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Issue Brief

The Politics of North Korea's 'Garbage Balloons' in South Korea

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S*ummary*

Between May and July 2024, North Korea sent thousands of balloons to South Korea with tonnes of waste material. This North Korean action was allegedly in retaliation to the South Korean activists sending anti-Kim dynasty regime propaganda leaflets and other material which are deemed 'dangerous' by Pyongyang.

Introduction

The recent incident of North Korean balloons carrying garbage and landing in South Korean territory has raised concerns about the intentions of the Kim dynasty regime in Pyongyang.¹ This is another example of the notorious activities of the leadership in North Korea. Prior to this incident, the regime had been infamous for human rights abuses, kidnapping of foreign nationals, drug trafficking, proliferation of nuclear and missile technologies, sending computer viruses across the world, and printing of counterfeit foreign currencies.

The ‘garbage bombing’ by the North Korean state is, however, a new phenomenon and unprecedented in the inter-Korean relations. Nearly 15 tonnes of garbage has been dropped through more than 3,500 balloons across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which divides the two Koreas.² This action of the North Korean regime was allegedly in retaliation to the South Korean activists and defectors from North Korea who had been sending balloons laden with anti-North Korean regime propaganda leaflets, K-pop contents in pen drives, medicines, dollar bills, food items, etc., for their brothers and sisters in North Korea and are considered ‘dangerous’ by Pyongyang.

These incidents also reflect the fragility of the security situation on the Korean Peninsula and anti-people orientation of the North Korean regime. Instead of garbage, North Korea could have better sent its own propaganda leaflets and videos in pen drives about the progress achieved in this reclusive state. Also, it would have been far better if the North Korean citizens would have sent such balloons reflecting the truly democratic aspirations of the ‘Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, the official name of North Korea.

The brief thaw in inter-Korean relations during the tenure of ‘progressive’ South Korean President Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) appears to have evaporated. Most importantly, the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has even completely thrown the idea of Korean national reunification into the garbage dump.³ Before that, North Korea turned the inter-Korean liaison office in Gaesong into garbage in 2020 and demolished a fire station constructed with the South Korean money at Mount Geumgang tourist resort in May 2024. It was also reported that the monument of the twin women, a symbol of Korean reunification or the Arch of Reunification, had been pulled down in North Korea.

¹ [“North Korea Flies Rubbish-filled Balloons to South in ‘tit-for-tat’ Attack”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 29 May 2024.

² [“Press Statement by Vice-Minister of National Defence of DPRK”](#), *KCNA*, 2 June 2024.

³ Heather Chen and Yoonjung Seo, [“North Korea Says It Will No Longer Seek Reunification with South Korea, Will Launch New Spy Satellites in 2024”](#), *CNN*, 1 January 2024.

More recently, the inter-Korean Donghae railway line is said to be demolished by the reclusive regime in Pyongyang.⁴ Even the Gyeongui railway line which once connected North and South Korea is reported to be dismantled.⁵ The politics of destruction of symbols and infrastructure of inter-Korean relations and turning them into garbage are North Korean ‘propaganda warfare’ against South Korea. In this regard, flying ‘garbage balloons’ towards South Korea is just a part of North Korea’s larger propaganda strategy.

Korean National Division and Propaganda

The Korean national division which followed soon after the liberation of the Korean Peninsula from the Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945) came as a surprise to the Korean people as the Allied Powers divided the country along the 38th northern latitude. On 25 June 1950, the North Korean army crossed this border to reunify their nation. The three years of the Korean War (1950–1953) was highly damaging to both Koreas, particularly the civilians. During the Korean War, propaganda leaflets known as *ppira* in Korean were distributed through fighter jets to influence the civilians and soldiers of the opposite sides. The war ended only with an armistice agreement, keeping the two Koreas officially at war and creation of a new dividing line called DMZ.

During the Cold War period, both North and South Korea sent radio waves and propaganda material inside each other’s territories.⁶ Later, North Koreans dug several tunnels across the DMZ to enter into the South Korean territory. In the post-Cold War period, there was optimism that the Korean Peninsula would follow the German model of reunification. But the ‘Sunshine Policy’ initiated by the former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) could not achieve the Korean dream of national reunification. While the Cold War-era ideological rivalry became garbage more than three decades ago after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Korean Peninsula still remains a Cold War zone.

