

North Korea's Second Nuclear Test: A Test for China and the United States too by Alan D. Romberg

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Following through on its official threat in the wake of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) condemnation of its missile launch in early April, Pyongyang detonated its second nuclear test on May 25. It has also reportedly launched several short-range missiles. Condemnation at the UN will almost certainly follow, as will further provocative actions by North Korea. The question will be how to stop the escalatory cycle and return to a path of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

President Obama issued a strong statement calling the test a "violation of international law," a "blatant defiance" of the UN Security Council, and "a matter of grave concern" to all nations. Many others – including Russia, Japan, and South Korea – followed suit. After a rather tepid early reaction by the PRC foreign minister, Beijing issued a formal statement noting that the test took place "in disregard of widespread opposition from the international community" and expressing "resolute opposition" to this action. China also "demanded" that the North "abide by the non-nuclearization commitments, stop related actions that may lead to further deterioration of the situation, and return again to the track of the Six-Party Talks."

The issue is currently under Security Council consideration. It is virtually certain that the Council will issue a resolution of condemnation – as it did in 2006 – and that it will call for further sanctions. The key issue will be not only the nature of those sanctions but the degree to which they are implemented. Following the April missile launch, the sanctions committee at the UN took steps against three major North Korean arms export firms. Although some called that a meaningless gesture, the U.S. administration reportedly believes that follow-through will in fact seriously crimp the North's potential foreign exchange earnings.

Now, focus will like come back on China both in terms of the words it adopts and the actions it takes. Many Chinese experts and others believe that harsh measures against North Korea are not only unproductive but actually counterproductive. One presumes that some will point to last weekend's test as direct fallout from the UNSC president's statement of condemnation after the April missile launch and ask rhetorically whether we want to create yet another such chain of events.

But two other factors will be part of Beijing's calculation. First, not only now but as far back as 2006, Beijing has

warned Pyongyang not to test nuclear weapons. Now, as in 2006, the North has spit in the PRC's eye. From the perspective of its own national interest, China must consider whether its policy of "calm and reason" has paid off, or whether something that exerts real pressure on the North such as curtailing crucial fuel shipments is now in order.

Second, the counsel of patience and reason will not sit well either in Washington or in other capitals. No one is itching to use military force. But, as administration officials have already said (in an echo of early George W. Bush statements), actions have consequences. Just as the April missile launch led to sanctions, this test surely will merit an even more serious response. Remaining on the same page as Washington is not a small consideration for Beijing, and even if it is prepared to go down a separate path on some issues, it is hard to see it doing so in this case unless the Obama administration were to act with uncharacteristic rashness.

All the "other five" participants in the Six-Party Talks (China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United States) would like to return to the negotiating table. But Pyongyang has indicated it has no interest in doing so. Moreover, all would insist that the first topic of conversation must be reaffirmation of North Korea's denuclearization pledge and adoption of concrete steps to return to that course. Pyongyang has declared that all pledges made in the Six-Party Talks are null and void and that it no longer has any interest in denuclearization.

None of this means that further diplomacy is out of the question. Nor does it mean that some negotiating framework other than six-party is impossible. Indeed, it seems likely that the United States would be willing – not anxious, but willing – to sit down bilaterally with North Korea if there has been full coordination and buy-in by the other parties. But it will neither be on the basis the North now insists upon – that the DPRK be accepted as a nuclear weapons state – nor focused on the agenda the North wants – abandonment of the alleged U.S. "hostile intent" toward North Korea and normalization of relations with the United States. (The U.S. might well be willing to talk about establishment of full diplomatic relations, but only in a context of full denuclearization.)

All of this takes place at a time of apparent domestic transition in the North, as Kim Jong-Il's successor is being consolidated in place on an accelerated schedule due to Kim's uncertain health. That is presumed to be a major factor in the hardline decisions taken by Pyongyang of late, but how that will affect future decisions is yet to be seen. Still, most people believe that the North has not yet played out its string of provocative steps.

In any event, this will be a moment of great importance for the Obama administration. It will reveal much about the president's leadership qualities not only on the crucial issue of

nonproliferation, not just toward North Korea but also Iran, but also in the diplomatic realm as he manages contending tendencies among the others who are with us in this endeavor.