



## North Korea's Nuclear Threat: Now What?

by Ralph A. Cossa

North Korea announced on Tuesday that it “will, in the future, conduct a nuclear weapons test,” promising that it will be done under conditions where “safety is firmly guaranteed.” While Pyongyang did not say when this test would occur, it made it clear that it felt compelled to take such action because of “the U.S. extreme threat of a nuclear war and sanctions and pressure.”

Should we take this threat seriously? North Korea has threatened such action before, although only in private. A public threat such as this is difficult to ignore (although many will try to do just that). Some will speculate that this is merely another attention-getting device (Iran-envy?), and this may be at least partially true. It may also be aimed at drawing attention from an imminent South Korean success story – the anticipated selection of ROK Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon to be Kofi Annan’s successor as UN Secretary General. Examples of previous attempts by North Korea to get attention and/or to upstage the South are too numerous to recount here.

Pyongyang may be bluffing, hoping that this will force Washington to lift its financial restrictions against North Korea’s counterfeiting and money laundering operations or at least accept bilateral negotiations on the nuclear issue – to date, Washington has said it would only meet the North bilaterally within the context of the broader Six-Party Talks (also involving South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia). Pyongyang may see this as a “win-win” gambit: either Washington gives in to its demands for direct negotiations (which is unlikely) or renewed disputes about Washington’s “inflexibility” will drive deeper wedges between Washington and its negotiating partners, especially in Seoul and Beijing, while also playing into domestic U.S. election year politics. North Korea’s next step may be to do nothing at all, other than to sit back and watch the rest of the world argue about what to do next.

It is also possible that Pyongyang really means what it says, and that it will soon conduct a nuclear weapons test, hoping that unlike its July 2006 missile tests – which resulted in a rare instance of international condemnation (including a surprisingly tough UN Security Council resolution) – this time the international community will fail to speak with one voice and institute even harsher measures. If we choose to wait and it turns out that Pyongyang is not bluffing, we will be faced with nothing but bad choices.

The best way to deter Pyongyang from taking this next step is to send clear signals in advance that there will be severe consequences if such actions are taken. While Washington seems prepared to lead this charge, unfortunately it has the least leverage over the North (unless it plans to capitulate to

Pyongyang’s demands). There is little that Washington (or Tokyo) can do, politically or financially, that it has not already done and military actions are simply not an option. If we are to “preempt” a North Korean nuclear test, it must be done politically, not militarily.

The real leverage rests with Seoul and Beijing; no threatened consequences are credible if not fully backed by these two nations and, preferably, by Moscow as well. Seoul should announce that a nuclear test will result in a halt in all political and economic exchanges between North and South (other than humanitarian assistance, which would be funneled exclusively through the UN). After all, Seoul has long stated that it “will not tolerate” a nuclear North Korea. While it has chosen to dismiss the North’s earlier claims to already be a nuclear weapons state, the Roh Moo-Hyun administration’s international credibility (and perhaps even the fabric of the U.S.-ROK alliance) will be severely tested if it fails to respond to an actual nuclear test.

China and Russia should issue similar statements, plainly stating that the North Korean regime’s threatening tactics must change. Beijing should also set a date certain for the next round of Six-Party Talks to discuss the crisis, while making it clear that a “six-minus-one” session will occur if the North refuses to come. Washington should encourage Seoul and Beijing to take the lead on this issue and look for other sympathetic Security Council members (the French come immediately to mind) to help take the lead in building an international consensus aimed at sending Pyongyang a strong message, *in advance of a nuclear test*, as to just how severe the consequences of such an action would be.

There is another option. Beijing, Seoul, and the never-ending (and growing) legions of Bush administration critics can continue their internecine arguments and finger-pointing and hope that Pyongyang is really bluffing. Of course, if they guess wrong, we will then be faced with the near-impossible task of trying to put the nuclear genie back in the bottle. At that point, the only options will be to accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state or take the much more difficult (and potentially dangerous) political, economic, and limited military actions (short of an all-out war) required to bring about regime change in North Korea.

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