

Policy Forum 09-045: Ramifications of the North Korean Nuclear Test

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Ramifications of the North Korean Nuclear Test

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By Emily B. Landau and Ephraim Asculai

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I. Introduction

Emily B. Landau and Ephraim Asculai, Senior Research Fellows at the Institute for National Security Studies, write, "Without strong action on the part of the US, we might enter a new dynamic with parallel developments: nuclear proliferation that proceeds at an accelerated pace, together with

inspiring but ineffective talk about (unheeded) international arms control treaties. So unless the US and its allies coordinate their moves, recognizing the acute seriousness of the North Korean nuclear challenge for both the immediate region and beyond, the situation will continue to deteriorate and could reach a dangerous point of no return."

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II. Article by Emily B. Landau and Ephraim Asculai

- "Ramifications of the North Korean Nuclear Test"

By Emily B. Landau and Ephraim Asculai

The May 25, 2009 North Korean explosion sent shockwaves around the world, much stronger and more diverse than the seismological data recorded. These were the mainly political but also military implications of the apparently successful nuclear test. "Apparently," because no outside, objective evidence was presented to confirm the characteristics and the magnitude of the explosion. If the underground test was fully contained and no radioactive particles were or will be vented to the atmosphere, no data will be available for the analysis of the test.

Assuming that the explosion was indeed a nuclear explosion, North Korea proved that it has a "device," if not an actual weapon, capable of wreaking havoc if used in anger. At the technical level, this test was needed to redress the apparent failure of the previous one, in 2006. As an indication of North Korea's confidence in the expected results of the current test, the US was informed one hour in advance of its execution.

The test - joined by the test firing of short range missiles and the restart of the nuclear reactor at Yongbyon and its fuel reprocessing plant (for the production of plutonium from the reactor fuel) - indicate significant nuclear escalation on the part of North Korea. The verbal condemnation of North Korea's actions was strong, but as of yet there has been no decision on the part of the international community on stronger action to force North Korea to backtrack, return to the negotiations table, and resume the moratorium on nuclear expansion.

A major question raised in light of the nuclear test is if this is a continuation of North Korea's familiar strategy of brinkmanship - using nuclear advances as a bargaining chip for attaining security and economic assurances for regime survival. Or, is it perhaps indicative of a new game where North Korea's main interest is the nuclear weapons as such?

North Korea explained that the test was necessary to enhance nuclear deterrence as a means of dealing with the threats that it faces from the hostile US. But statements made ahead of the 2006 explosion were virtually identical in content. Moreover, North Korea then as now expressed that it wanted to deal with the US bilaterally and on equal footing, nuclear state to nuclear state. Indeed, even though the latest events signal a serious escalation in its nuclear activities, there is no reason to assume that its basic goal of using nuclear developments as a means of improving its economic situation has changed. Further evidence of the economic value of nuclear technology for North Korea can be discerned from its willingness to sell it to whoever can pay. As such, the more likely explanation is that the recent escalation reflects an assessment that with President Barack Obama preoccupied with Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, Kim Jong-Il needed a more blatant step in order to get US attention focused back on North Korea.

How Obama reacts to this test is the first crucial test of his arms control policies. So far, Obama has

talked mainly about steps he intends to take in order to strengthen the international disarmament treaties and renegotiate START with Russia. US arms control advocates have expressed satisfaction with what they regard as the renewed importance attributed to nuclear disarmament, and applaud Obama's embrace of the move toward zero nuclear weapons worldwide.

But it is Iran and North Korea that pose the most acute challenges to nuclear arms control at the present time. Unfortunately, in this regard the NPT is largely irrelevant; the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) will not be of much help either. The most that is on the table right now in direct reaction to North Korea's test is a possible UN Security Council resolution on harsh sanctions. But harsh sanctions will not lead North Korea to disarm immediately. Rather, if sanctions hurt, North Korea will signal its willingness to return to negotiations - well-positioned to get the best deal ever for its latest "sale" of Yongbyon. The dynamic we have seen since the early 1990s is not likely to be broken.

As far as the regional context, Russia and China have more potential influence over North Korea, but are wary of the consequences of instability in the isolationist state. South Korea and Japan will be seeking nuclear guarantees. High tensions in the region could engender mis-escalation to military confrontation, as demonstrated by North Korea's reaction to South Korea's decision to join the US-initiated Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI): the North said it regarded this as an act of war.

Much currently hinges on Obama's ability to navigate the North Korean nuclear challenge in an effective manner. In addition to standing at the helm of developments on the North Korean front, Obama has situated himself as the primary negotiator vis-à-vis Iran. Therefore, what he does or does not do in reaction to the test will also have almost immediate implications for any future negotiations with Iran. While in many respects these two proliferation challenges follow distinct paths, in this case, the consequences will be unavoidably intertwined.

The US president's doctrine of "talks" has yet to register any success with either country. There is an emerging sense that he might be willing to accept nuclear weapons in these two countries as a non-permanent situation, and deal, when the opportunity presents itself, with the larger issue of nuclear disarmament. His staff echoes this when they have not suggested bolstering military staff in Southeast Asia, and when they have ignored the severity of Iran's nuclear challenge by tying it to the Palestinian issue. In addition, European concerns, which have mounted in part because of the increased range of Iranian missiles, are also being somewhat disregarded.

Without strong action on the part of the US, we might enter a new dynamic with parallel developments: nuclear proliferation that proceeds at an accelerated pace, together with inspiring but ineffective talk about (unheeded) international arms control treaties. So unless the US and its allies coordinate their moves, recognizing the acute seriousness of the North Korean nuclear challenge for both the immediate region and beyond, the situation will continue to deteriorate and could reach a dangerous point of no return.

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.

Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)

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