

North Korea tests third nuclear device

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North Korea conducted a third underground nuclear test yesterday, further compounding the already tense situation on the Korean Peninsula and across North East Asia.

The official KCNA news agency announced that scientists had conducted a successful test of “a miniaturised and lighter nuclear device with greater explosive force.” Estimates, based on seismic data, put the size of the blast at between 7 and 10 kilotons. This is larger than two previous tests in 2006 and 2009, and about half the yield of the US bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Both the US and Japan have dispatched spy planes to take air samples near the test site to determine whether the explosion involved plutonium or highly enriched uranium. Detonation of a uranium-based bomb would indicate that North Korea could build a larger arsenal than its limited supplies of plutonium would allow.

North Korea’s claims that nuclear weapons will enhance the country’s military defence are absurd. Far from providing protection, their development gives the US and its allies, South Korea and Japan, another pretext for continuing a military build-up in the region, directed in particular against China. Any attempt to use such bombs would result in a devastating response by the US and its allies.

As with its rocket launch two months ago, the Stalinist regime in Pyongyang is using the nuclear test as a bargaining chip to press for an accommodation with US imperialism, in order to end the country’s economic and diplomatic isolation. The KCNA statement declared that the nuclear test was in response to “outrageous” US hostility to the recent rocket launch and warned that continuing antagonism would result in “stronger, second and third responses in consecutive steps.”

The Obama administration has made clear that any rapprochement with North Korea will be on US terms,

including North Korea’s complete de-nuclearisation. Since 2009, Obama has maintained the aggressive stance taken by the previous Bush administration, which scuttled the so-called Sunshine Policy of opening up North Korea as a cheap labour platform. As well as tightening sanctions against Pyongyang, the Obama administration has exploited the North Korean nuclear and rocket tests to put pressure on Beijing.

Following yesterday’s test, Obama declared: “The danger posed by North Korea’s threatening activities warrants further swift and credible action by the international community. The United States will also continue to take steps necessary to defend ourselves and our allies.” His claim that Pyongyang constitutes “a threat” to the US is belied by the fact that the American nuclear arsenal, consisting of 1,700 sophisticated weapons and delivery systems, could obliterate North Korea many times over.

The UN Security Council met yesterday and voted, with China’s support, to “strongly condemn” the North Korean nuclear test as a “grave violation” of previous Security Council resolutions. It also warned of a new round of sanctions of North Korea, just three weeks after imposing penalties over the earlier rocket launch.

The nuclear test compounds the dilemmas confronting the Chinese regime over its ally North Korea, by undermining its efforts to restart the six-party talks to defuse tensions on the Korean peninsula. The blast also provides the Obama administration with a convenient justification for strengthening US alliances with Japan and South Korea, as part of its “pivot to Asia.” In this drive, Washington is developing anti-ballistic missile systems that can be used against China, as well as North Korea.

South Korea and Japan both condemned North Korea’s actions. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said the nuclear test was “totally unacceptable” and warned of additional Japanese sanctions on North

Korea. At the end of January, Japan used North Korea's rocket launch as the justification for putting two new spy satellites into orbit to augment its existing space intelligence capacity.

Responding yesterday, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said Beijing was "strongly dissatisfied and resolutely opposed" to the nuclear test. He called on Pyongyang to end "acts that could worsen the situation, and return to the right course of dialogue and consultation as soon as possible."

Sections of the Chinese press have called for tougher action to pull Pyongyang into line. An editorial in the *Global Times* last week declared: "If North Korea insists on a third nuclear test despite attempts to dissuade it, it must pay a heavy price. The assistance it will be able to receive from China should be reduced." Under conditions of a US-led economic blockade, North Korea depends heavily on China for imports of oil and food, as well as economic aid.

The editorial answered critics who suggested that penalising North Korea could drive it into the US camp. "Such a trap may be real," it stated, "but China shouldn't be taken hostage by North Korea's extreme actions in order to avoid such a trap." Newly-installed North Korean leader, Kim Jong Eun, has given hints that he might be open to a deal with the West. Perhaps the most significant was a rather odd visit by an "unofficial" American delegation to Pyongyang last month that included Google chairman Eric Schmidt and former US ambassador to the UN, Bill Richardson.

The *Global Times* made clear that "we are not advocating giving up the Sino-North Korean friendship." Beijing is deeply concerned that any implosion of the North Korean regime would send a wave of refugees into China and open up the possibility of a unified pro-US Korea on China's northern border.

Under conditions of rising tensions throughout the region as a result of Obama's Asian "pivot," North Korea is one of the flashpoints that could trigger confrontation and conflict between the US and China.



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