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IPCS Forecasts

East Asia in 2015

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East Asia in 2015: A Forecast

The future political landscape of Asia-Pacific would largely be decided, arguably, by happenings in the East Asian region. It is so because in East Asia, the interests of three important players of world politics - the US, China and Japan - come in direct contact with one another. In the last few years, these key players along with South Korea and North Korea have been trying to review and realign their foreign policies according to the 'changing realities' of the region. These 'changing realities' are not routine and they have potential to fundamentally change the nature of inter-State relations in East Asia as well as in the whole Asia-Pacific region.

US and China

The first and foremost bilateral equation that is going to be important for the region is between the US and China. The course of contest, cooperation, coexistence or containment between them is going to be played primarily in the East Asian region. In 2015, it would be interesting to see whether an 'assertive China' competes with the US' 'Asian pivot' or whether both countries chart out a cooperative course for bilateral relations in the framework of the G-2, in spite of their several disagreements. In the past, the policies and behaviour of both have been to evaluate the extreme options and many more in-betweens.

However, in 2015, both of them would be pressed to take a clearer stand on their bilateral relations. There could be several possibilities between the two countries and it would be premature to say that any possible future is a given. Nothing is perordained and both the US and China are going to shape each other's choices, preferences and postures, and more importantly, the process is going to be a non-linear and complicated one.

China and Japan

The next important determinant for the East Asia region would be the trajectory of relations between China and Japan in 2015, the second and third biggest economies of the world. If they cooperate, they could create a huge positive thrust for the East Asian region and beyond. But if they opt for military containment or confrontation with each other, it would be a huge disaster for the region. From recent Chinese and Japanese behaviour, it seems that they are finding it uncomfortable to co-exist with each other as both look at regional politics in a zero-sum game model. In 2015, China and Japan need to make peace with the existing realities, and the recent meeting between Shinzo Abe and Xi Jinping may have begun the process of mutual accommodation.

Japan, in the process, would have to re-think its quest to become a 'normal' State and its recent ultra-nationalist rhetoric over history, territoriality and other issues. Similarly, China also needs to re-adjust the course of its 'peaceful rise', which for a majority of neighbouring countries is not seen as 'peaceful' anymore. In 2015, if China does not review its behaviour, such as its stand on the disputes in the South China Sea, East China Sea and so on, it could propel many of the neighbouring countries to work overtly to counter-balance China.

Inter-Korea Relations

In 2015, relations between North and South Korea would also be of significance. The Korean Peninsula is rightly identified as one of the flashpoints in East Asia and uneasy inter-Korea relations constitute the core of it. In the first two years of her rule, South Korean President Park Geun-hye has been unable to begin a meaningful dialogue and exchanges with North Korea. However, if she is able to make it happen in 2015, it will be a welcome sign for regional politics.

For almost four to five years, North Korea has been going through a phase of succession, and after so much animosity, Kim Jong-un's regime might realise that the same tactics may not work each time, which could lead to another phase of engagement with the international community. Inter-Korea relations are important because it brings in the US, China, Japan and even Russia into the process. The political game that would be played out between these big players, if the Korean Peninsula is weak and unstable, would undoubtedly destabilise the region and perhaps even the entire Asia-Pacific. Thus, a bilateral or multilateral mechanism to bring about a breakthrough in the inter-State impasse is required in 2015.

East Asia: A Strategy for India

For many decades, India has seemingly considered East Asia too far away geographically and has therefore lacked an integrated policy towards the region. India has been satisfied in maintaining bilateral relations with North Korea, South Korea, Japan and China separately and has tried to keep itself away from their bilateral rivalry in region. The Indian approach has been based on the consideration that India neither has interests nor the capacity to pursue them in the region.

However, in the changing Asia-Pacific dynamics as well as with India's growing economic and political stature, it has become unavoidable for India to articulate a coordinated policy for the East Asia region. India has not been able to keep itself aloof from the contest between China and the US or China and Japan. Similarly, it would insufficient to say that India would be able to maintain good relations with both Japan and South Korea without taking a stand on their bilateral disagreements.

India, which is an emerging power in the Asia-Pacific, must realise that the churning and transformation in East Asia is going to shape the politics of the Asia-Pacific in an important way. Thus, it is not only appropriate but also incumbent upon India to be a part of this process of changing regional politics. The new course of Indian foreign policy towards East Asia must be initiated in 2015 knowing well that the process would be difficult and time-consuming. It may bring both displeasure and support from various quarters, but a principled, consistent, transparent, and cooperative approach would ultimately be able to overcome it.

East Asia in 2014: A Review

I

US-China and East Asia at Crossroads

China, Japan, Korea and the US: Region at Crossroads

Japanese Prime Minister Shinjo Abe visited Yasukuni shrine on 26 December last year and the visit invited usual condemnations from China and South Korea. The US also reacted by saying it 'disappointing' and would lead to 'exacerbate tensions' in the region. However, Japanese posturing has been relentless and on the New Year day, Japanese Internal Affairs Minister Yoshitaka Shindo had another visit to the shrine. The tension and mistrust in East Asia has been escalating in recent years and Japan, China and North Korea have shown uncompromising intent to compete rather than concede and cooperate on the issues of mutual disagreements. China has recently declared its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) unilaterally, which goes beyond its contest in East China Sea with Japan over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. North Korea is also going through domestic power struggle and restructuring of equations with its closest ally China. In this problematic interstate relations in the region, the Japanese right-wing assertions in domestic politics and its impact on foreign policy has further complicated the security calculus of the region.

The East Asian region is closely connected in economic, educational and cultural spheres but there is a huge trust deficit in security arena and it poses a grave challenge for further economic exchanges and integration of the region. There are assurances that the tension among these countries would not move beyond a certain limit as economic interdependent would bring in moderation in their behaviours. However, the argument may not sustainable beyond a point. If the escalation of tension among these countries could not be checked, it may derail and disrupt their cooperation in every field.

