

North Korea carries out fifth nuclear test

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North Korea announced on Friday it had conducted its fifth nuclear test, timed to coincide with the 68th anniversary of the founding of the regime. The US and its allies immediately condemned Pyongyang and will undoubtedly use the detonation to ratchet up their pressure, not just on North Korea, but also China, in line with Washington's confrontational "pivot to Asia."

The test, eight months after the fourth one, was conducted underground at Pyongyang's nuclear testing facility at Punggye-ri in the northeast of the country. North Korea previously conducted tests in 2006, 2009 and 2013. The magnitude of the blast has been variously estimated at between 10 and 20 kilotons, more than twice the size of the previous largest explosion, of 6 to 7 kilotons, in 2013.

"We successfully conducted a nuclear explosion test to determine the power of the nuclear warhead," North Korea's state television reported. "We will continue to strengthen our nuclear capabilities to protect our sovereignty. We have now standardized and minimized nuclear warheads ... We can now produce small nuclear warheads any time we desire."

Pyongyang's attempts to build a nuclear warhead that can be mounted on a ballistic missile are reactionary and in no way defend the North Korean people. In fact, the blast plays directly into the hands of the Obama administration, which has exploited North Korea's nuclear program and the regime's bellicose, but largely empty threats, to justify its military build-up in North East Asia and the strengthening of military ties with Japan and South Korea.

The North Korean test comes amid escalating geo-political tensions in Asia as the US seeks to reassert its dominance and undermine China through a diplomatic offensive and military expansion throughout the region. It comes in the wake of the East Asian Summit in Laos, where President Barack Obama further exacerbated

maritime disputes in the South China Sea by insisting that China abide by the July 12 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in The Hague that rejected China's territorial claims in the sea.

After the detonation, Obama, who spoke with South Korea's President Park Geun-hye and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, denounced Pyongyang "in the strongest possible terms as a grave threat to regional security and to international peace and stability." He called for "serious consequences," including new sanctions. Discussion is underway in the UN Security Council on further punitive measures against Pyongyang.

Abe held a teleconference with Obama yesterday in which he reportedly told the US president that the international community had to make "a resolute response" and North Korea should pay "a price for its provocative actions." Obama said he "completely agreed," according to a Japanese official.

Park declared: "Such provocation will further accelerate its [North Korea's] path to self-destruction." All three South Korean parliamentary parties condemned the test. A belligerent statement by the military command warned: "We will bolster our deterrence strategy and missile combat ability in alliance with the US, including an operation plan for a pre-emptive strike [against North Korea]."

The stage is being set for a dramatic escalation of tensions. An article in the *New York Times* suggested that the US policy of "strategic patience"—the gradual escalation of sanctions on North Korea—had failed. The "uncomfortable choice" facing Obama was between "a hard embargo... [that] risks confrontations that allies in Asia fear could quickly escalate into war" or negotiations that would only "reward" North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

NBC news went further, listing other options that included a cyber attack or a direct military attack on

North Korea's nuclear facilities and arsenal. Joint US-South Korean exercises this year rehearsed new operational plans agreed last year—OPLAN 5015—for a pre-emptive attack on North Korea and “decapitation” raids on its top leaders, including Kim Jong-un.

The Obama administration is already ratcheting up its pressure on China, demanding that it take tougher measures against North Korea, its ally. US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter declared: “I’d single out China. It’s China’s responsibility. China shares important responsibility for this development and has an important responsibility to reverse it.”

Speaking at a press conference, Chinese Foreign Minister Hua Chunying called on North Korea to live up to its commitment of denuclearization and called for a return to six-party talks involving the two Koreas, the US, China, Russia and Japan. He “urged all parties to speak and act cautiously with a larger picture in mind”—a remark directed as much at Washington as Pyongyang.

Beijing is caught in a bind. On the one hand, it opposes North Korea's nuclear programs as they provide a pretext for the US to continue to expand its military presence and could be used by militarist sections of the ruling elite in Japan and South Korea to develop their own nuclear weapons. In South Korea, Won Yu-cheol, the former floor leader of the ruling Saenuri Party, again called for the country to build its own nuclear arsenal.

On the other hand, the Chinese government is acutely concerned that intense pressure on the crisis-ridden North Korean regime could precipitate its collapse—a situation that the US and South Korea could exploit to try to install a government aligned with Washington on China's northern border. As a result, Beijing is wary about cutting off essential supplies, including of oil and food, to Pyongyang.

The chief responsibility for the tense situation on the Korean Peninsula lies with Washington. The Obama administration has effectively scuttled any return to the six-party talks by insisting that North Korea give up its nuclear programs in advance of any negotiations.

The US is likely to further increase its military presence as part of its build-up throughout the region against China. Immediately after the fourth test in January, Washington began discussions on deploying “strategic weapons” to the Korean Peninsula—in other

words, nuclear warheads and delivery systems. Washington and Seoul also used the opportunity to agree in July on the deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery to South Korea.

The US election campaign is playing into the tensions. Republican candidate Donald Trump blamed his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton for allowing the North Korean nuclear program to grow in strength and sophistication. “Hillary Clinton’s North Korean policy is just one more calamitous diplomatic failure from a failed secretary of state,” he said.

Both candidates have clamored to present themselves as more militaristic than the other during the campaign, an indication that no matter who becomes president, the risk of war will increase.



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