRK's denuclearisation and representing itself as a stern opponent of nuclear proliferation, India is trying to pressure Pakistan with the support of the US and the Western world. India believes its contribution to US-led efforts to eliminate North Korea's nuclear arsenals would result in a harsher stance from the US towards Pakistan. To achieve these objectives, the Indian government has taken several diplomatic steps in recent years.

India's ambitions to acquire sophisticated weapons and the development of ICBMs demonstrate New Delhi's strategic ambitions and dual standards on nuclear proliferation and sophisticated weapons. On the one hand, India is modernising its defence capabilities and advancing the arms race in South Asia; on the other hand, it has aligned itself with the US to play its role as a peacemaker and mediator to bring stability to the Korean Peninsula. This article attempts to answer the overarching question: what is behind India's apparent role in DPRK's denuclearisation efforts? Why has India aligned itself with the US to contribute to DPRK's denuclearisation efforts? While conceptualising the role of India in DPRK's denuclearisation efforts, this article finds that India is pursuing its foreign policy objectives, which include representing itself as a potential country to the US to receive the support of the US and its allies towards its defence modernisation and becoming a regional hegemon, and pressuring its arch-rival, Pakistan, to shift the strategic balance.

Theoretical Framework

This research has been carried out through the lens of the Security Dilemma theory. The security dilemma concept is both a reality and a mentality. It is based on historical animosity, subjective perceptions of security, and conflicts that have occurred in the past, creating tension between states. Initially, the concept of security dilemma was coined by John Herz. Herz has provided a detailed account of the concept: "Groups and individuals who live alongside each other without being organised into a higher unity... must be concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, dominated, or annihilated by other groups and individuals.

Striving to attain security from such attacks, they are driven to acquire more and more power to escape the effects of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Because no state can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on."⁴ In the current international security landscape, many security dilemmas exist in the world, such as those between India and Pakistan and North Korea and South Korea. Since its inception in 1947, Pakistan has constantly viewed India as a security threat, mainly due to its strategic designs and pursuit of regional hegemony. This threat perception compelled Pakistan to develop nuclear weapons and deter Indian aggression. Hence, Pakistan's foreign policy is security-oriented and India-centric due to historical realities and India's current military posture.

Development of DPRK's Nuclear Program

North Korea has continued to pursue nuclear ambitions despite extreme international pressure. Since its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003, North Korea has defiantly continued to develop nuclear weapons. The Kim regime believes nuclear capability is vital to satisfy threat perceptions and deter external aggression. So far, it has conducted six nuclear tests. Recent years have seen an accelerated pace of DPRK's development of nuclear weapons, particularly ballistic missile tests that have exacerbated tensions, especially creating challenges for the US. In 2016, North Korea carried out two nuclear tests and over 20 ballistic missile launches, followed by 21 ballistic missile tests in 2017, including launching three intercontinental and two intermediate-range ballistic missiles.⁵ North Korea has tested long-range, short-range, intermediate-range, and tactical missiles and submarine-launched, train-launched, hypersonic, and cruise missiles.⁶ The International community, especially the US, has been trying to denuclearise North Korea through diplomatic and economic pressure. However, it has failed because DPRK perceives nuclear weapons capability as vital for the regime's protection and national survival.

The geostrategic location of North Korea, surrounded by great powers and its contention with South Korea, drives DPRK's pursuit of nuclear technology. North Korea deems its nuclear weapons capability as a vital source of deterrence against external threats and national survival. Considering that fact, North Korea believes that rolling back its nuclear programme is non-negotiable.⁷ Until the 1990s, DPRK's main goal had been the reunification of the Korean Peninsula. However, regime survival has become North Korea's most pressing goal.⁸

US Response to DPRK Nuclear Programme

For years, the UN, the US and its allies have adopted diplomatic measures and used economic sanctions to pressurise DPRK and persuade it to abandon its nuclear programme. However, the Kim regime has defiantly pursued nuclear ambitions. After DPRK's second nuclear test, the UN Security Council (UNSC), on June 12, 2009,

unanimously voted to tighten sanctions against North Korea. Since then, the UN, the US, and its allies have taken diplomatic steps and imposed tougher sanctions to punish DPRK for its nuclear test conducted on May 25, 2009, and ballistic missile tests.⁹

