

Special Report

Implications of North Korea's Nuclear Test

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Thumbing its nose at the world community's warnings not to cross the nuclear weapons threshold, North Korea detonated a nuclear device Sunday. It matters not whether it exploded a crude device or a more sophisticated weapon capable of being installed in the warhead of a ballistic missile. For it has now crossed the nuclear Rubicon.

After four decades of determined effort, with critical help from outside parties, the regime of Kim Jong Il has demonstrated that it has joined the small nuclear club, which is comprised of the United States, Russia, Britain, France, China, Israel, India and Pakistan.

In a brief press conference, President Bush condemned the test as "provocative" and "unacceptable" and declared that considered action should come, initially at least, from the UN Security Council.

North Korea's test occurred barely a week after Japan installed a new more nationalistic Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, who has declared that the country should not only revise the Constitutional restraints imposed by the U.S. at the end of World War II, but should consider whether to acquire the military capacity to launch a preemptive strike against threatening North Korean nuclear sites.

One historical implication of the North Korean nuclear explosion is that it could trigger a domino effect in its region and beyond, significantly undermining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and opening the way to a more perilous situation in many parts of the world.

Consider the following:

Assumption: While the Bush Administration is reluctant to publicly acknowledge it, the North Korean and Iranian nuclear horses are pretty much out of the barn. Strenuous efforts therefore to lock the barn door will be of little avail, although it is necessary to continue to try. But long-range government and business planners

must be pragmatic. What are the likely geo-strategic implications—regional and global—of these major ruptures in the nuclear non-proliferation regime?

While the NPT has been largely successful in dissuading some countries from making Herculean efforts to join the nuclear club (bolstered in the distant past by enormous pressure, for example, by the United States against embryonic programs in South Korea and Taiwan), we may now be approaching a perilous period where significant defections from the non-nuclear regime will undermine it significantly, perhaps even rendering it a dead letter.

India, Pakistan, North Korea and Iran have clearly demonstrated that when nations believe it to be in their compelling self-interest to develop nuclear weapons capability, they will do so, regardless of the impediments. Israel led the way earlier. And it has nothing to do, as some contend, with whether the U.S. or other nuclear nations are testing or further developing the weapons in their arsenals. Nations act in what they regard as their national self-interest, unless prevented from doing so.

Granted that pressures caused South Africa and Libya to walk the cat back, but neither believed it had an overriding need for nuclear weapons. And in Libya's case, it feared a possible U.S. military campaign to oust the Khaddafi regime as had just occurred to Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

There needs to be a no-blinders analysis of the broad emergence of a number of nuclear-armed nations and its implications across the political, economic, military, and diplomatic spectrum. Head-in-the-sand wishful thinking will no longer suffice. We have a responsibility to face the future clear-headedly.

North Korea: Among other things, Pyongyang presumably believes that nuclear weapons will protect it from a nuclear-armed United States, and will catapult it to a place among the important powers on the world stage. Kim Jong Il may

believe he can use the leverage of such power to not only preserve his regime but to exact huge economic benefits, particularly from China and South Korea, who fear mass migratory flight across their borders if the North Korean government should suddenly collapse.

Medium and long range ballistic missiles are aimed at allowing North Korea to project its power and its threats in meaningful ways. And the regime doubtless believes that it would be largely protected from nuclear retaliation because for more than 50 years it has had its people laboriously digging a country-wide defensive infrastructure deep underground, including facilities for combat aircraft, warships, military factories, command and control centers, and shelters for the leadership cadre.

Were the regimes first of Kim Il Sung and subsequently of his son, Kim Jong Il, not so truculent and desperate for hard currency to shore up their terminally ill economy (and thus keep them in power), a nuclear-armed North Korea might not be so difficult to accept. But there is always the danger that in certain circumstances it will recklessly fire off a nuclear weapon or, more likely, sell weapons grade uranium or plutonium, or even a nuclear weapon, to either a rogue state or a well-financed terrorist organization.

Japan: As it becomes clear that the six power talks to persuade North Korea to give up its parallel nuclear programs have failed, and as the North builds up an arsenal of nuclear-tipped missiles capable of targeting all of Japan, Tokyo will likely decide to go nuclear for deterrence purposes—both against North Korea and China. Already it is moving in concert with the U.S. to install anti-missile defenses. But Tokyo's military planners understand that no missile defense is entirely impervious to penetration and thus they'll press hard for nuclear weapons to deter attack. Prime Minister Abe's talk of a pre-emptive strike capability would make little sense with conventional weapons.

