



Conflicts in the Gulf can only embolden North Korea

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Pyongyang's continued pursuit of its nuclear strategy will have wide implications for Asean.

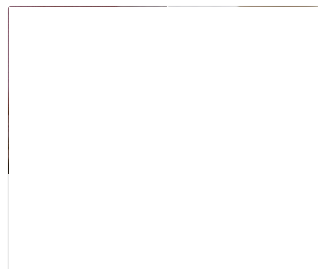


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The recent launch of approximately 10 ballistic missiles by North Korea into the eastern sea is more than a routine display of military bravado.

It is a stark reminder that the nuclear tensions of Northeast Asia cannot be geographically contained. Neither is Pyongyang intimidated by events in the Gulf and Iran.



Even regions far removed from the Korean Peninsula, including Southeast Asia, will inevitably feel the ripple effects of such destabilising acts.

According to South Korea's joint chiefs of staff, the missiles were fired from an area near Pyongyang.

Japan's defence ministry confirmed that they landed in waters outside Japan's exclusive economic zone.

While the immediate reaction has been measured, the symbolism of this move is unmistakable.

North Korea was responding to joint military exercises conducted by South Korea and the United States — exercises that Pyongyang routinely condemns as rehearsals for invasion. There are two major US-South Korea military exercises a year.

This familiar cycle of provocation and counter-provocation has long defined the strategic environment of the Korean Peninsula.

Yet what makes the current situation particularly alarming is the broader geopolitical context.

The world is already experiencing heightened tensions across multiple theatres — from the Middle East and Iran to Eastern Europe.

The Korean Peninsula, therefore, risks becoming yet another flashpoint in an increasingly unstable global order.

For Asean, the implications are far from abstract.

Although Southeast Asia lies thousands of kilometres away from the Korean Peninsula, the region cannot insulate itself from the consequences of nuclear brinkmanship.

Trade routes, economic confidence, and regional security perceptions are deeply intertwined with the stability of Northeast Asia.

Indeed, the economies of Asean are closely linked to those of South Korea, Japan, and China through complex supply chains.

Any serious military escalation involving North Korea would send shockwaves through the global economy, disrupting manufacturing networks, shipping lanes, and financial markets that Southeast Asian countries depend upon.

South Korea alone is one of Asean's most important economic partners.

It is a major investor in manufacturing, technology, and infrastructure across Southeast Asia.

Japanese investments likewise underpin countless industrial ecosystems in countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

If the Korean Peninsula were to descend into open conflict – even briefly – the resulting disruptions would immediately reverberate across Asean's economic landscape.

More fundamentally, North Korea's ballistic missile launches underscore the persistent danger of nuclear proliferation in Asia.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has spent decades developing increasingly sophisticated missile capabilities.

Some of these systems are capable of carrying nuclear warheads over intercontinental distances.

This reality fundamentally challenges the vision of Asia as a nuclear-free region.

Asean itself has long championed the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ), which was established through the Treaty of Bangkok in 1995.

The treaty represents a collective commitment by Asean member states to prevent the development, acquisition, or deployment of nuclear weapons within the region.

However, the presence of nuclear-armed states in Northeast Asia complicates this aspiration. North Korea's missile programme introduces a persistent strategic shadow over the entire Asia-Pacific.

Even if the DPRK has no direct intention of targeting Southeast Asia, the mere existence of such capabilities alters regional security calculations.

Moreover, North Korea's actions could indirectly encourage nuclear hedging among other states.

When a regime demonstrates that nuclear weapons can serve as a deterrent against external intervention, other governments may draw their own conclusions about the strategic value of such capabilities.

This is precisely why the Korean Peninsula remains one of the most dangerous nuclear flashpoints in the world.

From Asean's perspective, the preferred approach must remain consistent: diplomacy, dialogue, and restraint.

Asean has historically played a constructive role in facilitating diplomatic engagement on the Korean Peninsula.

Platforms such as the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) have provided rare opportunities for North Korean officials to interact with representatives from multiple countries in a relatively neutral environment.

Indeed, Malaysia's reputation for quiescent diplomacy enables it to host conversations that might otherwise be impossible in more confrontational settings.

Malaysia itself once maintained relatively cordial relations with North Korea.

Although these ties have deteriorated in recent years following diplomatic disputes, Kuala Lumpur still understands the importance of maintaining channels of communication.

Dialogue, even when difficult, remains preferable to confrontation.

The alternative – a spiral of military escalation – would benefit no one.

The joint military exercises conducted by South Korea and the United States are intended to strengthen deterrence.

From the perspective of Seoul and Washington, such exercises are necessary to demonstrate readiness in the face of an unpredictable adversary.

Yet Pyongyang inevitably interprets these drills as existential threats.

In response, it seeks to showcase its own capabilities through missile tests.

The result is a dangerous security dilemma: each side's attempt to strengthen its own defence appears aggressive to the other.

Breaking this cycle will require immense diplomatic patience.

For Asean, the task is not to take sides but to reinforce the principles of peaceful conflict management.

Southeast Asia has its own history of overcoming tensions through dialogue, from the normalisation of relations between former adversaries to the peaceful settlement of territorial disputes.

This experience offers valuable lessons.

At a time when major powers are increasingly prone to unilateral actions and coercive strategies, Asean's emphasis on consensus and multilateralism remains relevant.

North Korea's latest missile launches therefore serve as a reminder of the fragility of regional security.

They highlight the urgent need to revive diplomatic efforts aimed at denuclearisation and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Previous frameworks – from the Six-Party Talks to various bilateral engagements – have faltered.

But abandoning diplomacy altogether would only make matters worse. For Asean, vigilance is essential.

The region must continue to strengthen its economic resilience, maintain its commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, and support international efforts to reduce tensions in Northeast Asia.

Southeast Asia cannot afford complacency.

In an interconnected world, the launch of ballistic missiles from Pyongyang does not remain confined to the Korean Peninsula.

The geopolitical tremors travel far beyond Northeast Asia, reaching every region that depends on peace, stability, and open trade.

Asean, therefore, cannot avoid the nuclear tensions generated by North Korea.

But through careful diplomacy, principled restraint, and continued engagement, the region can at least help prevent those tensions from spiraling into catastrophe.

The views expressed are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of FMT.

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