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SOUTH KOREA'S LONG RANGE MISSILE CAPABILITY: ITS IMPLICATIONS?

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In April 2014, reports confirmed that South Korea has test-fired a 500kms range ballistic missile. Further, there were reports, which confirmed that Seoul has plans of developing ballistic missiles of 800kms rangeⁱ to address threats from North Korean ballistic missiles. The seriousness of this threat perception from North Korea is not new and in 2001, South Korea entered into an agreement with the United States under which Seoul was allowed to develop ballistic missiles of range 300kms with payload of 500kg. This was a slight modification from its 1972 Agreement with the United States. Under this Agreement, a ceiling was imposed on South Korea and hence, was not allowed to develop ballistic missiles above the range of 180kms in exchange for missile technology from the United States. This technology was reverse engineered by Seoulⁱⁱ and developed into NHK-1 and NHK-2 surface-to-surface missiles.ⁱⁱⁱ

The restriction imposed on Seoul due to the 1972 Agreement has been a reason for long held grievance for South Korea against the United States. Despite the growing threat perceptions from Pyongyang, Seoul lacked long range capability to deter any “armed provocation”^{iv} from Pyongyang. Seoul has been in constant rivalry with Pyongyang since the Korean War and even though an armistice was signed between the two rivals, a peace treaty is yet to be signed between them.^v However, in 2012, under a revised agreement with the United States, Seoul was allowed to develop ballistic missiles ranging up to 800kms.^{vi}

Michael Elleman, a missile expert has seen such developments in Seoul in positive light claiming that such missile systems are a “symbolic and psychological need” to “mirror” North Korea’s growing missile capabilities.^{vii} However, there could be a counter-argument to this. Though principally, Seoul



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is justified in developing long range ballistic missile capabilities given the threat perceptions it is subjected to, such developments do bear strategic repercussions.

Firstly, the arrangement of the 2012 Agreement clearly interferes with Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) of which the United States and South Korea are both party to. Further, it would negatively impact the Hague Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation (HCOC) of which Seoul is a member.

Michael Elleman, while the damage done to the MTCR is “troublesome”, such exceptions “should not be overestimated.”^{viii} However, there could be a counter-argument to his opinion. It is in the security interest of Seoul’s immediate neighbours like China, Japan and Taiwan that at present, South Korea adheres to the guidelines of the MTCR in order to prevent any arms-race escalation and provide any opportunity for other MTCR member states, especially China to defy the MTCR guidelines.

The United States agreed not only to assist Seoul in the development of ballistic missiles with range of 800kms, but also drones and UAVS with payloads exceeding 500kg. The MTCR on the other hand, does not allow member states to assist each other on missile technology or UAVs exceeding 300kms range and a payload of 500kg. In addition to this, Seoul is also developing long range cruise missiles ranging up to 1500kms.

Secondly, such missile capabilities undoubtedly jeopardize strategic calculations in the Asia Pacific Region. Though Seoul’s relations with Beijing are improving, such developments could be an irritant factor in China-South Korea relations. It could impact China-U.S relations also on matters pertaining to non-proliferation. Moreover, such missile developments would also stress relations between Japan and South Korea. This is because the Takeshima/ Dogdo Islands issue has been a reason for discontentment and rivalry between Japan and South Korea.

Under Park Geun hye, the current President of South Korea, the anti-Japanese sentiments have also been revived in the country which could further increase tensions between Tokyo and Seoul.



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Seoul's missile development program would lead to increased arms-race in the region, which is undesirable at the moment and would only add to strategic instability and could make the effort of achieving a denuclearized North East Asia far-fetched. Even though at present, Japan does not have any active ballistic missile program, in the near future, it can use its space program to develop ballistic missiles too.^{ix}

One could probably conclude that one of the reasons for the United States to defy MTCR norms and allow Seoul to develop missiles of longer ranges is to persuade South Korea to join the joint missile defence program along with Japan. However, Seoul seems to be playing its diplomatic and political cards wisely. Seoul has managed to get the US on its side to relax the MTCR norms to counter threats from North Korea. At the same time, it has refused to accept the joint missile defence program of the United States, which would have also been a defence against missile threats from Pyongyang.

By not doing so, Seoul is making clear to China, which has vehemently opposed the joint missile defence system in the Asia Pacific region that long range ballistic missiles are a deterrent only against Pyongyang and do not pose a threat to Beijing. This diplomacy is crucial to South Korea's foreign policy and decision-making since at present Seoul realises Beijing's importance in curbing North Korea nuclear weapons program.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

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ⁱ "South Korea extending ballistic missile range to counter North's threat", *Reuters*, April 4, 2014, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/04/us-korea-missile-idUSBREA3305H20140404>

ⁱⁱ "South Korean Long Range Missiles", *Global Security*, at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/rok/missiles.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ "South Korea", *NTI*, Updated November 2014, at <http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/south-korea/delivery-systems/>



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^{iv} Quoting Chun Yung, "South Korea says U.S. agrees to extend Seoul's ballistic missile range", *CNN*, October 7, 2012, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/10/07/world/asia/south-korea-us-announcement/>

^v "South Korea says U.S. agrees to extend Seoul's ballistic missile range", *CNN*, October 7, 2012, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/10/07/world/asia/south-korea-us-announcement/>

^{vi} Choe Sang-Hun, "U.S Agrees to Let South Korea Extend Range of Ballistic Missiles", *International New York Times*, October 7, 2012, at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/08/world/asia/us-agrees-to-let-south-korea-extend-missile-range.html?_r=0

^{vii} Kelsey Davenport, "South Korea Extends Missile Range", *Arms Control Association*, November 2, 2012, at http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2012_11/South-Korea-Extends-Missile-Range

^{viii} Kelsey Davenport, "South Korea Extends Missile Range", *Arms Control Association*, November 2, 2012, at http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2012_11/South-Korea-Extends-Missile-Range

^{ix} "Japan", *NTI*, Updated November, 2014, at <http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/japan/delivery-systems/>