



Why Was North Korea In Such a Hurry with its Missile and Nuclear Tests? The Challenges for 2013 and Beyond by Sukjoon Yoon

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Following Kim Jong Il's orders, his son and successor Kim Jong-un recently conducted tests of both a long-range missile (under the pretext of launching a communications satellite) and a nuclear weapon. This was useful to consolidate his power within North Korea, whose starving masses have little else to celebrate, but it was also a grave provocation to the international community, even to its principal ally China. So what is the payoff for North Korea – why be so brave?

Both steps, the launching of a three-stage rocket and North Korea's third nuclear test, had been widely predicted, coming after the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010. But there have been some unexpected developments in North Korea, notably in the behavior of the new leader, who cried ostentatiously before his father's coffin – an extraordinary lapse of discipline for the first secretary of the revolutionary Workers' Party of Korea. He has also been seen in public accompanied by his would-be first lady – which is almost unprecedented in Asia's communist states. Another surprise has been that North Korea has so far declined to follow the Chinese model of economic development, which many commentators had predicted. Still, in the matter of weapons testing, the pundits have been proved correct: North Korea successfully launched a long-range rocket on Dec. 13, 2012, on the third attempt, and detonated a nuclear bomb on Feb. 12, 2013. It seems that Kim Jong Un is continuing the deliberately provocative strategy adopted by his father, but questions remain about what he hopes to gain from such defiance. What signals are the North Koreans trying to send, and what are the implications for South Korea, China, and the US?

Signals to the US and President Park Geun-hye

The development of long-range missiles and nuclear weapons has become an attractive policy option for North Korea as a means to boost its influence, with the implicit threat of their use or further proliferation: in effect it is nuclear blackmail. It was surely not accidental that the missile test took place just one week before the South Korean presidential election of December 2012, in which Park Geun-hye was chosen as the first woman president in Korean history. Similarly, the nuclear test came at the beginning of President Obama's new administration, just hours before his State of the Union address, during which he expressed his strong condemnation of the test.

These provocations occurred during South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's government and on Hilary Clinton's watch as secretary of state, and it seems that the North Koreans are attempting to demonstrate their readiness to continue developing and testing nuclear weapons and long-range missiles while hoping for a change of attitude: they are allowing the new administrations to blame their predecessors for the tensions, and inviting their adversaries to adopt a different approach. Also, in the aftermath of the third nuclear test, there have been many rumors about further testing of nuclear weapons and missiles. It seems that North Korea is doing everything it can to disturb the peace of the incoming Park administration and the diplomatic and military circles of Obama's second term.

Implications for the New Chinese Leadership

Unfortunately, there are informal indications that the new Chinese leadership is prepared to accept and work with North Korea as a fledgling nuclear power, provided that South Korea and Japan do not respond by acquiring nuclear weapons themselves. They realize that Kim Jong Un needs to consolidate his power to survive, and therefore they understand that the recent tests are a way of increasing his strategic leverage so as to improve North Korea's position when dealing with the US and South Korea.

The North Koreans are pushing the Chinese leadership to recognize North Korea as an established nuclear power, and to represent it as such in their dialogs with the US, Japan, and South Korea. From the Chinese standpoint, the North Korean nuclear test is less threatening to China's security than the conventional armed exchanges that occurred between North Korea and South Korea near the Northern Limit Line in March and November of 2010. What worries the Chinese government most is the possibility that the nuclear test might furnish the US with a good excuse to enhance its military presence in South Korea. It seems that the North Koreans are encouraging the Chinese to adopt a noninterventionist and forward-looking position to avoid damaging relations between China and North Korea which might have a significant impact on the Chinese strategic stance on the Korean Peninsula.

The Chinese government has acknowledged its difficulties in dealing with North Korea, and is becoming increasingly willing to put the North Korean issue on the table at the United Nations Security Council. This appears to be a very effective way for the Chinese to convey their message and, hopefully, will result in helpful adjustments to their policy on North Korea.

North Korea has Dealt Itself a Good Hand

Now that North Korea has established its ability to produce missiles and nuclear weapons, it is anticipating dividends in the form of new policy approaches by the

neighboring governments of South Korea, Japan, and China, as well as the US. However, the gap between “the sovereign right to possess rocketry and nuclear technology” and “absolutely not allowing North Korea to establish itself as a fully-fledged nuclear power” is not easily bridgeable.

The most intractable problem, from the US perspective, is the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Now that the US faces a technological fait accompli from the North Koreans it is widely anticipated that the US will move toward at least some warming of US-North Korea ties. North Korea seems well aware of the expected US drawdown in East Asia and the prospect of regional domination by China. It understands that these changes are potentially disturbing for all the nations bordering Korea and that they are united in resisting North Korea’s nuclear aspirations. From the North Korean perspective, the potential blackmail value of the threat of proliferation puts a very large price tag on its nuclear weapons and missiles, and will not soon relinquish them. North Korea has acquired both nuclear weapons technology and the long-range missiles necessary to deliver nuclear warheads, which means, indisputably, that the onus is on other countries to step up to the negotiating table.

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