The role of the US is considered to be important as it has leverage to pacify Japan and constructively engage China to make the region more stable. The US could also convey China to contain North Korean provocative behaviour as well as sock-observe any instability in North Korea. Washington has been trying to reach out Beijing through its diplomatic channel but there is no indication that it has been equally keen in pacifying Japan. The Japanese aggressive posturing, even if not openly appreciated by the US, has been granted silent consent by the US and it is quite unsettling for not only China but also South Korea. Japan has been cleverly silenced Washington by remaining fully committed to the US alliance and its interests in the regional politics. For example, the day after the Prime Minister Abe's visit to Yasukuni, Okinawa governor agreed to relocate the US military base at Futenma to near by Henoko. It was characterised as 'critical milestone' by the US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel. It appears that the US is more interested in its narrow national interests in the region and it does not have any serious objection with Japanese aggressive posturing. Probably, the US thinks that an assertive Japan would be a buffer against the rise of Chinese influence in the region. Many scholars relate American concession to Japan with its strategy of 'Asian pivot'. There are also speculations that probably the US does not have enough diplomatic leverage over Japan to stop its aggressive posturing and so it has decided to go along with Japanese plan of things rather than dictating its own terms.

Whatever be the reason, the complacency on the part of the US would definitely make it difficult for Washington have any credible and consequential engagement with China. China would not be satisfied by the use of words like 'disappointment' and it would definitely chart out its own course of actions, which might be detrimental for the regional security environment. The

Chinese announcement to have its own ADIZ could be better understood in the light of above dynamics. Furthermore, the US conceding and accommodative behaviour vis-à-vis Japan poses a difficult question to South Korea, which is equally close ally of the US in the region. Even though, South Korea enjoys security guarantee from the US, it has to rethink about its own security equations in the neighbourhood. South Korea is challenged by a belligerent and 'unpredictable' North Korea as well as an aggressive and uncompromising Japan. Seoul tried to forge a cooperative relationship with China in variety of areas when South Korean President Park Geun-hye visited Beijing in mid-2013. Although, it does not mean that South Korea would abandon its old ally- the US, in near future but continuous Japanese aggressive posturing and insufficient American attempt to prohibit it, may force it to review its relations with the US.

Thus, the East Asian region is at a crossroad and a vicious cycle of threatening and uncompromising behaviours have been posing huge risk of conflict. No single country could be blamed for present escalations and there have been chains of actions and reactions. It would be pertinent to see how soon all the stakeholders realise that the process must be stopped collectively or it may lead to a point of no return.

Obama's Visit: Deciphering US' Regional Intentions

The four-nation trip made by US President Barack Obama in April 2014 could be interpreted in many different ways. It was important as in October 2013, Obama was not able to participate in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit and many commentators read it as a dilution of the 'Asian pivot'. The recent visit had several objectives, and it seems that the US has been able to clearly convey most of its messages.

The first message was to China, and it conveyed that the US is not in agreement, at least at this point of time, with Xi Jinping's idea of a 'new type of great power relationship'. While the US commitment to the idea of its 'Asian pivot' could be debated, Washington seems to be serious about its commitment to its regional allies, Japan, South Korea, Philippines, and so on. Although Obama made it clear that the US did want to 'control' or 'contain' China, the message he sent across the region was loud and clear, and naturally, it created a big hue and cry in the Chinese media. The second goal was to persuade Japan and South Korea to be more accommodating of each other. It was indeed a tough job, and the US President tried to demonstrate his full commitment to Japan while at the same time cited historical references and the issue of comfort women to soothe South Korean sentiments.

He suggested that by being more 'honest' to the past, these issues could be resolved. He also said that more than the past, it is important to "also keep our eye to the future and possibilities of peace and prosperity." It was a clear message to its two closest allies that the US does not endorse their animosity and does not want to become a party to it. It would be interesting to see whether this message will be lost in the domestic politics of these two countries or will initiate a new phase in their bilateral relations.☐☐

The third message was the very inclusion of Malaysia in Obama's itinerary. Malaysia is considered to be a 'swing state' and the visit means that the US is interested in reaching out to more partners in Southeast Asia, apart from consolidating its relations with time-tested partners. However, Obama's attempt to forge a partnership with Malaysia has raised some

tough questions regarding human rights and other issues. It could arguably be called the most discomfiting leg of Obama's visit.

The only solace was that the itinerary was finalised and announced at least seven months in advance and China was aware that this was going to happen. ¶¶The fourth purpose of the visit was to send another resolute message to North Korea that the US is in no mood to change its tough but consistent policy of 'strategic patience', and is not ready to negotiate with a nuclear North Korea. This message was also conveyed during the Nuclear Security Summit in March 2014 in The Hague to Xi Jinping, when he proposed a renewal of the Six-Party Talks with North Korea. During Obama's visit to Seoul, there was speculation that North Korea might conduct a fourth nuclear test. However, Obama was not deterred by the shadow of a possible North Korean nuclear test and said that it would 'further isolate' North Korea and invite more 'biting sanctions'. ¶¶The fifth and most obvious message Obama gave to China during his visit was with regard to the Philippines. Although he did not name China, he said that sovereignty, territorial rights, international law, and freedom of navigation must be respected. He expressed the US' 'iron-clad' commitment to the Philippines' security, and emphasised that all disputes must be settled peacefully, and not by intimidation and force.

It was a clear message to China regarding its behaviour in the South China Sea and territorial disputes with the Philippines. The US also has a defence deal with the Philippines which would bring back US troops to the country at a much larger scale.¶¶

The sixth and probably less discussed objective of the visit was canvassing for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The partnership is one of the most important economic negotiations currently underway, one which seek to establish a free-trade regime for countries that constitute 40 per cent of the world's GDP. Most importantly, it excludes China.¶Thus, Obama's visit to East Asia sent clear messages about the US' intentions to friend and foe alike. Now, the question is whether the US has the capacity to execute these intentions given the complex equations in regional politics and Chinese responses to the US' messages. It is said that clarity of intent and consistency of policy is not necessarily a merit of foreign policy in international relations, and an assessment of the visit at this point would be premature.

II

A Thaw in China-Japan Relations?

Abe-Jinping Summit Meet

After almost two years of the election of Shinzo Abe as the Prime Minister of Japan, he and Chinese President Xi Jinping met for the first time at a summit meet on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) gathering in Beijing on 10 November 2014. Shinzo Abe and Xi Jinping have deliberately avoided each other since coming to power. The rivalry between China and Japan over the islands in the East China Sea and other maritime and historical disputes have overshadowed huge economic exchanges and the dependence that both countries have on each other. Many have commented that if their foreign policy courses are not corrected, it would have a destabilising effect on the region. Thus, even though the meeting between Xi

Jinping and Shinzo Abe lacked substance and was more symbolic, it has been appreciated as a positive gesture from both sides.

