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North Korea's Thermonuclear Test: Challenge to World or Path to Self-Preservation?

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The year 2016 began on a worrisome note on the Korean peninsula. There has been yet another nuclear test by Pyongyang, which will have fairly long-term consequences, will trigger yet another censorious Security Council resolution with an expanded package of sanctions, and will also prompt stepped-up military activity in the region by the US, Japan, and South Korea. This will inevitably lead to a new cycle of burgeoning tension on and around the Korean peninsula.

Pyongyang's motives

North Korea's leaders are not frightened by the prospect of painful retaliatory actions – they are prepared to suffer even more than that in exchange for the right to strengthen their nation's «nuclear deterrent forces». A series of official statements from Pyongyang leaves no doubt on this point.

Explaining their decision, North Korea's leaders again pointed to America's unlawful practice of using military interventions to oust undesirable regimes in independent states.

Refuting the fearsome predictions of Western politicians, Pyongyang insists: «We will not disseminate nuclear weapons, nor transfer the means or technology related to nuclear weapons. We will continue our efforts to denuclearize the world. Still valid are all proposals for preserving peace and stability on the peninsula and in northeast Asia, including the ones for ceasing our nuclear test and the conclusion of a peace treaty in return for a US halt to joint military exercises».

And yet questions remain. Why was this test conducted now? Was it entirely unexpected? Along what trajectory and at what speed is North Korea's nuclear program moving? Are the neighboring countries at a much greater risk? What are the potential international legal or military and political consequences of this detonation?

Let's start by trying to figure out what kind of test took place on Jan. 6. Pyongyang made an official announcement that it had tested a small hydrogen bomb, and that only the geographic limitations of its republic had prevented North Korea's nuclear physicists from testing a series of several hundred-kiloton and megaton hydrogen warheads.

Of course, such a message has captivated the world's attention. North Korea's production of a new and much more powerful weapon than an ordinary nuclear bomb naturally raises deep concerns. However, looking at the seismic data on this 5-6 kiloton explosion, in addition to other details, most nuclear experts tend to believe that this was merely the detonation of a simple atomic bomb, since a thermonuclear device, according to some of those scientists, would have a yield of at least one hundred kilotons. However, many experts warn that this time North Korea's nuclear physicists have [used](#) a new type of «boosted» hybrid bomb that allows the nuclear reaction to be more carefully controlled and the nuclear fuel used more economically and efficiently – although the real issue is that the stage has been set to begin creating a thermonuclear weapon.

Pyongyang showed true restraint throughout 2014 and into early 2015, submitting numerous peace proposals to almost all the parties involved. Their opponents labeled these proposals as «propaganda» and they were rebuffed. Pyongyang put forward one proposal on Jan. 8, 2015 that was rejected without consideration, which suggested canceling the bilateral US-South Korean military maneuvers, in exchange for a freeze by Pyongyang on its nuclear missile tests. In an [interview](#) broadcast on YouTube on Jan. 22, 2015, US President Barack Obama admitted with shocking frankness that his goal of regime change in Pyongyang was becoming more complicated: given North Korea's impressive military capabilities, which include missiles and nuclear weapons, it does not seem feasible to wipe out that state by military means. However, Washington, calculating that South Korea will be able to quickly engulf its northern neighbor, is

hoping that North Korea will collapse from within.

With that, Washington completely destroyed any basis for possible substantive bilateral contacts with Pyongyang in the future, while confirming the validity of the republic's leaders' choice of a policy focusing on building both their economy as well as their nuclear capability.

One should not underestimate the domestic political capital gained by conducting a nuclear test during the run-up to the 7th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), which is scheduled for May 2016 (the first in 36 years). At that congress North Korea's young leader will now be able to confidently announce that the republic has entered into a new, thermonuclear era of «Kimjongunism» and is today even safer from the threat of external aggression.

To us it seems as though North Korea has [added](#) the concept of «strategic patience» to its arsenal of weapons to defend itself against the US and is succeeding in getting the US used to living alongside a nuclear North Korea.

The North Korean foreign ministry offered a clear message on this subject in its January statements: «Since hostile acts by the US have become a 'common event' ... The United States must now get used to the DPRK's nuclear status, whether they like it or not».

