

N. Korean Nuke Tests Say World Must Return to Peace Agenda

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NEW DELHI, Oct 9 (IPS) - North Korea has shocked the world by detonating a nuclear explosion and making good the threat it had held out six days earlier. Pyongyang's action is one more blow to the existing global non-proliferation order and will trigger greater instability in Northeast Asia and in the Asian continent and world as a whole.

Yet, the world would be profoundly mistaken to make a knee-jerk response to the test by imposing sanctions on North Korea and reiterating the importance of nuclear non-proliferation, while ignoring the critical agenda of nuclear disarmament.

In particular, the Big Powers would commit a blunder if they encourage or allow Japan and South Korea to re-arm by citing a new threat from North Korea and stoking Cold War-style rivalry and an arms race.

The United States must take the lion's share of the blame for the failure of recent efforts to restrain Pyongyang from crossing the nuclear threshold. Complicit in it are two close U.S. allies and North Korea's neighbours, Japan and South Korea.

President George W. Bush has over the past six years torpedoed the reconciliation process between the two Koreas, aggravating their insecurities. In January 2002, he named North Korea as an "Axis of Evil" state and pledged to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons.

This led North Korea to terminate the 1994 Agreed Framework accord with the United States, under which it had suspended its nuclear activities. Earlier, Washington reneged on its commitment to annually supply North Korea 500,000 tonnes of fuel oil for power generation. It also did not deliver on its promise to build, with Japanese and South Korea's collaboration, light-water nuclear power reactors in North Korea.

In 2003, Pyongyang walked out of 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 to negotiate nuclear restraint on its part. When these faltered, largely because of Washington's inept diplomacy, the U.S. put North Korea under quarantine.

As North Korea's isolation increased, it flexed its military muscle. It conducted a series of missile test-flights, including seven past July. One of these, of the Taepodong-2 missile, capable of reaching Alaska, reportedly failed. North Korea became more frustrated and restless.

The North Korean regime observed the U.S. invasion of Iraq, premised upon the trumped-up charge that President Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Its rulers probably drew the conclusion, attributed originally to India's former Chief of Army Staff General K. Sundarji, that: "one principal lesson of the [first] Gulf War is that, if a state intends to fight the U.S., it should avoid doing so until and unless it possesses nuclear weapons."

Three recent developments seems to have clinched Pyongyang's decision to conduct the nuclear test, and its timing. These include the appointment of Right-wing militarist Shinzo Abe as Japan's Prime Minister, the lead taken by South Korean foreign minister Ban Ki-Moon in the race for the election of the United Nations Secretary General, and a contentious remark by China's ambassador to the UN ahead of a Security Council meeting which was expected to issue a strong warning to North Korea against testing.

U.S. envoy John Bolton said last week that while Washington's Western allies were agreed on a stiff warning, he was not sure "what North Korea's protectors on the (Security) Council are going to do." In reply, Chinese ambassador Wang Guangya said: "I'm not sure which country he is referring to, but I think that for bad behaviour in this world no one is going to protect them."

By testing a nuclear weapon, North Korea has posed a serious challenge to the global nuclear order. A cornerstone of this is the NPT, under which the non-nuclear weapons-states (non-NWSs) agree not to make or acquire nuclear weapons and subject themselves to inspections or safeguards under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

In return, the NWSs must undertake serious negotiations to eliminate nuclear weapons worldwide and also offer civilian nuclear technology and materials to the non-NWSs.

However, the NWSs have refused to undertake nuclear restraint and arms reduction, leave alone disarmament. The International Court of Justice ruled in 1996 that they are obliged under international law to completely eliminate nuclear weapons.

North Korea was an NPT signatory, but walked out of the Treaty under Article XI, which permits this with three months' notice.

Earlier, three NPT non-signatory states, Israel, India and Pakistan went nuclear.

The North Korean test will be seen the world over as successful defiance of the U.S. It will be viewed as an object lesson by Iran, which too has said it would consider walking out of the NPT if it is cornered by the Western powers over its nuclear activities. It is certain to encourage, not deter, future breakouts.

There is a strong likelihood that Pyongyang's crossing of the nuclear Rubicon will strengthen forces in Japan which want to rewrite its post-War constitution by allowing the country to build a full-fledged military capability with offensive forces. Under Abe's leadership, Japan will probably consider a radical revision of a principle, which commits it not to "bring in", make or acquire nuclear weapons.

Japan has a stockpile of 40.6 tonnes of plutonium, allegedly for civilian use. This is enough to make 5,000 nuclear weapons. It plans to annually stockpile another 8 tonnes.

Similarly, South Korea might be tempted to develop nuclear weapons in "self-defence". Technically, the two Koreas are still at war although a ceasefire has held between them since 1953. (However, there are occasional skirmishes. On the weekend, South Korean troops fired warning shots after North Korean soldiers briefly crossed the border.)

Taiwan too may feel that the North Korean test has strengthened the case for nuclearisation. Any move in that direction is certain to bring about a hostile response from China.

Ironically, tit-for-tat responses by North Korea's neighbours will only spur an arms race. Northeast Asia will get trapped in a "security-insecurity syndrome" in which a state arms itself in the perceived

interests of security, but ends up losing it because its adversaries develop superior capabilities.

Such rivalry spells insecurity and instability for all concerned. This climate will encourage other countries too to acquire more lethal weaponry.

Pakistan has had major armaments transactions with North Korea. Its missile programme is based on North Korean designs. These were reportedly traded in exchange for uranium enrichment technology developed by the A. Q. Khan network.

Yet another destabilising factor is the U.S.'s ballistic missile defence (BMD or "Star Wars") programme. One component of it aims to provide a "theatre BMD" shield to Japan and South Korea against possible threats from North Korea and China. Washington's likely response to North Korea's test would be to accelerate work on this.

This is bound to elicit a hostile response from China. Beijing has long regarded the U.S. BMD programme as directed specifically against itself.

A nuclear and missile arms race centred in Northeast Asia, but not confined to it, will make the world a far more dangerous place.

However, such an outcome is not inevitable. It can be averted if the NWSs address one of the root-causes that drive nations to acquire nuclear weapons. This lies in double standards. The NWSs want to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, but stiffly oppose fulfilling their part of the global bargain by moving towards their global elimination.

So long as the NWSs treat these terrible mass-destruction weapons as a currency of power, other states too will want to acquire them.

North Korea proves that even a desperately poor, industrially backward and politically isolated country, which has recently suffered from famines, can acquire nuclear weapons if it is determined to do so. The technology is not hard to master.

At least 40 other countries of the world can develop a nuclear capability. Their resolve not to do so will be weakened unless the spread of nuclear weapons and the NWSs' addiction to them are ended.

North Korea's test should shake the NWSs out of their complacency and double standards.

P.S.

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