The second and third largest economies of the world have had strong disagreements on political, security and strategic issues for some time. In Asian politics, one is considered to be a rising power and the other also seeks to maintain its foothold and be more assertive. In an era when the Asian political landscape is a contested arena both for the countries (new and old regional powers) and for the models of inter-state relations (cooperative and balance of power), the bilateral relations between China and Japan have been and should be followed with keen interest.

The economic exchanges between the two countries have been one of the largest in the world but in the past few years, it has been a bit derailed by politics. It is said that the year 2010 was the turning point in their bilateral relations. This year, China replaced Japan as the second largest economy in the world and in September 2010 a crisis erupted when a Chinese trawler collided with Japanese patrol boats near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. It has also been said that the incident was blown out of proportion because of some disputes related to the export quotas of rare earth minerals. While this may or may not be true it was definitely a new moment in Asian politics in which Japanese economic superiority was surpassed by China.

For almost two and half decades, Japan found solace in being the number one economy in Asia and number two economy in the world, despite a stagnant economic growth. It might be claimed that China catching up with Japan in the economic sphere was hard for Japanese people to accept and it was one of the factors, along with rising nationalism, that provided Shinzo Abe with the support for his assertive policy. Japan was probably uncomfortable to coexist with an economic equal in the neighborhood. When the Japanese government decided to buy three islands of the Senkaku/Diaoyu in September 2012, it led to a huge political and diplomatic crisis between the two countries. Strong posturing and words were exchanged and it severally affected their bilateral economic exchanges. These events affected bilateral trade and the Japanese investment to China has since gone down by almost 50 per cent in the first nine months of 2014.

Meanwhile, China has also been negotiating its future course, both external and internal, and how a stronger China would stand in Asian politics. There was a consensus that China should work for its 'peaceful rise' or economic growth rather than overtly making political and strategic assertions. In 2010, when the Chinese economy became the second largest economy in the world, the hawkish forces in China started demanding a more assertive China. The aggressive Chinese behaviour in the trawler collision incident, Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands disputes, South China Sea disputes, and declaration of ADIZ could be linked with pressure from Chinese political hardliners who want a more assertive China as they believe that China now has enough economic clout to sustain it.

By recasting China-Japan relations in this manner, it can be said that the change in economic equations between the two made them aggressive and assertive - one because of over-confidence and another because of a sense of loss. A military conflict between China and Japan is hard to visualise and the economic implications of the present bilateral rivalry have been bad for both the countries.

Thus, the meeting between Xi Jinping and Shinzo Abe might be an important course correction for mutual coexistence with an acceptance of the new realities by both China and Japan. It does not mean that political and security rivalry related to the future of Asia and their roles in it would be resolved once and for all. The way both countries made claims and counter-claims about the 'agreed' issues of the summit meet make it clear that it would be premature to say that it is a thaw in their relations. But it is definitely a new beginning in the contest of 'who blinks first'.

Japan: Implications of Indiscriminate Assertiveness

Shinjo Abe's unrelenting tough approach towards China is arguably the second most important development in recent years in East Asia after the growing military might of China. There is lots of support across the region for his policy of 'staring at China' on the Senkaku/ Diaoyu islands disputes, especially among those countries, which have been uncomfortable with growing 'Chinese assertiveness' in the region but unable to stop it. The US stance has also been overall supportive to the changed posture of Japan.

However, Abe's indiscriminate assertiveness, which hurts South Korea and other regional players, would be unable to achieve desired results. There are critiques of Japanese foreign policy, who point out that Japan has not been able to create trust in any of its neighboring countries such as South Korea, North Korea, Russia, and China. Thus, Japan needs to moderate its assertiveness and make it more nuanced to make it more palatable and wide-based.

The biggest problem in Shinjo Abe's approach is that it entirely disregards 'goodwill capital' of Japan, which has been accumulated in the post-World War-II period. Japan evokes a very different kind of state behaviour, which denounced use of force in resolving inter-state disputes and concentrated on welfare of people inside its own territory and beyond. The concept of official development assistance (ODA) became synonym of the Japanese economic assistance to many Asian, African and Latin American countries. Japan could and must utilize this 'capital' for creating a network of relations across the region along with economic interdependence and people-to-people contacts, which would make it costly for China or any other countries to becoming assertive. It does not mean that Japan could be complacent on its defense preparedness, however, it does need to be approached in a framework of cooperative security involving as many as possible like-minded countries of the region. Japan has been respected for its peace-constitution and enough deliberation must happen before abandoning the alternate model of Japan.

Even if, Japan decides to make a paradigm shift in its foreign policy approach, which seems to be the case under Shinjo Abe, it must be more careful in articulating it. First and foremost, it is advisable to Japan to work on its defense preparedness without too much rhetoric directed against one or other country. In 2013, Japanese defense budget was increased to Yen 4.77 trillion which was an increase first time after 2002. The increase in itself is enough to create suspicions in the minds of observers and any sharp words are further going to create mistrust in the regional countries. Probably, Japan could learn from China, which continues augmenting its defense capabilities but keeps talking about 'peaceful rise' and 'harmonious development'.

Secondly, even if Shinjo Abe administration intends to be tough towards 'Chinese assertiveness', Japan needs to be more careful about its other neighboring countries including South Korea. In last one year of his term, South Korea-Japan relations have further deteriorated. It would not be enough to say that South Korean government has either been too much sentimental or playing

the game of domestic populism. When Japanese ministers, members of parliament and Shinjo Abe himself visits Yasukuni shrine, it is well-known that South Korea would not take it easy. When, insensitive statements are given and confrontational actions are taken on the issues related to history disputes, comfort women and Dokdo/Takeshima islands disputes, it is going to affect South Korea's perception about Japan and its intensions. Rather than expecting South Korea to be more accommodative to the new posture of Japan, a more conciliatory approach must be adopted in dealing with South Korea. By using all possible channels of communication, it must be conveyed to South Korea in a credible manner that in the Japan's contest with China, Tokyo would seek cooperation from South Korea.