The international community, particularly the US, has been working to negotiate with North Korea and persuade the Kim regime to back off its nuclear programme. Nevertheless, these efforts have yet to bring productive results. In 1994, an agreement was signed between the US and North Korea under which Pyongyang agreed to freeze its plutonium weapons programme, and the US was bound to grant economic aid. The agreement could not end DPRK's intentions and collapsed in 2002. In January 2003, North Korea decided to be no longer bound under NPT. In response to this, the world powers (US, China, Japan, Russia and South Korea), in August 2002, initiated talks with North Korea. After remained a standstill in the early stage, it reached a significant breakthrough in 2005 when DPRK agreed to roll back all its nuclear programme and return to NPT. Additionally, the parties agreed on a framework for implementing the agreement in 2007. However, the talks collapsed in 2009, and DPRK announced its intention to withdraw from the agreements and never return to negotiations.¹⁰

After the end of the Korean War, the US sought to prevent the spread of communism in the region and promote its national interests. To this end, it positioned its military forces in Japan and South Korea and signed a security pact with these two countries. When the Cold War ended, it also resulted in a shift in the US foreign policy objectives in the region. Even though security concerns were part of US national security interests, the region's economic impacts on the US economy were perceived by Washington as a grave threat.¹¹

The region's significance in US strategic calculations emerged at the beginning of the 21st century after the new world order. For the US, in the post-cold-war period, protecting its national interests in the region by military means became even more important. Also, the US sought to promote economic interests in the region. The US strategic goals in the region are protecting its allies from aggression, promoting political and economic leverage, and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Hence, maintaining the status quo is vital to the US national interests in the region. Against this backdrop, North Korea's attempts to acquire nuclear capability constitute a significant security concern for the US. It is perceived mainly that North Korea's nuclear capability will challenge the balance of power, lead to an arms race in the region, and create economic instability. Hence, imposing economic sanctions on DPRK is intended to push the country into an economic crisis and, as a result, bring about a regime change to implement constructive security and monetary policies in the region, which is part of the broader US national security goals in the region.¹²

After withdrawing from Iraq in 2003, DPRK's nuclear issue again became the top agenda of the US security policy. In 2017, when North Korea, for the first time,

demonstrated the capability to strike long-range targets such as the US, North Korea's nuclear issues began to appear in the world's top news stories. The US seeks collaboration with allies and regional partners to achieve its regional foreign policy objectives.¹³ The US views South Korea as a potential country to achieve its regional interests. They are pursuing their common goal of promoting a regional strategy in which complete denuclearisation of North Korea is at the top of the agenda. The two countries are collaborating closely to develop bilateral and multilateral responses to ensure that DPRK does not threaten their interests.¹⁴

India-US Strategic Partnership and North Korea's Nuclear Programme

The beginning of the twenty-first century saw a major shift in US foreign policy. India and the US pursued contrasting policies during the cold war period. However, India emerged as a key country in the US network of alliances at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The Indo-US strategic partnership has increased its efforts on North Korea's nuclear issues. India has emerged as a potential US ally in promoting its national interests, including eliminating North Korea's nuclear programme and promoting its interests in East Asia.

In recent years, India has increased diplomatic efforts to halt North Korea's strategic programme. In support of the UNSC resolutions, the Indian government has adopted a stringent policy toward DPRK's nuclear programme. The current government of India has been more proactive in raising the issue of DPRK's nuclear programme. In 2017, the Indian government issued a notification, imposing a wide range of sanctions on North Korea, barring continuing to provide food and medical support. In addition, the same year, the Indian government issued another notification, imposing more sanctions on North Korea. As a result, India, the second-largest trading partner of North Korea, cut off its trade connections with the country.¹⁵

In September 2017, the Indian Minister of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj, during the UN General Assembly session, condemned DPRK's ICBM test and demanded an investigation into the countries that helped North Korea in developing nuclear technology.¹⁶ In addition, in January 2018, India participated in the Vancouver Dialogue, initiated by the US and aimed at finding options to resolve the perceived DPRK's nuclear issue. India also started to perceive Pyongyang's nuclear capability as a threat to its security.¹⁷ On March 25, 2022, India's permanent representative to the UN condemned North Korea's ICBM test, declaring it violated the UNSC Resolution. Also, the Indian government declared it a significant threat to regional and international security.¹⁸

The US has sought India's role in North Korea's nuclear issues in recent years. The US wants India to adopt strict diplomatic and economic policies towards North Korea. In 2011, the US ex-Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs said that Washington and New Delhi agreed to cooperate regarding North Korea's nuclear

issues.¹⁹ Furthermore, in July 2017, the US State Department's delegation visited India and sought New Delhi's proactive role in halting DPRK's nuclear programme by suspending diplomatic ties between New Delhi and Pyongyang. In the same year, when North Korea conducted tests of ICBM, Admiral Harry Harris, the US Pacific Command commander, emphasised India's role in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. He mentioned that India is a potential country and can play a larger role in North Korea's nuclear issue.²⁰