After all, North Korea has struck fear into the

hearts of the Japanese public by test firing a ballistic missile across northern Japan in 1998, and more recently firing six missiles into the Sea of Japan, any one of which could have been aimed at Japanese cities. Now the explosion of a nuclear weapon is sure to put the issue on the front burner.

And China, which has been building up its entire defense establishment at an increasing rate of at least 10 percent a year for several years and which contests some territorial sovereignty claims with Japan, this constitutes another argument for Japan to come out from under the U.S. nuclear umbrella and provide for its own deterrence.

There are influential Japanese in the military and in the military industrial complex who have long pressed quietly to move in this direction. Japan has tons of plutonium recovered from spent fuel from its commercial power reactors. Pacifist sentiment has its limits. Proponents can, in fact, use the trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to argue: If we don't want a repeat, we need to deter potential nuclear predators like North Korea. How better to deter attack than to have a survivable retaliatory capability?

Taiwan: Increasingly alarmed by the military buildup, conventional and nuclear, along the mainland coast, Taiwan's leaders know they can't possibly match China missile for missile. But if they can credibly threaten to devastate Beijing, Shanghai, and a half dozen other major cities, they should be able to deter Chinese aggression.

Actually, China should be self-deterred from attacking Taiwan in any case, because of the impact that would have on its global trade and prosperity (which help it preserve power). But one can't be totally sure what Beijing's leaders might do if serious momentum builds on Taiwan to declare its independent status as a nation.

If Taiwanese leaders see Japan break out of the Non-Proliferation Treaty constraints for deterrence purposes, Taiwan would be less hesitant

to follow suit, attempting of course to keep its program secret for as long as possible. The U.S. no longer has the clout to prevent this, as once it had.

South Korea: While many South Korean strategists have privately favored the “bomb in the basement” strategy—i.e., North Korea will eventually either collapse or merge with the South and at that point Seoul will “inherit” the North’s arsenal—the South Korean Joint Chiefs may mount a persuasive internal campaign to go nuclear. This is something they have long wanted to do. Interestingly, they would likely point to Japan—which historically has been the principal threat—rather than North Korea, as providing the compelling reason for going nuclear for deterrence purposes, sooner rather than later. Again, the U.S. no longer has the clout to prevent this.

Iran: Assuming Tehran is not able to buy weapons grade uranium or plutonium but must depend on its own production, this might stretch out the time before it possesses its first nuclear weapon. It is working apace on ballistic missile delivery systems. There is always the hope, some say, that regime change might make Iran appear to be less predatory than at present. But even young liberals are said to favor an Iranian nuclear weapons capability as evidence of Persian technological capability and nationalistic right.

Egypt, Saudi Arabia and perhaps Turkey will not want to see Persian Iran with the capability to become the hegemon, controlling the Persian Gulf’s oil production rates and pricing. They would fear that militant Ayatollahs might even move conventionally against neighboring states, confident that the West would not interfere for fear of triggering a nuclear war. (If Iraq had possessed nuclear weapons when it invaded Kuwait, there’s a serious question whether the U.S. and other nations would have intervened.)

Thus there would be an immense temptation on the part of others in the region to follow the nuclear weapons path themselves. In the case of Saudi Arabia, it might simply arrange covertly to

buy nuclear weapons from Pakistan, since it does not have a sufficient home-grown technical-industrial infrastructure.

Would General Pervez Musharraf permit such a sale? That’s impossible to predict. But, first off, he’s already survived at least three assassination attempts and may have difficulty getting a life insurance policy. And, secondly, it’s hard to imagine that weapons guru Abdul Qadeer Khan could have so long been selling nuclear weapons plans and equipment to North Korea, Iran and Libya without top military officers in Pakistan being aware of his activities. (To this day, Musharraf forbids U.S. access to Khan.)

Witnessing Japan, Taiwan and South Korea abandoning the constraints of the NPT, Mideast countries would be less concerned about Western counter-pressures. In point of fact, some Western countries might not be inclined to discourage their companies from quietly assisting such developments, since they would not want to see Iran with the power to dictate oil policies in the Gulf, a development which—if unconstrained—could have enormous negative impact of the economies of the industrialized world.