Thirdly, Japan also must re-emphasize that it would like to have more cooperation with the US and other democracies in the region such as South Korea, Australia and India. It would be a different paradigm for the Asian security architecture in which a multipolar, inclusive, open and rule-based structure is sought for. In case, Japan tries to counter 'Chinese assertiveness' by its own assertiveness, it might be considered no different than China. To have a different framework needs emphasis on involving all possible partners and creating regimes, institutions and structures rather than having a tit-for-tat approach.

The recent visit of Shinjo Abe to India probably could be used as the beginning for a more nuanced Japanese assertiveness in the regional politics, which would try to create network of multilateral partnerships. India, though has avoided to express any opinion on Japanese indiscriminate assertiveness, would be more comfortable if Japan tones down its rhetoric. Similarly, it would be easier for the US to keep both Japan and South Korea, two of its closest allies in the East Asia, together. The changed Japanese approach would also be in consonant with Australian foreign policy approach. Japan needs to realize that to contest with China on the turf created by China would not only be dangerous but also be an isolating exercise and it must be avoided.

III

North Korea: Seeking New Friends?

North Korea appears to have become increasingly desperate in its behaviour. It executed its number two leader Jang Song-thaek in December 2013, called South Korean President Park Geun-hye a 'prostitute' and the US President a 'pimp' in April 2014, characterised China as 'spineless' in July 2014, and fired around one hundred short-range missiles in the East Sea in June-July 2014. North Korea's desperate behaviour has not been able to bring any change in the US and South Korean postures but it has definitely alienated China.

South Korea's tough posture, the US policy of 'strategic patience' and the growing economic and political hardships and isolation of North Korea have been problematic for the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. North Korea had tried to come out of the crisis by being tough and uncompromising as it did in the past. Through nuclear and missile tests in early 2013 and escalation of military tensions in mid-2013, it tried to show that pressure and sanctions would not work and South Korea and the US must go back to placating North Korea. However, North Korea miscalculated not only South Korean or American responses but also Chinese in the latest round of hostilities.

It is important to underline that China provided North Korea the strategic space in which it could independently deal with the US and South Korea, and China did not either intervene in it

or find it discomforting. However, it seems that North Korea went beyond this strategic space. Military tension escalated in the region when North Korea loudly opposed - both in words and actions - the South Korea-US joint military exercise in April 2014. The North Korean justification was that the US had brought its more advanced weaponry in the region as well as installed a missile defence system in Guam. North Korea-China relations became estranged and China started cooperating more substantially with the international community in putting sanctions on North Korea.

The execution of Jang Song-thaek was symbolic of the growing distance between North Korea and China as he was supposed to be close to China. Rather than amending its ways, North Korea in a way challenged or warned China not to expect any compromise from it. This growing distance can be understood from the fact that the new Chinese and South Korean Presidents have been able to have two summit meets in both countries but there has been no visit by China's top leaders to North Korea.

North Korea probably wants to convey to both its rivals and friends that it would not succumb to any pressure and the only way to deal with it is engagement. It wants to send this message by resorting to the escalation of military tension and rhetoric. But it seems that the new Chinese leadership is not in agreement with this North Korean strategy. China has also been looking at the broad regional equations in which it has to deal with an assertive Japan, ambivalent US and a possible partner in South Korea.

North Korea has also been looking to inculcate new partnerships and entertained a Japanese official delegation in Pyongyang for talks on the issue of Japanese abductees in April 2013. Japan and North Korea have been meeting to discuss this issue since May 2014. North Korea has been exploring in Japan a potential partner, which might be able to lessen the international isolation and pressure. North Korea thus appears to be utilising the Japanese isolation in the region in its own favour. Since 2013, North Korea has also been trying to reach out to Russia as its relations with China have not been smooth. In May 2014, Russia wrote off US\$10 billion in loans to North Korea and there have also been a few important bilateral visits from both sides.

In an unprecedented move in July 2014, the North Korean media called for the strengthening relations with Russia on the 11th anniversary of a summit between Kim Jong-il and Vladimir Putin. In the same context, there was no official statement on China-North Korea relations in on the 33rd anniversary of its Friendship Treaty with China. It has also been reported that North Korea's trade with Russia reached up to US \$104 million in 2013 with a rise of 37.3 per cent. To further the exploration of new relations, the North Korean foreign minister is to visit Vietnam, Laos, Singapore, Indonesia and Myanmar before he attends the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Myanmar.

However, this search for new partners would not be able to compensate for its growing distance from China. There are still expectations that not everything is lost in China-North Korea relations and it is also not easy for China to fully abandon North Korea. However, Pyongyang's overture towards Japan is going to be the key and would be most keenly watched in Beijing. If North Korea crosses the Rubicon, China will have to seriously re-think its North Korea policy.

North Korean Peace Gestures and Inter-Korea Relations

A lot has been happening in North Korean domestic politics as well as its relations with South Korea in recent months. Some of these happenings appear to indicate that there may be some improvement in the relationship between Pyongyang and Seoul. But some other events indicate that rivalry and hostility between them is not going to abate in the near future.

A day after North Korea threatened to wipe out South Korea, Kim Jong-un proposed to stop all slandering - in speech and in action - by both North Korea and South Korea, from 30 January 30 (beginning of the lunar new year). North Korea agreed to family reunions after seven years but kept postponing dates for one reason or another. The recent round of family reunions happened from 20 to 25 February. However, on 26 February, North Korea reportedly fired four missiles. These contradictory happenings pose serious challenges to our understanding about North Korean approach and intentions. North Korean peace gestures along with its contrary behaviour must be seen through a broad framework of inter-Korean rivalry.

At present, any North Korean reconciliation with South Korea will arise out of four important sources. First, North Korea may realise that the path of confrontation with South Korea is futile and their military and economic security would be better served if they cooperate with Seoul. Second, North Korea may respond to a sincere, sustained and long-term vision to co-exist as proposed by South Korea in its North Korea policy. Third, North Korea may have to address instability in its domestic political and economic domains and try to show its people that Kim Jong-un is the main driver in inter-Korean relations, which would provide legitimacy to him. Fourth, North Korea may be forced by external players, especially China, to cooperate and make peace gesture towards South Korea.

It seems that the recent North Korean peace gestures are driven not by the first two reasons, and domestic legitimacy and external pressure are the more probable reasons for its changed behaviour. Actually, North Korean survival strategy or intent towards South Korea has not changed much in these months and the execution of Jang Song-thaek means that reform and reconciliation with South Korea is not high on the North Korean agenda. Pyongyang is also sceptical about the South Korean trust politik as the policy seemingly demands trust from North Korea first and then promises to reciprocate. Thus, it is clear that North Korea has also not been responding to the South Korean trust-building process.

