

For India, North Korea's test poses key challenge

Reconfiguring the nuclear order is no longer a simple matter. For the simple reason that there is no longer any nuclear order.

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THE ONE “silver lining” Indian diplomats have latched on to is the “Pakistani connection” to North Korea’s “clandestine” nuclear status but this clever point aside, Pyongyang’s test of a nuclear weapon has immensely complicated India’s quest for assimilation in the existing nuclear order.

The fact is that as of Monday, there is no longer any nuclear order, at least not in Asia. Experts can quibble about its low yield but the North Korean test has brought to a formal end the core bargain on which American nuclear policy in East Asia has rested: that in exchange for Japan and South Korea forswearing their right to nuclear weapons, the United States would guarantee not just their security against nuclear attack from Russia or China but also that there would be no new nuclear weapons state in the region.

Pyongyang may have delivered a body blow to Washington’s security architecture but it is China which is likely to be most affected in the medium to long-term. For one, it is now apparent that Beijing has rather less influence over Pyongyang than it had let the U.S. and the wider world believe. Secondly, the spectre of “Japanese militarism” — which continues to haunt not just China but a broad swathe of East Asia including South Korea as well — will start looming larger as Tokyo moves to reassess its security policies in the light of the North Korean test.

Japan’s reaction

Since the 1950s, Japan has remained wedded to the “three nuclear principles” — banning the possession, manufacture or presence of nuclear weapons on Japanese soil — and any explicit change on that front is highly unlikely. However, what the North Korean test will do is loosen the bounds of what has until now been a tightly controlled public discourse on this taboo subject. Secondly, greater Japanese commitment to and investment in missile defence systems is a foregone conclusion. Thirdly, a relaxation of constitutional norms on the nature and mandate of Japan’s Self-Defence Forces is also inevitable. Article 9 of the country’s Constitution says the “Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish [this] aim ... land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognised.” Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is keen to amend this article to permit the Japanese military to play a pro-active and even pre-emptive role. Each of these three trends — which worry China and others in Asia — already existed in Japan but Pyongyang’s test makes the development of a more robust military profile many times more likely.

In South Korea, the Dear Leader's nuclear test will be seen with a mixture of mostly shock but also a little awe. Whatever Seoul may say about North Korea having blasted its way into the nuclear club, one thing is certain: a reunified Korea, as and when it comes about, is unlikely to surrender the status claimed by one of its halves. The Indian nuclear tests were a serious blow to the U.S. but they eventually facilitated the emergence of closer political, economic, and military ties between the two. Inter-Korean relations have grown tremendously throughout the past decade of tension on the nuclear front and the trend is likely to return to that path once the initial shock of the nuclear test wears off.

Throughout the past two years, the South Korean government pleaded with Washington and Tokyo that the imposition of sanctions would not help resolve the North Korean nuclear question. Now that Pyongyang has crossed the Rubicon, Seoul's energies will be devoted to ensuring Washington gives up any idea of reversing its nuclear status through force or even sanctions. Countries do not take the decision to go nuclear lightly. If sanctions did not succeed in preventing North Korea from testing an unproved weapon, now that the bomb design has been validated there is even less chance that it can be forced to roll back.

For now, the main focus of the international community has to be to avoid converting international anger at the North Korean test into a confrontation. If anything, it is the Bush administration's policies of confrontation that slowly but surely pushed North Korea over the nuclear edge. North Korea signed the NPT in December 1985 but signed a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) only in January 1992. The reason for the delay was the presence in South Korea of American nuclear weapons. It is only when the U.S. decided to withdraw its nuclear weapons from the peninsula and suspend its provocative "Team Spirit" military exercises that Pyongyang felt confident enough to activate the safeguards agreement by mid-1992. But even then, there was a trust deficit with the U.S. insisting on the repeated inspection of non-nuclear facilities. In March 1993, after less than a year of safeguards, North Korea announced its withdrawal from the NPT.

Bush's role

During the Clinton presidency, and even until 2001, the Agreed Framework signed by Washington and Pyongyang in 1994 worked fairly well in ensuring the North Korean nuclear weapons programme remained verifiably frozen. What the Kim regime was looking for was regime survival, economic security, and diplomatic recognition. It also wanted the normalisation of relations on the Korean peninsula and an end to the virtual state of war that has existed between it and the U.S. since 1950. President George W. Bush upset this equation in January 2002 when he gratuitously placed North Korea in the "axis of evil" and marked its government as a target for future regime change.

The goal of regime survival had pushed Pyongyang to cut a deal with President Clinton but now the same imperative propelled it towards the development of a nuclear "deterrent." The lessons of Iraq — where a country that possessed no weapons of mass destruction was invaded and laid waste — were also not lost on the North Korean military. It is significant that in the October 3, 2006, statement warning the world of its impending nuclear test, North Korea referred indirectly to the devastation wrought by the U.S. in Iraq. "A people without reliable war deterrent are bound to meet a tragic death and the sovereignty of their country is bound to be wantonly infringed upon. This is a bitter lesson taught by the bloodshed resulting from the law of the jungle in different parts of the world," the North

Korean Foreign Ministry had said.

India

For the Manmohan Singh Government, the primary concern for the moment will be what happens to the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal. With the Congressional approvals process delicately poised and the Nuclear Suppliers Group yet to study the "India exception" docket, the North Korean test will come as a shot in the arm for all those opposed to allowing the resumption of nuclear commerce with India. The election season debate in the U.S. this fall is likely to focus closely on the Bush administration's mishandling of the non-proliferation issue vis-à-vis North Korea. The Democrats, after all, handed over a non-nuclear Pyongyang to President Bush and now the unthinkable has happened on his watch. To the extent to which the Democrats seek to discredit Mr. Bush's nuclear policies, the India deal too is likely to come under renewed attack. At any rate, the task of keeping the "no nuclear test" clause out of the India-U.S. Nuclear Cooperation Agreement (the so-called '123 Agreement') — a key demand of India — looks much more difficult today now that North Korea has focussed renewed international attention on the danger of testing.

Looking beyond the Indo-U.S. agreement, India needs to join hands with South Korea, China, and Russia to ensure that the lessons of the North Korean fiasco are understood properly by the U.S., Japan, and Europe. As long as nuclear weapons exist and are legitimised in the doctrines and force postures of a handful of states, the "nuclear order" will never be stable. Force and sanctions cannot deter a country from developing nuclear weapons. If anything can work, it is diplomacy and dialogue. Confidence-building is a two-way street. In Korea, the international community has missed the bus. Let the same mistake not be repeated in Iran.

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