In order to influence the North Korean people, South Korean activists and North Korean defectors in South Korea had been sending balloons to North Korea carrying anti-regime propaganda material. However, there has been apparently no direct involvement of the South Korean state in this anti-North Korea campaign by the activists. To pacify North Korea, the former South Korean President Moon Jae-

⁴ Yonhap, “[Signs Detected of N. Korea Demolishing Part of Donghae Inter-Korean Railway: NIS](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 5 June 2024.

⁵ Yonhap, “[North Korea Expands Inter-Korean Railway Demolition to Gyeongui Line: Seoul](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 11 July 2024.

⁶ Michael Lee, “[\[WHY\] Why are Both Koreas Fixated on Cross-border Propaganda?](#)”, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 22 June 2024.

in even adopted a law in 2020 making it an offence to send balloons into North Korea, only to be struck down by the Constitutional Court of South Korea later, as this law violated the spirit of the ‘freedom of expression’.⁷

A humble air balloon is often used for sports purposes or for monitoring weather conditions, but in the recent times it has emerged as a new security threat. In 2023, a huge controversy erupted in Sino-American relations when a Chinese balloon trespassed into the airspace of the United States and was accused of spying. Eventually it was destroyed by the American air force. However, the recent balloon campaign by North Korea was different as it was not meant for spying on the ‘conservative’ South Korean leaders, but to harass the common people of South Korea.

Evidently, the property damage caused by these North Korean garbage balloons in South Korea was estimated to be US\$ 19,000.⁸ They also caused major disruptions in the passenger flights in South Korea. Earlier in May 2024, the North Korean regime jammed Global Positioning System (GPS) along the inter-Korean maritime border to jeopardise the lives of the South Korean residents. Nonetheless, North Korea’s garbage balloons in South Korea raise several important questions. Firstly, why has North Korea suddenly resorted to ‘garbage bombs’? Secondly, what could be the possible retaliatory measures from South Korea against this North Korean exportation of garbage?

North Korean ‘Garbage Bombs’

Although considered to be a country with cleanest cities, North Korean state’s role in polluting the cities in South Korea could only be considered as an example of ‘bioterrorism’. The garbage balloons have also become a source to understand this highly secretive state. A South Korean professor had been collecting trash coming from North Korea through sea routes and had been researching on them to develop his knowledge about this country.⁹ Also, it is worth noting that till recently, garbage such as human and animal waste used to be precious commodities in North Korea as they were used as manure in the farming sector. North Koreans were encouraged to collect their excreta and submit it to the authorities.¹⁰ However,

⁷ Lee Hyo-jin, [“Will Court Ruling to Lift Anti-NK Leaflet Ban Escalate Inter-Korean Tensions?”](#), *The Korea Times*, 6 October 2023.

⁸ Kim Hyun-bin, [“N. Korean Trash Balloons Cause \\$19,000 in Property Damage in Seoul, Gyeonggi Province”](#), *The Korea Times*, 1 July 2024.

⁹ Hyung-Jin Kim, [“Scholar Uses Trash as Treasure to Study Life in North Korea”](#), The Associated Press, 21 April 2022.

¹⁰ Myungchul Lee, translated by Leejin Jun and written in English by Eugene Whong, [“Citizens Fight Over Feces to Fill Human Fertilizer Quota in North Korea”](#), *Radio Free Asia*, 14 October 2019.

the recent exportation of garbage as ‘gifts’ to South Korea reflects that North Korea has probably become self-reliant in chemical fertiliser production.¹¹ In the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un had called upon his countrymen to strive for self-reliance or *Juche*, the so-called ruling ideology of North Korea.¹²

On the surface, it appears that North Korea’s sending of garbage to South Korea is a ‘tit-for-tat’ approach. South Korean activists and North Korean defectors have for years been sending propaganda leaflets, pen drives with K-pop content, rice and other items to North Korea by using air balloons. But the real reason for North Korean current action might be beyond the simple idea of revenge. Information about the outside world and the ever-increasing wealth gap between two Koreas might have increased the anxieties of the leadership in North Korea.¹³

As a country which is often called as an ‘information black hole’, information is like a weapon for North Korea. Therefore, North Korea’s knee-jerk reaction to the humble propaganda balloons from South Korea reflects the threat they pose to the Kim dynasty regime in Pyongyang. Apart from this, North Korea’s sudden move to send thousands of balloons across the inter-Korean border echoes the frustration of the regime as it is unable to extract aid and concessions from South Korea and the United States.

