Anticipating a North Korean Nuclear Test: What’s to Be Done to Avert a Further Crisis

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by Dan Fata

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I. Introduction

Dan Fata, Republican Party Committee Policy Director for National Security and Trade, writes: "It is not too late to avert a North Korean nuclear test. However, the key to preventing a nuclear test lies primarily with China. The PRC must be made to understand that its failure to convince North Korea

to dismantle its nuclear weapons program will have dramatic effects on China's relationship with the United States and its own neighbors - and, ultimately, on its own security."

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II. Policy Paper by Dan Fata

-"Anticipating a North Korean Nuclear Test: What's to Be Done to Avert a Further Crisis"
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Introduction

Recent actions by North Korea suggest that it may be preparing to test a nuclear weapon. Since Pyongyang's announcement in October 2002 that it was rejecting previous commitments to halt nuclear weapons production (thus violating the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and giving the world justification to hold North Korea accountable for its actions), the North Korean regime has dangled the prospects of such a test before the eyes of the world. For more than two years, the United States, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have engaged in Six-Party Talks with North Korea in an effort to convince Pyongyang that it should verifiably terminate its nuclear program. Although there have been three formal rounds of talks held in Beijing (none since mid-2004), the results have been less than productive, due mostly to North Korean intransigence and Chinese unwillingness to pressure Pyongyang.

If North Korea were to actually test a nuclear weapon, it would show that Pyongyang does not wish to peacefully resolve this nuclear dispute, but, rather, prefers nuclear blackmail over negotiations as its negotiating tactic. A nuclear test would demonstrate that Pyongyang either doesn't care about the regional and international security consequences of such an action or, worse, that it doesn't understand the consequences. A North Korean test would also show that the PRC either isn't as influential over North Korea as the West has been led to believe or, again worse, that the PRC has determined that it is actually in its interest to allow North Korea to become a nuclear power.

Arguably, there are steps that can be taken to avert a North Korean nuclear test. Now is the last chance for North Korea's neighbors to consider the ripple effects that will occur throughout the region as a result of Pyongyang's actions. Some of these effects will be immediate and some will occur over time, but the repercussions of a North Korean nuclear test will be sweeping. Steps to avert a nuclear test should be of particular interest to China given the regional implications associated with such a rogue action by North Korea. Resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis immediately and peacefully is a clear test for China: is it to be considered by the United States and its allies as a positive force for stability within the Asia-Pacific region?

This paper will briefly examine some of the potential reactions by key nation states if North Korea were to conduct a nuclear test. This paper will also assess what would happen regionally and internationally following such a nuclear test.

Possible National Reactions in the Asia-Pacific Region

United States. Certainly all eyes around the world would be looking at the reaction of the United States following a North Korea nuclear test. The initial options open to American policymakers would include mere diplomatic objection, engaging in enhanced diplomatic discussions as part of the Six Party talks, and introducing a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Pyongyang and

applying economic sanctions - possibly including a naval blockade - against North Korea. Accelerated and enhanced missile defense cooperation between the United States and its allies in Northeast Asia are a near certainty in the wake of a North Korean test. Permanent stationing of additional U.S. forces at sea and on land in the region should be expected, including the possibility of nuclear deployments. U.S. forces likely would be put on a higher alert, prepared to respond immediately to any sign of North Korean aggression, perhaps even preemptively.

South Korea. The democratic half of the Korean Peninsula would be under great pressure to respond to a definitive nuclear weapons program in North Korea. It would be reasonable to presume that Seoul would likely engage in intense diplomatic talks with the six parties involved in this crisis. South Korean government critics will insist that South Korea restart its long dormant nuclear weapons program and end all humanitarian assistance and political openings to North Korea. As tensions grew in the region as a result of other parties' responding to a North Korean nuclear test, South Korea might mobilize its forces to protect against an invasion from the north. Additional steps that may be taken by South Korean diplomats and military planners could include purchasing and deploying Aegis and other theater defense weaponry from the United States, and beginning discussions with regional and global allies about possible support in a confrontation with the North.

However, another scenario that might develop is one in which Seoul determines it to be far safer to form some kind of arrangement or confederation with North Korea. The South Korean populace, afraid of possible all-out war that could include nuclear attacks, may well opt for the confederation option. This would likely result in Seoul asking that U.S. forces leave the Korean Peninsula. North Korean and Chinese officials would likely welcome this because it would remove the U.S. military from the region. Such a move could have dire security consequences for U.S. allies, namely Taiwan and Japan.