Basically, Pyongyang has been making peace gestures towards South Korea either to address its own domestic situation or to show the outside world, especially China, that it is positive and constructive in its rapprochement towards Seoul. The North Korean economy has been in bad shape for decades, and after another round of economic embargo following the Unha-3 rocket test in late-2012 and a third nuclear test in February 2013, economic conditions have further deteriorated. The much publicised execution of Jang Song-thaek also indicates that there are serious challenges to the political stability of the regime. By initiating a few peace gestures towards South Korea, Kim Jong-un wants to garner favourable international opinion and economic assistance. Moreover, if South Korea positively responds to North Korean gestures, it may be projected in North Korea as the result of the young leader's initiatives, thus providing him with domestic legitimacy.

The pressure of China on North Korea to abandon or minimise its provocative actions and behaviours is also significant, and has made it increasingly difficult for China to support North

Korea in the context of international pressure not to do so. In March-April 2013, hostility on the Korean peninsula reached a dangerous level in the wake of a joint military exercise between South Korea and the US and almost daily power-assertions across the 38th parallel between North and South Korea. It provided an excuse to the US to bring high-tech weapons and aircraft to the region and establish a missile defence system at Guam military base. It was dangerous to Chinese interests and China has been trying to push North Korea against any such escalation in future. North Korean peace gestures could also be linked to the Chinese factor.

The contradictions in North Korean behaviour exist because of being less genuine. It wants to show its own people and the outside world that it is constructive and seeks peace with South Korea. Since the initiatives do not emanate from any fundamental shift in its perception about itself or South Korea, there is an in-built inconsistency in its behaviour. North Korea must realise that a genuine peace gesture entails more consistent rapprochement with South Korea and this would only bring positive results for its economic, political and legitimacy deficit. South Korea has also to show that its trust politik is fundamentally different from the previous South Korean administration's tough policy towards Pyongyang. It would be quite fruitful if Pyongyang makes more genuine peace gestures and Seoul responds more positively in dealing with North Korea.

China-North Korea: Reasons for Reconciliation

On the occasion of the third death anniversary of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il on 17 December 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping sent a special message to the North Korean embassy in Beijing. The Chinese President underlined the significance of their "traditional friendship." Xi Jinping also said that that China "is ready to work with the DPRK to maintain, consolidate and develop the traditional friendship."²²

It is definitely a clear departure from the recent attitude of Xi Jinping and China towards North Korea. First, the message was delivered to the North Korean embassy in Beijing by the fifth highest official in the Chinese Communist Party hierarchy, Liu Yunshan. Second, it has been the most open and straight forward statement by the Chinese President emphasising China's old friendship with North Korea since he assumed power in early 2013. Third, it was given on the occasion of the third death anniversary of Kim Jong-il, which according to the Confucian tradition means the end of the official mourning period and beginning of the new leader's rule. In a way, it means granting legitimacy to Kim Jong-un, who has had a few differences smooth with China since coming to power. Fourth, Xi Jinping's statement and the profile of the Chinese delegate to the North Korean embassy are very significant because they happened despite China not being officially invited to the death anniversary programme in North Korea. ²³

What were China's Objections?²⁴

The China-North Korea relationship has been derailed in recent years. China's first and foremost discomfort with Pyongyang is related to the North Korean nuclear programme, not because of it does not want a nuclear North Korea but more because it would bring a direct US strategic response to the region. The North Korean nuclear programme may also propel South Korea and Japan to move on a similar course of nuclear weaponisation. The second important Chinese

objection is the lack of economic reforms. China apparently wants North Korea to adopt Chinese-style reform if it wants to survive and survive well. China was reportedly disappointed with Kim Jong-un on both accounts, and 2013 was particularly disappointing for bilateral relations.

In February 2013, North Korea had its third nuclear test, which invited sharp international criticism. In March-April 2013, North Korea escalated military tensions and rhetoric towards South Korea and the US when they were conducting their annual joint military exercise. North Korea cut-off hot line communications with South Korea and closed down Gaeseong Industrial complex. In spite of Chinese persuasion, North Korea escalated the situation to a point that prompted the US to send its state-of-the-art weapon systems to the region and install a missile defence system at Guam. In December 2013, North Korea executed the number two in the North Korean power hierarchy, Jang Song-thaek, who was supposed to be the closest to China and was pro-reform. It was reported that a clear signal was being sent to China. Xi Jinping tried to put pressure on North Korea by cooperating with the international community on the issue of economic sanctions after the nuclear tests and by having two summit meets with South Korean leader Park Geun-hye without any high-level Chinese visits to North Korea.

Context of Rapprochement:

However, it seems from recent developments that China has decided to reach out to North Korea even though North Korea does not look ready to change its course. There are important reasons for this. One, China has been disappointed by South Korean reciprocity, as despite good Chinese posturing, South Korea is still not ready to think beyond its primary ally in the region, the US. Two, US, South Korea and Japan recently signed a trilateral intelligence-sharing agreement related to threats emanating from North Korea. China has criticised this move and considers that the mechanism might be used to share information about China as well. Three, China does not find it appropriate on the part of the international community, especially the US, South Korea and Japan, to become 'over-proactive' on the issue of human rights violations in North Korea.

Although because of the veto from China and Russia, the matter could not move forward, it was definitely a coordinated move to declare North Korean human rights violations 'crime against humanity' and refer it to the International Criminal Court (ICC). China worries that such precedents would be bad for Beijing. Four, North Korea over the past year had been moving closer to Russia. In December 2014, No Kwang-chol, vice chief of the General Staff of the North's Army met his Russian counterpart, and Choe Ryong-hae, the Workers' Party of Korea secretary met Russian Foreign Minister and pledged to improve bilateral defence and economic relations. Furthermore, Russian President Vladimir Putin has invited North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to Moscow in 2015.

All these developments have made China rethink its policy of putting pressure on North Korea and it seems that a new beginning in the estranged bilateral relationship might be sought by Xi Jinping. China has taken the first step in the process of rapprochement, now it's up to North Korea to respond.