The failure of both inter-Korean dialogue and the North Korea–US rapprochement has propelled this isolated regime to seek closer relations with China and Russia. The destruction of the symbols and infrastructure related to the inter-Korean relations is also testimony to the fact that national reunification is no longer the goal of the North Korean regime. Pyongyang has even designated South Korea as an ‘enemy state’. The North Korean state media has also now been using the official name of South Korea as the Republic of Korea or ROK, instead of ‘south Korea’.

South Korean Response

As expected, the retaliation from South Korea for this North Korean misadventure had indeed been calculated. North Korea’s closeness to Seoul metropolitan area and the adjoining region where almost half of South Korea’s population is concentrated is a serious security challenge for the South Korean government. Given the fact that North Korea is an impoverished nation, it does not have much

¹¹ Park Jun-hee, [“Ministry Finds Parasites in North Korea’s Trash-laden Balloons”](#), *The Korea Herald*, 24 June 2024.

¹² [“North Korea’s Kim Pushes Self-reliance Amid ‘Worst Difficulties’”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 29 March 2022.

¹³ Kwak Yeon-soo, [“Why Did NK Change Its Policy Toward South Korea?”](#), *The Korea Times*, 2 July 2024,

to lose if in case a military skirmish breaks out between the two Koreas. But the South Korean economy would definitely suffer in case of a broader inter-Korean conflict. Therefore, it appears that Seoul would also be hesitant to provoke Pyongyang and increase tensions on the Peninsula.¹⁴

However, to satiate the domestic population, the government could increase security cooperation with the United States. This is evident from the recent participation of American B-1B bomber planes in a military exercise in South Korea after a gap of almost seven years.¹⁵ The South Korean government has also suspended the 2018 inter-Korean military agreement for peace and has restarted military activities near the border between the two Koreas. Subsequently, the South Korean army carried military exercises along the western maritime border and artillery firing drills near the inter-Korean border at the Demilitarized Zone.

However, some South Korean experts have been cautioning their government against the resumption of military activities and use of loudspeakers for ‘psychological warfare’ against North Korea as it may dangerously escalate the tensions.¹⁶ The practicality of using the loudspeakers is also questionable as it has not deterred the North Korean regime from sending more garbage laden balloons towards South Korea and harming the lives of the common South Korean people. Arguably, it would be pragmatic for the South Korean government to prevent the North Korean defectors from sending balloons and propaganda material into North Korea.¹⁷

Conclusion

The situation on the Korean Peninsula remains volatile. The ‘tit-for-tat’ kind of response could lead to a dangerous escalation. Moreover, another large-scale conflict on the Korean Peninsula should certainly not be an option. Therefore, cooler heads should prevail and more pragmatic solutions needs to be chalked out. The stalled inter-Korean dialogue needs to be given another chance and focus should be on building trust between the two Korean states. The South Korean government needs to handle this issue of North Korean garbage balloon with caution and devise alternative means to send information into North Korea about

¹⁴ Lee Hyo-jin, [“Government’s Inaction on Anti-NK Leaflets Draws Criticism”](#), *The Korea Times*, 11 June 2024.

¹⁵ Michael Lee, [“U.S. B-1B Bomber Holds Bombing Drill in South Korea for First Time in 7 Years”](#), *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 5 June 2024.

¹⁶ Kwak Yeon-soo, [“South Korea Resumes Loudspeaker Broadcasts as More Trash Balloons Arrive from North”](#), *The Korea Times*, 9 June 2024.

¹⁷ Daniel Connolly, [“Unwanted Participation? Defector Public Diplomacy in South Korea”](#), *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 4, 2022, pp. 432–451.

the outside world. It would also be pragmatic for Seoul to prevent activists from sending balloons inside North Korea.

On the other hand, the North Korean regime needs to learn from the Chinese and Vietnamese experiences and adopt economic liberalisation policies. The mindless expenditure on the military and development of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) by the Kim dynasty is draining the country’s resources and has kept the lives of the people in a miserable situation. North Korea has enough resources to make it another ‘economic miracle’ of the East Asian region. It has enormous iron ore deposits, rare earth minerals and cheap but disciplined workforce that could help to revive the North Korean economy. A prosperous North Korea would indeed be beneficial for the entire region.

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