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# **RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN NORTH KOREA**

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**Repercussions for North-east Asia and the World**



**PR Chari**

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# RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN NORTH KOREA

## REPERCUSSIONS FOR NORTH-EAST ASIA AND THE WORLD

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### INTRODUCTION

Four issues are relevant to analyzing North Korea's nuclear test on May 25, 2009, and its six missile tests thereafter: the technical and legal parameters of these tests; why is North Korea indulging in this aberrant conduct; can the direction taken by it be reversed; and, what are the implications of its actions for the international system and Northeast Asia. Further, what are the implications of these events for India, and how could they develop in the future.

An initial foreword about North Korea's present nuclear capabilities would be relevant. Its source of fissile material (plutonium) centers around two nuclear reactors in Yongbyon of around 8 MW and 5 MW capacities that were constructed in the early seventies with Soviet assistance. North Korea began establishing the facilities for a complete fuel cycle in the eighties before acceding to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1985. It had begun work on a 200 MWe reactor and reprocessing plant, but also a secret nuclear reactor in Yongbyon.<sup>1</sup>

These reactors are to be dismantled following decisions taken during the Six Party talks; now, there are reports suggesting that Pyongyang has restarted its plutonium reprocessing plant to separate fissile material from accumulated spent fuel stocks. North Korea is believed to have separated plutonium earlier to the present events to suffice for assembling six

to eight nuclear weapons. Following its two nuclear tests in October 2006 and May 2009 its plutonium stockpile would have significantly depleted.

North Korea had shown interest in pursuing the enriched uranium path to nuclear capabilities. Pakistan had, in fact, transferred its purloined centrifuge technology to North Korea, but it does not seem to have pursued this option seriously. North Korea also possesses short, medium and intermediate range missiles. South Korean sources suggest that it is preparing to flight-test a long-range missile capable of reaching the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Whether North Korea has succeeded in miniaturizing its nuclear weapons for fitment into a missile warhead is presently unclear. There is some confidence, therefore, that worst-case scenarios do envisage Pyongyang developing nuclear warheads and delivery system, but "they still have a long way to go. The imminent danger is the proliferation of that type of technology to other countries and potentially terrorist organizations and non-state actors."<sup>3</sup> Reports that North Korea is planning a third nuclear test--it will further deplete its limited stocks of fissile plutonium-- suggest that it remains unsure about the credibility of its nuclear device.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Aftergood and Hans M. Kristensen, "North Korea: Nuclear Weapons Program," [http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/dprk/nuke\\_dated\\_16\\_November,2006](http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/dprk/nuke_dated_16_November,2006) accessed on 11/6/09.

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<sup>2</sup> Global Security Newswire, "North Korean Missile Being Assembled, Report Says," June 3, 2009. [http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print\\_friendly.php?ID=nw2009/06/03](http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print_friendly.php?ID=nw2009/06/03) accessed on 4/6/09.

<sup>3</sup> Remarks attributed to Gen. James Jones, National Security Adviser to the Obama Administration. Global Security Newswire, "U.S. Officials Worry About North Korean Proliferation," May 28, 2009. [http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print\\_friendly.php?ID=nw-20090528](http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print_friendly.php?ID=nw-20090528) accessed on 29/5/09.

## I WHAT ARE THE TECHNICAL AND LEGAL PARAMETERS OF THESE NUCLEAR/MISSILE TESTS?

The May 25 nuclear test was the second conducted by Pyongyang at its Kilju test site, some 60 miles northeast of the capital. The first test, conducted on October 9, 2006, is widely believed to have failed; the device did not explode but ended in a 'fizzle'. The recent test has been described by North Korea in opaque language as being "safely conducted on a new higher level in terms of its explosive power and technology of its control and the results of the test helped satisfactorily settle the scientific and technological problems arising..."<sup>4</sup> This is hardly illuminating about the success of the test, assessed on the touchstone of its designed yield. The yield was assessed by the CTBTO (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization) to be in the 'low one-kiloton' range. But the precise yield can only be calculated realistically after further seismic, acoustic and radiological data is collected and examined. Preliminary investigations by South Korean authorities have failed to confirm the presence of noble gases like krypton-85 and xenon-135 that are normally released into the atmosphere after a nuclear test,<sup>5</sup> which was found, incidentally, after the first test. The absence of radioactivity in air and water samples near the nuclear test site does not mean that no nuclear explosion took place,<sup>6</sup> since, in theory, the explosion could be fully contained, to ensure that no 'venting' takes place. But, this would presume that North Korea has vastly

improved its nuclear technological capabilities between its two nuclear tests in October 2006 and May 2009. Nothing is known, incidentally, about the weight of its nuclear devices, raising further doubts about their suitability for being carried by a missile or aircraft.