At the same time, the clap of «nuclear thunder» on Jan. 6, 2016 was Pyongyang's sobering response to the idea – quite divorced from reality – of the inevitability of North Korea's imminent collapse and takeover by South Korea.

The consequences of the «nuclear thunder» for North Korea, the Korean peninsula, and all of Northeast Asia

Because of Pyongyang's violation of existing UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting North Korea from conducting nuclear missile tests, it seems inevitable that the Security Council will adopt a new, harsher document. Some tricky negotiating is going on behind closed doors there, and – as is always the case – the US and China are the primary architects behind the project. We can safely assume that right now these powers are doing some hard bargaining and that Washington is pushing for the harshest possible scenario of sanctions, while Beijing is advocating for a more moderate and balanced document.

In the West, North Korea's actions have been [characterized](#) as «irresponsible bullying by the young Kim» and «a grave threat to world peace,» plus demands have been made for the «Draconian punishment» of that wayward regime. It is suggested that «sanctions don't work only because there aren't enough of them». The recommendations can be boiled down to a total embargo of North Korea, which would require that that country be put back on the official US list of states that sponsor terrorism, commit financial crimes, or engage in money laundering.

Bruce Klingner, a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, suggests that the US should have the right to impose sanctions on third countries and to deprive financial institutions in those countries of access to the US financial system if they have any contact with North Korean companies. It is not hard to guess that the razor edge of this punitive policy is primarily aimed

against companies and financial and economic entities in China and Russia.

It was also recommended in the US House of Representatives that North Korean planes and ships be searched and detained wherever they are found – an attempt to expand American jurisdiction to encompass the entire world and a sign of dogged determination to impose Washington's will and dictates.

In this context, Russia's restrained position appears sober and clear-headed. Moscow continues to insist on the option of using negotiations to resolve the Korean problem in general, and its nuclear component in particular. The Russian foreign ministry has [acknowledged](#) that the nuclear test in North Korea represents «...the next step in Pyongyang's development of nuclear weapons, which is a flagrant violation of international law and UN Security Council resolutions». In addition, the document emphasizes the need to find a diplomatic way out of this situation: «...we call on all concerned parties to maintain restraint and avoid actions that could create further uncontrolled tensions in Northeast Asia. We reaffirm our support for a diplomatic settlement of the situation on the Korean Peninsula within the six-party talks format and a dialogue aimed at creating a reliable system for peace and security in the region as soon as possible».

Rational experts in the US have also [come to the conclusion](#) that Washington's 25 years of attempts to halt and reverse Pyongyang's nuclear program through sanctions and pressure has been a complete bust. The only successes the Americans have had over those years have been episodes associated with American moves toward a substantive dialog with North Korea: the unilateral withdrawal of US tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea by George H. W. Bush (1991), which opened the way for the 1992 signing of the Joint Declaration of South and North Korea on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and the conclusion of the Agreed Framework Between The United States of America And The Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1994, which froze Pyongyang's nuclear program for ten years. While that agreement was in effect (1994-2002), the Korean peninsula enjoyed the most peaceful period in its postwar history.

Thoughtful scientists in the US, in addition to a number of retired American diplomats, are urging their government to recognize the need for a comprehensive diplomatic solution to the Korean problem as the only way of solving the nuclear issue. Unfortunately, such recommendations are not being heeded in the White House today. This means that in the absence of a meaningful US-North Korean dialog and given the ongoing confrontation, Pyongyang retains its incentives and its free hand to further develop its national nuclear missile program.

A realistic assessment suggests that due to the fact that North Korea has conducted four nuclear tests, restraint is now needed, as are continued efforts to seek a diplomatic solution. And this is not a policy that appeases a «troublemaker» or encourages «bad behavior» by a violator of UN Security Council resolutions. This is a rational understanding of the obvious fact that we cannot ignore Pyongyang's entirely valid concerns about its security. The only way out of the current situation (which is in fact a dead end) must be based on equitable six-party talks, which proved their value from 2003 to 2009 and are a format for negotiations that we can return to. All that's needed is the goodwill of all of the parties, without exceptions.