

AFTER NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR TEST: THE DILEMMA OF RESPONSE

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North Korea's recent nuclear test and satellite launch throw into sharp relief the dilemma of how the international community should respond to Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. While immediate reaction is accorded to strengthening sanctions and other countermeasures, it is ultimately only dialogue that will bring about a longer-term resolution of the nuclear crisis, argue Sangsoo Lee and Alec Fors.

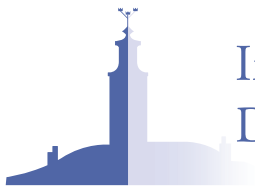
North Korea's fourth nuclear test last month, in addition to its ostensible satellite launch one month later, reflects Pyongyang's intentions to disregard international censure of its nuclear ambitions. It further puts in the spotlight the failure of the international community to persuade Pyongyang to desist from continuing its pursuit of nuclear weapons. This fact represents a two-fold dilemma: the immediate one is how to manage crisis and reduce tensions amidst the growing seriousness of North Korea's nuclear threat and its repercussions; the second, longer-term challenge is how to grasp the nettle of resolving the nuclear issue on the Peninsula in a situation where previous efforts have failed. So far, the international community, led by the U.S., has reacted strongly to the recent tests, pushing forward additional punitive sanctions against Pyongyang and raising the prospect of boosting military deterrence measures. However, by themselves, they will arguably contribute to exacerbating, rather than ameliorating, tensions as well as North Korea's nuclear resolve. Notwithstanding the failure of previous negotiations and agreements, dialogue is now needed more than ever between the parties to manage tensions and redefine starting points for resumed negotiations.

Test and Reaction

On January 6, North Korea announced that it had successfully tested a powerful hydrogen bomb. The detonation was the country's fourth nuclear test since 2006, and the first since February 2013. If confirmed as a hydrogen bomb, as opposed to a less powerful fission bomb detonated in previous tests, it would represent a significant leap forward in North Korea's nuclear capability. According to

the U.S. Geological Survey, basing their assessments on the lower-frequency seismic waves (magnitude 5.1) emitted by the test, its strength was similar to North Korea's previous test. However, North Korea's media reported that the primary objective of the test was to "scientifically verify the power of a miniaturized hydrogen bomb." Therefore, the test could have been a prelude to another, more powerful test based on H-bomb technology in the near future. In the absence of concrete evidence, such assertions cannot be verified. Regardless, what is clear is that North Korea – allied with its subsequent satellite launch on February 7, whose technology experts suspect could be used to deliver a miniaturized nuclear warhead – has further demonstrated its commitment to enhancing its nuclear capacity in contravention of U.N. Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. U.S. experts estimate that its current stockpile consists of 10-16 nuclear weapons.

In response, North Korea has faced strong international condemnation, including from China and Russia. A new U.S. sanctions bill passed the Lower House on January 12, with the U.S. Senate overwhelmingly approving the bill (as well as adding broadened measures) on February 10. The bill includes a request to mandate sanctions "against any country, business or individual that materially contributes to North Korea's economy." Prominent voices in the U.S. have also argued for coordination with the UN and Asian countries to enforce additional measures that would prohibit North Korean ships and air carriers from accessing certain ports and airports, in order to prevent arms shipments and cash smuggling. The UN Security Council has vowed a new sanctions resolution, while South Korea and Japan are also pursuing their own further bilateral sanctions.



At the same time, the U.S. and South Korea are discussing intensifying the scale of annual joint military exercises which could take place in early spring. Simulating an attack on North Korea's nuclear facilities may be a part of these exercises, as well as the deployment of B-52 long-range bombers, nuclear submarines, and other strategic weapons to the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, the recent test and rocket launch have also reinvigorated discussions in South Korea on a possible deployment of the U.S. THAAD anti-ballistic missile system to enhance its defense capability from North Korean missile attack.

While a robust response is seen as necessary to North Korea's violations of UNSC resolutions, it calls into question whether such measures can coerce Pyongyang to the negotiation table on the premise of abandoning its nuclear program.

Implications

Indeed, there are significant question marks over the likely efficacy of a strengthened sanctions regime. For one, Pyongyang has proved not only adept at circumventing existing sanctions but also remarkably resilient in the face of international isolation and pressure. Indeed, its relative isolation from the international economy and financial system – unlike Iran – buffers it to some degree from its effects. Additionally, the adoption of elements of capitalism have stimulated people to increase agricultural production and economic activity, while export of labor has increasingly become one of the main income sources for the regime. Meanwhile, North Korea has recently diversified its diplomatic and economic ties with many countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Consequently, North Korea's economy has showed some tentative signs of improvement that could help it to withstand the impact of augmented sanctions.

For sanctions to be more effective, this relies on greater international coordination, not least with China – a fact recognized in the U.S. This is unlikely to succeed. While China has expressed strong disapproval of North Korea's nuclear program, it is unwilling to exert leverage on North Korea that could bring it to the brink of economic collapse and so trigger flows of refugees into China. Further, if sanctions target Chinese economic interests with North Korea by penalizing banks and other entities, Beijing is unlikely to accede to such. Moreover, the staging of large-scale joint military exercises and the deployment of THAAD missile defense

as part of enhancing defense cooperation with South Korea (and Japan) would be seen by Beijing as augmenting U.S. strategic assets at the expense of China. Under such conditions, North Korea's strategic value will grow for China in countering the U.S. "pivot to Asia" policy. As a result, the North Korea nuclear issue will be even more difficult to resolve by precluding the prospect of Chinese cooperation.