IV

South Korea's External Relations**More Rhetoric, Less Content?**

South Korea's foreign relations especially in East Asia are in a state of impasse under the current President Park Geun-hye. During the last President Lee Myung-bak, it was clear that South Korea gave priority to its alliance with the US and resultantly drifted away from its closest economic partner, China. The current President Park Geun-hye from the very beginning wanted to balance this over tilt. She tried to implement a two-leg policy, and made her first 'official visit' to the US and first 'state visit' to China, emphasising the importance of both in the foreign policy calculus of the country. It was indeed a very perceptive move. Similarly, South Korea under the current administration declared the initiation of 'trust politik' towards North Korea, which was a correction to the unconstructive hard-line policy of the previous South Korea administration. It was considered to be the right choice to pacify North Korea and engage it in meaningful dialogue towards denuclearisation, economic reform, and ultimately, bringing about a peace regime on the Korean peninsula.

However, it seems that in both of these foreign policy objectives, South Korea has not been able to move forward as expected. South Korea appears to put more emphasis on rhetoric and showmanship and less on content. South Korea sought Chinese support in its dealings with North Korea, and as a quid-pro-quo, showed its agreement with Chinese objections to Japan's assertive behaviour. However, this was not considered sufficient by China. China expects more from South Korea based especially on Shinzo Abe's approach towards Japan's historical and territorial disputes with the former.

China was expecting South Korea to show restraint in the process of partnering with the US' strategic games in the region. South Korea has recently announced its part in the US THAAD missile defence system in East Asia and also declared that it would not take over the operational command (OPCON) of the joint forces during the war-time until 2020s, which was supposed to be taken over in 2015. There are reports that this has led China to re-contemplate its relations with North Korea. Reports also say that the Chinese Ambassador to North Korea has become more active in his engagement with North Korea.

The foreign policy objective of the current South Korean government might be different than the previous one, but it appears to be gradually but surely moving on the same path and towards the same destination. For the first time there have been confirmed reports that China was decisively unhappy with North Korea and was ready to work with South Korea to resolve the North Korean issue. If China drifts away from South Korea, it would be a huge loss for Seoul.

South Korea's North Korean policy has also been more rhetorical and less pragmatic. The 'trust politik' seems to have got the sequencing wrong as North Korea is expected to make a gesture first. There are lots of activities to begin inter-Korea talks, and South Korea has recently constituted the Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation. However, one of the two Vice-Presidents of the Committee states that South Korea should 'wait out' North Korea. Basically, the current South Korean government's emphasis on a 'principled engagement' with North Korea is not very different from the previous government's hard-line policy. So, the result of this 'trust politik' has also been a deadlock. Basically, it seems that South Korea, rather than

reaching out to North Korea and Japan, is making proclamations meant for its domestic audiences.

Regarding South Korea's estranged bilateral relations with Japan, the blame could largely be attributed to the 'indiscriminate' assertiveness Japan under Shinzo Abe. Japanese assertiveness vis-à-vis China does have some reasonable explanations but it does not make any sense to distance South Korea and push it towards China. However, South Korea has also been inflexible and the Park Geun-hye has deliberately avoided any meeting with Shinzo Abe. This gesture might be useful for evoking popular sentiment in South Korea but it cannot be called strategic in terms of foreign policy. It would definitely be more productive to talk and with Japan and try to persuade it to moderate its stand.

From the Indian perspective, it seems that South Korea's foreign policy is equally dissatisfactory. The previous South Korean administration under Lee Myung-bak had the 'New Asia Initiative' policy to reach out to the Asian neighbourhood including India in a more proactive manner. It was an important departure from the past when South Korea was more involved with big regional players such as China, Japan, the US and Russia. President Park Geun-hye tried to carry forward this policy and visited India in the very first year of her office. However, her attempts to reach out to Southeast Asia have been weak or at least inconsistent. For example, she decided to visit India at the wrong time: when the UPA government was about to end its term. More than anything else, Park Geun-hye has been too complacent in reaching out to the new Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. India and Japan have forged several new ties and strengthened old ones in the past few months but there have not been enough proactive South Korean attempts to reach out to the new Indian government.

The Park Geun-hye administration still has more than three years of office. During this time, South Korea can learn from its non-achievements and become more comprehensive and strategic in its foreign policy making, and also detach itself from domestic political demonstrations.

China-South Korea: Changing Dynamics of Regional Politics

Chinese President Xi Jinping's two-day visit to South Korea on 3-4 July 2014 is symbolic of a nascent but important change in East Asian political equations. For the first time, a Chinese President visited South Korea before meeting with the North Korean leader. Many observers feel that this is an important shift in Chinese policy towards the Korean peninsula. The growing Chinese exchanges with South Korea in economic and other spheres are not new, but Beijing has always maintained that this does not mean a dilution of its relations with Pyongyang, which has until now been characterised as 'a special relation'. However, it seems that the recent North Korea behaviour has annoyed China decisively.

North Korea of late appears to not be listening to Chinese suggestions and seems to be creating problems for Chinese interests in regional politics. The third nuclear test, execution of Chang Seong-thaek and several missile tests might be seen as an embarrassing situation for China; China has thus been moving closer to South Korean position. Beijing stressed a "nuclear weapons-free Korean peninsula" during the summit meet with the South Korean President Park Geun-hye in Beijing in 2013. However, he was more direct during the recent visit to Seoul and

expressed that China would not like “any development of nuclear weapons on the peninsula.” It is an important achievement for South Korea, which wanted China to be more direct in opposing the North Korean nuclear programme.

Xi Jinping has seemingly been trying to use the growing gap between the US and South Korea over the aggressive Japanese postures on territorial, history and security issues. The US has not been keen to stop Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s revisionist behaviour. China perceives it an important opportunity to reach out to South Korea, who is an important partner in the US-Japan-South Korea security partnership. The Chinese attempt to use South Korean discontent with the US over conceding to the aggressive Japanese postures would not be easy and immediate but in the long-term it may bring very important changes in the regional political equations. Xi Jinping’s visit to Seoul has challenged US foreign policy-makers to reconsider their generous concessions to Japan.

