



NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR CRISIS: HOW WE GOT HERE AND WHERE WE ARE GOING

Speaker: Vipin Narang, Associate Professor of Political Science, MIT

Chair: Amb. Skand Ranjan Tayal

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The talk began with an outline of the ‘New Nuclear Era’ and its characteristics. According to the speaker, the first characteristic, great power nuclear arms competition, was revived when US withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019. He argued that the demise of the INF Treaty did not necessarily mean death knell for all nuclear arms control between the great powers but it did represent an increasing move away from an arms control regime that had entirely been about reductions. The US after withdrawing from the INF treaty has developed an option to develop and deploy intermediate range ground launch convention missiles not just in Europe but also in East Asia to counter what US calls, ‘the Chinese threat of Intermediate Range missiles’, given that most of China’s inventories are of intermediate range.

The extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), the speaker argued, was the second characteristic of the New Nuclear Era. The New START caps strategic deployments between US and Russia under the 1,550 system. US and Russia had seen a decrease in the strategic deployment since the end of Cold War. However, a re-election of Trump could entail a re-negotiation of the New START and also include China. The problem, Prof. Narang notes, is that the New START limits the number of deployed systems at 1,550 while the total number of China’s strategic systems deployment stands pretty close to zero. If China is included in the New START, it would mean that it is either an invitation for Beijing or it has to be included at a lower cap, a rather unlikely scenario. Russia, on the other hand, wants the new START to extend without any re-negotiation or pre-condition. If the Treaty does not get an extension then it would be the first time that there would be no arms control arrangement between the US, Russia and China since the end of Cold War. Discussing about the likely scenarios to occur in the event of an absence of constraint over the nuclear powers, the speaker states that with any wrong turn there is a clear possibility of escalation than de-escalation.

Elaborating upon the third characteristic, nuclear-proliferation, Prof. Narang argued that the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the eventual restart of uranium enrichment by Iran is a crisis that we are dealing with and have to deal with in the years

to come. Apart from its adversaries acquiring nuclear weapons, allies have also been acquiring nuclear weapons, as was evident in the case of South Korea. Since the US President is wary of sharing the support of defense system of its allies, the question rises if allies such as Japan, South Korea and Germany should develop an independent nuclear defense system.

Discussing about the North Korean nuclear program, the speaker argued that the Hanoi Summit in 2019 was the last opportunity where we could have tried to slowdown North Korea's nuclear program. He further added that there are three propositions vis-à-vis North Korea. First, as long as Kim Jong-un is in power, it is not going to give up nuclear weapons. He noted that the only state that has given up its nuclear weapon after developing them is South Africa. Secondly, the cases of Muammar Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein and Iran serve as a precedent to Pyongyang and Kim Jong-un recognizes the importance of being a nuclear power for regime survival. The speaker contended that the only option to deal with its nuclear program is to slow down the growth of the program, as counter-strike would be risky. This would imply that there can be a system where North Korea can put a cap on its warheads in exchange for sanction reliefs.

Tracing the growth of North Korea as a nuclear power, the speaker noted that it was in 2017 when North Korea became a full-fledged nuclear power state. In 2018, Kim Jong-un said that they would perfect their nuclear deterrence and mass-produce nuclear weapon capabilities for deployment and operational readiness which is seen as the beginning of Charm offensive. It was after the successful test of the thermal nuclear weapon's test that Kim Jong-un declared that he was ready to have a dialogue. In the same year, Kim Jong-un sent his sister to Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, which led to the Singapore summit, an opportunity he used to ratify North Korea as a legitimate nuclear power state, and get sanctions relief and recognition by the US. The Singaporean Declaration, which was eventually signed, Prof. Narang argued, is not a treaty but a roadmap, which states three points- trust building, peace treaty and complete de-nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. He added that the point on de-nuclearisation was vague as to what would constitute de-nuclearisation and had no agreed upon definition, a major reason contributing to the failure of the Hanoi Summit. The other reason was that the US went to the table without any bandwidth or foresight to slow it down, and there was no agreement about the scope and sequence. The scope refers to the agreement on the regions, which North Korea would lay bare as a site of its nuclear inventories, and sequence refers to who would take the first step the US of North Korea.

Responding to questions about China's role in the North Korean nuclear conflict, the speaker observed that it does not want North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons. For China, North Korea acts as a valuable buffer against Western powers. In his opinion, a collapsing North Korea is riskier for Beijing than a nuclear North Korea as it does not see nuclear North Korea as a threat to global security.

This report was prepared by Bihu Chamadia, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.

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