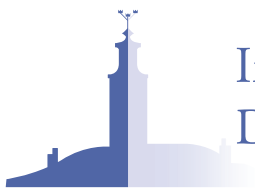
The main parties involved have also arguably underestimated North Korea's nuclear development and ambitions. Since 2006, North Korea has conducted four nuclear tests at roughly three-year intervals, with the status of becoming a full-fledged nuclear power an official agenda of the Kim Jong Un regime. Accordingly, in a situation where Pyongyang perceives a hostile security environment, nuclear weapons offer it the ultimate security guarantee. Hence, in the absence of external security assurances, it is unlikely either that any amount of humanitarian, economic, and energy assistance (which underpinned previous negotiations) by itself would persuade it to take steps towards denuclearization. What is more, its pursuit of a strong nuclear deterrent enables it to reallocate part of its conventional military budget towards developing the economy (part of its Byongjin Policy), such as through redeploying soldiers to the construction sector.

In sum, given the limitations identified above, it is ultimately only dialogue (discounting military intervention or regime collapse) that holds the prospect, however difficult, of bringing longer-term resolution of the nuclear crisis.

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Yet in recent years, resuming negotiations has been discredited with a collapse of trust amidst North Korea's failure to abandon its nuclear program. The Six-Party Talks have been moribund since the end of 2008, while the breakdown of the 2012 Leap Day Agreement signaled the end of Washington's patience in dialogue. All sides have since imposed high preconditions as the basis for dialogue, and its resumption, which have proven unacceptable to the other. For the U.S. and South Korea, this involves tangible denuclearization measures; for North Korea this entails the signing of a peace treaty and a dismantling of the U.S. "hostile policy."

Notwithstanding, preventing any crisis from escalating must be the first priority. The deteriorating security environment is pushing the Korean Peninsula in a dangerous direction. Reacting to the tests, South Korea has closed the Kaesong Industrial Complex, resumed loudspeaker broadcasts across the DMZ, with the prospect of joint U.S.-ROK



military exercises and possible deployment of strategic weapons to come. Meanwhile, North Korea has terminated North-South hotlines, a patrol boat is reported to have crossed the Northern Limit Line, and further missile tests and other military actions are possible. In view of this, diplomatic channels, both at official and unofficial levels, between the U.S./ROK and DPRK are urgently needed to clarify intentions and defuse tensions in order to try and stabilize the situation. Dialogue should focus on the speedy re-establishment of direct military hotlines, issuing prior notification of military movements, and preventing unexpected incidents.

Beyond the immediate concern of military crisis management, the next challenge is for each side, specifically the U.S. and North Korea, to remove or lower the preconditions to more formal dialogue. In the context of possible future nuclear tests by North Korea, items for discussion could include issues of transparency, safety, non-proliferation, and potentially a code of conduct so as to control any escalation. This could give momentum to identifying and compromising on a suitable starting-point to break the current deadlock. One tentative proposal that could be discussed is a non-aggression agreement whereby the U.S. affirms it will not attack North Korea, thereby guaranteeing a certain level of security to Pyongyang, in return for it declaring a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests. However, the devil would lie in the detail of how joint U.S.-ROK military exercises would be treated as well as the monitoring and verification of any moratorium. Given the current environment, this will not be an easy task and requires political will as well as bold and imaginative diplomacy.

This could then offer a basis for the resumption of multilateral negotiations comprising of at least the U.S., North Korea, China, and South Korea to discuss more detailed steps. In so doing, it is necessary for all sides to reaffirm that the end goals remain (if indeed they are) full denuclearization of the Peninsula and the signing of a peace treaty. In a situation where North Korea's nuclear program is motivated by its security dilemma, there is need to put greater focus on security building from the outset in return for denuclearization measures. Secondly, it is necessary to revisit previous agreements and decide which principles and aspects still hold relevance. The situation has evolved on the Peninsula and North Korea's nuclear capability enhanced since previous agreements were inked. Thirdly, there needs to be more specific language and stipulations, stringent verification measures, and clear steps outlined in case of non-

compliance. Factoring in these considerations, it would be necessary to establish a roadmap which specifies mutually agreed on levels of reciprocity and sequencing of measures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, attention is currently focused on responding to and counteracting North Korea's nuclear and missile tests. Myopically, in the heat of the moment, there is less focus on the urgent need for crisis management and longer-term thinking on how to resolve the nuclear issue. This is not to say that sanctions and other countermeasures do not have a role to play. Indeed, they signal to North Korea international unacceptance of its nuclear program and can apply pressure on the regime by raising the costs of such. However, if not complemented by serious long-term efforts to engage Pyongyang in dialogue, they risk further entrenching not attenuating its nuclear ambitions. With each test North Korea conducts, and so advances its nuclear status, the harder it will be to coerce or convince it to denuclearize. At the same time, it should point all sides to the conclusion that they cannot afford *not* to engage in dialogue.

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