

The Nuclear Rationale

A Commentary on North Korea's Third Nuclear Test

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Introduction

After several weeks of speculation and despite and against all international warnings, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test on February 12, 2013. The North's central news agency (KCNA) stated that the atomic weapon test was a response to the international sanctions following the launch of the Unha-3 rocket on Dec. 12, a measure described as an infringement on the country's sovereignty. It said the test will bolster the country's defense against security threats from abroad. The report added that the latest nuclear test will ensure peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the surrounding region. Immediately after the test, large parts of the international community condemned the measure as provocative, threatening and a violation of the country's international obligations. South Korea's government issued a statement, in which the test was described as violating past U.N. Security Council (UNSC) resolutions and that it would pose an "unacceptable threat" to peace and stability in the region and a "head-on challenge to the international community". According to the statement released Tuesday, "North Korea won't be able to avoid grave responsibility", noting that South Korea will try to take every possible measure to get North Korea to abandon its nuclear programs. Similarly, U.S. President Barack Obama declared North Korea's nuclear test a "threat to world peace" and a "highly provocative act" with which North Korea breached its international obligations. What these statements make clear is that despite a great deal of attention paid to the nuclear issue by the media and the international community, North Korea's motives to go nuclear and the concomitant foreign policy of P'yŏngyang – often deemed unpredictable or even irrational – still mystifies international observers. While it is too early to assess the long-term ramifications of the latest developments, both the test itself and the reaction of the international community reveal several significant points from which a number of important inferences with immediate political implications may be drawn:

- (1) It has become highly unlikely that North Korea will entirely abandon its nuclear power.
- (2) Though North Korean foreign policy follows a different logic than it does in other, especially Western countries, it is inherently rational.
- (3) The nuclear issue, which has become a central 'identity project' of and for the North, is more a political than it is a military problem for the international community.
- (4) Sanctions alone do not work.

The Improbability of comprehensive De-Nuclearization

North Korea's latest nuclear test was conducted after several months of speculation and, more importantly, following continued threats of the international community to further expand its punitive measures, i.e. sanctions, against North Korea. The fact that North Korea conducted its latest nuclear test against and in spite of all international warnings once more shows that North Korea seems to have made the far-reaching decision to continue its nuclear strive and it therefore seems highly unlikely that North Korea is prepared to entirely abandon its nuclear power status. In fact, while North Korea has repeatedly announced its nuclear capability through its state-run broadcaster and newspapers since 2005, P'yöngyang encoded its status as a 'nuclear state' in the revised constitution (of 2012) – an ultimate expression of the country's strive to maintain its nuclear status. More importantly, the 'historical achievement' of its status as a nuclear power is constructed as an accomplishment of its late leader Kim Jong-II, who is said to have "transferred the country into an undefeated country with strong political ideology, a nuclear power state, and invincible military power." Totally abandoning its nuclear status would therefore bear the risk of undermining the main achievement and ultimately the legacy of Kim Jong-II.

A Different, Yet Rational Logic of North Korean Foreign Policy

Despite a great deal of attention paid to the nuclear issue by the media and the international community, North Korea's motives to go nuclear and the concomitant foreign policy of P'yöngyang – often deemed unpredictable or even irrational – still mystifies international observers. Yet, as the latest nuclear test has shown, North Korea's (foreign policy) behavior is, if judged from a North Korean view,

in fact very rational, characterized mainly by continuity and is therefore to great deal even predictable. The latest nuclear test, conducted in the week of Kim Jong-Il's birthday and just ahead of Barack Obama's State of the Union address, is yet another example for this predictability. It follows a pattern of timing its 'autonomy-seeking' foreign policy behavior with important domestic and international events as established by Kim Jong-Il and maintained by the regime of Kim Jong-Un. The fact that many international observers maintain a view of a hardly predictable foreign policy (behavior), despite such clearly established patterns, has to do with the *different* logic on which North Korea's foreign policy operates. The international community must recognize and acknowledge that North Korea's foreign policy follows different rules than that of other countries, especially when compared to Western democracies and when judged from a 'Western perspective'.

Foreign policy, in the North Korean case, is above all a representational practice; one that is inherently linked to North Korea's national identity. Following Richard Ashley, North Korean foreign policy should be regarded as a boundary-producing political practice with which central identity patterns are permanently (re-)produced. Hence, what is deemed as a highly provocative act if judged from a 'Western view' is understood very different in North Korea: a measure of strength and prestige that secures North Korean sovereignty and reduces the possibility of war – and therefore upholds peace on the Korean Peninsula against the permanent threats from foreign powers, as is stated in the latest announcement put forth by the KCNA after the third nuclear test.

Sanctions (Alone) don't Work: The Politics of North Korea's Nuclear Strive

The above-stated assumptions suggest that North Korea's strive is by and large a political move. Accordingly, the danger(s) resulting from North Korea's nuclear test is more a political one than it is a military one. It poses a threat to the legitimacy of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty and its political efficacy reaches beyond the Korean Peninsula to, for example, the case of Iran, where the latest developments and the reaction of the international community will be watched very closely. This is the political dilemma that the international community is confronted with: on the one hand, the international community is under pressure to react to the

latest North Korean provocations in one way or another. On the other hand, however, there is only so much they can do. While a war against North Korea would have horrific consequences on and beyond the Korean Peninsula, history has shown that sanctions alone do not lead to wished-for results. Not only did North Korea pursue its nuclear strive despite multiple layers of sanctions already in place, it even uses those measures domestically to externalize internal problems, e.g. in that the catastrophic economic situation is constructed as a direct result of such punitive measures of the international community. Hence, sanctions alone are unlikely to work. Rather, the goal of the international community should be to restrain a further expansion of North Korea's nuclear weapons program(s) and on reducing the risk of the proliferation of these weapons and the connected knowledge and technologies. This, however, requires a political willingness of the international community and especially the U.S. as North Korea's significant other for a comprehensive approach – one that reaches beyond the military aspects of the nuclear question. As the developments following the first nuclear test in 2006 have shown, such crisis-inducing measures by the North may ironically also work as a catalyst for a renewed diplomatic activity.

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