The six missiles launched thereafter were staggered over May 25 and 26 to flight-test short-range (below 300 km) missiles. The first two tests had a range of 130 km and were launched from a base in the east central coast of North Korea into the sea off Japan. They flight-tested an anti-aircraft and anti-ship missile with the plain intention to warn off aircraft or ships approaching the test site to gather radioactivity data for a technical analysis of the nuclear explosion. Incidentally, these missile tests constitute further acts of defiance by North Korea following its long-range missile test on April 5, 2009. Pyongyang had stated that its missile test was intended to place a satellite in orbit, which had succeeded and was beaming patriotic songs back to North Korean citizens! The truth is quite different and more prosaic. What was tested was a long-range Taepodong-2 missile that failed to reach orbit and fell back into the sea with its payload. This provocative action was severely criticized by the United States, which also pressed the UN Security Council to tighten its sanctions against North Korea. Japan, for its part, had threatened to shoot down this missile if it over flew its territory. According to Pyongyang the subsequent nuclear and missile tests are acts of protest, intended to register its resentment against criticism of its so-called satellite launch.

The legal implications of North Korea's actions can be reviewed. It had withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) some years back, and is consequently not bound by its prohibitions; especially that non-nuclear weapon states party to the Treaty will not "manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive device." [Article II]. It has not joined the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and is not bound by its prohibitions against all nuclear tests, including underground tests,

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<sup>4</sup> Text of the North Korean Announcement of Nuclear Test, *The New York Times*, May 25, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Jung Sung-ki, "No radioactive materials found since nuclear test," *The Korea Times*, June 4, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Global Security Newswire, "U.N.Group Reaches Agreement on North Korea Sanctions," June 10, 2009.

[http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print\\_friendly.php/ID+nw\\_20090610](http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print_friendly.php/ID+nw_20090610) accessed on 11/6/09.

like those conducted in Kilju. North Korea, however, has clearly infringed the terms of the UN Security Council Resolution 1718 passed a few days after it had conducted its first nuclear test in October 2006, which envisages that North Korea shall “suspend all activities relating to its ballistic missile program and in this context re-establish its pre-existing commitments to a moratorium on missile launching.... abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner....abandon all other existing weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs....”<sup>7</sup> The long-range missile test conducted by North Korea in April 2009, and its second nuclear test conducted on May 25 clearly challenge UN Resolution 1718.

Further, North Korea has indulged in a series of further defiant actions on the specious grounds that its national honour was besmirched by international criticism of its missile test intended to place a satellite in orbit. It has unilaterally abrogated the Armistice signed in 1953 that formally ended the Korean War (1950-53)<sup>8</sup>; it has walked out of the Six Party talks designed to negotiate a modus vivendi and reverse the military direction taken by the North Korean nuclear program; it has expelled the UN inspectors that were safeguarding that program to ensure its peaceful content; and, finally, it has resumed reprocessing its spent reactor fuel to increase the supply of plutonium for its weapons program. It has also threatened to conduct more nuclear and long range missile tests,<sup>9</sup> leading to further warnings being issued

by the United States.<sup>10</sup> In a classical self-destructive action North Korea has abrogated its agreement with South Korea to jointly develop the Kaesong industrial area that employs 38,000 North Korean workers and generates millions of dollars for the bankrupt regime in Pyongyang.<sup>11</sup>

All these actions make it very difficult for the international community to reverse the North Korean nuclear program, which is placing the nuclear non-proliferation regime under great strain, especially when the NPT Review Conference is looming ahead in 2010. Inevitably, these defiant actions have provoked reactions by the United States and South Korea, which have raised their military alert levels. South Korea has also outlined its plans to counter a possible missile attack on its battleships in contested waters with joint attacks from surface, air and sea on North Korea’s missile base.<sup>12</sup> This escalatory war of words and actions forebodes a period of tensions and instabilities in the Korean peninsula, unless one of the parties to this contest backs off.

## II WHY IS NORTH KOREA INDULGING IN THIS SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR?

In the absence of an official explanation by North Korea, and it would be naïve to expect one, all assessments of its provocative actions are speculative, and based on expectations of rational behavior, which may be completely erroneous. However, several plausible reasons obtain to explain Pyongyang’s actions which are

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, Security Council resolution 1718 (2006) adopted by the Security Council at its 5551<sup>st</sup> meeting on October 14, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> However, it needs recognition that the Armistice of 1953 was never converted into a formal peace treaty; hence the anomalous situation that the Korean War has not ended, and the two Koreas are still at war

<sup>9</sup> Global Security Newswire, “North Korea Preparing New Missile tests, Russia Says,” June 9, 2009. <http://gsn.nti.org/site>

[services/print\\_friendly.php?ID=nw](http://services/print_friendly.php?ID=nw) accessed on 10/06/09.

