by Bruce Klingner

Pyongyang's eagerness to conduct a nuclear test so quickly after its long-range missile launch shows it has abandoned the façade of negotiations and is no longer interested in diplomatic entreaties.

The rapid pace of North Korea's provocations since January indicates that North Korea is intent on achieving a viable nuclear weapon and ICBM delivery capability and recognition as a nuclear weapons state. North Korea's longstanding goal to develop the means to threaten the U.S. and its allies with nuclear weapons underscore the critical need for America to develop and deploy a missile defense system.

Change in Tactics

North Korea's previous strategy was to slowly build toward an escalatory act, thereby allowing the U.S. and its allies sufficient time to offer new diplomatic or economic inducements. On those occasions when North Korea carried out the act, it followed with several months of calm to allow all countries to become accustomed to the new elevated status quo prior to initiating the next lengthy provocation process.

Since the beginning of 2009, however, North Korea has initiated a rapid-fire series of provocations against the U.S., South Korea, and Japan without allowing time for diplomatic outreach. It is increasingly evident that Pyongyang is now focused on realizing strategic technological achievements rather than gaining tactical negotiating leverage.

The change in North Korean objectives may have been triggered by Kim Jong-il's health crisis last year. Kim may be driven by a desire to achieve nuclear objectives prior to his death or the formal transfer of power to a successor. Rather than incrementally raising the ante as in the past, Kim Jong-il is now willing to risk a high-stakes poker move by "going all in" to force international acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear power.

Pyongyang has announced that it seeks to become a "powerful nation" by 2012, the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth, a possible reference to achieving formal recognition as a nuclear weapons state.

Trying to Negotiate the Non-Negotiable

Despite high expectations that North Korea would adopt a moderate policy after the change in U.S. leadership, Pyongyang has refused repeated attempts by the Obama Administration to establish contact. North Korea's refusal to engage in dialogue with the U.S., South Korea, and Japan even as economic conditions worsen is another indication that Pyongyang is playing a

new game.

North Korea will continue additional missile and nuclear activity during 2009-- impervious to naïve initiatives such as offering a senior-level presidential envoy for bilateral discussion or changing the number of participants in the nuclear negotiations.

North Korea may eventually be willing to return to negotiations once it has demonstrated a clear nuclear and ICBM capability. If Pyongyang were to return, it would do so with far greater leverage and expectations. The most benign scenario would be for Pyongyang to trade its future nuclear weapons capability--but not its existing weapons inventory--in return for all of the previously discussed economic and diplomatic benefits, though in greater quantities.

It is more likely that North Korea would demand a far greater price for denuclearization. As it telegraphed in statements made this past January by the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs, Pyongyang now requires the removal of the U.S. "hostile policy." This would likely include the abrogation of the U.S.-South Korean defense alliance, the removal of U.S. forces from South Korea, and the abandonment of the U.S. nuclear security guarantee toward South Korea and Japan. A refusal by Washington and Seoul to accept such terms would, in Pyongyang's eyes, equate to recognition as a nuclear weapons state.

Obama Administration's Actions Fall Short of Its Firm Rhetoric

The Obama Administration has issued commendably firm rhetoric about the need to confront North Korea for its transgression. But the U.S. and South Korea became complacent after attaining the disappointedly minimalist U.N. Security Council response to the April 4 North Korean missile launch. Both Washington and Seoul were reticent to pursue any initiatives beyond the three North Korean companies placed on the U.N. sanctions list.

U.S. and South Korean officials believed that they had taken the ball as far as down the field as possible after the missile provocation and that it was therefore best to passively wait for Pyongyang's next belligerent act in order to persuade China to allow pushing the ball a little further down the field. Such an approach is deeply flawed, since it does little to pressure North Korea, abandons any real defense of international law or the Nonproliferation Treaty, and depends on China, a North Korean ally that has proven time and again uninterested in bringing real pressure to bear on the Pyongyang regime.

Washington should adopt a multi-track approach consisting of both punitive action and dialogue: squeezing North Korea in order to influence their negotiating behavior by enforcing U.N. resolutions and resuming the enforcement of international law while simultaneously offering to hold open the door for negotiations, all the while making clear that a nuclear North Korea is unacceptable. The U.S. should also fully fund and proceed with development and deployment of the only really reliable option to defend itself against a nuclear North Korea: ballistic missile defense.

China and Russia Must Step Up

The U.S., South Korea, and Japan should use North Korea's latest outrage to demand that China and Russia agree to stronger punitive measures in the U.N. Security Council. China has repeatedly shown its inability or unwillingness to rein in North Korea's repudiation of international law. Consequently, Washington should cease the charade of praising Beijing's behavior in the six-party talks and instead criticize its obstructionism to carrying out the will of the international community as expressed in two U.N. resolutions.

Time for Tangible Action

As a result of North Korea's continued pursuit of nuclear weapons, the U.S. should:

* Demand a U.N. resolution that sanctions all North Korean and foreign companies, banks, and government agencies complicit in Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs. Such a resolution should insist upon full enforcement of extensive sanctions. A provision for allowing the use of military means to enforce the resolution should be included, and a 30-day deadline for North Korean compliance should be imposed.

* Since Beijing will continue to resist enforcing existing law, the U.S .should lead a parallel multilateral effort to augment U.N. action. This initiative would comprise financial, military, law enforcement, and intelligence organizations targeting both North Korean and foreign entities.

* Resume enforcing U.S. and international law against North Korean illicit activities such as currency counterfeiting, money laundering, and production and distribution of illegal drugs. Complicit foreign companies and banks should be included in such law enforcement operations.

* Continue U.S. and allied missile defense development and deployment and call on South Korea to deploy a multi-layered missile defense system that is interoperable with a U.S. regional missile network.

* Urge South Korea and China to join the Proliferation Security Initiative.

Is History Repeating Itself?

The nuclear stalemate with North Korea will get worse before it has any chance of getting better. Although it is unlikely Pyongyang ever intended to negotiate away its nuclear weapons, the recent shift in North Korean strategy away from negotiations is troubling. Since the U.S., South Korea, and Japan have remained resolute in the face of North Korean provocations, Kim Jong-il will feel it necessary to ratchet up tensions even further.

Pyongyang will continue its belligerent behavior by conducting additional missile and nuclear tests to advance its technical capabilities. North Korea may also risk more direct confrontations, such as a naval clash along the disputed inter-Korean maritime boundary in the West Sea.

Ironies abound in President Obama's approach toward North Korea. For all of his criticism of the Bush Administration's tactics, President Obama was prepared to simply adopt the same policy of the last two years of the Bush Administration, a policy that had failed to achieve

success. Following North Korea's belligerence, rejection of dialogue, and provocations, President Obama has now adopted the policy and rhetoric of the first six years of President Bush.

North Korean actions and U.S. rhetoric in 2009 are strikingly similar to those of the 2003 crisis. The danger in such an approach is that both countries may be following the same paths that led to military confrontation in 1994. In an international confrontation where an irresistible force meets an immovable object, the danger of escalation arising from miscalculation rises exponentially.

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