

North Korean Nuclear Test: Implications for Asian Security by Muthiah Alagappa

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North Korea carried out its third nuclear test on Feb. 13, 2013 after having successfully test-fired its long-range rocket in December 2012. Pyongyang is on its way to developing a nuclear weapon capability that can be delivered at short range and in due course over longer ranges including to the United States, China, and Russia. As expected, the international community has reacted to the test with calls for tighter sanctions and will try to induce North Korea to the long-stalled Six-Party Talks. These are unlikely to succeed.

Though paying a high price, North Korea is intent on developing a strategic nuclear deterrent against present and potential adversaries. The international community must recognize and attempt to integrate a nuclear North Korea into Asia and the world. This may be unpalatable to policymakers who have persisted with a sanction and roll back policy as well as for the bankrupt nonproliferation community. However, there is little else that the international community can do. It can bomb North Korea to oblivion but that carries risks and would serve no substantive political or strategic purpose.

North Korea has pursued the nuclear weapon path at very high cost over two decades not for prestige, legitimacy, bargaining leverage, or because of irrationality as often presumed in the West. These presumptions were essentially self-serving fig leaves for policy. The international community (the US and its allies in Asia as well as China) failed to address the real concern of national security that has driven the North Korea nuclear weapon program. It is no longer possible for international security assurances to cap or roll back the North Korean nuclear weapon program. The world must now confront the reality of a nuclear North Korea.

Policy must begin with an examination of the possible consequences of a nuclear North Korea for regional security and for the world. The primary purpose of nuclear weapons is deterrence. There is no conceivable political purpose for the offensive use of nuclear weapons. Blackmail, diplomatic leverage, etc. are situation dependent and not outright consequences of nuclear weapons. If North Korea were to deploy its limited capability in a pre-emptive strike against the United States or its allies (assuming there was a political and strategic rationale for such use) it would suffer huge retaliatory damage. No political cause would be served by such a strike. In sum, North Korea can do little with its nuclear weapon

capability except to deter aggression and blackmail. In my view, nuclear weapons will give Pyongyang a greater sense of security and thus enhance stability in Northeast Asia and more broadly in Asia.

Nonproliferation theory and practice

A nuclear North Korea does not necessarily lead to nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia. The domino theory holds that Japan and South Korea may follow suit. While both countries have security concerns relating to North Korea, Japan and South Korea are covered by the extended nuclear deterrence commitment of the United States. The latter will not support the development of nuclear-weapon capability by these two countries. The most likely consequence will be for Japan and South Korea to demand firm and effective extended deterrence commitments as was the case in Europe during the Cold War.

Japan is already a virtual nuclear weapon state. For it to take the next step, it will have to overcome the Hiroshima-Nagasaki and Fukushima effects still strong in Japanese society and calculate the consequences (reactions from China, the United States, and South Korea) for its national security and for its international standing which has been predicated on a nonnuclear stance. Likewise South Korea will have to consider the costs and benefits of going nuclear. In the 1970s, both South Korea and Taiwan embarked on covert nuclear weapon programs, triggered by the belief that the US would no longer guarantee their security. Only with firm US security assurance and under pressure from Washington were these two nuclear-weapon programs terminated. Belief in the effectiveness of the US extended deterrence commitment and domestic political calculus and not the domino effect would be the key drivers affecting Japan and South Korea's decision to pursue nuclear weapon capability.

Nonproliferation enthusiasts contend that accepting the DPRK as a nuclear weapon state would further undermine the NPT regime. This simplistic argument does not bear scrutiny. Throughout its history the NPT regime increased the cost and slowed the spread but did not prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons by determined states. Further, there is no rationale for some states to have nuclear weapons and for others to be denied that capability. This is not to argue that "more is better" or that every state that desires it must be free to develop such capability. Those interested in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons must address the demand side of the equation (insecurity) and not just the supply side as is the case with the present NPT. Like all other armaments, nuclear weapons are symptomatic of insecurity not the cause of it.

Accepting reality of nuclear Asia

Contrary to conventional wisdom, nuclear weapons have increased security and stability in Asia though there are also

dangers and insecurities that should be addressed. Rather than hide behind the NPT regime and persist with a failed approach, it is time to confront the reality that, broadly defined, Asia has seven of the nine nuclear-weapon states (US, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea). A determined Iran could well become the eighth nuclear weapon state in Asia and the tenth member of the world nuclear club. The Asian nuclear era is fundamentally different from that of the Cold War.

Although deterrence and extended deterrence remain important concepts, their content and application have become much more complicated. It is opportune to begin exploration of the roles and significance of nuclear weapons in contemporary Asia, develop concepts and strategies germane to the Asian nuclear situation, identify risks and dangers including acquisition by nonstate actors, and explore how they may be ameliorated and addressed.

There are many issues to be explored. Instead of being frozen in a mindset, it is time for Asian and Western policy circles and scholars to unravel the fake security blanket, go past post-Cold War paralysis, and do some real work on the subject. Ironically we may have to thank the DPRK for this stimulus.

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