China. Any nuclear test by North Korea would raise the obvious question: Why did the PRC let it happen? The answer would be either because it couldn't stop North Korea or because it wouldn't stop North Korea. Either answer would result in a strain in relations between Washington and Beijing. As U.S. pressure for a stern response mounted, Chinese reluctance would lead U.S. policymakers to assess that Beijing did not share America's concerns and was not a willing partner in developing a constructive security dialogue in Asia. A North Korea nuclear test would show the world that the PRC was not the constructive, influential, emerging global (or even regional) power that it has implied itself to be. It can be argued that a North Korean nuclear test would be a direct rebuff to Beijing's bureaucrats and would cost the PRC much political capital within the Asia-Pacific region. The other plausible argument, of course, is that Beijing did not want to be a force for peace and stability, i.e., an able partner to the United States, in resolving this crisis. This idea rests on the premise that Beijing determined that resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis, i.e., having Pyongyang give up its nuclear program, is not in its own security interest. Keeping America tied down diplomatically and militarily in the region because of the North Korea crisis while allowing the PRC to play a lead role in convening the Six Party talks would play well to Beijing's desire to become a more influential regional and global player.

Japan and Australia. Along with South Korea, Japan and Australia would be forced to consider taking diplomatic and possible military action in response to a North Korean nuclear test. As was witnessed two weeks ago, North Korea has already engaged in intimidation tactics by firing a long-range missile into the Sea of Japan, thus upping the ante for some kind of response from Japan and Australia. Options for Tokyo and Canberra would range from doing nothing to moving naval assets closer to North Korea, possibly for use in a blockade. Both nations would likely step up their ongoing work with the United States on missile defense. A test in North Korea would certainly raise the prospect of a major public debate in Japan over whether to turn its latent nuclear capabilities in its

civilian and space sectors into an overt nuclear weapons program.

Elsewhere in (and out of) the Region. To date, the policy of all major powers has been to oppose development of nuclear weapons programs beyond the five existing declared nuclear weapons states. Other countries in Asia have a tense history with the PRC. If the principle of not developing nuclear weapons is breached either with tacit consent or over the objections of the United States, the PRC, and other members of the Six Party Talks, countries such as Taiwan (which currently has the technological base to develop nuclear weapons) and Vietnam (which has substantially less wherewithal in the near term to develop a nuclear weapon) would have the motive and, perhaps at some point in the future, the desire to follow North Korea's course. Countries in the Middle East, in particular Iran, also will be watching. If no action is taken against North Korea, Iran will likely proceed further down the path of developing nuclear weapons. Moreover, if Iran proceeds, other countries in the region will hedge their bets and determine that there are minimal, if any, costs in pursuing a nuclear weapons program, thus emasculating the NPT and global anti-proliferation efforts.

The Bigger Picture: Possible Scenarios Following a Nuclear Test

Given these possible national reactions to a North Korean nuclear test, what does it mean when all of this is combined? Here are three possible scenarios and the security consequences inherent in each:

Scenario One - ***Global acquiescence and acceptance of North Korea as a new nuclear power***. This scenario implies that Six Party Talk members and others in the region and around the world saw no pressure that could be applied or acceptable concessions that could be offered to North Korea in order to induce the verifiable dismantling of its nuclear weapons program. Such acquiescence would be interpreted by Iran, Syria, and other rogue states, as well as countries such as Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, and others that the pursuit of a nuclear weapons program would not be opposed and, more importantly, was necessary in order to be respected as an emerging power as well as a counterbalance to the world's leading powers. This, in effect, would lead to a massive proliferation of nuclear-weapons- ready states around the world. The United States and its allies would attempt to "enforce" the NPT in order to discourage a massive nuclear weapons proliferation drive, but the North Korean example would undermine all noble diplomatic efforts to avert a proliferation crisis. In addition, the proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons production capabilities in the hands of Iran, its neighbors, and North Korea would reduce American freedom of action in key economic and security zones, i.e., the Persian Gulf and East Asia. This would likely result in the eventual withdrawal of U.S. military forces and corporate entities within the Persian Gulf and East Asia, which would have dramatic consequences for U.S. national security and America's economic well-being.

Scenario Two - ***Increased tensions leading to war***. Another scenario involves an initial mobilization of U.S., Australian, South Korean, and Japanese troops to prepare for a naval quarantine on North Korea. There would also likely be steps taken to more deeply involve Japan, Australia, South Korea, and possibly Taiwan into U.S. missile defense efforts. Another possible consequence of a nuclear test would be the development of an alliance system in East Asia made up of democracies (Taiwan, Australia, South Korea, and Japan) to counter North Korea. The development of (or even the discussion of) such an alliance, while likely not welcomed by the PRC, would force the PRC to decide if it wanted to be helpful in resolving the North Korean crisis.

