

Testing time(s) in North Korea?

A draft discussion paper circulated for comment

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We look forward to receiving your comments (ccarle@unog.ch)

Is Pyongyang upping the ante in the hope of extracting more concessions and assistance? Or is the increase in tensions being manufactured to create the conditions for a more drastic North Korean move?

The option most often discussed among experts and in the media is a resumption of long-range ballistic missile tests, of the kind that caused such intense—and lasting—disquiet in 1998 when a Taepo Dong missile flew over Japan. But it is doubtful what dividends a repeat performance would bring Pyongyang.

There is also another option, which has so far gone unmentioned. This is a nuclear test by North Korea.

'Unpredictable' is often the adjective tagged to North Korean strategic behaviour. But short of accurate prediction, it is more than ever essential to ask questions about the options at Pyongyang's disposal. It is also urgent. In October 2002, when the attention was focussed on Iraq and when the DPRK was displaying a sunnier face with gestures such as bringing out Japanese nationals abducted in the 1970s, one had good reason to pause and wonder what would come next in the North Korean pattern of blowing hot and cold. Shortly thereafter came the 'admission' to a United States envoy that North Korea had a uranium enrichment programme for bomb-making purposes. Pyongyang then announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, expelled International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors and put the all Agency's monitoring equipment out of commission.

With military operations in Iraq looming, came the North Korean test of an anti-ship missile, a close encounter between North Korean interceptors and a US reconnaissance aircraft, followed in short order by US deployment of additional airpower in Guam, and on 10 March by another test of an anti-ship cruise missile.

No publicly available information allows for a conclusive evaluation of North Korea's present nuclear status. The estimation that it has enough fissile material for one or two bombs is plausible, however. And it has been plausible for long enough for these bombs to exist already. Then again, the North Koreans may be 'a turn of the screw away' from actual nuclear devices, but for all practical purposes of strategy and diplomacy the distinction is negligible.

Would a North Korea possessing one or two bombs decide to blow one up in a test? Perhaps not. But with the prospect of more fissile material becoming available after the restart of the North Korean nuclear installations, the arithmetics of testing would change.

With an invasion of Iraq, the politics of testing would change too. This will further reinforce the perception that only the possession of nuclear weapons can provide immunity to US or US-led military coercion. Saddam Hussein's Iraq is about to provide another illustration, as it

did in 1991. This lesson has not been lost on North Korea. The perverse effect of the use of superior force as an instrument of disarmament will be an incitement to nuclear weaponization for those who feel they have reason to be next on the hit-list.

An arsenal of six bombs, for instance, would make a nuclear test a viable option for North Korea, sending a message that it is not to be trifled with, while also pulverizing the current international moratorium on testing.

Before long, North Korea may well decide to follow in the footsteps of India and Pakistan, whose nuclear tests in the spring of 1998 have been no lasting obstacle to their membership of good standing in the international community, and which are both enjoying remarkably good relations with the United States, given the latter's preoccupation with terrorism and its disaffection from arms control—including the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty.

North Korean official pronouncements have moved up an octave in the stridency scales. The talk is now of a state of war—no less. War itself may not be the intention, but talk of war could serve as pre-emptive justification for a resort to exceptional measures. A nuclear test would be just such a measure.

It could be a hot spring and summer in Korea. As many observers have prognosticated, such a temperature rise would have widespread effects, but a nuclear test could bring them much closer than one might have hoped. Several East Asian states have ample nuclear know-how, but their history and commitments have so far led them to forgo the nuclear weapons route voluntarily. After a North Korean nuclear test, how would Japan and South Korea react? And in turn, what about China, Taiwan, India and Pakistan? East Asian repercussions, serious enough in themselves, could spread to South Asia and even to the Gulf, becoming the most serious strategic challenge since the end of the Cold War.

Security may not have become globalized, but insecurities are certainly interdependent—and contagious.