

## **North Korea's Nuclear Test: Would Brinkmanship Work Out?**

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North Korea's nuclear test of May 25, the second after the October 2006 test, and subsequent missile launches again heralded the Korean Peninsula into a flash point. In fact, in the past two months, Pyongyang has been sabre-rattling on impending nuclear tests even as it fired a nuclear capable long-range Taepodong-2 missile on April 5<sup>th</sup>. The May 25<sup>th</sup> test is considered as a blatant violation of the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1718 - passed after the 2006 nuclear test - which demanded Pyongyang must refrain from conducting additional nuclear tests. Significantly, Pyongyang had threatened that it would conduct a nuclear and ballistic missile tests in response to the UNSC condemnation of North Korea's missile test of April 5<sup>th</sup>. However, the international community has failed in preventing North Korea from defiance.

The test is a clear indication of North Korea's relentless pursuit of acquiring a nuclear weapon and its uncompromising stand on the right to develop a nuclear weapon. At the same time, Pyongyang has shown no intention whatsoever of relinquishing its hard-won nuclear deterrent capability without clear security guarantees. Similarly, Pyongyang has seemingly lessened its stakes on the Six Party Talks which was initiated to diffuse the nuclearisation of North Korea.

The nuclear test comes as an unfortunate development for the non-proliferation regime, which is reeling under severe stress from threshold states and non-state actors. More importantly, the North Korean tests once again demonstrated the inadequacy of major non-proliferation mechanisms, especially the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which North Korea has repeatedly impinged in its tryst for nuclear weapons.

For over two decades, North Korea has been secretly developing a nuclear weapon capability. It had reprocessed the spent nuclear fuel available from its civilian nuclear facilities (derived out of its status as a non-weapon state party in the NPT) into weapon grade plutonium clandestinely, which enabled it to produce around five or six first generation-Hiroshima type- nuclear weapons. Research work has been undergoing at its Youngbyon nuclear facility, though it was frozen by the "North-

South Denuclearisation Declaration” with South Korea in 1992 and the “Agreed Framework” concluded with the United States in 1994. Concurrently, Pyongyang had been developing delivering capability of such weapons which culminated in the April 5<sup>th</sup> missile launch.

Since the Cold War, nuclear weapons have been used as an effective deterrent in the security calculus of nations. Nuclear weapons have political as well as military advantages. Given its massive destructive capability, nuclear weapons have played a major role in ingraining aspirations among the weak to arm itself with the ultimate weapon against the stronger rivals, achieve power and prestige and maximise nuclear brinkmanship whenever its national interests demand so. Nuclear weapons have been often by autocratic elites to avert demands for regime change or to evade international pressure, through sabre-rattling. Nuclear weapons have thus emerged as a potent political tool in the balance of power game.

For North Korea, a nuclear weapon is a twin-edged sword: it is a guarantor for survival of the Kim Jong Il regime. It also acts as a bulwark to a pre-emptive US military strike. Of course, a classic response to a threat - perceived or real - is to develop a counter threat.

There is no basis in international law for preventing North Korea from going nuclear. North Korea withdrew from the NPT in January 2003, and hence the NPT provisions and punitive actions do not apply to Pyongyang. Significantly there is no Nuclear/Atomic Weapons Convention on the lines of Chemical Weapons Conventions, a law that prohibits research, development, production, possession, transfer, use or threat of use of chemical weapons. Evidently, NPT was successful in terms of preventing proliferation of nuclear materials, but it was not able to prohibit non-NPT nations in developing nuclear weapons on its own.

More over, sanctions and embargos have proved unsuccessful while dealing with nuclear weapons programmes of any particular country. History has demonstrated that when India and Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons, sanctions and impositions were followed, but they continued their policies intact and recovered economically. Eventually all the restrictions have been lifted without any assurance from these two countries. India was instead rewarded with a civilian nuclear cooperation agreement. Although North Korea’s economy is not as strong as that of India, the regime is careless about the impoverished economic situation of that country. Given the kind of legal and illegal trade with some of its neighbours, particularly with China, sanctions would be proved as a futile exercise.

North Korea's decision to explode a nuclear device had several motivations. Firstly, it was a reassurance of its own capabilities that it had a fully functioning nuclear weapon since the October 2006 test was widely considered to have fizzled, yielding less than one kiloton, while the second one is viewed as 20 kilotons equivalent to nuclear weapon dropped in Hiroshima. After the nuclear test North Korea declared that it was a demonstration for "resolving the problem of scientific and technological" capability that had arisen out of the first nuclear test.

Secondly, the test appeared to be a result of the frustration over Washington's reluctance to hold bilateral negotiations with North Korea to normalise the ties between the two countries. One of North Korea's chief arguments for abandoning the nuclear weapons programme was to have a bilateral negotiation with the US on economic assistance and gain security guarantee in exchange for abandonment of its nuclear weapons programme. Above all, North Korea realises the importance of nuclear weapons as a political bargaining chip, which could strengthen its strategic position in that region.

Thirdly, the test could also have been aimed to sustain the Kim family's sway over the country. It is reported that the current leader Kim Jong Il's health condition is deteriorating and is likely to be tipped to succeed his youngest son Kim Jon-un. Now it is the duty of the Kim senior that his successor's position and power should be guaranteed from any sort of threat internally or externally. The National Defence Commission (NDC) - the highest decision making body - has been expanded to 13 member council at the first session of North Korea's new Parliament in early April, and the NDC will ultimately decide who governs the nation after Kim senior. Control over nuclear weapons and its delivering capability would likely ensure Kim junior's position remains unchallenged.

In the current situation, it is highly unlikely that any of North Korea's demand would be met; a security guarantee and bilateral negotiation with the US, and acceptance as a nuclear weapon state. The more likely situation is that there will be severe restrictions and economic embargo on Pyongyang. Japan and US have mooted proposal containing calls for "reinforcing existing sanctions against North Korea" at the UNSC. However, China would ultimately not allow a punitive measure on Pyongyang. Other obvious options won't easily work. An invasion or military attack on North Korea would face the world's fourth-biggest armed forces, would probably lead to the devastation of

Seoul or hit Tokyo with nuclear weapons, as well as send millions of already impoverished North Koreans fleeing to China.

But the real threat is a possibility of illegal commercial activity of fissile material by North Korea. Nowadays many countries have expressed interest on augmenting nuclear program, albeit civilian nature but might end up in a full-fledged weapons program and Pyongyang can deliver plutonium technology and nuclear test data to those countries. If North Koreans are caught red-handed selling nuclear weapons or allied materials to terrorist groups such as Al Qaida or anti-western States, then the situation in the Korean peninsula would be grave.

As a matter of fact, this is the most suitable time to resolve the North Korean nuclear imbroglio for ever and is to apply diplomacy effectively in the region. North Korea has already expressed its willingness to give up its weapons program with some conditionality. Now it is for the United States to have a direct dialogue with Pyongyang over the nuclear issue and address it in a best possible way for regional peace and stability. The Korean Peninsula could be the first battlefield of Obama's universal nuclear disarmament policy.

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