

After The North Korean Blast

Thursday 26 October 2006, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 19 October 2006).

North Korea has punched a big hole through the already frayed global nuclear order. The effects of its nuclear test will ricochet the world over, causing a change in the Asian balance of power, and an impact on Iran and other countries which aspire to acquire nuclear weapons/capability. The explosion calls into question several assumptions on which today's non-proliferation regime is based. It also underscores some unvarnished wisdom: the best way to deal with "problem cases" like North Korea is to sincerely pursue the global nuclear disarmament agenda while discarding nuclear weapons as a currency of power.

North Korea's blast showed that a small (pop 23 million), poor, industrially backward, economically and politically isolated country, which recently experienced a series of famines, can build nuclear weapons if it's determined to. Splitting the atom requires neither high science nor very advanced technology. The science is more than 60 years old, and the technology no more sophisticated than what a car garage has-once you have fissile material or reactors. The test set a terrible precedent and a bad example. Forty countries of the world have significant civilian nuclear programmes, which can be diverted to make weapons.

Why did North Korea test? Pyongyang's super-secretive rulers aren't likely to disclose their motives. But there's a long history of conflict with South Korea, backed by the United States. During the 1950-53 Korean War, US commander General Douglas MacArthur had plans to launch 26 nuclear strikes against the North.

More recently, President George W. Bush torpedoed the reconciliation process between the two Koreas. In January 2002, he named North Korea an "Axis of Evil" state. This totally negated the improvement in Washington-Pyongyang relations made through the 1994 Agreed Framework, under which North Korea suspended its nuclear activities. Washington also reneged on its commitment to supply it fuel oil and nuclear power reactors.

In 2003, Pyongyang quit the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), citing security reasons. After this, the U.S. joined Russia, China, Japan and South Korea in Six-Party Talks with Pyongyang on nuclear restraint. These faltered largely because of inept US diplomacy. In September 2005, Pyongyang signed a preliminary denuclearisation agreement in Beijing. But four days later, Washington declared economic war on the regime!

Having watched the US-led invasion of Iraq, North Korea was desperate to prevent a "regime change" in Pyongyang. In recent weeks, its anxieties mounted with the appointment of Right-wing militarist Shinzo Abe as Japan's Prime Minister and the lead taken by South Korean foreign minister Bar Ki-Moon in the election of the United Nations Secretary General. On October 3, its foreign ministry said: "A people without a reliable war deterrent are bound to meet a tragic death and the sovereignty of their country is bound to be wantonly infringed upon. This is a bitter lesson taught by the bloodshed resulting from the law of the jungle in different parts of the world."

North Korea's nuclearisation exposes the folly of relying on purely physical controls, of the kind imposed by International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards under the NPT, to prevent nuclear materials from being put to military use. Such safeguards are leak-prone. In the past, they failed to

account for over 20 kg of plutonium in reprocessing plants. Only 3 to 8 kilos are enough to make one nuclear weapon. Besides, a country can walk out of the NPT at three months' notice and divert technology/materials to military uses. That's what Pyongyang did, and Iran might do if cornered.

More important than safeguards, and critical to a country's decision not to cross the nuclear-weapons threshold is its political will. Without this, safeguards can't work. In many countries, this will has been greatly weakened-largely because the NPT-recognised nuclear-weapons states (NWSs) and de facto NWSs (India, Pakistan, Israel) have doggedly refused to undertake nuclear arms reduction, leave alone disarmament. One-and-a-half decades after the Cold War ended, thousands of nukes remain on high alert.

The NWSs have flagrantly violated the NPT's Article VI, which mandates complete elimination of nuclear weapons-declared a legal obligation by the World Court in 1996. Slavishly imitating them in their hypocrisy are the de facto NWSs, including India, once a frontline disarmament campaigner. India's nuclear deal with the US is widely seen as granting approval to double standards: indulgence for America's friends (India, Israel, Pakistan), and punishment for Iran or N. Korea. But double standards are not Washington's monopoly. All NWSs practise them.

