

Testing Times: Thinking Through North Korea's Latest Nuclear Challenge

Wade Huntley

June 4, 2009

North Korea has conducted its second nuclear test. The big test now is whether the world's response will recognize the unique features of this most recent intensification of the crisis, and so effectively answer Pyongyang's latest challenge to global nuclear stability and the embryonic disarmament renaissance.

To be sure, on the surface many aspects of recent developments are familiar. The May nuclear test, the April long-range missile test (a.k.a. satellite launch), and Pyongyang's announced withdrawal from the Six Party Talks process resemble numerous previous instances of North Korea undertaking dramatically belligerent acts apparently to foment crisis as a tactic of coercive diplomacy. Such brinkmanship is to be expected given that it has worked for Pyongyang in the past. As a notable example, North Korea's first nuclear test in October 2006 generated international outrage and the most significant UN sanctions on North Korea since the Korean War, but also stimulated negotiations and led mere months later to the February 2007 agreement to implement North Korea's denuclearization.

As this accord collapses, many Western reactions are also familiar. We've witnessed a new round of outrage and calls for UN sanctions. We've seen reiterated Chinese condemnation coupled with continuing reluctance in Beijing to squeeze North Korea too hard (out of concern, whether or not justified in Western eyes, that the prospect of precipitous collapse of this contiguous neighbor is a comparable threat). And we've seen a rehashing of the time-tested cases for greater confrontation and greater engagement, once again orienting policy debate along this linear axis.

Unfortunately, such debate is driven more by predilections independent of North Korea than by assessments of the needs of the situation. Thus, engagement advocates tend to assume that Pyongyang is prepared ultimately to reach an agreement surrendering its nuclear capability, and explain North Korean belligerence as maneuvering for bargaining position. Confrontation advocates usually assume just the opposite and dismiss North Korean accommodation as merely a tactic to assuage neighbors and buy time.

But North Korea has shown that it neither dependably reciprocates accommodation, as engagement advocates hope, nor routinely cowers to intimidation, as confrontation advocates expect. The reason is that the assumptions underlying these approaches may both be wrong. North Korea's leadership pursues its nuclear program for multiple and evolving reasons, and perhaps has not even made up its mind whether it will ultimately surrender it. Internal regime

dynamics and perhaps parochially divergent viewpoints further complicate these motivations. The difficulties presented by both these factors are exacerbated by the opacity of the regime's decision-making.

North Korea's most consistent behavior has been to exercise coercive diplomacy to disrupt unsatisfactory circumstances and provoke action by interlocutors. Consequently, policy success has been most forthcoming when the US and other principals have been attentive to its full implementation; i.e., when prioritizing *interaction* over *neglect*. North Korean provocations tend to stimulate that interaction when it wanes, and to signal a need to shift policies, eventually moderating Pyongyang's actions.

This North Korean tactic is more than merely an effort to "get attention" from the United States and other principals. The notion that Kim Jong-il is simply a spoiled adolescent in need of a good spanking – an image reinforced by much media representation of the Dear Leader – functions to obscure the strategic utility of this approach to North Korea's interests.

Interaction in this context is far from synonymous with engagement. A strategy of interaction seeks to improve overall outcomes independent of whether the any negotiations succeed on their own terms. In the common parlance, interaction means more of *both* "carrots" and "sticks" rather than less.

Policy response choices can be represented on a matrix of these two axes. But the choices are still difficult, because prospects for success depend on how Pyongyang will respond, which in turn depends on the underlying motivations driving its behavior – the very motivations that are complex and obscure. Where ideology and national unity dominate, for example, external hostility serves to positively reinforce regime legitimacy, so a relative emphasis on engagement is advisable. Where more conventional power and interest factors drive thinking, more of a tilt toward confrontation is warranted, including both hardball negotiations and credible threats. In each of these motifs, considerable interaction is useful. But where Pyongyang's internal regime dynamics overshadow its behavior, strong interaction could prove problematic – almost any action could provoke one or another faction or be (mis)represented internally to that effect. In the absence of sure knowledge of the nature of the regime, the "sweet spot" for policy is significant and consistent interaction with a lean toward engagement. But the closest possible attention to the regime's current conditions is vital to success – no static assumption of Pyongyang's motivations and fixed policy disposition will succeed in the long-run.

Herein lay the diagnosis and idiosyncrasies of current circumstances. Given the clear commitment to diplomatic outreach by the new Obama administration, North Korean obstreperousness is on the surface perplexing. One should not be surprised to find US officials scratching their heads and turning their attentions to countries already responding more positively to their outreach, from Russia to Iran.