Xi Jinping’s visit also has to do with the growing assertiveness of Japan. China is aware that South Korea has been equally worried about the Japanese claim over the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands, the review of Kano’s statement, insensitive statements on the comfort women issue, and regular visits to Yasukuni shrine by Japanese leaders. One day before Xi Jinping’s visit to Seoul, Japan reinterpreted its constitutional provision and expressed that it has every right to keep defence forces. China is also interested in using South Korean anger against Japan for deciding to conduct a joint investigation with North Korea on the Japanese abductees who were abducted by North Korea in the late 1970s. Japan has relaxed some sanctions on North Korea in the context of this joint investigation.

Xi Jinping has been very subtle in his approach to reach out to South Korea. He has been trying to placate South Korea by indicating to Seoul that the US gives more priority to its alliance with Japan than South Korea. He is also sending a clear signal to South Korea that if Seoul reconsiders its alliance with the US, China is also ready to re-think its relations with North Korea. However, China is aware that South Korean connections with the US and Japan are strong and it would not be easy or straight forward for South Korea to change sides from the US to China. In the immediate future, China would be satisfied if South Korea takes up more autonomous foreign policy-making. Xi Jinping has been working to create a broader plan for an alternate Asian economic and security architecture in which he emphasises the notion of ‘Asia for Asians’, and any change in South Korean policy towards autonomy would be a welcome development for China.

From the South Korean perspective as well, its relationship with China is quite delicate. Economic cooperation between the two countries has been indispensable for Seoul. Furthermore, its most reliable partner (the US) is not doing enough to address its concern vis-à-vis Japan. There is a sense of betrayal in South Korea towards the recent American generosity towards Shinzo Abe. South Korea therefore wants to express its displeasure by dealing more closely with China. Moreover, South Korea sees a golden opportunity to break the close relations between China and North Korea, which would make North Korean survival more problematic. However, Seoul is still not prepared to give up its alliance with the US and the warm welcome to the Chinese President in Seoul is basically a political game to send messages to the US and Japan.

In brief, a chessboard in East Asian politics have been laid out on which both South Korea and China have been moving carefully, with the aware that it would be too early to trust each other at this point of time. However, the future course of East Asian relations would depend on how the US and Japan respond to these moves.

V

India in East Asia

Modi's Three Summit Meets

In September 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had summit meets with the leaders of Japan, China and the US. The summit meets initiated the unfolding of India's policy towards the East Asian region. By choosing Japan as his first destination outside the Indian subcontinent and also by having an exclusive five-day programme for Japan, Modi gave clear signals about the preference and direction of his foreign policy. Further, he also referred to and expressed his disagreement with the 'tendency of expansionism', indicating China, suggesting that India is geared to more overtly confront China's 'growing assertiveness'. It seems that India considers Japan's strong response to China as basically a 'reaction' and appears to not only be in agreement with Japan in confronting China but also ready to join their efforts. It was therefore a very clear and strong Indian message to China.

The messages of the India-Japan summit meet cast its shadow over the Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to India in mid-September. In the beginning, it was expected that China would try to placate India by offering more Chinese investments in India. However, the summit meet was not satisfactory for either side. During the visit, the issue of Chinese 'incursions' made headlines in the Indian media and both countries could not release a joint statement after the summit meet. There could be various explanations and theories about China's behaviour, but even without any Chinese 'incursions' it would not have been a successful bilateral exchange as it happened in the context of India's very vocal support to Japan. Additionally, the Indian President concluded his visit to Vietnam just before the Xi Jinping's visit to India.

In another important development, Modi made a much anticipated visit to the US in late-September. The visit was important in the context of the misunderstanding between Modi and the US authorities on the issue of his visa in the past. Modi was able to transcend this old misunderstanding and move beyond it. The visit was also important for Indian policy towards East Asia as for the first time in history, the joint declaration by the US and India mentioned the South China Sea. The US has been eager for India to play a role in East Asia for some time, and it has referred in the past to a more active role by India in the Korean problem and through the use of terms such as 'Indo-Pacific'. However, the reference to South China Sea in the joint statement with India has been the most direct one yet, which sends a significant message to China.

In a way, it seems that India's role in East Asian politics is growing through India's alignment with Shinzo Abe's Japan and the US. It is definitely going to put pressure on China, as it would not be easy for China to overlook Japan, India and the US trilateral understanding and common approach.

It must be emphasised that taking sides between Japan and China or the US and China has probably been the easiest foreign policy choice for India. However, this would also mean that India would be sucked into a vortex of the big powers' game, which is neither a wise option for India nor India is prepared for it. A much more challenging course for Indian foreign policy would be to lead regional politics by bringing in constructive, cooperative and innovative issues and ideas and by not leaning towards any of these two rival groups. The historical, ideational and material capital of India must be invested in such a futuristic vision for Asia rather than going back to the archaic concepts of balance of power and containment.

In the last three summit meets, the new Indian government made a strong statement to China against its 'assertive' and 'expansionist' tendencies. It could be said that a strong message to China was required, which has become more 'assertive' vis-à-vis Southeast Asian countries, Japan, and to an extent, India. However, it would be more prudent for the Modi government to avoid populist and easier options which might be counter-productive for India and the region in the long-term. The success of Indian foreign policy-making towards East Asia has been its principled engagement with all possible countries in an open manner. Having an overt alliance against China might look attractive in the near future but the unfolding of its repercussions would not be beneficial for the stakeholders. Thus, it would be better for India to continue its open, balanced, principle-based and futuristic approach towards friendly and not-so-friendly countries in the East Asian region.

Modi's Visit to Japan: Gauging Inter-State Relations in Asia

It is remarkable that Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided to visit Japan for his first foreign visit outside the Indian subcontinent. The visit is based on the consistently growing partnership with Japan and as well as the annual summit meet between the top leaders of India and Japan. It must be also remembered that Shinzo Abe shows extra regard for Modi, and both Modi and Abe reportedly follow each other Twitter.

The visit is an important event in the inter-State relations of Asia. It may be an oversimplification to say that both the democracies are willing to work together against the rise of a China-centric Asia. It would instead be more proper for the Indian PM to keep in mind the complexities of the issues involved.