The world has roundly condemned North Korea for its test. But it has few options to deal with Pyongyang. Military force isn't one. President Bush has virtually ruled it out-not out of magnanimity, but compulsion. The US is too bogged down in Iraq to spare a large force in Korea. Some 35,000 US troops are stationed in South Korea. North Korea's 1.2 million-strong army, with 11,000 artillery pieces, and an arsenal of short- and -medium-range missiles, can make devastating conventional strikes against South Korea and even Japan, where another 40,000 US troops are stationed. There's also the risk of a nuclear attack.

The Big Powers know "tough" sanctions won't be very effective against North Korea. China and Russia oppose them. There's no alternative but to engage North Korea. This will probably ensure its regime's survival, even stabilisation. So much for Mr Bush's boast that he will prevent the "Axis of Evil" states from acquiring mass-destruction weapons!

India and Pakistan too have strongly condemned North Korea. North Korea claims the test was a "historic event" and a "great leap forward". We heard exactly this slogan in 1998 in India and Pakistan! This is another gross instance of hypocrisy. Pyongyang has cited the same reasons for going nuclear that they did. It doesn't lie in India's mouth to condemn it. Nor is it remotely credible for Pakistan to do so after having traded uranium enrichment with North Korea's missiles. Today, India and Pakistan both practise the same double standards that they for decades (rightly) accused the N-5 of doing!

India's Foreign Office has strongly warned against "the dangers of clandestine proliferation." The reference is to Pakistan. Some have even cited President Musharraf's "In the Line of Fire", which reads: "Dr Khan transferred nearly two dozen P-1 and P-11 centrifuges to North Korea. He also provided North Korea with a flow meter, some special oils for centrifuges, and coaching on centrifuge technology..."

This, and more, is true. But on all available evidence, the Korean test used plutonium, not enriched uranium. The plutonium came from a small nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, built by the Soviet Union in 1965. In 1994, North Korea removed 8,000 used fuel rods from it and reprocessed them into 25-30 kg of plutonium, enough to make 4-6 bombs. It operated the reactor between February 2003 and April last year, when another 8,000 fuel rods were probably removed.

It would be foolish for India to use the Korean test as a stick to beat Pakistan with. The demand that

Dr Khan should be subjected to interrogation for his North Korean operation won't cut much ice. India should also know that North Korea's test will strengthen the non-proliferation lobby in the US and create more difficulties for the India-US nuclear deal, which already faces hurdles.

Japan and South Korea would be singularly ill-advised go nuclear in response to North Korea. That will trigger an arms race involving China, in which all concerned lose. Northeast Asia and indeed the world will be destabilised under the impact of such an arms race. If the US adds to this by developing a "theatre ballistic missile defence" ("Star Wars") shield for Northeast Asia, China will respond with the utmost hostility, aggravating regional insecurity.

The time has come for a radically different approach, which reforms the global nuclear order by honestly implementing the two-way bargain on which it was originally based. Under the bargain, the non-nuclear weapons-states agreed not to make or acquire nuclear weapons and subjected themselves to IAEA inspections. In return, the NWSs committed themselves to serious negotiations to eliminate nuclear weapons worldwide. However, the NWSs have grievously damaged the nuclear order by cheating on their part of the bargain. India and Pakistan added to the damage.

The remedy lies in negotiating a return to the two-way bargain, i.e. to the global disarmament agenda. A combination of restraint and disarmament measures is called for-including de-alerting of nuclear weapons worldwide, separation of nuclear warheads from delivery vehicles, and phased destruction of nuclear armaments.

There must be regional initiatives too to dissuade North Korea from a weapons programme by offering it security and economic incentives. Such arrangements can lead to the creation of a Northeast Asian nuclear weapons-free zone which addresses the security concerns of all regional states. The world must muster the political will to do this. Can it afford yet more nuclear breakouts before it takes the nuclear bull by the horns?

P.S.

* From the Transnational Institute, TNI-News, 19 October 2006. An edited version of this article was published in The Daily Star (Bangladesh), 17 October 2006. Copyright 2006 Praful Bidwai.