India's Relations with South Korea and Japan

India's improved ties over the past two decades have also helped New Delhi enhance diplomatic, defence and economic engagements with South Korea and Japan, key US regional allies which rely on US extended nuclear deterrence. Security challenges emanating from China's military expansion and North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons capability are central to the US, South Korea and Japan's foreign policy goals. India views its growing trade ties and security cooperation with South Korea as advantageous for its economy and enhancing regional goals. North Korea's nuclear threat has been the focus of South Korea's foreign policy. South Korea's Indo-Pacific (Asia-Pacific) strategy states India as a special strategic partner. South Korea sees India's role as important in North Korea's denuclearization.²¹

India's active role in the US-led international efforts to denuclearise North Korea has strengthened South Korea's military cooperation with New Delhi. In recent years, defence ties between Seoul and New Delhi have been deepened with the special strategic partnership established during Indian Prime Minister Modi's visit to South Korea in 2015. The two sides have signed numerous Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and agreements to strengthen their diplomatic, defence and economic ties. The Indian government's decision to cut off trade linkage with North Korea has further helped New Delhi strengthen relations with the US and South Korea. India is actively contributing to the containment of North Korea's aggression. India sees it as an opportunity to boost its diplomatic standing in the region and achieve its long-term goal of becoming a viable competitor to China. Moreover, New Delhi is seeking out the US and Western support to criticise Pakistan's nuclear programme, which is one of the main goals of India's strategic policies.²²

India's Ambitions vis-à-vis Pakistan

For seven decades, the assertive military posture of India has been the main factor in Pakistan's security-oriented and Indian-centric foreign policy. In 1965, India waged an undeclared war against Pakistan, followed by the war in 1971 that was a result of India's conspiracy with its active involvement.²³ In 1974, when India conducted its first nuclear test, Pakistan's threat perception towards India intensified. In 1998, when India conducted its second nuclear test, it became inevitable for Pakistan to deter India by responding with its nuclear tests. Eventually, on May 28, 1998, Pakistan successfully conducted its nuclear weapon tests and equalised its status

with India as a nuclear power state.²⁴ Since then, India has been trying to raise questions over Pakistan's nuclear programme with the help of its Western allies. Soon after Pakistan's successful nuclear test, the US imposed sanctions against Pakistan raising concerns over the safety and security of its nuclear programme. India also joined the US-led Western propaganda campaign against Pakistan's nuclear programme. In 2005, the Indian Foreign Minister accused world powers of failing to act against Pakistan for its alleged proliferation activities to draw the international community's attention to its nuclear arsenal and put pressure on Pakistan.²⁵

Over the past two decades, almost every Indian government has raised concerns and tried to create a technological nexus between North Korea and Pakistan. Under its apparent contribution to international efforts to halt DPRK's nuclear arsenals, the Indian government has been disseminating fake news about Pakistan's strategic programme. It is trying to pressure Pakistan with the help of the US and its allies, which support India in building conventional and nuclear weapons and increasing its defence capabilities.

India has been persistently trying to challenge the credibility of Pakistan's nuclear deterrent. At the doctrinal level, it has adopted proactive operations, cold start doctrine, seeking space for limited conventional operations, and practising these precepts in major war games. To counter Pakistan's ballistic missile delivery systems, it has pursued a ballistic missile defence programme at the technical level. It has also tried pressuring Pakistan on the political-diplomatic front by adopting a toughened stance on bilateral issues. Since coming into power, the Modi-led BJP government has adopted an aggressive military strategy, challenging Pakistan's conventional deterrence. India has prioritised modernising its military capabilities and persistently increasing military spending.²⁶ India not only seeks to dominate the South Asian subcontinent but is also trying to become a great power country. Motivated by 'Great Power Ambitions,' India has been trying to shift the strategic balance in its favour, causing concerns for Pakistan.

India's Double Standard on Sophisticated Weapons

Under the banner of its two-front war, India is pursuing its foreign policy objectives for achieving regional and global hegemony. India's quest for nuclear and conventional modernisation aims to become a great power nation. It has been engaged in developing ICBMs, but India faces no opposition or reaction from the US or the Western world. India is improving its nuclear force capability and credibility. On the one hand, India has aligned itself with the US-led international efforts to denuclearise the Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, it is advancing its military capabilities and conducting ICBM tests, directly threatening South Asia's already volatile security environment. India is developing and maturing its nuclear triad at a time when tensions in the Asia-Pacific are escalating. To show its nuclear deterrence against China, India tested an ICBM, Agni-5, in October 2021. The ballistic missile can strike targets with a range of up to 5,500 kilometres.²⁷

Since the launch of ICBMs by North Korea, India has been raising objections over North Korea's weapons modernising. India's double standards on peace and security are evident because it criticises DPRK for developing nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles and demands the international community's role in addressing the nuclear and missile technologies. At the same time, it is engaged in military modernisation that could lead to an increased arms race in the region and undermine strategic stability in South Asia. Moreover, its long-range missile capability, which can cover most of the Asia-Pacific region, threatens international security and disturbs the regional strategic balance.

