

North Korea conducts fourth nuclear test

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North Korea carried out a fourth underground nuclear test yesterday, triggering a round of international condemnation led by the United States. The test will further heighten the tense and dangerous situation in North East Asia and throughout the region generated by the Obama administration's confrontational "pivot to Asia" directed against China.

The official KCNA news agency declared that the North Korean nuclear test—the first since 2013—was a "complete success" and involved the underground detonation of a hydrogen bomb. Several analysts have cast doubt on the latter claim as a hydrogen bomb—a two-stage device that sets off a fusion reaction—would have generated far more explosive energy than has reportedly registered in initial seismic data.

White House press secretary Josh Earnest condemned North Korea's "increasingly provocative acts" that had resulted in it becoming "one of the most isolated countries in the world." The Obama administration is already facing congressional agitation for tougher action. "The answer to North Korea's threats is more pressure, not less," Ed Royce, the Republican chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said. "The administration's North Korea policy has proven a dramatic failure."

US allies in Asia and Europe joined in the denunciations. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe "strongly condemned" the nuclear test and branded it as "a major threat to our country's security." South Korean President Park Geun-hye convened an emergency national security council meeting, declared that North Korea's actions constituted a "grave provocation" and warned of "corresponding measures." Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said the test confirmed "North Korea's status as a rogue state and a continuing threat to international peace and security."

Such remarks are completely hypocritical. The greatest threat to international peace is not the small,

economically backward state of North Korea, but US imperialism. Washington is currently waging a predatory war in the Middle East and has ratcheted up tensions throughout Asia over the past five years through its "pivot" against China. Its provocative military challenges to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea threaten to ignite a conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers.

The United States has long exploited North Korea as a means of putting pressure on China and as a justification for its military build-up in North East Asia. The Obama administration has refused to take part in six-party talks sponsored by China to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue unless Pyongyang accedes to US demands in advance. Following North Korea's nuclear test in 2013, the US prevailed on China to back tougher UN sanctions, compounding the economic crisis of the Pyongyang regime.

At the same time, Washington used the test as a pretext for boosting its anti-ballistic missile systems in North East Asia, in collaboration with Japan and South Korea. Such weaponry is not aimed primarily at North Korea, but China and also Russia. Nor is it defensive in character. The Pentagon is seeking the capacity to mount a first-strike nuclear attack, secure in the knowledge that its anti-missile systems could prevent a residual Chinese or Russian retaliation.

Moreover, Washington's systematic isolation of the unstable, faction-ridden regime in Pyongyang is a major contributing factor to the regime's erratic and desperate acts. North Korea's claims that its nuclear weapons will protect it against US imperialism are absurd. If Pyongyang ever attempted to use its small, rudimentary devices, the US would quickly devastate the country and destroy its military and economic capacity.

North Korea's latest nuclear test appears to be aimed as much at pressuring China for concessions, as

countering the US and its allies. Since Pyongyang detonated its last atomic bomb in 2013, Beijing has enforced the tougher UN sanctions and cooled relations with its Cold War ally. President Xi Jinping, who assumed office in March 2013, has yet to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, but has visited South Korea—a country that is still formally at war with North Korea.

Efforts to improve relations resulted in a visit by a top Chinese official to Pyongyang in October to attend a military parade and present a letter from Xi sending “best wishes” to the North Korean leader. The situation quickly soured, however, after Kim Jong Un indicated in December that North Korea would test another nuclear device—overturning previous assurances to Beijing that it would not do so.

China quickly expressed its hostility to yesterday’s test. Foreign affairs spokeswoman Hua Chunying declared that Beijing was “strongly opposed to the act” and urged Pyongyang “to fulfil its promise of denuclearisation.” An editorial in the state-owned *Global Times* criticised North Korea’s “misshapen security policies centred on nuclear weapons” and called on it to “consider the long-term negative impact on Beijing-Pyongyang ties and its own development.”

The latest nuclear test is likely to reignite the debate in Chinese ruling circles over whether to cut its North Korean ally loose. Beijing confronts a dilemma. It is deeply concerned that the nuclear tests provide an excuse for the US to accelerate its military build-up in Asia and for Japan and South Korea to potentially manufacture their own nuclear weapons.

At the same time, China does not want the North Korean regime to implode, creating a social and political crisis that could reverberate into northern China, and also open the door for pro-US regime in Pyongyang, or a unified Korea. Beijing has always regarded North Korea as a useful security buffer on its northern border.

The Korean Peninsula is just one of the dangerous flashpoints that the Obama administration has deliberately stoked up as part of its “pivot to Asia.” By encouraging allies like Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines, and strategic partners like India, to take a more aggressive stance toward China, the US is transforming the whole region into a tinderbox. A relatively minor incident or accident, whether on the

border separating the two Koreas or in the East China and South China Seas, can become the spark for a wider conflagration.



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