

North Korea Nuclear Test and Cornered China

by Zhu Feng

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North Korea's second nuclear test on May 25, 2009 was not unexpected. After threatening to strengthen its nuclear deterrent by all means, on April 28 Pyongyang clearly signaled it would go all the way in its defiance of the international community following its controversial missile test-firing April 5 and its April 14 announcement that it would withdraw from the Six-Party Talks and restore its nuclear facilities. As a result, the second nuclear test, the next step in the Dear Leader's frenzy, did not stun Beijing. What has stunned Beijing for the moment is the way North Korea conducted the nuclear test.

North Korea has habitually and uniformly blamed other states for its nuclear ambition and aggressive behavior. On April 13, it denounced the UN Security Council President's Statement as a denial of its right to engage in the peaceful exploration of space and used this as an excuse to quit the Six-Party Talks; Pyongyang used the UNSC refusal to retract the condemnation to justify another nuclear test. However, these are misdirections. How could North Korea complete preparations for a nuclear test within just one month, presumably between April 28 and May 25? How was North Korea able to move so precipitously and conduct its second A-bomb blast? Chinese experts contend that it would take at least half a year for North Korea to locate the detonation point, dig the hole to install the nuclear bomb, and finish the testing apparatus around it. If this estimate is correct, it means that North Korea had decided to explode its second nuclear bomb no later than the end of last year. Scapegoating the international community is not just tactless but is desperate.

It's appalling. It's clear that Pyongyang meant to conduct the second nuclear test whatever the state of relations between itself and the international community after the missile launch in early April, whether it was a missile test or a satellite launch.

Furthermore, if North Korea had decided to explode its second nuclear device as early as the end of 2008, then all the successive events and actions by Pyongyang over the past three months are the outcome of a strategy and indicate North Korea's grave calculations. This fact troubles the Chinese leadership because it shows that Pyongyang's nuclear ambition is impossible to roll back as long as Kim Jong-il stays in power. His single-minded embrace of nuclear weapons means that his actions are not being shaped by whether the international community can somehow satisfy

him, but hinges more on his determination that North Korea should be a nuclear power.

That means the DPRK might use the vacuum created by the new U.S. administration which signaled it had no intent in its early days to try coercive diplomacy to push for nuclear dismantlement. North Korea may want to establish a fundamental reality of a nuclear North, forcing the other parties to swallow this bitter fruit. Unless the format of the diplomatic process changes in favor of the DPRK, or the White House compromises and changes course, Pyongyang says it will not return to the Six-Party Talks, and will not bargain simultaneously with the other five parties any more. By testing its second nuclear bomb, Pyongyang is telling the world that it should be perceived as the conductor on the podium rather than a "criminal suspect."

Traditionally, Beijing's policy of mediating the DPRK nuclear crisis and hosting the Six-Party Talks has been based on the Chinese belief that North Korea's nuclear program is negotiable. As long as its regime security and economic demands could be met, Pyongyang might be willing to give up its "nuclear card." It seems to me, however, that all evidence now points in the opposite direction. In fact, the recent nuclear test by the DPRK is not just a slap in the face of China, but a sobering wake-up call for the Chinese leadership to face up to the malignant nature of their North Korean counterparts.

China has had two concerns about a nuclear North Korea: completing the denuclearization of the Korea Peninsula, and preventing instability of the Kim Jong-il regime. These twin concerns roughly co-existed as long as Beijing believed Pyongyang would not push the envelope and was sincerely trying to strike a deal with the U.S., Japan, and South Korea. Once North Korea clarified that it had no intent to give up nuclear weapons and instead upped the nuclear ante by escalating military tension on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing's longstanding and delicately balanced policy toward Pyongyang became a casualty of the second nuclear test from its neighbor of the North.

It's too early to say what Beijing would prefer to do in response to North Korea's provocations. Yet, the breaking of China's illusion that the DPRK's nuclear capability could be dismantled through negotiations will very likely bring about a quick and fundamental change in China's policy. The reason is simple: the DPRK's possession of nuclear weapons was not scary as long as it was believed to be temporary and could be eventually eliminated. North Korea's secretive conspiracy to become a *de jure* nuclear power, however, has recklessly crossed Beijing's "bottom line" and will inevitably and catastrophically lead to the collapse of multinational talks. Beijing was willing to tolerate the diplomatic deficit caused by inefficient Six-Party Talks, but is not prepared to accept a truly nuclear North Korea. Exceptionally, Chinese Defense Minister

Liang Guanglie joined the international community on May 27 to decry North Korea's nuclear test. This is a significant sign that China's policy toward the North might shift.

Presumably, Beijing will fully engage other parties and seek a new UN Security Council resolution to address common concerns. But this time, Beijing will not offer any protection for the DPRK if the Security Council decides that a tougher policy is what Pyongyang deserves. Kim Jong-il's folly has deprived the North of its last important friend in the international arena and has dramatically brought new unity to Asia.