India is already capable of targeting Pakistan's entire territory. India's acquisition of long-range missiles and developing submarine-launched missiles undermines global non-proliferation efforts. Also, it is threatening the strategic stability of South Asia. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) factsheet published in 2022, India stands first on the list of arms imports (2018-2022).²⁸ India is also advancing its nuclear capability and delivery systems and developing nuclear-delivery systems to counter China's growing conventional and nuclear capability.

India represents itself as a potential US ally in eliminating the nuclear programme of North Korea. Meanwhile, it seeks the US and Western advanced military technologies to enhance its military capabilities and achieve its strategic ambitions of shifting strategic balance in its favour. During the past two decades, the theft of over 200 kilograms of nuclear material has been reported in India, which is a serious source of concern. These incidents pose a serious threat of nuclear terrorism, demanding the due role of the international community and calling into question India's safety standards. These repeated nuclear theft incidents question India's arrangement for the safety and security of fissile material and signify the country's involvement in illegal nuclear activities.²⁹ There is an urgent need to investigate nuclear theft incidents in India. It is a blatant violation of the UNSC Resolution 1540.

India's double standard role in global politics has proven that the country has yet to have the potential to promote the US national interests but rather engages in promoting its dual objectives, which is evident from New Delhi's dichotomous role in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. The US and the West's support has only resulted in India's military modernisation and regressive military policies, which have intensified regional rivalries.

Conclusion

Pursuing nuclear weapons has been central to North Korea's foreign and defence policy objectives. DPRK has continued to develop nuclear weapons amid extreme international pressure to satisfy its perception of threat, ensure national survival, and deter external aggression. The US and its allies see it as a strategic challenge; hence, they have been working to end North Korea's nuclear programme,

which is nearly impossible. India, a key US ally in its grand strategy of containing China, is perceived as a potential facilitator for the US in its efforts to denuclearise North Korea. In recent years, New Delhi has adopted a double standard approach while keeping a more rigid stance towards Pyongyang's nuclear activities, especially its ICBM tests. The renewed Indian efforts to denuclearise DPRK are intended to secure US interests while extending India's power ambitions. India has increased efforts to explore mutual interests while advancing its strategic presence since the visit of the Minister of State for External Affairs of India to North Korea in May 2018 after a gap of 20 years. To achieve its dual objectives, India is attempting to create a false link between the nuclear programmes of Pakistan and North Korea. It continually claims Pakistan is involved in nuclear proliferation. The facts and records tell us that the case is otherwise, and the proliferating track could be found in India's policies which have put regional peace at risk.

In its recent efforts to contribute to the denuclearisation of North Korea, India is trying to raise questions over the strategic programme of Pakistan, which has earned repute and international recognition concerning its safety and security. Pakistan has emerged as a responsible nuclear state with a robust nuclear security culture. India's growing role in US-led security alliances, as well as its role in US-led international efforts to denuclearise North Korea, may lead to more anti-Pakistan rhetoric. India, for years, has been engaging with North Korea to develop and strengthen diplomatic ties through science and technology, research, and cultural agreements with direct engagement between the external affairs ministry of India and the foreign ministry of DPRK. With this, India assures North Korea not to take it as a US ally but as a neutral state that attempts to extend its bilateral cooperation. It shows the double standards of the Indian government towards nuclear proliferation issues.

Extending the bilateral ties in the science and technology domain is next to evolve in defence and military relations. In that case, the US and the West must keenly observe and reconsider their labels on nuclear proliferation or proliferators and arms race instigators. The US must reconsider its stance on India and Pakistan's factually based relations with DPRK. The US relaxation for India and its increased cooperation in the defence domain is undermining the strategic environment in South Asia. Also, it has resulted in a biased and discriminatory role of export controls and non-proliferation regimes. The US should realise that its military assistance to India could result in an arms race and undermine strategic balance in the region, thus leading to nuclear risks with far-reaching consequences. Also, it should ensure no discrimination against Pakistan at global forums. Pakistan must strengthen its diplomatic position in the international community and counter India and the West propaganda against its strategic assets. Also, Pakistan must counter India's ambitions of shifting the strategic balance in its favour and asserting undue pressure on Pakistan.

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