



Policy Forum 06-81A: PRC Scholar Analyzes Implications of a DPRK Nuclear Test



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Article by Shen Dingli

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I. Introduction

Shen Dingli, the Executive Deputy Director of the Institute of International Issues at the Fudan University, the director of the US Study Center of the Fudan University, and the director of the arms control and regional security research project, writes, "the DPRK considers its national interests to be greater than its relations with China. It will not give up the independent guarantee of national security gained through nuclear tests just because of China's concerns and the possibility of China

applying pressure on it. Therefore the DPRK is bound to hold that the advantages of conducting a nuclear test outweigh the disadvantages; hence it will proceed with a nuclear test."

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II. Article by Shen Dingli

- PRC Scholar Analyzes Implications of a DPRK Nuclear Test
by Shen Dingli

Since the DPRK possesses plutonium, it has become more and more of a pragmatic issue for it to conduct nuclear weapon tests. The DPRK's choice to conduct nuclear test will be decided based on its interests and the advantages and disadvantages involved in conducting a nuclear test, and not from the interests of other countries.

This article will try to analyze what advantages the DPRK can gain from conducting nuclear tests, as well as why it is unlikely that relevant countries can do much on this issue.

Gaining Ultimate Security

In the history of international relations, the United States has, since the advent of nuclear weapons, never used nuclear weapons against another nuclear weapon state; it did not use nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union and China, nor has it used nuclear weapons against any other country that possess nuclear weapons.

This does not mean that the United States has not thought of using nuclear weapons, it is rather that the United States dared not use it. According to a declassified document, the United States did plan to make a preemptive strike against China's nascent nuclear force, but it finally backed off. Although the United States sympathizes with and even supports "Taiwanese independence," it has to pretend that it is against "Taiwanese independence" because it knows that it could trigger a military confrontation between China and the United States with catastrophic consequences for the U.S.

This is because China possesses a considerable nuclear arsenal. Since nuclear weapons have a deterrent effect, the United States can not, politically, accept a nuclear strike against its homeland and its troops stationed in overseas. Compared to a nuclear strike, the damage caused to the United States by the September 11 terror attacks would be miniscule.

These facts have an edifying effect on the DPRK, teaching it that the state's security must be grasped firmly. The United States dares not wage war against nuclear countries, but it was willing to attack Iraq, a non-nuclear country. It even attacked Yugoslavia which had no weapons of mass destruction. This has convinced the DPRK that it must develop nuclear weapons that can be carried by guided missiles as to act as a nuclear deterrent on US targets in the Asia-Pacific region. That way, the DPRK will be able to control state security and genuinely realize the "Juche [self-reliance]" guiding philosophy of neither relying on the establishment of friendly relations with the United States nor depending on special relations with China, Russia, and with other countries.

The United States Will Not Attack the DPRK

There are five major reasons that make the DPRK believe that the United States will not attack it. They are: first, the DPRK's nuclear deterrent effect; second, the deterrent effect of the DPRK conventional forces; third, the opposition of South Korea and Japan, the allies of the United States;

forth, the opposition of China, Russia, and other countries; and finally, the restraining effect on the United States due to the Iraq situation, the Iranian nuclear challenge, and the chaotic situation surrounding Lebanon and Israel.

The deterrent effect of nuclear weapons are a major factor that can make the United States think twice about attacking the DPRK. The DPRK's conventional force also constitutes another deterrent effect. The DPRK has one million regular troops and five million para-military troops. The offensive deployment of the DPRK's ground force constitutes a conventional deterrent effect to South Korea and to the US troops stationed in South Korea and the "Nodong" series of missiles are enough to serve as a warning effect on Japan. Thus, if the United States were to consider attacking the DPRK, it will definitely meet with opposition from South Korea and even from Japan.

A preemptive strike by the United States against the DPRK would also be opposed by China and Russia. China and the DPRK signed a mutual assistance and cooperation treaty. According to international law, this alignment and cooperation treaty is still valid today. If the DPRK were attacked by the United States, China, according to international law, is obliged to come to assist the DPRK. Due to these considerations, the United States will not receive support from China for its aggression against the DPRK. The US is not willing to fight with China again just because the DPRK develops nuclear weapons. Russia also maintains delicate relations with the DPRK. Due to geopolitical security considerations, Russia will also come out strongly against a US use of force against the DPRK.

The United States has its hands tied in the global political arena. The US war in Afghanistan has not ended. The US strong-arm position on the Iranian nuclear issue will lead nowhere. Even more pressing is the Iraq stability situation which will restrain the direction of the US political situation. The US mid-term election is approaching and the ability of the Bush administration to rapidly stabilize the situation in Iraq will have a major impact on the election. Given that the United States is deep in the Iraq quagmire, some 2,500 US servicemen have died in Iraq, and that the United States has spent \$300 billion in Iraq, the Bush administration will definitely not put the political future of the Republican Party at risk by attacking the DPRK this year. This gives the DPRK another safe period of opportunity to develop or even test nuclear weapons.