This would be a mistake – it would reinforce the sense of neglect in Pyongyang that most likely motivates its short-term provocative behavior. Indeed, North Korean leaders may already be reacting to the administration's highly visible efforts to engage interlocutors elsewhere in the world – most notably Iran and the global Islamic community. Unfortunately, North Korea's leaders are unlikely to recognize a crucial difference this time: brinkmanship works a lot better when the US and others are more willfully neglectful, wherein the crisis Pyongyang precipitates signals policy failings that induce change in the direction Pyongyang seeks. Ironically – and tragically – using such tactics with a US government already disposed to engagement and

dialogue is thus more likely to signal a policy failing in the opposite direction, producing alienation and inducing a shift *away* from increased interaction rather than toward it. If Pyongyang fails to appreciate why its previously successful tactic is now not yielding results, it will become more provocative to break through what it perceives as resistance. Thus the present situation is ripe for a positively reinforcing cycle of increasingly hostile actions that could intensify the crisis to levels not seen since 1993.

Further aggravating the situation is the likelihood that internal regime dynamics, driven by what may be a hidden succession crisis, are playing a particularly strong role in North Korea's current behavior. In this situation, as noted above, the effectiveness of any outside actions is likely to be limited, and the risk of actions producing unintended consequences particularly high. Yes, North Korea has shown it can moderate behavior and reach crisis-defusing agreements in the midst of leadership succession – the achievement of the Agreed Framework after the sudden death of Kim Il-sung demonstrates this. But the internal deal-making underlying Kim Jong-il's rule may be more fragile, particularly if he has been unable to secure the same level of allegiance to his chosen successor as his father achieved.

What, then, is to be done? The first step is not to panic. In some ways the situation is graver than ever: the second nuclear test moves North Korea even closer to being decidedly a nuclear armed state – both technologically and in its own state of mind – and resumption of plutonium reprocessing will allow Pyongyang to expand its stock of fissile materials. Achieving a non-nuclear Korean peninsula now requires rolling back an existing capacity, which is qualitatively more difficult than freezing a nascent status quo.

But over the past decade the implications of North Korea's nuclear progress have been less dire than many feared. So far there is little evidence that North Korea is prompting further regional proliferation; that may change if North Korea crosses further key thresholds but is probably more sensitive to the durability of US security guarantees and the nature of regional reactions than to North Korea's own actions. The global non-proliferation regime has also weathered North Korea's defiance relatively well, despite its many other travails, and the new crisis is unlikely by itself to disrupt prospects for the 2010 NPT Review Conference. The danger of North Korea's proliferation of materials or knowledge to other states or non-state actors is the one area in which concern must grow. Responses should focus on this challenge.

A nuclear North Korea can never be accepted as a *fait accompli* – that would surely catalyze more dire repercussions. But so long as these consequences are relatively containable, there remains time. Hence, the second step is to recognize that, despite the current crisis intensification, the objectives remain medium- and long-term. A proactive and foresighted strategy is wanted more than ever. This strategy should focus on affecting North Korean behavior by shaping the environment the country faces as much as on interaction with the regime itself. Success requires a strategic consensus among the United States, China, and the other principal interested powers (South Korea, Japan and Russia) as to long-term goals. Such a coordinated consensus would provide the basis for a nuanced and responsive policy that incorporates elements of both engagement and confrontation and disallows Pyongyang from playing off the rivalries among these other centrally interested parties.

In this vein, a relatively near-term objective of the Obama administration should be to forge a meeting of the minds with China over medium-term goals on the Korean peninsula. This will require enough reconciliation of other US-China differences to at least de-link those differences

from Korean developments. The more the United States and China can get on the same page with respect to North Korea, the less room for maneuver Pyongyang will have, and the greater the possibilities for long-term resolutions become. This factor is considerably more important than posturing over the degree of short-term “punishment” to be imposed on North Korea for its latest provocations and vexing over whether or not China is “doing enough” to solve the problem.

Finally, the corrosive dangers of North Korea’s nuclear ambitions cannot be fully appreciated out of the context of the governance failure of the regime and the desperate conditions of North Korea’s political culture, economy and society. These conditions constitute as grave a human crisis as we face anywhere in the world. The nuclear problem may not be resolvable until the conditions of the North Korean people are raised to a level enabling the country to minimally function as a member of the international community. The South Korean and Chinese dispositions to take longer-term views of the nuclear crisis and focus on the country holistically reflect this reality.

Appreciating this context means acknowledging frankly the linkage between Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions and the nature of the regime. But this linkage does not automatically justify ostracizing the regime – improved governance within states is rarely achieved through means that widen the divides between states. And this linkage is not unique to North Korea – it evokes the pernicious bond between reliance on nuclear threat-making and inadequate governance conditions existing at regional and global levels as well. A peaceful and permanent nonproliferation solution in Korea thus also depends upon the strength of progress toward arms control and nonproliferation in Northeast Asia and around the world.

The renaissance of nuclear disarmament aspirations, consummated eloquently by President Obama in Prague, offers the strongest hope in many years for not only reducing security reliance on nuclear threats but also delegitimizing nuclear armaments as an indicator of national power and prestige. Complete nuclear abolition need not be fully achieved in order to realize the constitution of a global security order in which threats of nuclear conflict are eliminated. And as the rest of this community becomes warmer, it will become increasingly tempting for North Korea to come in out of the cold.

Please address responses to simons.centre@ubc.ca