

Malaysia and the Question of North Korea. A US Led War against North Korea Would Affect the Entire Asia-Pacific Region

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A US led war against North Korea would affect the entire Asia Pacific region. It is crucial that ASEAN countries take a firm stance against Washington's first strike missile threats against the DPRK.

As outlined by Chandra Muzaffar, Malaysia has taken the lead. (M. Ch. GR Editor).

The Malaysian government has done the right thing in keeping the channels of communication with the North Korean Government open. It wants an amicable resolution of the friction arising from the murder of Kim Jong-Nam, the elder brother of the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-Un, at KLIA (Kuala Lumpur International Airport) 2 on the 13th of February 2017.

Prime Minister Najib Razak has made it very clear that Malaysia has no intention of severing diplomatic ties with North Korea.

The North Korean government has also adopted a positive stance. It has given a firm assurance to its Malaysian counterpart that the nine Malaysians who are still at the Malaysian Embassy in Pyongyang are safe and are allowed to carry on with their daily routine. However, they are barred from leaving North Korea. The Malaysian government has reciprocated by reiterating that North Koreans in Malaysia who are prohibited from leaving the country will not be harmed in any way.

These positive vibes from both sides should encourage the two governments to begin serious negotiations on a variety of issues pertaining to the current crisis. It is quite conceivable that the talking has already commenced. If a facilitator is required, the Chinese government would be the best candidate. It remains — in spite of its disillusionment with Pyongyang — North Korea's only real ally. At the same time, China and Malaysia are close friends.

Apart from lifting the bans on nationals from each other's country that Pyongyang and Putrajaya have imposed, the two governments will have to address the central question of Kim Jong-Nam's murder and the investigations being conducted by the Malaysian authorities. North Korea will have to concede that Malaysia has been rational and professional in its approach. It has adhered to international law and established norms in the handling of cases of this sort. For these reasons Pyongyang should extend its fullest cooperation to Putrajaya.

Going on the basis of North Korea's past record, it will not be easy to persuade its leadership to uphold the principles of international law. As a case in point, in spite of six sets of UN Security Council resolutions aimed at stopping North Korea's nuclear and missile tests, it continues to conduct such tests. The latest was its firing of two powerful Musudon medium-range missiles on the 1st of March 2017 one of which flew 400 kilometres into the Sea of Japan.

North Korea has often argued that it conducts these tests because the United States of America and South Korea continue to hold annual military war-games in its vicinity. The Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, has proposed that North Korea suspend its nuclear and missile tests while the US and South Korea halt their military exercises. A quid pro quo approach he hopes can bring the three parties to the negotiating table.

Once negotiations begin other outstanding issues can also be addressed. The recent deployment of the US's Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system in South Korea has undoubtedly exacerbated relations between South and North Korea and between South Korea, on the one hand, and China and Russia, on the other. China and Russia perceive THAAD as a system that alters significantly the balance of power within the region. THAAD, and the larger question of the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula should be discussed among all concerned parties.

In fact, denuclearisation was the focus of a six-party discussion from 2003 to 2008. North Korea, China and Russia, together with South Korea, Japan and the United States constituted the six parties and they met in Malaysia. Though the talks did not achieve their desired goal, there is no reason why an attempt should not be made to revive it. Immediate concerns such as missiles and THAAD rather than denuclearisation should be the main items on the agenda this time.

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