

Policy Forum 05-51A: Finger on the Button



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By Bruce Klingner

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I. Introduction

Bruce Klingner, Korea analyst for Eurasia Group, an independent research and consulting firm that provides global political risk analysis, wrote: "A test would remove the strategic ambiguity that allows Beijing and Seoul to avoid acknowledging North Korea as a nuclear state... A test would likely derail any potential diplomatic resolution to the nuclear impasse, encouraging a range of more aggressive US strategies."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by Bruce Klingner

- Finger on the Button
by Bruce Klingner

Although the likelihood of a North Korean nuclear-weapons test is somewhat higher than it was six months ago, several factors suggest that Pyongyang remains unlikely to conduct a test in the near term. Reports that US intelligence has observed "rapid, extensive preparations" and a statement by a North Korean official that "a plutonium-based test is unavoidable" exacerbated fears that North Korea would continue its escalatory policy. But even as Pyongyang continues to pursue brinkmanship tactics, a nuclear test carries significant costs for North Korea.

A nuclear test would be the next logical stage in the development of North Korea's nuclear-weapons program since Pyongyang has already conducted nearly 100 high-explosive tests related to nuclear warhead development, according to media reports of US intelligence assessments. Moreover, a nuclear test would further North Korean national objectives and be consistent with Pyongyang's recent return to brinkmanship tactics.

"Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il may calculate that a nuclear test would increase Pyongyang's bargaining leverage and force Washington back to the six-party talks, which have been suspended for more than a year. By formally achieving status as a nuclear state, Kim might conclude that Washington would have to accept Pyongyang as an equal negotiating partner, a long-held North Korean foreign policy objective. A demonstration of its nuclear capabilities could also be seen by Pyongyang as a means of ensuring regime survival by deterring a US military attack. Moreover, a successful test would provide the Kim regime a domestic propaganda windfall, similar to that reaped from the 1998 Taepo Dong 1 missile launch.

However, other factors make it unlikely that Pyongyang will engage in a nuclear test during the next several months. Subsequent media reports of the supposed test preparations indicate decreasing consensus on the issue within the intelligence community. Most notably, The New York Times, the initial source of the most definitive reporting on the observed activity, has downplayed its original assertions.

US intelligence has previously misinterpreted North Korean underground activity. The most notable example was in 1998-99, when the US and North Korea engaged in tense negotiations over a site at Kumchang-ni, which the US suspected as a nuclear reactor and reprocessing facility; subsequent US inspections confirmed the site was not nuclear-related.

More recently, in September and January of last year, the Times reported warnings from US intelligence sources of nuclear test preparations, but no test ensued. The difficulty in determining nuclear test-related activity is also shown by the 1997 US demarche to Russia in which Washington accused Moscow of violating the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty based on satellite observable activities that were "a dead ringer" for preparations for a nuclear test. The US later admitted the assessment was incorrect.

On May 26, Pyongyang denied that it was conducting nuclear test preparations, dismissing the US statements as "fabricated rumors". The observed activity may be unrelated to North Korea's nuclear-weapons program or part of a calibrated North Korean strategy to raise regional concerns over its

intentions while still allowing Pyongyang to retain strategic ambiguity over its capabilities. North Korea has previously placed long-range missiles in observable locations, raising international alarm over an impending launch, and subsequently removed them.

Kim likely understands the irreversible consequences of conducting a test. A test would remove the strategic ambiguity that allows Beijing and Seoul to avoid acknowledging North Korea as a nuclear state. A test would also provide the George W Bush administration the necessary justification to bring the nuclear issue before the UN Security Council. Although Beijing has publicly rejected US "strong-arm tactics" toward North Korea, Chinese officials have privately indicated growing frustration and anger with North Korea and a willingness to step aside following a nuclear test if the US took the issue to the Security Council. A test would likely derail any potential diplomatic resolution to the nuclear impasse, encouraging a range of more aggressive US strategies. Although Pyongyang has exhibited little interest in continuing negotiations, its most recent official statements and informal entreaties suggest it has not yet fully rejected the six-way talks.

Several recent events also make a near-term nuclear test less likely. The resumption of inter-Korean talks provided Pyongyang with 200,000 tons of critically needed fertilizer, with promises of an additional 300,000 tons for attending a follow-on meeting later in June. Although neither the inter-Korean talks nor a New York meeting between US and North Korean officials were successful in breaking the nuclear impasse, they provide North Korea a buffer against any Chinese or South Korean diplomatic pressure absent provocative actions by Pyongyang. Kim is also unlikely to initiate a nuclear test this month ahead of the June 15 visit by South Korean Minister of Unification Chung Dong-young and the North-South Korean ministerial meeting scheduled for June 21-24 in Seoul.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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