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North Korea: the reverberations of 25 May

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45

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North Korea's second nuclear test has reawakened many of the concerns that surrounded its first test in late 2006. Some judge those concerns not as troubling now as they were then, arguing that North Korean testing has lost its 'shock' value. Such judgments are wrong. This test is much more troubling than the first: technically, it seems to have been more successful; politically, it occurs during more uncertain times in North Korean politics; strategically, it encourages perceptions of a North Korean arsenal that is permanent and growing rather than temporary and diminishing; and diplomatically, it undermines not only the existing agreements at the Six-Party Talks but the broader philosophy of a negotiated settlement. For the other members of the Six-Party Talks (the US, China, Japan, Russia and South Korea), and for the region more generally, a series of difficult policy choices now loom.

Technicalities

A second nuclear test was always likely after the first test (on 9 October 2006) resulted in a poor yield—something of the order of half a kiloton. It was generally seen as a 'fizzer'. (It's possible, of course, that the North Koreans always intended a relatively small explosion, but unlikely they would deliberately have planned one quite that small.) This second test seems to have been closer to about 3 kilotons, based upon the established formula that relates yield to earthquake magnitude. But estimates of the size vary significantly, with some sources suggesting a yield similar to the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 (broadly, 15–20 kilotons). Those estimates cover a comparatively wide range but cannot be resolved here. In truth, though, whether the test was 3 kilotons or 20 kilotons matters little for the conclusions that follow.

We also don't know what progress the North Koreans have made towards actual 'weaponisation': that is, whether or not the device is now in a more deliverable form. Most unclassified analyses argue that the North is still some years from having robust miniature warheads that could fit on top of its ballistic missiles. That seems likely to be true, but the paucity of hard information in this area makes it difficult for analysts to state confidently just how far away Pyongyang actually is from attaining such a capability.

Most importantly of all, the test tells us that the North Koreans are still interested in designing and constructing a reliable, deployable warhead. They have chosen to use a non-trivial fraction (perhaps one-sixth) of their

available fissile material in an attempt to move towards a more credible and sophisticated arsenal.[1] True, the resumption of reprocessing at Yongbyon will soon be able to make good the cost in terms of the plutonium stockpile. But on current projections, for some years yet the North Koreans will be able to produce enough plutonium per year for only one nuclear device. Testing bites into that stockpile—but simultaneously strengthens the arsenal.

Succession issues in Pyongyang?

North Korean politics are opaque. But Korea-watchers believe that Kim Jong-Il—weakened by heart attacks and a stroke—has begun to set up succession arrangements in an attempt to ensure the orderly transition of political power from himself to a relative in the event of his own sudden demise.[2] Those interested in the Byzantine politics of North Korea see the test itself as signalling the rise of the hardliners within the Pyongyang leadership as succession issues arise. And the text of the North Korean announcement of the test certainly suggests political factors have been unusually prominent in the decision: it refers specifically to a 150-day propaganda campaign currently underway, and explicitly endorses the 'military first' policy as central to North Korean security.

So we might be in a period when domestic political factors inside Pyongyang—factors that go to the core of regime longevity—are playing an important role in North Korean decision-making about the nuclear issue. The nature of that role remains obscure. But long-term observers of North Korea note Pyongyang's decisions typically become more aggressive when its leadership is weak or it feels ignored.[3] Kim Jong-Il's illness, and the uncertainties surrounding the regime's future, plus the enormous global interest in a range of other issues lately—the Global Financial Crisis, Obama's settling-in period, Afghanistan, China's rise, Iran—mean both conditions are currently satisfied.

Strategic messages

The latest test underlines North Korea's ambition to be a recognised nuclear weapon state in Northeast Asia. It encourages perceptions of an arsenal that is permanent, sophisticated and growing, rather than temporary, rudimentary and shrinking. Such perceptions are highly unsettling to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's neighbours. In truth, Japan and South Korea cannot be indifferent to the emergence of a *de facto* nuclear North Korea. A North Korea with an established and growing nuclear arsenal is an entirely different proposition from the one regional states have previously encountered. In short, we might be at a tipping point in regional perceptions. Robert Gates, US Secretary of Defense, recently suggested at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore that North Korean progress in nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles was 'a harbinger of a dark future.'

If we are approaching that dark future, important strategic consequences will follow. The Americans, like the Japanese, have been quick to say that the idea of a nuclear-armed North Korea is 'totally unacceptable'. But, historically, a determined nuclear proliferator has always been hard to stop. As the idea of a growing North Korean arsenal spreads, two debates will become especially prominent: the first, a debate about how Pyongyang might choose to 'use' its arsenal; the second, a debate about how the neighbours might respond.

Nuclear weapons have great 'gravitational' utility.[4] The common perception that nuclear weapons are useless unless they are used directly—that is, by being fired at someone—is deeply flawed. During the Cold War, for example, nuclear weapons exercised profound strategic influence while never leaving their silos. It is more than likely that North Korea intends its own arsenal to provide just such leverage. But it is also misleading to believe that nuclear weapons used gravitationally are always 'defensive' weapons. A nuclear umbrella can certainly be a defensive instrument. It can also provide other sorts of cover, though: cover for conventional aggression, for the provision of proliferation assistance to others, or for the arming and support of non-state groups. That's why the US and the region can't accept a nuclear-armed North Korea.