The Difficulty for China and Russia to Decide to Imposing Sanctions

At present, China's core interests lie not only in developing the economy but also in reunifying the Chinese nation. The main task now is "opposing Taiwan independence" With the final goal of realizing the state's reunification. In this respect, the DPRK at least puts in check the tens of thousands of US troops in South Korea, thus helping to reduce the US military pressure on the course of reunification and "opposing Taiwan independence." To a certain extent, the DPRK helps China divide the military threat of the US military forces in the Asia-Pacific region. As an ally, the DPRK also helps our country defend the main gate of China's Northeast regions. As the DPRK believes that it contributes to China's national security, it is therefore impossible for China to abandon the DPRK and it is absolutely impossible for China to adopt comprehensive sanctions against it if the DPRK conducted nuclear tests.

The DPRK may calculate that China would care more about avoiding a "regime change" and having a stable situation on the Korean Peninsula, more than putting pressure on the DPRK. China will therefore be forced to accept the result of a DPRK nuclear test. The DPRK may likewise hold that Russia, though it would not be happy about the DPRK's nuclear tests, but would also decline to impose sanctions on it.

How to Improve the DPRK's Situation

As mentioned above, the DPRK calculates that if it carries out a nuclear test, it will not only be not subjected to a US military strike but that it does not have to worry about real economic sanctions from the international community; hence the disadvantages to the DPRK of carrying out a nuclear test will be far less than the advantages.

If the DPRK successfully carries out a nuclear test, it will be accepted as a de facto nuclear country after a period of international sanctions, as India and Pakistan were reaccepted by the United States and by other mainstream countries in the international community several years after they conducted nuclear tests in 1998. Weighing gains and losses, the DPRK will consider the gains greater than the losses.

Becoming a nuclear country through nuclear tests can also greatly help the DPRK reduce spending on conventional weapons, thus saving more resources for economic development. From a defense economic perspective, the DPRK also needs to conduct nuclear tests.

US-Japan, US-South Korea Alliances Put to Test

There is a lingering worry in the international community. That is, the DPRK's nuclear test will incite Japan and South Korea to develop their own nuclear programs. Such a view is based on the skeptical belief in the reliability of the alliance between the United States and its East Asian partners. Although such a possibility cannot be ruled out, the chances of Japan and South Korea developing their own nuclear programs are not great.

If Japan and South Korea develop their own nuclear programs in disregard of their military alliance relationship with the United States due to a DPRK nuclear test, this will only show that they no longer believe in US military protection and would like to go their own way on defense issues. This is bound to erode their alliance with the United States, thus subjecting the East Asian security situation headed by the US to even greater challenges. The United States may not control DPRK's nuclear tests, but it still has the ability to prevent its East Asian allies from independently taking the path of developing nuclear weapons.

DPRK Nuclear Test and Sino-DPRK Relations

There should not be too many technical difficulties for the DPRK to design a nuclear weapon device and conduct a nuclear test considering that it has fission materials for producing several to ten Hiroshima/Nagasaki class nuclear bombs. It also already has the ability to chemically extract weapons-grade plutonium. The first generation of nuclear weapon design is already an open secret. It has already been known that the DPRK has already mastered the explosion technology.

The DPRK believes that the following results would be caused by a nuclear test: limited sanctions are imposed by the international community; China is forced to accept and take part in limited sanctions against the DPRK; the United States strengthens military cooperation with its East Asian allies; and an even more complicated security situation emerges in Northeast Asia.

But the DPRK considers its national interests to be greater than its relations with China. It will not give up the independent guarantee of national security gained through nuclear tests just because of China's concerns and the possibility of China applying pressure on it. This is because its ultimate security should be held in its own hands, and it will not rely on its alliance relationships. Therefore the DPRK is bound to hold that the advantages of conducting a nuclear test outweigh the disadvantages; hence it will proceed with a nuclear test.

China's Choice

Our country has not many choices when it comes to whether or not the DPRK will conduct a nuclear test. This is because the Sino-DPRK security relationship is not a one-way street. It is impossible for China to apply excessive pressure on the DPRK. It is impossible for us to prevent the DPRK from realizing its fundamental interests while not harming our country's fundamental interests. In the past there was such a balance of interests. It is still true today as "Taiwan independence" [forces] run rampant. Basically, our country's work of persuasion with the DPRK in the 12 years that the DPRK developed its nuclear program had been a failure. The causes are evident.

Once the DPRK carries out a nuclear test, our country only needs to symbolically take part in the sanctions (including import restrictions on its nuclear technology) that the international community will surely impose on the DPRK. But China should block economic sanctions. In the choice between limited sanctions that demonstrate our country is a responsible power and harsh sanctions that forces the DPRK to go to extremes or bring about "regime change," China can only afford to take the lesser evil approach.

According to the above analysis, we should pay full attention to the possibility of a DPRK nuclear test but there is also no need to indulge in blind pessimism.

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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