

# Policy Forum 06-102: Going Nuclear; Why Now And Now What?

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Going Nuclear; Why Now And Now What?

Article by Zhiqun Zhu

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## I. Introduction

Zhiqun Zhu, assistant professor of international political economy and diplomacy at the University of Bridgeport, writes, "Now that North Korea has taken a giant step towards joining the nuclear club, finger pointing is unhelpful. All major players involved share responsibilities for the diplomatic failure. The international community needs to think prudently what to do next."

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## **II. Article by Zhiqun Zhu**

- Going Nuclear; Why Now And Now What?  
by Zhiqun Zhu

Nearly two months after North Korea conducted a nuclear test on October 9, the international community is still trying to figure out why North Korea did it, and what the world can do about a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Due to the opaque nature of the Kim Jong-il regime, one can only guess what actually prompted North Korea's nuclear test. There are several possible explanations. Any one or a combination of any of these factors may have directly triggered Kim Jong-il's fateful decision.

1. The test coincided with the 9th anniversary of Kim Jong-il's elevation to be the leader of the North Korean Workers Party and head of state. For Kim, the anniversary could not have been celebrated with a greater fanfare than a nuclear test.
2. The test came just one day before South Korea's Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon was to be confirmed by the U.N. Security Council as the next U.N. secretary general. It's a glorifying moment for South Koreans. North Korea does not like South to occupy the center stage alone. It needs attention badly in a fierce competition with the South.
3. Chinese Ambassador to the U.N. Wang Guangyas comments earlier that "no country is going to protect North Korea if it conducted a nuclear test" probably infuriated many North Korean generals, who may have felt a sense of betrayal.
4. The test was timed to embarrass Shinzo Abe, the new Japanese prime minister. Abe decided to travel to China and South Korea within two weeks of assuming his new post, departing from a tradition of Japanese prime ministers to make their first overseas trip to Washington, D.C. He seriously wants to ameliorate Japan's relations with China and South Korea damaged by his predecessor who repeatedly visited the Yasukuni Shrine. What a welcoming gift for Abe as he began his Seoul visit!
5. The test may have also been designed to influence America's mid-term elections a few weeks away. Kim Jong-il may be hoping that the nuclear test will create a foreign policy crisis, resulting in the defeat of President Bush's Republican Party in elections.

Now that North Korea has taken a giant step towards joining the nuclear club, finger pointing is unhelpful. All major players involved share responsibilities for the diplomatic failure. The international community needs to think prudently what to do next.

1. While the international community has unanimously condemned North Korea's test and pushed for the passage of U.N. Resolution 1718, one must understand that what is more important now is damage control, not punishment.

North Korea was already suffering from sanctions imposed by the United States and Japan before the test. As China and South Korea do not wish to see the collapse of the North Korean regime, how effective will any new sanctions be? And how are we going to face the starving North Korean people? The 23 million North Koreans do not deserve sanctions.

The biggest threat is not North Korean missiles hitting the United States or Japan; the real risk is the dire consequence of nuclear proliferation. How to prevent North Korea from transferring nuclear weapons or technology to other countries or groups is perhaps the greatest challenge for the international community.

2. In retrospect, what could have been done to avoid this unfortunate situation? It is time to reflect upon major powers policies towards North Korea. China and South Korea's more moderate and soft approach has obviously failed to dissuade North Korea from developing a nuclear program. How about America and Japan's more hard-line approach? North Korea has repeatedly requested to talk to the United States directly. Even before the recent test, a North Korean official suggested that North Korea would not test the bomb if the United States held direct talks. The United States has flatly rejected North Korea's every request in recent years. This sense of rejection and inferiority is haunting the United States.

The Chinese have a saying: It's not too late to fix the sheepcote after one sheep has escaped. In addition to multilateral talks, the United States should consider directly negotiating with North Korea now, not as a way of rewarding or kowtowing to Kim Jong-il, but aimed at bringing to an end this lingering dilemma soon. As former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker commented, to talk to your enemies is not appeasement. Does it make sense if you wish to solve a problem but do not want to deal with the people who created the problem in the first place?

3. Every cloud has a silver lining. One positive outcome of the test could be closer ties between Japan and both China and South Korea. Contrary to achieving its possible intention of sabotaging Japan's new diplomatic initiative to China and South Korea, North Korea's nuclear test may well unite Japan, China and South Korea to jointly address the largest security challenge in Northeast Asia. The test may finally awaken the Chinese, Japanese, and South Koreans to the fact that the Yasukuni Shrine and other long-standing historical disputes, though not insignificant, should not be the pestering issues separating them.

U.S.-China cooperation may also deepen as a result. China used some of the harshest language against North Korea after the latter conducted the test. The United States and China have strengthened peacekeeping efforts. Presidential hotlines and shuttle diplomacy have brought the two countries even closer. The real challenge for the two great powers is how to translate this closer tie into concrete actions to promote long-term peace and prosperity in East Asia and beyond.

### **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](mailto: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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