

# North Korea's Brinkmanship

by Nicole Finnemann (*nmf@keia.org*)

## They Did What?!

On the morning of May 25, after giving the U.S. government one hour's notice, North Korea detonated a nuclear device underground at the same northeast site of its now infamous October 2006 test. Larger than the 2006 detonation—between two and four kilotons in size—the test violated UN resolution 1718, not to mention the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, of which North Korea was once a part. Later that same day, Pyongyang test-fired three short-range ground-to-air missiles from the Musudan-ri launch site. [Recall that North Korea launched what it claimed was a satellite from this site in April, an act that elicited strong condemnation in a UN Security Council Presidential Statement.] The next day, it launched two more short range missiles. Seoul reacted by immediately becoming a full participant in the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), regarding the search of ships and other carriers with suspicious cargo, and North Korea's response was a declaration that it was abandoning the armistice that ended the Korean War. The North also warned that it would respond with military action to any attempts to interfere with North Korean ships and cast further doubt over the future of the North-South industrial venture at Kaesong. The excitement did not end there, however, as Pyongyang test-fired another short-range missile on May 29, possibly of a different design, and declared it would "retaliate if provoked" by UN action. Then, word of the North's restarting its Yongbyon nuclear reprocessing facility began to spread. Now, as *Insight* goes to press, there are reports of an impending launch of another Taepodong-2 long range missile (see April edition of *Insight*), at a new, reportedly more-protected launch site near the Chinese border.

## And Now for the Reactions...

Surprisingly low-key—at least for the time being. The United States, Japan, and South Korea all condemned the nuclear test and called for immediate tough action at the Security Council—which has yet to happen. South Korea raised the alert status of its 650,000 troops and deployed an extra warship off islands in the Yellow Sea. Both the United States and South Korea raised their overall intelligence readiness in response to North Korea's increasingly antagonistic rhetoric, but Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said there was no need for the United States to boost its military presence on the peninsula. "We have no intention of taking military action against North Korea unless they do something that requires it." He also indicated that he was not aware of any military moves in the North that were out of the ordinary.

The most significant element of South Korea's reaction, and the one that infuriated Pyongyang the most, was its May 26 joining of PSI. For its part, Beijing announced its "shock" at the test, after having been "resolutely opposed" to the North's even considering a nuclear test. While this may look like strong language, China is not expected to back tough sanctions at the UN Security Council that would threaten the North's regime, as it also failed to enforce the sanctions passed against North Korea after its 2006 nuclear test. Beyond Japan's condemnation of the tests and launches by the North, Tokyo would like to see the United States reinstate North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism. However, U.S. officials have commented that it would be very difficult legally to justify such an action. And, while Moscow has not reacted as strongly as Washington, Seoul and Tokyo, it has increased monitoring of North Korea, while remaining measured in its willingness to act. "We should not rush into punishing North Korea for punishment's sake," said Sergei Lavrov, the foreign minister of Russia. "The Security Council must . . . work out those measures that would prevent a further dilution of the non-proliferation regime . . . we must also find a way . . . to create conditions for the resumption of six-party talks."

## What are North Korea's Motives This Time?

No one knows for sure. According to the North, it was forced to act after being ganged up on in the April UNSC presidential statement condemning its launch of a purported satellite. This sense of vulnerability led to its second nuclear detonation as it sought to enhance its deterrent capability—or so the story goes.

More likely, the North has been on this path for some time, seeking technological advancement and perhaps furthering illicit sales from conducting such blatant activity. The timing was simply related to when it was finally ready to conduct the test. In addition, Pyongyang has announced that it seeks to become a “powerful nation” by 2012, the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth. There is, however, no doubt that Pyongyang was angered by international condemnation of its “satellite” launch. Legitimate sources of revenue have declined while the diplomatic situation deteriorates, aid has dried up, and trade sanctions have been tightened—suggesting to some that Pyongyang may be looking to enhance not only its prestige, but its earnings through the sale of missile or, eventually, nuclear technology.

The increased provocations from the North could also be triggered by the uncertain future of regime leadership. Following Kim Jong-il’s health crisis last year, and the appointment of both his brother-in-law and youngest son to powerful posts, speculation began to arise over posturing and demonstrations of strength tied to the process of validating a Kim successor.

### **What to Pay Attention to...**

The UN Security Council continues to work on a new resolution in response to North Korea's second nuclear test. The current U.S.-sponsored draft demands that the North stop testing nuclear devices, cease advances in its missile program, and allow international inspectors to monitor its nuclear activities. North Korea, however, warned it would retaliate in the event of such a resolution. “If the UN Security Council makes a further provocation, it will be inevitable for us to take further self-defense measures,” the North’s Foreign Ministry said in a statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency. North Korea also accused the Security Council of hypocrisy. “There is a limit to our patience,” the statement said.

It will also be important to watch what happens off as well as on the west coast of the Korean peninsula in the coming month. The disputed territorial waters over which the two Koreas have fought on a number of occasions—usually during crab fishing season which is beginning now—is under heightened tension as South Korea agreed to search any North Korea ships in its territory suspected of carrying illicit arms or technology and the North declared it would react to any such action with military force.

Of note, a U.S. inter-agency delegation is now on a trip to South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia to seek cooperation on action against North Korea’s latest provocations. The high ranking team consists of Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, Treasury Under Secretary Stuart Levey, Special Representative for North Korea Policy Stephen Bosworth, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs Chip Gregson, and Senior Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council (NSC) Jeffrey Bader. The outcome of the trip should be closely watched. While North Korea has declared the Six Party Talks dead, never to return, one possible development might be the agreement of the other five parties to meet without North Korea—a clear indication of just how isolated Pyongyang is becoming.