


Policy Forum 09-042: North Korea's Nuclear Test of International Resolve

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North Korea's Nuclear Test of International Resolve

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By Stephen Noerper

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I. Introduction

Stephen Noerper, Senior Fellow, Asia, at the EastWest Institute and Senior Associate of the Nautilus Institute, writes, "What needs to occur among the U.S., its allies Japan and South Korea, and dialogue partners China and Russia is a seriously enhanced commitment toward solving rather than

simply managing the North Korea problem."

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II. Article by Stephen Noerper

- "North Korea's Nuclear Test of International Resolve"

By Stephen Noerper

North Korea's May 25 underground nuclear test, followed by the launch of a short-range missile, constitutes the latest challenge to the Obama Administration. It also suggests the need for enhanced and immediate coordination among Russia, China, the United States, South Korea and Japan.

Seismic evidence shows that North Korea's official pronouncement of enhanced power and technology over its 2006 test may be true. The U.S. put it at 4.7 on the Richter scale, Japan at 5.3, and Russia and South Korea around 5.1. In contrast, South Korea registered the 2006 test at only 3.6, revealing a much more significant explosion Monday. Villagers from neighboring China reported feeling the aftershocks.

North Korea's short-range missile, which traveled 80 miles and is aimed at ratcheting concern among U.S. and South Korean forces, raises less concern as a technological feat. But it, too, was intended to intimidate - the third in a North Korean trifecta that began with the launch of a long-range missile on April 5. In its unusual middle-of-the-night statement, the White House strongly condemned the nuclear test, asserting that North Korea was in "blatant defiance" of the United Nations Security Council.

Through its May 25 actions, North Korea reveals that its "military-first" hardliners are in control. Their objectives:

- Confront the Obama Administration with the strongest possible challenge in order to win concessions and register firmness. In particular, the hardliners wanted to send that signal in advance of future U.S.-North Korea bilateral talks, which were discussed by Special Envoy Stephen Bosworth with Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo in recent weeks. Pyongyang has now offered President Obama the first of his 3 a.m. wake-up calls alluded to in the U.S. presidential campaign. The June 4 trials of two American journalists who crossed into North Korea from China will present Washington with its next challenge from Pyongyang. Coming on the 20th anniversary of Beijing's Tiananmen crack-down, the "trials" remind Washington of continued affronts in Northeast Asia. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, in China on May 25, noted "great alarm" over North Korea's "clear violation" of Security Council Resolution 1718, prohibiting North Korea from testing.
- Sow discord among the other six-party talk members, who have failed to come up with a common response. In contrast to the White House statement, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov registered "concern" and China was initially mute. For its part, Japan reacted with alarm, as Prime Minister Aso called for a late afternoon Security Council meeting at the United Nations. Calls are mounting in Tokyo for much harder responses to Pyongyang, which could prompt a regional arms race. In South Korea, the won and markets declined, further shaking a country that was already reeling from the suicide of former populist President Roh Moo Hyun on May 23. For successor Lee Myung Bak, the North Korean test is a further challenge on top of recent disputes with Pyongyang over the joint Kaesong industrial zone.
- Impress upon the North Korean population and international observers that they remain firmly in

control, despite lingering concerns over the impact of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's August stroke. Kim was this spring "reappointed" as head of the National Defense Commission by North Korea's assembly; also on the all-powerful commission designee list was a placeholder for one of his sons - the first indicator of a succession in play. The handoff of an enhanced nuclear capability, less than two months after North Korea's long-range missile traveled 2000 miles, seals Kim's legacy from a North Korean perspective. But former President Bill Clinton has suggested that Pyongyang may be masking discord from within. One certainty is that through the test, military leaders are seeking to stifle international conjecture about the regime's solidity - this after recent rumors of a Chinese plan to position PLA forces across North Korea in the event of a rapid disintegration of the regime.

The onus of an international response now falls largely on China and Russia - both of whom resisted tighter sanctions after the April missile test and calls by U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice for stronger wording. Pelosi's U.S. Congressional delegation traveling in China and others urged Beijing to get Pyongyang back to the table for multilateral talks. Pyongyang announced last month it was walking away from the six party talks, though Beijing and Moscow cautioned others in the dialogue that Pyongyang would be back.

What needs to occur among the U.S., its allies Japan and South Korea, and dialogue partners China and Russia is a seriously enhanced commitment toward solving rather than simply managing the North Korea problem. Five party talks should ensue - North Korea has insisted that the six party talks are more 5+1 anyway - with the major players convening to address how to push North Korea towards denuclearization. They also need some serious contingency planning if those efforts fail. The five parties should also posit regional models of change for North Korea. One example: nearby Mongolia, which on May 25 saw the election of Democratic Party candidate Ts. Elbegdorj as President following a vibrant campaign and high voter turn-out; two decades ago, Mongolia, too, was a Communist outpost. It embraced economic change, opening up to the outside world and labeling itself a nuclear weapons free zone.

Isolationist North Korea is a much tougher case--that is certain. And the international community needs to be ready, both to ease coordination and avert disagreement among the great powers, as well as to ease the cost burden of eventual integration that will befall South Korea.

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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