

North Korea's Nuclear Test

North Korea's nuclear test serves several purposes. Its first purpose is to bolster the flagging legitimacy of the regime and, by drumming up war hysteria, achieve domestic mobilization in the face of mounting internal difficulties. Throughout North Korea's turbulent history, the regime has periodically resorted to war hysteria, at times on even grander scale than what we have recently seen. North Korea's Songun (army-first) policy requires periodic crises to maintain the myth of enemy encirclement and the army prestige. If history is any judge, the North Koreans will step away from the brink when their domestic aims have been achieved.

Another reason for North Korea's militancy, ironically, is to break out from international isolation. For years Pyongyang has sought direct dialogue with the United States with an eye to obtaining security guarantees and economic aid. Six party talks have put Pyongyang into a five-against-one situation, and although the North Koreans have accepted the format they do not regard them as a replacement for direct talks with Washington.

Thirdly, this latest round of militancy signals Pyongyang's growing irritation with 'hardline' policies of Yi Myongbak's conservative administration. Brandishing the new South Korean President a "national traitor," Pyongyang awkwardly attempts to undermine his domestic standing and hopefully exacerbate conflict in US-South Korean relations. In view of this policy, Kim Jong Il's condolences to the deceased South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and the nuclear test are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory measures.



Fourth, there is no doubt that Pyongyang is in great need of economic aid. The North Korean leadership believes that the US and South Korea have used economic levers to extract concessions and the current sabre-rattling, specifically the severance of economic contacts in the Kaesong industrial area, are a way for North Korea to signal its defiance to this economic pressure. At the same time the North Koreans are once again pumping-up tensions to raise the price of compliance once things get back to the negotiating table.

Fifth, North Korea badly needed a demonstration of a viable deterrent. The first atomic test (in October 2006) was an unconvincing performance; at the time, many observers thought it fizzled out. Despite significant progress in missile technology in the last few years, North Korea has not done as well as some military experts expected, as attested by the recent satellite launch fiasco. The A-bomb test erases any doubts about Pyongyang's membership in the nuclear club - a serious deterrent by any measure.

Given the value of this deterrent, it is unlikely that Pyongyang would ever give it up, either for aid or for security guarantees. It may well negotiate and even agree to dismantle its nuclear programme. But living up to such promises would not only go against the essence of Songun politics but, from North Korea's perspective, reduce the country's international leverage. So whilst we might expect negotiations and even progress we should not expect a solution to the North Korean nuclear problem.

Few options other than talks are on the table. A war on the Peninsula is unthinkable, not least because of South Korea's vulnerability. Economic sanctions have been tried before and found to work very well as an alternative to doing nothing. China's and Russia's cooperation will be limited, as it has been before, and for a good reason: a genuine sanctions regime, which would leave North Korea completely isolated, could have extremely grave consequences for the viability of the regime - and that would be bad news for all parties involved. As long as there are talks about North Korea's denuclearization, there is hope for calming the nerves of regional powers, in particular Japan, and so averting what potentially could be a very damaging nuclear arms race in the region.

There are, of course, reasons to worry, not least because we don't know who is in charge in North Korea. Kim Jong Il may be strong, he may be weak, or he may be dead, for all we know; in any case, it is clear that the struggle for succession is already under way. What role the current nuclear crisis plays in this struggle is unclear, and there can be no guarantees that the nuclear button will not end up under the finger of an irrational maniac? The one shred of hope in such a scenario is that, as the historical precedent of Mao in the 1960s attests, nuclear-armed maniacs turn out much more rational than they may seem at first sight.

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