

## Testing the World's Patience

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North Korea's second and the world's 2,052nd nuclear weapon test explosion represents yet another low in the long-running multilateral diplomatic effort to freeze and verifiably dismantle Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities. Pyongyang's test blast is also a stark reminder of the need to finally bring about a permanent, global test ban.

Coming just two years after North Korea agreed to refreeze its plutonium separation operations and disable some of its key nuclear facilities in accordance with the 2005 Six-Party denuclearization agreement, North Korea's estimated 2-4 kiloton test blast, missile launches, and renewal of plutonium separation are reckless and exasperating.

But we've seen this behavior before. In each of the past three major nuclear-related crises in 1994, 2002, and 2006 - when Pyongyang conducted its first nuclear test - North Korea has raised the stakes with provocative actions. Each time, U.S.-led diplomacy, backed by sanctions, has led to agreements involving food aid, fuel, and offers of normalized relations in exchange for verifiable constraints on Pyongyang's nuclear program.

Since there is no viable or prudent pre-emptive strike option and punitive sanctions alone cannot stop North Korea's nuclear and missile buildup, the latest crisis requires a renewed diplomatic push, led by Washington, combined with the implementation of more effective economic, military, and political sanctions that have the full support of North Korea's main trading partner, China.

Containing the North Korean nuclear threat will likely be even more difficult this time around. Kim Jong Il's poor health and an opaque succession process probably mean that North Korea's leadership will be reluctant to return to the path of verifiable disarmament for a year or more.

For now, North Korea possesses fissile material for fewer than a dozen bombs. It is not yet capable of delivering working nuclear warheads on long-range ballistic missiles. Such a threat is still deterrable without the United States or other countries resorting to nuclear weapons threats.

But if left unchecked, North Korea can and will separate more plutonium (at a rate of about one bomb per year), and conduct more nuclear tests. If desperate enough, it could sell some of its fissile material to third parties. Over time, Japan and South Korea might reconsider their nuclear options, which would lead to even more instability and the unraveling of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

So far, the Obama administration, which had hardly begun to re-engage Pyongyang following last year's impasse over the verification of North Korea's denuclearization, has promised that North Korea will "pay a price" for its defiance. Diplomats have been deployed to reassure allies in the region. International condemnation has been strong, swift, and universal. The UN Security Council will likely call for enhancing the implementation of the sanctions authorized by Resolution 1718.

But history shows that punitive sanctions and stern lectures will not by themselves halt North Korea's nuclear activities or force the collapse of the already-isolated regime. As he has done with his policy toward Iran, Obama must reject the false ideology that dialogue with adversaries is a reward for bad behavior. Rather than waiting in vain for North Korea to return to the Six-Party

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negotiating table while it improves its nuclear and missile capabilities, Obama should authorize official and non-official direct talks with senior North Korean officials to gather facts, and resolve differences regarding the implementation of the Six-Party agreement.

Most importantly, such talks are needed not only to clarify the costs of further defiance, but also to highlight the benefits of cooperation. The United States must outline, again and in detail, the security assurances, trade benefits, and energy support that the U.S. and other regional allies would be prepared to provide if North Korea once again halted its nuclear and missile programs, ended its proliferation behavior, and dismantled its nuclear complex.

China must also step up and exert its diplomatic and economic influence to rein in the North's provocative behavior. Beijing's leaders should be more concerned about the prospect of a nuclear-armed North Korea triggering a full-blown East Asian arms race than the possibility that tighter sanctions might lead to a refugee crisis. China, which accounts for 73 percent of North Korea's international trade, must do its part by helping to shut down trade in military items, and luxury items, and joining others in using financial sanctions to shut down entities involved in Pyongyang's missile and nuclear programs.

Without bold U.S. and Chinese diplomatic leadership to contain proliferation in North Korea as well as steps that would strengthen the global nonproliferation system - including ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and negotiation of a global fissile material production cutoff - Pyongyang's test may become a nuclear proliferation tipping point.

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