Shinzo Abe might be happy to receive Modi as a strong and aggressive leader from India and may like to convince the India PM about his future vision for Japan and regional politics. However, it would be pertinent to note that Japan's assertive behaviour has not gone down well with other regional countries such as South Korea and China. By approaching North Korea to have negotiations on the issue of Japanese abductees, Abe has defied international pressure to isolate North Korea. India must be informed about these complexities before embarking on any common vision for Asia with Japan. Modi has taken a constructive approach towards South Asian politics and is apparently working to set a futuristic agenda for all the neighbouring countries such as in the fight against poverty, on energy,

infrastructure and other developmental issues. He has probably been trying to minimise the space for disputes in the bilateral relations of these countries, and once a positive vibe and

momentum is created, the face of South Asian politics might be very different than what it is today. Unfortunately, Abe has been doing quite the opposite in the East Asia. It must be conveyed by Modi to Japan that India would like to follow its own approach and would be happy if Japan joins India (rather than India following the Japanese approach).

India shares its concerns with Japan regarding the growing assertiveness of China in the region. Modi must reassure Abe about India's commitment to Japan and the bilateral partnership. At the same time, however, the Modi must also inform Japan that to contain or counter China through military power is not appropriate. Through diplomatic and other economic means, Japan and India could create disincentives for China in the context its assertive behaviour. If Modi is able to create this balance during his visit to Japan, other regional countries such as South Korea and China would not be alarmed and it would be easier for India to deal with them in the future. A very strong statement and aggressive intent would not go down well.

The PM must be aware of the need to coordinate India's regional policy rather than having bilateral relations in isolation, which may contradict one another and create structural limitations for India's bilateral gains. While India should be able to take its bilateral relations with Japan to a new level, it must be future peace-oriented and coordinated with India's bilateral relations with other countries in the region and beyond. The growing stature of India in the region and world has made it impossible for India to keep a low profile and work on bilateralism alone. There is keen interest across the world in Modi's visit to Japan as it may become one of the indicators of Asia's inter-State relations in the future, and Modi has to keep in mind these factors.

Modi would like to have defence cooperation with Japan as both countries share some common threats. But again rather than making it country-specific, defence cooperation must be issue-specific, broad-based and open. It would be a positive if Modi is able to get Japanese consent for the civil nuclear deal, and both countries could further diversify and deepen their security ties.

The Indian PM's visit and the extensive talks on economic cooperation would bring a lot of benefit to India. Japan is one of the most important sources of foreign direct investment in India, and Japan has provided remarkable help to India's infrastructural projects. Creating an atmosphere of trust and cooperation must further accelerate the process. Modi in all probability is also going to talk with the Japanese leader about the bullet train project. He has been accompanied by a huge contingent of Indian business leaders, which indicates that he would like to place significant emphasis on economic cooperation between the two countries.

Modi has been so far successful in bringing in 'out of the box' thinking in his approach towards foreign policy, especially in South Asia. His approach appears to bring in new positive agendas for mutual cooperation rather than being caught up in old confrontations. A similar approach during his visit to Japan would be a wonderful outcome for India and also for Asian politics.

A Foreign Policy Agenda for the Modi Government

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi started his term with a bold and positive move to invite all the SAARC leaders to his inaugural ceremony. These are positive vibes, and it would be great if the new government is able to achieve a breakthrough in the problematic quagmire of South

Asia. Equally important would be the Modi administration's approach towards Northeast Asia, which includes China, Japan, South Korea and North Korea. It is interesting that Modi has not been a prisoner of the stance he took when he was in opposition and during his election campaign. He gave several sharp comments about China during his election campaign and it is good that he has shown a different outlook and approach after his inaugural.

China is also probably anxious to know more about his real position. On 29 May, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang made a phone call to Modi to congratulate him and express China's desire to establish a robust partnership with the new government. It was an important move and Modi responded positively by bringing in civilisational links between the two countries. He mentioned the seventh century Chinese scholar Hiuen Tsang's visit to his village Vadnagar. Apart from the phone call, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi is expected to visit India in the second week of June. The Chinese President Xi Jinping is also supposed to visit in the later part of 2014. The Indian approach towards China and vice versa is going to be one of the most important variables in the emerging Asian economic and security architecture.

There are many thorny bilateral issues between the two countries, however, there are also many important issues on which both countries could enrich and help each other. The opportunities for bilateral trade must definitely be articulated and widened. In addition, these bilateral relations are also important for the regional calculus. China's relations with Japan are quite bitter after the election of Shinzo Abe, and there are suggestions that China has become more assertive in regional politics in recent years. Chinese behaviour in the South China and East China Seas are quite instructive in this regard. It would be interesting to see how New Delhi takes up a stand on these bilateral and regional issues.

Modi has a strong personal fan in the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. It is reported that Abe sent a warm congratulatory note to Modi and expressed his desire to work with India. Personal relations apart, India has been able to forge a strong multifaceted partnership with Japan in recent times, and to carry forward the momentum and strengthen ties between the two countries more profoundly would not be a big challenge. However, bilateral relations between India and Japan would also have to take into account developments in Japan-China relations. It would be a challenge for the new government in India to coordinate its foreign policy towards China and Japan. India needs to bring in a constructive but restrained and careful intervention in the China-Japan rivalry and work for a multipolar, inclusive, rule-based Asian security and economic architecture. This would not be an easy task for the new government.

Japan recently concluded an agreement with North Korea for a joint investigation of the Japanese abductees, and this was seen as a Japanese step to move out of its current isolation in regional politics. Shinzo Abe's aggressive postures have not been appreciated by both China and South Korea. By reaching out to North Korea, Japan is taking a dangerous plunge, which would derail the collective sanctions put on Pyongyang because of its nuclear and missile programmes and human rights violations. The move might further distance South Korea and China from Japan, and the emerging scenario would be a big challenge for the new Indian government. India enjoys good relations with South Korea; President Park Geun-hye visited India in January 2014 to further consolidate and diversify India-South Korea cooperation. Any extra leaning towards Japan would certainly not send a positive message to South Korea.

Instead of bilateral policies, India needs to evolve a well-coordinated policy for the region. The policy also needs to take into account North Korea and its nuclear and missile programmes. India has enjoyed a low-key but sustained relationship with North Korea and there are expectations that India would play a more active and constructive role in reaching out to North Korea. During her visit to India, the South Korean President Park Geun-hye expressed her desire for an Indian role in inter-Korea relations.

India has emerged as an important player in Asia and it would be a litmus test to see how India conducts itself in Northeast Asia. India's Look East Policy has moved from phase-one to phase-two by bringing in more issues and countries. India now needs to implement the next phase of the Look East Policy, which would introduce innovative and constructive elements in regional politics and be a boon for both India and the region.