Other Wannabes: With the non-proliferation regime crumbling, it would not be hard to imagine other countries either following the same path—Brazil and Argentina come to mind—or taking steps to position themselves to become “virtual” nuclear powers, that is, developing the capability but not actually building complete weapons. Brazil and Argentina have explored the idea of nuclear weapons capability. Germany, in so far as is known, has not. But it has the capacity and if it appears that world power status will become in part measured by nuclear capability, it might become tempted to at least move to a screw-turn away.

The United States: What would be some of the possible implications for the United States? Arguably, while it would not admit it publicly, it would not be aghast at Japan having the power to counter-balance China in the Far East, just as it

is not unhappy about India serving as a counter-balance to China in East Asia. That's probably one reason the U.S. did not make as a *sin qua non* of its agreement to sell civilian nuclear energy technology to India that it put its military reactors under IAEA inspection. It understands that India wants to have the option to at least match the Chinese nuclear weapons buildup.

As India continues to expand its nuclear arsenal, there is the likelihood that Pakistan will do likewise. In fact, Pakistan is constructing a huge new heavy water reactor at Khushab believed capable of producing enough plutonium for 40 to 50 nuclear weapons a year—a 20-fold increase in current capabilities. Pakistan denies the facility will have such an awesome capability.

It would take imaginative, multi-state diplomacy to encourage India and Pakistan to damp down their animosity, by settling explosive issues such as in Kashmir. Else, a fourth round of war, possibly including nuclear weapons, could eventuate.

Taiwan's acquisition of deliverable nuclear weapons would necessarily not be viewed as a terrible development from a U.S. perspective, in that it would markedly decrease the chances of a conflagration between Taiwan and China, with the concomitant danger of drawing in United States forces.

And South Korea, with a small number of nuclear weapons, would not pose an offensive threat to its neighbors.

Conclusion: Admittedly, the foregoing is full of facile assumptions. They are not, however, beyond the pale. To the contrary, we believe they are very real world possibilities.

Some, contemplating the failure to rein in North Korea or Iran, suggest that by putting fingers in the non-proliferation dike, we can prevent further leaks. On the other extreme, others would argue that it doesn't matter, that we should simply have a declarative policy of warning any newly nuclear-capable state that threatens our national

interest with being turned into a radioactive moonscape. Big legacy weapons of the kind that constitute the existing American nuclear arsenal could serve such a purpose.

There is another potential strategic loophole: What if a rogue nuclear state secretly provides a nuclear weapon to a terrorist group, for example North Korea selling a weapon to Osama bin Laden, or Iran providing a weapon to Hezbollah or Hamas? These could even be crude devices capable of being carried by a truck or boat, rather than a more sophisticated warhead on a missile.

But such rogue states could be put on notice: If you provide a nuclear weapon to a proxy which is then used against United States territory, its forces, or those of its allies, overwhelming nuclear retaliation will fall on your country. Arguably, this would be a credible threat. Even if they are not well traveled or sophisticated, the rulers of North Korea or Iran (or some other country in future) would well understand that if a nuclear weapon was exploded in an American city, the public demands for retribution would be overwhelming.

Could the U.S. determine the original source of such an explosion? The elite, super-secret Nuclear Emergency Search Team (NEST), which has been in existence since 1975, is believed to have developed the technical means of determining the source of a weapon from an analysis of the impact area. How quickly that could be ascertained is a matter of conjecture.

Very much concerned about the potential danger of the use of nuclear weapons or devices by terrorist organizations, the U.S. and Russia have just agreed to establish the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism. While details are still being worked out, the aim is to build an international consortium of like-minded countries prepared to quickly and forcefully move into a territory—regardless of national boundaries—to preempt terrorist schemes to employ such weapons.

An earlier, American-led Proliferation Security Initiative has been intercepting or blocking ground, sea or air shipments of illicit nuclear weapons materials. More than 70 countries are now involved in this activity. Its most celebrated accomplishment was the interception four years ago of a ship bound for Libya carrying centrifuge parts for Tripoli's nuclear weapons program. It was after that seizure that Libya decided to give up its nuclear program.

Notwithstanding such activities, there's a crying need for a realistic, rigorous, multi-disciplinary analysis of a world in which nuclear weapons are expected to spread into the hands of additional nation states of varying world-views and objectives. It's an analysis that ought to be undertaken in concert by the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China. Insofar as is known, such an effort is not underway or even contemplated.