



BULLETIN

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The Consequences of the Nuclear Test in North Korea

by Łukasz Kulesa and Marek Madej

The nuclear test on 25 May 2009 was more powerful than the one in October 2006. A progress in developing the nuclear arsenal is also strengthening the position of Kim Jong-Il, who is preparing to nominate his successor. Applying effective pressure on the DPRK to return to negotiations under the previous terms is not to be expected soon. The crisis could worsen, and further nuclear and missile tests by North Korea cannot be ruled out.

Developments Prior to the Test on 25 May. Under the terms of the agreement reached on 13 February 2007 during six-party talks, in return for a normalization of relations with the United States, Japan and South Korea as well as economic aid, the DPRK pledged to stop construction work at the nuclear facility in Yongbyon, and then dismantle it and present a complete and verifiable declaration about its nuclear programs, including on the quantity of plutonium in its possession. Despite initial progress (the closure of the Yongbyon nuclear complex in July 2007 and its inspection by the IAEA), these terms have not been fulfilled, chiefly because of the obstacles placed by the DPRK. Its authorities presented the required declaration in June 2008, but it did not conform to the terms agreed upon earlier. The six-party talks collapsed on 26 August 2008, when the DPRK stopped dismantling its nuclear installations and threatened to reinstate them. Even though the United States had removed Korea from the list of sponsors of terrorism (in October 2008), the situation remained unchanged until the end of President George W. Bush's term-of-office.

After the inauguration of President Barack Obama, who manifested a desire to resume talks and augured progress in global nuclear disarmament, North Korea continued with its strategy of confrontation. Following a series of provocative actions towards South Korea, on 5 April 2009 the DPRK carried out a long-range missile test (officially claiming that the missile was carrying a communications satellite into orbit). Despite pressures from the United States and Japan, the UN Security Council merely issued a declaration on 13 April condemning the DPRK's conduct and specifying the sanctions provided under Resolution 1718 adopted after the DPRK's first nuclear test in 2006 (financial restrictions *vis-à-vis* three North Korean firms). In reply, North Korea's authorities announced the resumption of work in the nuclear facilities, and on 16 April forced international inspectors to leave Yongbyon.

Nuclear Test on 25 May. North Korea carried out the underground nuclear test in an area in the north-east of the country that was used for the 2006 nuclear test. The test was heralded by a declaration of North Korea's Foreign Ministry on the country's intention to "strengthen the nuclear deterrent." Apart from possessing political significance, the test no doubt served to achieve progress in the nuclear program. According to initial reports from Russian sources, the explosion was equivalent to 10–20 kilotonnes of TNT, but seismological readings indicate a strength of only 3–8 kilotonnes.

The strength of the explosion can be determined with greater accuracy only after more thorough tests (including of radioisotopes that reached the atmosphere) are carried out. If the explosion is less powerful, this could suggest the testing of a payload to prove its reliability and to see whether its mass and dimensions allow it to be carried by combat aircraft and ballistic missiles. The use of a more powerful payload, which would lessen the chances of failure, would suggest that the test was first of all of political significance. The strength of the last test explosion in 2006 was less than one kilotons, probably due to faulty design or construction errors. The fact that North Korea decided to

conduct another test in spite of its low reserves of plutonium (ca. 30–50 kg) could suggest that the country's experts have serious doubts about the technical feasibility of its arsenal.

The political significance of the test has to be examined in a domestic and international context. It is possible that following his serious illness last summer, Kim Jong-Il decided that his main objective in the immediate future should be to consolidate the regime's position and ensure the support of the armed forces for his designated successor. But another possibility is that he is thus trying to safeguard a credible deterrent for his regime in case, after his death, other countries (such as China) try to coerce the DPRK into modifying its system of government or attempt to influence the choice of a new leader.

The chief goal of North Korea's foreign policy is to alter the pattern of contacts with the United States and with the remaining participants of the six-party talks. Within the previous format of talks, North Korea could count on political and economic advantages only in exchange for concrete disarmament measures. At present, the DPRK wants its future contacts to be based on its permanent recognition (explicit or implicit) as a country with nuclear weapons. In practice, this would mean not only waiving the sanctions against North Korea, but also replacing denuclearization demands with a normalization of relations. The North Korean regime is no doubt also counting on the exclusion from the talks of representatives of South Korea (which has become particularly significant since the coming into power of President Lee Myung-bak, who wants economic aid for the North to be dependent upon progress in denuclearization) and of Japan (which is demanding an explanation of the fate of its citizens kidnapped by DPRK intelligence).

Prospects. Such a serious breach of international security requires swift reaction from the UN Security Council, but it is unlikely that its permanent members will approve far-reaching sanctions fast. Therefore, it is possible that initially the Security Council will merely expound and specify—in the form of a new resolution—the terms of Resolution 1718 on freezing the funds of enterprises and on persons engaged in developing weapons of mass destruction and building ballistic missiles, banning them from entering the territory of UN member states. It is also possible that UN members will be called upon to control more thoroughly the cargo of North Korean vessels and aircraft once those are under their jurisdiction.

At present, it is the United States which bears the main burden of responsibility for the future of the crisis. The DPRK's conduct signifies the failure of the present administration's policy of ignoring North Korea's developing nuclear and missile program, and is also a blow to President Obama's prestige. South Korea and Japan will very much expect the United States to be more active and confirm its security guarantees. But at the same time, the need for further engagement (including military) in other parts of the world is seriously restricting the possibility of any change in American policy towards the DPRK. This should compel the United States to adopt a two-track strategy combining efforts to strengthen and improve sanctions against the DPRK with offers of a return to negotiations. Diplomatic dialogue between the United States and North Korea is possible, but a formal departure from the six-party model of talks would be seen in particular by South Korea and Japan as a sign of American disregard for their vital interests. The crisis will boost China's role as a country that is best informed about the DPRK's domestic situation and one relatively best equipped to exert an influence on North Korean authorities. However, preventing an escalation of the crisis remains a priority for China, so China will seek a gradual introduction of any restrictions on economic contacts or aid for North Korea.

A change in policy of the DPRK as a result of diplomatic pressure or the impact of sanctions may take place in a few months' time, at best. In the meantime, North Korea will reopen the nuclear facility in Yongbyon, especially the fuel reprocessing plant (thus increasing its plutonium stockpiles for the production of nuclear weapons), and could also conduct further nuclear and missile tests. As a result, there will be increased domestic and international pressure on President Obama's administration to adopt a more determined strategy by launching either effective preventive measures or talks with the DPRK without insisting upon its denuclearization.