

North Korea's Nuke Test Sparks Calls for Diplomacy over Sanctions

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The United States and South Korea resorted to tough talk and shows of force in the immediate aftermath of North Korea's most recent nuclear test, but commentary in western and South Korean media suggests more people are beginning to recognize the futility of continuing down the same path of sanctions and escalating military tensions.

North Korea conducted its fifth underground nuclear test last Friday, merely four days after it test-launched three rounds of ballistic missiles. This is the first time that North Korea conducted a missile launch and a nuclear test in the same week, and the country says it successfully managed to put a warhead on a ballistic missile. According to North Korean state media, the country's leader Kim Jong-un directly oversaw the September 5 missile launch conducted by "the DPRK's strategic Hwaseong artillery unit, tasked with striking the bases of the U.S. imperialist forces in the Pacific theater in the event of a contingency."

In response, President Obama has vowed more sanctions, and the [United States flew two nuclear-capable supersonic B1-B bombers](#) over South Korea in a show of force on Tuesday. For her part, South Korean President Park Geun-hye [accused](#) the North of "maniacal recklessness," and the South Korean military rolled out the "[Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation](#)" plan involving commandos and preemptive attacks with large numbers of missiles to target the North Korean leadership in a punitive and retaliatory strike at the slightest sign of a North Korean nuclear threat.



North Korea [scoffed](#) at U.S. threats of more sanctions as "laughable" and defended its right to conduct nuclear tests in order to "protect our dignity" amid threats of "nuclear war" from Washington. "The group of Obama's running around and talking about meaningless sanctions until today is highly laughable, when their 'strategic patience' policy is completely worn out and they are close to packing up to move out," said a North Korean foreign ministry spokesman. "As we've made clear, measures to strengthen the national nuclear power in quality and quantity will continue to protect our dignity and right to live from augmented threats of nuclear war from the United States," he added.

Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying also had strong words for the United States on its role in the nuclear crisis. "Mr. Carter was being unnecessarily modest," [she said](#), referring to U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter, who had [pointed to China](#) as being primarily responsible for the nuclear crisis with North Korea.

"The cause and crux of the Korean nuclear issue rest with the US rather than China," Hua continued, "The core of the issue is the conflict between the DPRK and the US. It is the US

who should reflect upon how the situation has become what it is today, and search for an effective solution. It is better for the doer to undo what he has done. The US should shoulder its due responsibilities.” To fundamentally resolve the crisis, she said, “An approach that addresses all parties’ security concerns and leads to enduring peace and stability of the Peninsula must be found through dialogue.”

Growing Calls for Diplomacy

Commentary in western and South Korean media in the aftermath of last week’s North Korean missile and nuclear tests suggests more people are realizing the futility of sanctions and prefer diplomacy as a way to resolve the crisis.

The latest nuclear test by North Korea proves that economic sanctions against the regime have failed utterly,” [writes Simon Jenkins in The Guardian](#). Pointing out that sanctions have had the exact opposite of their intended effect in North Korea, that they have driven the country to militarize its society and hasten the acquisition of high-profile weaponry, Jenkins proposes, “The sane alternative is to do everything to open North Korea, to flood it with trade, promote cultural exchange and hope one day that, like east Germany, it will reunite with its neighbor. This will never happen under sanctions. Ending sanctions cannot cause more harm than what is happening now. It would probably do good. So end the sanctions.

Nuclear scientist Siegfried Hecker, who has visited North Korea frequently to assess its plutonium and uranium enrichment programs at the Yongbyon nuclear facility, agrees. In an [article published on 38 North](#), he writes, “The latest nuclear test demonstrates conclusively that attempting to sanction the DPRK into submission and waiting for China to exert leverage over Pyongyang’s nuclear program do not work.” Warning that adding missile defenses in South Korea will only make China less likely to cooperate, he concludes, “What’s missing is diplomacy as much as Washington may find it repugnant to deal with the Kim regime.”

As repugnant as Washington might find the North Korean regime, its leadership is quite sane, assures the New York Times. Political scientists have repeatedly concluded that “North Korea’s behavior, far from crazy, is all too rational,” [writes](#) New York Times columnist Max Fisher. “Its provocations introduce tremendous danger, but stave off what Pyongyang sees as the even greater threats of invasion or collapse,” he adds. Indeed, missing in the flurry of media commentary about North Korea’s latest nuclear test is any mention of Ulchi Freedom Guardian, the massive twelve-day U.S.-South Korean combined military exercises that just ended earlier this month. The war games involved 25,000 U.S. military personnel and 50,000 South Korean troops under U.S. command and reportedly included simulated exercises to “decapitate” the North Korean leadership.

The Hankyoreh, critical of what it calls failed hardline approaches to North Korea, urges a fundamental solution. “Of the five nuclear tests to date, four happened while Seoul was carrying out hard-line North Korea policies,” it [notes](#) and says denouncing and pressuring Pyongyang will get us nowhere. Urging all parties to move past “Cold War-style logic,” the Hankyoreh writes, “Instead of pinning vague hopes on a North Korea collapse scenario – an approach that is both dangerous and unrealistic – we need a strategic approach that can lead to a comprehensive solution.”

Civil society groups in South Korea and the United States, as well as former U.S. officials, including former U.S. Ambassador to South Korea [James Laney](#), have advocated for a formal end to the Korean War and a peace treaty to replace the 1953 armistice. [Writing for NK News](#), Donald Kirk cautiously raises this as a possibility. “What about if the U.S. were to sue for peace – that is to say: ‘at last we’d like to discuss your demand for a ‘peace treaty’ marking the formal conclusion of the Korean War?’” he asks.

Priority for the Next President

Whatever the comprehensive solution may be, many seem to agree that North Korea needs to be a top priority for the next U.S. administration. “Beyond sanctions, any lasting solution will almost certainly require some kind of negotiations, though Republicans in Congress are certain to resist such a move,” [writes](#) the New York Times in an editorial. Noting that the Kim government [issued a statement](#) in July that could be viewed as an overture for talks, the New York Times concludes, “Since far too little has been done to contain North Korea’s nuclear ambitions in the past decade, this accelerating threat will require the urgent attention of Mr. Obama’s successor.”

Former U.S. diplomat and arms control expert Mark Fitzpatrick apparently agrees. Speaking to Kirk for NK News, [Fitzpatrick said](#) the next U.S. president “will have to put North Korea at the top of the agenda. ... He or she will have to use all the tools of American policy-making.”

If Clinton becomes our next commander in chief, picking up where her husband left off in 2000 wouldn’t be a bad place to start. Bill Clinton signed the historic [joint communique](#), in which the United States and North Korea declared “no hostile intent” toward each other and agreed to improve bilateral relations based on the principle of “mutual respect for sovereignty and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs.” He sent then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to Pyongyang to discuss normalizing relations but ran out of time in his administration to finish the deed.

[Hillary’s recent comments](#), which referred to North Korea’s nuclear test as a “reckless action” and its determination to develop a deliverable nuclear weapon a “direct threat to the United States” that she “cannot and will never accept” indicate that she’s still working off of an old script. Setting the next administration on the path of dialogue towards a comprehensive resolution will likely be an uphill battle. But commentary in western and South Korean media following last week’s North Korean nuclear test gives one cautious optimism that the political landscape may be gradually changing in a direction that will make dialogue, even a peace treaty, a more palatable option.

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