

## **What is North Korea up to with its fourth nuclear test?**

By Sukjoon Yoon

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There have been three North Korean nuclear tests since 2009; they were primarily aimed at influencing the United States, together with its allies, South Korea and Japan, to change their North Korea policies. The fourth and latest test on Jan. 6 – supposedly an H-bomb though technical experts are unconvinced – was different in that it was also aimed at North Korea's only important political ally, China. Worldwide reaction has focused on how China can and should use its influence to punish and restrain North Korea, without noticing how North Korea is gradually slipping the Chinese leash. Nevertheless, there is little prospect of new policies, from China or other interested parties.

### **North Korea's worldview**

Why is North Korea testing another nuclear device at this time? The answer is because Kim Jong-un sees an opportunity to expand his strategic autonomy with minimal blowback. US President Barack Obama's policy of "strategic patience" effectively signals inaction on North Korean nuclear issues, and North Korea is aggrieved to be getting nothing from the US as Washington becomes more accommodating toward Cuba and Iran. China is engaged by security and economic problems, with the lowest economic growth in 26 years, and the election in Taiwan of a pro-independence president. Growing disharmony was also revealed by the last-minute cancellation of a Chinese tour by the North Korean musical group Moranbong in December 2015. China is expected to deal with the North Korean problem, but China is busy with President Xi Jinping's ambitious plans to establish a "New Type of Great Power Relations" with the US, and intractable territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas (ESCSs): its response is unlikely to go beyond the stern words already uttered.

Kim Jong-un's new year speech reiterated the so-called "Byongjin policy" which seeks to make North Korea a great and strong nation by simultaneously pursuing economic development and nuclear weapons. The latest nuclear test is portrayed to the North Korean people as a defensive measure to protect against preemptive attack by the US and South Korea, which Kim hopes will consolidate his power by boosting his personality cult and to China as securing the communist motherland, which he expects will result in continuing supplies of Chinese energy and food, without which economic development is impossible.

## **The regional impact**

North Korea may expect that consequences from its latest nuclear test will be minimal, but there will be an impact for other countries in the region. First, China is scrambling to avoid being blamed for North Korea's behavior. Nevertheless, while the Chinese are well aware of the geopolitical and strategic implications of a fourth nuclear test, following Xi Jinping's apparent endorsement of Kim Jong-un in a formal letter last October, it seems that it will be business as usual, with China maintaining its economic lifeline to ensure North Korean survival and avoid the threat of North Korean collapse, which for China is an even worse outcome than the status quo.

Second, South Korean President Park Geun-hye's policy of rapprochement with China is now being roundly criticized by the South Korean press. China, South Korea's principal trading partner, is essential to the South Korean economy, but Park's approach has failed to establish any linkage between economic and security issues. Seoul looks impotent as it attempts to persuade Beijing to rein in its North Korean client.

Third, the US has underlined its commitment to providing a nuclear umbrella for South Korea, in place since the Cold War, by dispatching strategic assets, including B-52 bombers, an aircraft carrier strike group, and nuclear-powered submarines with land-attack missiles. President Park is trying to put pressure on China by hinting in her new year press conference that South Korea would consider deploying the US Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on Korean soil to deter North Korean nuclear and missile threats, following the apparently successful test-firing of a North Korean Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile in May 2015.

Fourth, after some progress on the "comfort women" issue, ad-hoc trilateral security cooperation between Japan, South Korea, and US is likely to become much closer, for example with the implementation of the General Security of Military Information Agreement, stalled since 2012. China fears that this trilateral alliance is primarily intended to contain the resurgence of its influence and power in Northeast Asia, but this misses the point since it ignores the real threat posed by North Korean nuclear weapons.

### **Whose fault is it?**

There is plenty of blame to go round, for both the Chinese and South Korean leaders. Although China has repeatedly stated that it will not tolerate additional nuclear tests by North Korea, it has done little to allay South Korean concerns: after an initial condemnation, China is now back-pedaling, reiterating its long-held stance that there should be no nukes on the Korean Peninsula. Following a telephone summit between the leaders of the US, South Korea, and Japan, China warned against ratcheting-up of tensions, and advocated resolving the North Korean nuclear threat through peaceful

dialogue. This has not satisfied South Korea, which seeks punitive measures against the North, and together with the US and Japan, wants an extension of existing sanctions.

The hotline established between the militaries in Beijing and Seoul has also been a disappointment, its effectiveness limited by the complex command and control structure in China, with responsibility split between the Chinese Communist Party's Central Military Commission and the party's secretary general.

Unfortunately, Korean issues are not a top priority globally, for the US or China. The two great powers are fully engaged in dealing with the meltdown of the world's economy, and the US is more concerned about fighting the proliferation of Islamic terror groups, whereas China is focused on the election of a pro-independence president in Taiwan and territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. In effect, South Korea is obliged to take the lead in dealing with the North Korean nuclear threat.

### **Steady as she goes**

North Korea's fourth nuclear test makes no important difference for China or South Korea: North Korea has already crossed the nuclear threshold and has no intention of going back. Still, it remains unclear whether Xi Jinping will come up with any new response to repeated North Korean nuclear provocations and defiance of Chinese wishes. Most likely China will seek to maintain the status quo on the Korean Peninsula, doing nothing to neutralize North Korea's increasing nuclear capabilities. As ever, the Chinese will place great emphasis on saving face, to the obvious detriment of more practical considerations. Still, this latest test has brought about a subtle shift in Chinese policy toward North Korea. China does not want to be blamed for allowing North Korea to assert itself as a bona fide nuclear power, nor for facilitating the consolidation of another Kim family tyrant. As China and South Korea continue their geopolitical rapprochement, North Korea will not get everything it wants, though it is clearly determined to assert its strategic independence from China. Beijing has become a less reliable ideological ally of Pyongyang, despite continuing to provide essential oil and food supplies. Only deepening China-South Korea cooperation offers any prospect of North Korean denuclearization.

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