

North Korea's Second Nuclear Test

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North Korea current provocative posture has been in the making over making years. In the minds of its political leadership, especially its generals, the DPRK's brash rejection of international condemnation is neither irrational nor unpredictable. In recent years we have seen a similar cycle repeat itself three times: December 2002-January 2003 when it withdrew from the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and restarted its plutonium based nuclear weapons program, July-October 2006 when it ended its moratorium on testing ballistic missiles and tested its first nuclear weapon, and now first with a ballistic missile test followed by a second nuclear weapons test. Each time North Korea rejected further negotiations, restarted its nuclear weapons program and blamed everything on the US "hostile policy" toward it and international pressure. Like before, this provocative conduct accomplishes nothing constructive for anyone, including North Korea.

But each time the international community responded in the same manner: public condemnation of North Korea, economic sanctions and UN Security Council statements. Obviously such tactics have not achieved their desired goal – end North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

North Korea conducted its second nuclear test primarily because its rhetoric of April 2009 had painted it into a corner. After the UN Security Council issued its presidential statement in April condemning Pyongyang's April 5 ballistic missile test, North Korea angrily declared that it would defend its sovereignty by strengthening its nuclear deterrent capability with another test, restart its nuclear program and withdraw from the Six Party Talks. Having said this, it had to act on its own words.

Prior to this, however, on March 24, 2009 the DPRK Foreign Ministry issued a long policy statement that concluded something to the effect that if you cannot first achieve your goals via dialogue and negotiation, then it would be necessary to strengthen the nation's military might. In other words, Pyongyang has made a calculated and very significant shift in its strategy toward the international community, particularly the USA.

Beginning in 1991, Pyongyang focused on achieving its national interests via negotiation and dialogue which produced numerous agreements. All the while North Korea's military grumbled and did its best to complicate and obstruct the negotiating process. When President Bush in December 2002 declared his "pre-emptive" nuclear strike doctrine and a month later proclaimed the "axis of evil" a threat to the USA, North Korea's military jumped on his words to justify resumption of North Korea's nuclear weapons program and withdrawal from the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

Eventually North Korea returned to the negotiating table, i.e. the Six Party Talks, but only reluctantly and because of China's pressure and economic inducements. But in September 2005, no sooner had North Korea agreed to the Six Party Talks joint statement, the Bush Administration slapped financial sanctions on North Korea. This act returned the initiative to the generals in Pyongyang. A few months later Pyongyang talked itself into a corner, launched missiles in July and conducted its first nuclear test in October 2006.

Angry and embarrassed, China came down hard on Pyongyang but also pressed the USA to shift from coercive tactics to inducements. The USA did adjust its tactics accordingly. Again Pyongyang returned to the negotiating table and there was progress toward dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program. However, Japan's extension of economic sanctions on North Korea in the fall of 2007 enabled Pyongyang's generals to renew their claims that the "imperialists," i.e. the USA and Japan were intent upon "strangling" North Korea, i.e. destroying its sovereignty using economic pressure.

Kim Jong Il beginning in January 2007 cautiously and hesitantly pursued a dual track strategy of continuing to negotiate, primarily with the USA, while allowing the Korean People's Army to continue its weapons programs.

By 2008 Pyongyang seemed willing to pursue dismantlement, but only so long as the USA ended its Trading with the Enemy Act (TWEA) sanctions and dropped the DPRK from the US terrorism list. Despite Tokyo's outrage, President Bush hesitantly approved the move, but added the requirement that North Korea permit a verification process that measured up to international standards, i.e. the taking of samples to verify North Korea's claims about pass plutonium production, etc.

When Pyongyang rejected this second requirement, President Bush reversed his decision and maintained the TWEA sanctions and kept the DPRK on the terrorism list. It was at about this point that Kim Jong Il reportedly had his stroke.

Kim Jong Il appears to have been caught in a vise of his own making. On the one hand he has attempted to use negotiations to gain the economic resources he needs, particularly from China and South Korea, to build his "strong and prosperous nation," a goal he declared in 1998. On the other hand, he sought to appease his politically potent generals by allowing them to continue their weapons of mass destruction programs.

At the same time he faced a fundamental dilemma – naming his successor. To ensure acceptance of his preferred successor, he needed the generals' concurrence. After all, neither he nor his sons have done anything to defend the nation from the so-called "imperialists." To win the military's respect, Kim needs to demonstrate to his generals that we will not bow to international pressure but instead resist the so-called "imperialists." In 1998 Kim assumed the title "Supreme Commander," became chairman of the National Defense Commission and proclaimed his "Military First" (*Son'gun*) political policy that assigned the military priority access to the nation's limited resources. Ever since the military has been able to increase its influence on national policy.

When President Bush wavered on lifting sanctions in August 2008, again North Korea's generals jumped on the opportunity. Ill and anxious to name a successor, Kim Jong Il appears to have given in to his generals in the fall of 2008.

Consequently, during the early months of 2009 we have for the first time seen relatively frequent policy statements by the spokesman of the Korean People's Army General Staff declaring its resolve to defend the nation's sovereignty against the "imperialists," to develop modern weapons, i.e. nuclear bombs and ballistic missiles, etc.

Additionally, the DPRK Foreign Ministry began to lengthen the list of concessions North Korea demands for ending its nuclear program, including a peace treaty with the USA, withdrawal of all US forces from the Korean Peninsula, an end to the US nuclear umbrella over South Korea, etc. plus verification in both halves of Korea that there are no nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula.

Then on March 24, 2009 the Foreign Ministry declared North Korea's intention to first strengthen its "military might" prior to returning to the negotiation table. The KPA shortly after declared that it had never put hope in negotiations.

The April 5 missile test challenged the Obama Administration's conciliatory posture. In its early days it had offered to engage in bilateral dialogue and to normalize relations. North Korea rejected both offers. The missile test could have been designed to see if President Obama would respond quietly or call for international condemnation of North Korea. When the Obama administration joined Japan and others at the UNSC to condemn North Korea, Pyongyang's generals publicly claimed that the Obama Administration is no different than the Bush Administration, i.e. willingness to use coercive tactics rather than concessions and inducements to deal with North Korea.

Intensification of international pressure on North Korea will play into the hands of North Korea's generals. Kim Jong Il appears increasingly dependent on his generals' concurrence and thus unable to manage the situation himself.

The international community's options are very limited. Sanctions have not achieved positive concrete results since 1950 but rather have been used by the generals' to argue in favor of ignoring the international community and reinforcing the DPRK's military might.

Quiet, intense intervention by China and Russia in Pyongyang's political situation might be the most effective tactic for returning North Korea to the negotiating table. Kim Jong Il could use China's threat to cut off oil, etc. as a way to back off his generals. At the same time, the US and Russia can help by keeping open the door for dialogue. This would give North Korea's diplomats some leverage in policy debates in Pyongyang.

Nevertheless, the situation would become precarious if Kim Jong Il were to die without naming his successor. At the same time, the more time North Korea's generals have to

pursuing development of their WMD systems, the sooner Pyongyang will be able to wed a nuclear warhead to a ballistic missile. At that point, Pyongyang's price for reversing its nuclear program will become astronomical. Pyongyang once again has used provocative conduct to create a "no win" situation.

Being an optimistic person, I believe North Korea will pull back from the brink of disaster. China's economic and diplomatic pressure will help. USA restraint and offer to resume bilateral dialogue will also help. But any return to the negotiating table will require that Japan and South Korea moderate their current preference for coercive tactics. Otherwise, tensions in Northeast Asia will once again spiral upward toward the possibility of a second Korean War. Only this time, the price of such a war will be far greater because of the weapons that might be used.