In this scenario, the United States would urge the PRC to make a difficult decision and convince North Korea to dismantle its nuclear program. The PRC might well ask for something in return, i.e., for the United States to stop protecting Taiwan. This is something to which the United States cannot

agree.

Scenario Three - *Enforced Restraint*. In this scenario, the United States and its allies turn to the PRC for Beijing's help in enforcing a quarantine on North Korea, arguing that North Korea essentially brought international enmity upon itself by testing a nuclear weapon in violation of its previous obligations under the NPT. U.S. officials would explain to their Chinese counterparts that they are looking for a mutually beneficial outcome. Clearly, for the United States, the positive outcome would be the dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program and, ideally, the end of the Kim Jong Il regime. For the Chinese, such an outcome might include U.S. restraint on Japan's and Taiwan's nuclear ambitions. U.S. policymakers would then note that, should the Chinese not agree to help resolve the nuclear crisis in this manner, the United States may not be able to restrain nuclear proliferation efforts within the region as much as it may like to. (Of course, this scenario depends upon a willingness of - and a strategic calculation by - Japan or Taiwan to pursue nuclear weapons.)

Policy Options

What can the United States and its allies do to avert a North Korean nuclear weapons test? *Essentially, the United States must demand that the PRC make a choice: either help out or face the possibility of other nuclear neighbors*. Helping the United States would include participating fully in the quarantine of North Korea; tolerating Japanese, South Korean, and Taiwanese missile defense programs; and doing nothing to pressure the South Koreans to agree to a confederation with North Korea.

In addition, the Administration should consider doing the following:

- **Repeat the U.S. and allied position**. North Korea must verifiably dismantle its nuclear program. Offering concessions to Pyongyang - including providing nuclear assistance or signing a peace treaty - would only embolden other rogue states to pursue their illegal nuclear programs for the rewards that are to be derived from nuclear blackmail.
- **Discuss North Korean nuclear violations report at the United Nations**. This report was filed at the U.N. Security Council in February 2003. However, agreement was reached that the violations would not be discussed at the Security Council while the Six Party Talks were being conducted. Given that Pyongyang does not appear to be a willing partner in these talks and in finding a solution to the crisis, it is logical for the United States to propose that a full-scale discussion of the IAEA's violations report be undertaken to demonstrate to the world the danger of allowing North Korea's NPT violations to proceed unpunished.
- **Implement a quarantine on North Korea**. Such an action must be undertaken given that North Korea has threatened to share its nuclear capabilities with others. The United States and its allies cannot turn a blind eye toward this proliferation threat. Quarantine discussions must involve the PRC and Russia, who would be responsible for enforcing a land-based quarantine. Additional action should be taken with likeminded countries and the United Nations in enforcing the quarantine.
- **Develop rules for future NPT violators**. One of the key weaknesses of the NPT is that it lacks any enforcement measures and punishment provisions for those that violate the NPT and then withdraw. Part of the dilemma that has faced the participants in the Six Party Talks is that there has been no discussion of consequences for North Korea's violations of the NPT prior to withdrawing from that treaty. (Arguably, this has also emboldened Iran to actively pursue its nuclear program.) The United States, with its allies within the United Nations, should develop rules that include strict punishments, possibly including suspension from all U.N. activities, for the worst violators of the NPT.

- **Encourage Japan and South Korea to restate their desire to find a mutually acceptable solution to the crisis**. One of the key goals of the United States in its efforts at mediation should be to use this opportunity to bring Japan and South Korea together, rather than exacerbate these countries' already strained relations. As part of this announcement, South Korea and Japan should state that they themselves currently do not seek to acquire nuclear weapons, that they will work with the United States and other members of the Six Party Talks to contain the North Korean threat, and that they would like to see the United Nations endorse any quarantine action on North Korea.

Conclusion

The consequences of a North Korean nuclear test would have far-reaching effects on the security and political dynamics in the Asia Pacific region. The United States, Japan, Australia, and Taiwan will rightly view a North Korean nuclear test as a direct affront to their own collective security.

It is not too late to avert a North Korean nuclear test. However, the key to preventing a nuclear test lies primarily with China. The PRC must be made to understand that its failure to convince North Korea to dismantle its nuclear weapons program will have dramatic effects on China's relationship with the United States and its own neighbors - and, ultimately, on its own security.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@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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