The reactions of the neighbours are also critical. North Korea has long promised to be the fulcrum of an actual nuclear tipping point in Northeast Asia, sharpening the strategic challenges felt by Japan and South Korea to the point where the reassurance currently offered by the US doctrine of extended nuclear deterrence is less satisfying. Condoleezza Rice raced to Tokyo and Seoul in October 2006 to assure both countries that extended nuclear deterrence could still offset the North. The Obama administration now has a slightly more difficult task. Obama's nuclear disarmament credentials are more prominently displayed than George W Bush's were, as some prominent Japanese commentators—including Yukio Satoh—have noted. And the North Korean arsenal now seems to cast a darker and more lasting shadow.

Finally, China's position has become more problematic. An important part of China's claim to be fulfilling the role of a 'responsible stakeholder' has been its careful management of the North Korean problem. China doesn't want a nuclearised Korean peninsula. And it knows that both the US and Japan take the issue so seriously that if diplomacy fails, other more serious strategic options will come onto the table. It may have further cards to play to exert increased leverage over Pyongyang, but is itself frustrated over the waywardness of its small, erratic neighbour.

The diplomatic options

Robert Gates confirmed at Shangri-La that the Obama administration was looking for a political response to the test rather than anything more drastic. The US would reach out to the other four members of the Six-Party Talks, he said, and canvass options more broadly with regional governments. But Gates also said that he was opposed to the idea of 'paying for the same horse twice', and that the Six-Party Talks, on any neutral accounting, could probably not be judged a success. The question confronting both Washington—and others—he observed, now lay in devising more effective instruments for resolving the crisis.

But what else can be done? Tighter sanctions can certainly be devised, but would have to be rigorously enforced. Even if they were rigorously enforced, would they lead to the desired end-point, or merely accelerate the precipitous collapse of the North Korean regime? Would sudden collapse be a good or bad thing in a country that already has 40kg of weaponised plutonium? Who would pick up the pieces after such a collapse? On the other hand, we have little idea what a military solution would look like. An air attack could certainly flatten the key facilities in Yongbyon, and that would prevent further fuel irradiation and reprocessing there. Such an attack would 'cap' the program, at least for some years. But the North's weaponisation facilities, and probably

the weapons themselves, lie elsewhere. Further, the North would have its own response options to such an attack, given its massed artillery along the demilitarised zone. Escalation control would be critical in any such scenario.

Negotiated settlements still have one major attraction for the other members of the talks in comparison to other, more costly options: they hold out the promise that the issue can be bounded and constrained without risking either a war on the Korean peninsula or a catastrophic collapse of the North Korean regime. And perhaps the North hasn't totally abandoned the idea of further negotiations either: part of what the North wants (a better security assurance from the US and better economic support from its neighbours) can't be achieved away from the negotiating table. The problem, of course, is that the North Koreans want those objectives alongside—not instead of—a nuclear weapons arsenal.

Is there any way forward?

When ASPI last published on North Korea, we suggested that the issue might return to the forefront of a cluttered international security agenda in 2009.[5] It has done so with a vengeance. Much more now than in 2006, the region faces an improving North Korean nuclear arsenal, a stressed and perhaps transitional decision-making mechanism in Pyongyang, a looming nuclear tipping point in Northeast Asia, and a lack of obvious instruments to address the crisis. Moreover, how the international community manages the challenges the North Koreans have posed has wider ramifications—Tehran, for example, probably sees lessons here for the future of its own program.

In such circumstances, the Australian Government will want to consult closely with its regional partners and friends over the best way forward. There might be value in further negotiations, either multilateral or bilateral (between the US and North Korea), as a time-buying exercise. But we seem to have crossed an important threshold in the long-running North Korean crisis, the threshold beyond which key countries accept that negotiations can no longer deliver the desired outcome of a denuclearised North Korea. If that is so, then, frankly, opportunities for a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem are dwindling rapidly. More drastic and consequential options are now much closer. There is still a path forward, but it is a path paved with higher levels of risk—indeed, a path similar to the one the world walked during the days of the Cuban missile crisis.

Endnotes

1 Seigfried Hecker (2009) 'The risks of North Korea's nuclear restart', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 12 May
2 See, for example, Choe Sang-hun (2009) 'Speculation rises on N. Korea's leader', *New York Times*, 3 June
3 Victor Cha (2008) 'The coming crisis', *The Chosun Iibo*, 25 September
4 See the distinction between 'gravitational' and 'direct' use of military force outlined in Robert Art (2004) 'The fungibility of force', in Robert Art and Kenneth Waltz (eds.) *The use of force: military power and international politics*, 6th ed. (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield)
5 Rod Lyon and Keah Molomby (2009) 'North Korea: sliding towards the abyss', *Strategic Insights* No.46 (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute)

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