

# How conflicting interests of Russia, China, and US destabilise required equilibrium in Korean Peninsula

The inter-power rivalry has picked up steam in recent times due to provocative actions by the opposing sides

Maj Gen GG Dwivedi | Last Updated: August 13, 2023 19:01:12 IST



**In this photo provided by the North Korean government, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, right, with Russian delegation led by its Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visits an arms exhibition in Pyongyang, North Korea. The content of this image is as provided and cannot be independently verified. Korean language watermark on image as provided by source reads: "KCNA" which is the abbreviation for Korean Central News Agency. Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP**

The Korean Peninsula, named Chosun-'land of morning calm' by local tribals, sometime in 24th Century BCE has remained a contested territory since ancient times. The region was the scene of brutal wars involving Japan, Russia and China. Conquered and colonised, it changed hands between the trio; Japanese being the last rulers from 1910-45. As a sequel to the Japanese defeat in WWII, the Peninsula was partitioned along the 38th Parallel in 1945. This line soon transformed into an iron curtain, an ideological barrier between fanatic Communists in the North and liberal democracy in the South. With the growing tension between two incompatible systems, the stage was set for another global confrontation.

On 25 June 1950, North Korea under leadership of Kim Il-sung launched a blitzkrieg offensive against South Korea, hoping to unify the country. In barely three weeks, North Korean Forces overran most of South Korea. In a bid to halt the Communists expansion, the US led 'United Nation Command' (UNC) entered the War. Following the spectacular success achieved by General MacArthur, the US Administration contemplated unification of Korea and wipe out Communism from the Peninsula.

With over 200,000 Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) moving into North Korea by the beginning of November 1950, the course of War took yet another turn. Marked by a series of ups and downs, the conflict dragged on, finally reaching a state of stalemate around the 38th Parallel by May 1951. Marathon peace talks started thereafter, ultimately resulting in the signing of 'Armistice Agreement' between US and China-North Korea duo, on July 27, 1953.

Although fighting ended with the 'Armistice Agreement', provocative incidents continued through the Cold War, across the 'Demilitarized Zone' (DMZ), separating the two sides. The famous ones included the 'Blue House raid' when in January 1968 North Korea sent commandos to assassinate South Korean President Park Chung-hee and 'Axe Murder' incident in 1976 when North Koreans killed two US officers. Initially, DMZ a highly fortified defence line was envisaged to act as an instrument for containment of Communism. By the mid-1970s, the role of DMZ got redefined to become a key symbol of regional stability in the wake of tectonic geopolitical shift, marked by Sino-American rapprochement and Sino-Soviet split.

Post the Cold War era, the Korean Peninsula remained a key variable in shaping the security landscape of North East Asia. Towards the 1990s, inter-Korean diplomacy gained momentum and provocative incidents witnessed a significant decrease. There was substantial progress towards normalisation of bilateral relations in 2000 when leaders of two Koreas met for the first summit. However, North Korea continued to resort to strategic nuclear brinkmanship, culminating in the first nuclear test in October in 2006, leading to a shift in the strategic balance in the region. Here on, denuclearization of the Peninsula emerged as the most pressing challenge to the security architecture of North East Asia. Chairman Kim Jong-un went on to amend the national constitution in 2013 to pronounce North Korea as a 'nuclear state'. Washington's deterrence to persuade Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear and missile programme obviously failed to deliver.

The US remains wary of China using North Korea to further its strategic ambitions. China's primary interest is to maintain its hold on North Korea by ensuring stability of the regime and averting conflict on the Peninsula. Beijing has often resorted to coercive economic approaches to safeguard its interests; case in point imposing unofficial sanctions on Seoul as a reaction to the deployment of 'Terminal High Altitude Area Defence' (THAAD) in South Korea by the US. In view of convergence of interests, China has colluded with Russia in opposing extension of US led regional missile defence in the region. In 2018, Kim arrived on the international arena by holding summit meetings with President Trump in Singapore, later in 2019 at Hanoi and DMZ. Interestingly, post the meeting at DMZ, North Korea launched several short-range ballistic missiles highlighting the complexities of dealing with Pyongyang.

The inter-Korean dialogue gained traction once again in 2018 owing to South Korean President Moon Jae-in's pragmatic approach. Besides, he also served as an important channel between the US and North Korea. With Panmunjom and Pyongyang declarations in 2018, both Koreas decided to pursue military confidence building measures and economic cooperation initiatives. Over the past decades, vast array of actions have been undertaken to de-escalate tension on the Peninsula, including the 'six party frame work', 'carrot and stick' diplomacy, America's 'strategic patience' and China's 'Three Nos' (no war, no instability, no nukes) but failed to realise the policy objectives. In fact, the frequency of military provocations by Pyongyang increased sharply of late; with North Korea firing over 90 missiles in 2022 alone.

The inter-power rivalry has picked up steam in recent times due to provocative actions by the opposing sides. New agreements have been signed between the US and South Korea to deter North Korea, including commitment to deploy nuclear armed submarines in South Korea for the first time since 1980. Under the Washington Agreement unveiled in April 2023, a set of new steps have been taken to boost US-South Korean cooperation including military training, information sharing and strategic asset movement. South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy embodies its aspirations to reach out beyond its neighbourhood, evident from strengthening ties with Quad nations- especially Japan and India, besides ASEAN countries.

On the other side, proximity between Pyongyang, Beijing and Moscow is growing steadily. There have been reports of North Korea supplying military hardware, especially ammunition to Russia. Recently Russian Defence Minister Shoigu and Chinese Communist Party Politburo member Li Hongzhong were seen standing shoulder to shoulder with Kim at the celebration of 'Victory Day' Parade on the '70th Anniversary of end of Korean War' on 28 July 2023. Latest nuclear capable Hwang song 17 and 18 'intercontinental ballistic missiles' were on display at the Parade.

North Korea continues to rattle its neighbours with the development of advanced nuclear weapons and missiles, increasing chances of conflict on the Peninsula which could prove catastrophic. Given the complexities and divergent interests of major powers, maintenance of strategic equilibrium in the region remains a key challenge as resolution of prevailing imbroglio in the near future remains a remote possibility.

*Writer is a War Veteran, former Assistant Chief, served as Defence Attache in China, North Korea and Mongolia; currently Professor Strategic & International Relations. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely that of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.*