

North Korea: Nuclear Power or Rogue State?

by Prof. Dr. Ralph C. Hassig

North Korea's underground nuclear test of May 2009 measured just a few kilotons and received considerably less attention than its first test, in October 2006, suggesting that the world now recognizes that North Korea is an emerging nuclear state, although a few governments, including the United States, refuse to officially acknowledge this.

North Korea's nuclear weapons program can be viewed from two angles. If North Korea is recognized as an emerging nuclear state, then it is hardly surprising that it would test its new weapons. Other nuclear powers have followed the same road. The United States conducted the 20-kiloton Trinity test in 1945, the first of over a thousand tests. In the 1950s and the early 1960s, the skies over Nevada, Bikini, and Eniwetok lit up with giant mushroom clouds from nuclear and thermonuclear explosions ranging from a few kilotons to 15,000 kilotons. And they had interesting names too, like test series Buster-Jangle, Teapot, Wigwam, Nougat, and Castle, and individual tests named Shrimp (the largest), Alarm Clock, Jughead, Zombie, and Morgenstern. The Russians, of course, were avid nuclear testers as well.

After the Limited Test Ban treaty of 1963 was ratified, nuclear tests went underground, where they were rarely noticed by the general public. The signature of North Korea's 2006 underground test was so small that a couple of days later the Japanese mistook a minor earthquake for another North Korean test. No one watching the spectacular atmospheric tests of the 1950s ever mistook them for anything else. One wonders if the North Koreans rue the change in international norms that restricts them to such obscure underground testing.

North Korea's nuclear program was newsworthy in the late 1980s, when a large plutonium reprocessing plant was discovered by satellite imagery, and in the early 1990s, when intelligence analysts began to release estimates that the North Koreans had reprocessed sufficient plutonium to make one or two bombs. Since then, the North Korean's goal to become a nuclear weapons state has been clear and consistent, hardly the stuff to inspire news headlines. Under the Kim regime's "military-first" policy, the world should expect that North Korea's nuclear development will continue, especially in the run-up to the year 2012, when Kim Jong-il has promised to make his country a *Kangsong Taeguk* – an economically and militarily powerful state.

Another way to view North Korea's nuclear test is to see it as the provocative action of an international rogue state that has willfully chosen to violate a host of bilateral and multilateral

commitments and agreements, including its 1985 accession to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (from which it later withdrew), the 1991 Joint Declaration of a Nuclear-Free Korean Peninsula, and the September 2005 “joint statement” at the Six-Party Talks to end its nuclear weapons program. The nuclear tests and missile launches also go against United Nations’ resolutions, although North Korea is hardly the first country to ignore the United Nations. The Kim regime is also reneging on numerous unilateral commitments, including Kim Il-sung’s repeated insistence that North Korea had no intention to develop nuclear weapons and Kim Jong-il’s assurance that, if only the United States would end its threats, North Korea was ever eager to see the Korean peninsula completely denuclearized.

Despite these earlier promises and commitments, and for whatever reasons, North Korea now publicly admits that it is committed to developing nuclear weapons, thus reconciling rhetoric with reality. Privately and provocatively, North Koreans have told foreign visitors that they are also prepared to transfer their nuclear technology to other countries – something that the United States fears more than a direct nuclear threat from North Korea.

Some analysts believe the Kim regime is developing these weapons in order to trade them away for security guarantees and economic benefits from the international community, but a more realistic view would be that North Korea is no more ready to give up its nuclear weapons than is the United States, China, or Russia, because these weapons serve the same purposes for North Korea that they do for other nuclear weapons states, and the North Korean press has frequently noted that although many small states have been invaded by larger states, no nuclear state has ever been invaded.

It is likely that the nuclear tests and the rocket launches serve domestic political purposes as well, although speculation about the role of these events in preparing for a leadership succession may be off the mark. Certainly, the tests reflect the prominence in the North Korean power structure of the military, which has no desire to see the country embrace economic reform or open itself to the international community. Demonstrations of the power of North Korea’s weapons may also boost the pride of the ordinary North Korean, but according to reports coming out of the country, most people are so alienated from their government and so focused on making a living that they care little for their country’s reputation in the international community.

Can anything be done to rid North Korea of its nuclear weapons? Threats, which come readily to hand, are useless because North Korea is by now quite used to them. Short of military action, the United States can do nothing it hasn’t already done to seriously damage the Kim regime. The offer to engage North Korea and draw it into the international community would greatly benefit ordinary North Koreans but would be viewed as a threat by the ruling elites, who must keep the people isolated in order to control them.

Engaging in dialogue with North Korea is useful to communicate ideas and express sentiments, but it will persuade the North Koreans to give up their nuclear weapons because they have heard all of the arguments many times before, just as they have heard the threats. What dialogue does is satisfy or at least distract political constituencies, and after all the first rule of politics is to keep your constituents happy. As long as talks continue, political leaders can claim to be working on the problem; they can even claim to be making progress. This assertion fools some of the people some of the time, but since most people (and the media) are not “seized” (to use jargon from UN resolutions) by any foreign policy problem for more than a few days at a time, temporarily distracting people is often sufficient to succeed in politics.

For its part, the United Nations has no more influence over North Korea than does China, which is North Korea's major benefactor and protector. Neither China nor Russia wants to see North Korea reunified with a democratic, U.S.-friendly South Korea; consequently, China is not likely to use its considerable economic leverage unless it can figure out how to make North Korea a de facto Chinese satellite.

In the meantime, North Korea can do no better than continue to provoke other countries with its nuclear tests and missile launches, perhaps even going so far as to launch a very limited attack on South Korea. In the past, such provocations have brought the United States to the bargaining table, thus providing the Kim regime with international legitimacy and economic aid.

At the bargaining table, the North Koreans have stated on many occasions that they will not give up their nuclear weapons unless the United States ends all traces of its hostility toward the Kim regime. Since the North Koreans are famous for harboring suspicion and fear, even a peace treaty and diplomatic recognition are unlikely to satisfy them.

If talks, economic inducements, and political agreements will not convince the Kim regime to denuclearize, is there anything else that the United States could do to move toward the goal of Korean denuclearization? I would offer two suggestions. First, ignore the regime when it is "bad." If ignored, it may become worse, but then again it seems to be getting worse anyway. Perhaps if the North Koreans continue to develop their nuclear weapons program and even begin selling or their nuclear technology, the Chinese may decide they have had enough from their neighbor and end their economic support for the regime.

At the same time, since the essential value of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction is to protect and maintain the Kim regime, it would be useful to work for regime change. Once this regime and any like-minded successor regime is gone, the chances of ridding the Korean peninsula of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles will improve dramatically. Engagement should be not with the North Korean leaders, but with their people, who are not happy with how their country is being run, and for the most part do not benefit from the billions of dollars in economic benefits that in recent years have flowed directly into the hands of the elite class. Communicating with the people by all means available, including radio broadcasts, and letting them know that unification, which they desire for economic reasons, will come only after their current government is gone, will put constant pressure on the regime. History suggests that cracks will eventually open up in the regime's upper ranks and they will become distracted with political infighting. When the regime is gone, the main rationale for developing nuclear weapons will have gone with it.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. The analysis has already been published by Council for Asian Terrorism Research E-journal, Asian Conflicts Report, June 2009.



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