

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

North Korea's Nuclear Test

Victor D. Cha
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Q1: What is the significance of North Korea's nuclear test?

A1: The nuclear test represents the latest in a string of provocations dating back to the end of 2008 when Pyongyang walked away from a denuclearization agreement at the end of the Bush administration. It then responded to diplomatic overtures by the new Obama administration by threatening and then carrying out a ballistic missile test (April), proclaiming the end of the Six-Party Talks, and conducting its second nuclear test since October 2006.

Q2: Why test now?

A2: The test appears to be related to two factors. First, the nuclear test is part of a broader effort to improve both the North's long-range ballistic missile technology and its nuclear weapons capability. The April missile test, for example, deployed its first and second stages more successfully than the previous test in July, which failed less than a minute after launch. The second nuclear test, moreover, apparently registered seismic activity consistent with a higher yield weapon (10–20 kilotons) than the October 2006 test (less than 1 kiloton).

Second, these tests could reflect a leadership transition in the North in which the stroke-afflicted leader Kim Jong-il is gradually being succeeded by a coterie of hard-line loyalists and members of the Kim family. Internal political fluidity in totalitarian systems like North Korea usually gets externalized in belligerent not conciliatory behavior.

Q3: What do the North Koreans ultimately want?

A3: The standard answer to this question from North Korea experts is that Pyongyang uses such provocations to gain “face-to-face” negotiations with Washington. But Pyongyang has rebuffed all serious efforts by the Obama administration thus far to engage in high-level talks. So what do they want? The history of negotiation and Pyongyang's rhetoric suggest two possible long-term desires.

First, the North may ultimately want nuclear arms reduction negotiations with the United States, in which they are accorded the status of a nuclear weapons state. The ideal outcome of this negotiation, in Pyongyang's eyes moreover, is an agreement that assures them a civilian nuclear energy element and the control of a portion of its nuclear programs outside of international inspection, the latter of which could then serve as their residual nuclear deterrent.

Second, the North may seek a special type of “regime security assurance” from the United States. This stems from the fundamental reform dilemma that the DPRK faces: it needs to open up to survive, but the process of opening up could lead to the regime's demise. Thus, what Pyongyang wants is an assurance that the United States will support and bolster the regime in Pyongyang as the Kim Jong-il (or post-Kim Jong-il) regime goes through the dangerous and potentially destabilizing effects of a reform process. This is different from a negative security assurance already given to North Korea in 2005 when the United States agreed “not to attack North Korea with nuclear or conventional weapons” (Six-Party Talks joint statement, September 2005).

These goals pose formidable challenges for the United States and other members of the Six-Party Talks.

Victor D. Cha holds the Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

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