

North Korean nuclear test triggers international tensions

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North Korea's detonation of a small nuclear bomb on Monday provoked immediate condemnation by the UN Security Council and sharply raised tensions in North East Asia. Pyongyang had been warning of further nuclear weapon and ballistic missile tests for weeks, insisting that the UN had to apologise for a statement criticising North Korea's April 5 missile launch. As well as triggering the nuclear device, the military fired several short-range missiles on Monday and Tuesday.

The test was North Korea's second. The first took place in October 2006 and was widely assessed by technical experts as being a failure, with a yield of less than one kilotonne. While the North Korean announcement hailed the latest test as "successful" and "greatly inspiring to the army and people," most initial estimates put the yield at just a few kilotonnes. Further analysis of the radioactive gases emitted is needed to provide more precise information about the nature of the blast.

The North Korean statement absurdly claimed that the test would contribute to defending "the nation and socialism". The Stalinist regime's ability to make a few primitive bombs will do nothing to defend North Korea from a potential threat from the US or other major powers, which have the ability to obliterate the country's limited industry and military capacity. For all its posturing about standing up to the US, the underlying aim of Pyongyang's test is to pressure the major powers for a political accommodation and a place in the global capitalist order.

Far from achieving any of its aims, North Korea's second nuclear test plays directly into the hands of the most right-wing layers in Washington and threatens to provoke a dangerous arms race in North East Asia. US

President Obama immediately condemned the test as "recklessly challenging the international community" and the US is pressing for further UN Security Council sanctions against Pyongyang.

A *Wall Street Journal* editorial seized on the nuclear test to criticise Obama's policy of diplomatic engagement and demanded tough action to send a message not only to North Korea but Iran and Syria as well. The editorial was just as scathing of those in the Bush administration, such as former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who had "pulled the plug" on efforts to "squeeze North Korea economically".

Following the 2006 nuclear test, the Bush administration struck a deal, through six-party talks, involving the US, China, Japan, Russia and the two Koreas, for the denuclearisation of North Korea. Washington agreed to establish normal relations with Pyongyang in return for the shutdown and eventual dismantling of North Korea's nuclear facilities and programs. The drawn-out process of implementing the agreement first by Bush, then Obama, was a major factor in the breakdown of the so-called six-party process.

The political impact of the latest nuclear test is likely to be greatest in Tokyo. Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), particularly its most right-wing sections, will certainly seize on the "North Korean threat" to bolster its own poor polls and divert attention from the country's deepening economic and social crisis. In the lead up to North Korea's missile test in April, the government sought to whip up a climate of fear, stationing anti-missile batteries in Tokyo and northern Japan and issuing exaggerated warnings about debris from the rocket.

Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso branded Monday's

test as “a grave challenge” to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Tokyo already maintains tough sanctions against North Korea—with a ban on all imports from North Korea, no transport links and a prohibition on exports of luxury items. The Nikkei English News reported that the government was considering a complete ban on exports to North Korea.

Speaking to an LDP panel yesterday, former defence chief, General Nakatani, suggested that Japan had to equip its warships with cruise missiles to enable the military to attack “an enemy’s territory and bases”. Under the pacifist clause of its post-war constitution, Japan is nominally barred from taking aggressive action or acquiring aggressive weapons. Even before Monday’s test, the LDP officials were exploiting the previous missile test to argue that Japan should be able to take “preemptive action” and not “sit and wait for death”.

Proponents of Japanese rearmament not only face the formal constitutional obstacle but entrenched popular hostility to the country’s militarist regime of the 1930s and 1940s and, in the case of nuclear weapons, the bitter experience of the American atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. While Pyongyang’s nuclear test immediately provoked protests by organisations representing the survivors, it also strengthened the hand of sections of the political establishment who want a Japanese nuclear bomb.

Japan and the US led the calls for an emergency session of the UN Security Council to condemn North Korea. The implementation of tougher measures by the UN body depends, however, on the agreement of China and Russia. Beijing, which is a formal ally of Pyongyang, issued an official statement declaring that it was “resolutely opposed” to the nuclear test, but further sanctions pose a political dilemma.

China is undoubtedly concerned that North Korea’s actions could provide the pretext for Japanese remilitarisation. At the same time, however, Beijing is acutely aware of the fragility of the Pyongyang regime and concerned that political turmoil in North Korea could be exploited by the US and its allies to gain a foothold on China’s border. In the first term of the Bush administration, prior to becoming bogged in the war in Iraq, Washington’s barely concealed objective was to precipitate a crisis in Pyongyang to bring about regime

change.

China sponsored the six-party talks as a means of defusing tensions—using its political and economic leverage over North Korea to force it to the negotiating table on US terms in 2003. Time and again, the main obstacle to any agreement proved to be resistance in the Bush White House from those grouped around Vice President Dick Cheney who were adamantly opposed to any concessions to North Korea, no matter how limited. Implementation of the deal that was finally cobbled together in February 2007 came to a standstill in December 2008 when Pyongyang refused to accept new US verification demands.

The Obama administration has taken no steps toward ending the impasse or easing tensions with North Korea. More than two years after the agreement was signed, North Korea remains just as isolated diplomatically and economically as it was previously. The only step—taken by Bush last year—was the largely symbolic removal of North Korea from the US State Department’s list of terrorist sponsoring states. Like Bush, Obama has maintained the crippling US economic blockade on North Korea, imposed more than 50 years ago, which has been a major factor in that country’s deep economic and social crisis.

In the final analysis, the international furore over Monday’s nuclear test is not about North Korea but about the jostling of the major powers—the US, Japan and China—for advantage in North East Asia. The rise of China and declining relative position of the US and Japan, now accelerated by the global economic crisis, are fuelling growing tensions. For Washington and Tokyo, Pyongyang’s actions are a convenient means for pressuring Beijing and advancing their own economic and strategic agenda in the region.



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