<sup>10</sup> Al Jazeera, “Obama Warns N. Korea on Nuclear test.” June 6, 2009, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/americas/2009/06/html> accessed on 10/06/09.

<sup>11</sup> “A merry dance,” *The Economist* (London), 26 May, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Reuters, “S.Korea Plans to Counter North Korea: Report,” June 7, 2009. <http://www.reuters.com/article/world.News/idUSTR> accessed on 10/06/09.

discussed below, while also noticing the reasons to question them.

First, that North Korea wishes to externalize its internal contradictions, especially with a succession struggle proceeding to nominate Kim Jong-il's successor, who suffered a paralytic stroke in August 2008, and is now in poor health. He wishes to anoint his third son Kim Jong-un in his place, which has since been announced. The support of the all-powerful armed forces is critical here, which explains their pampering with luxury goods despite the economic difficulties facing the country and the privations suffered by the common people. Indeed, privileging the armed forces informs Pyongyang's traditional 'military first' policy. The present nuclear and missile tests are generally designed to enhance the military's visibility and prestige in the domestic polity, but more particularly to assure their support for a third-generation scion of the ruling family becoming the 'Great Leader', which is a significant departure from Marxist tradition. In this process, North Korea has offended the Obama administration, which was hoping to review the rigid policies pursued against it by the Bush administration. Kim Jong-il's actions have also embarrassed China that was taking the lead in the Six Party talks to negotiate suitable economic and technological incentives to Pyongyang for abandoning its nuclear program. Hence, the Chinese dismay with these nuclear and missile tests.

Second, that North Korea is signaling its desire to establish a bilateral dialogue with the United States, separate from the Six Party talks that also brings in other players like South Korea, China, Japan and Russia. The tactical advantage for North Korea is that it might succeed in cutting a more favorable deal with the United States, but also in driving a wedge between the United States and the other nations involved in these talks. The strategic advantage would be that a bilateral dialogue with the Americans would raise the regime's status in the

region and the broader international system. What Pyongyang fails to understand is that this modality is inconceivable for the United States. It would offend China and Russia by sabotaging the Six Party initiative, especially with China having been persuaded to take its leadership to deal with North Korea, but also disconcert South Korea and Japan who shelter under the extended deterrence provided by the United States. South Korea and Japan had abjured their nuclear options in return, which could get revived. Further, the United States has not been averse to informal discussions with North Korea, and had appointed Ambassador Stephen Bosworth as its nominee. But Pyongyang has thus far refused to meet him.

Third, North Korea's intransigent actions have moved it further towards becoming a nuclear weapon power, making it very difficult for it to reverse direction and denuclearize. There is a sense now that "Kim Jong-il wants to force the world to acknowledge it [North Korea] as a nuclear power before he dies,"<sup>13</sup> to enhance the regime's domestic prestige, and pander to his egotism. Aware that North Korea cannot become a *de jure* nuclear power under the restrictive provisions of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act it "wants to be treated like India and Pakistan: a declared nuclear weapon state existing outside the NPT."<sup>14</sup> More specifically, it seeks similar treatment like India, which, "though it has kept its bombs and ignored global anti-nuclear rules, last year won exemption from nuclear trade restrictions with help from America's outgoing Bush administration."<sup>15</sup> The United States has also reached the conclusion that North Korea truly wishes to become a nuclear weapon state and sell its arms and technology to nuclear aspirants. North Korea has a flourishing arms trade of

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel E. Sanger, Mark Mazzetti and Choe Sang-hun, "North Korean Leaders is Said to Pick a Son as Heir," *The New York Times*, 2 June, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Michael McDevitt, "North Korea as a Nuclear Weapon State," *PacNet Newsletter # 41A*, 2 June, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

around \$ 1.5 bn. annually, largely dependent on exporting short- and medium range missiles to anti-Western states like Syria and Iran, Libya, but also to U.S. allies like Pakistan and Egypt. <sup>16</sup> Whether North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons, like South Africa, is unlikely.

### III

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE TO REVERSE THE DIRECTION TAKEN BY NORTH KOREA?

On the historical note it needs recollection that North Korea's nuclear obsession can be traced to the Korean War, during which General Douglas MacArthur had requested President Truman for permission to use nuclear weapons against Pyongyang. This had prompted Kim Il-sung to request nuclear technology from the erstwhile Soviet Union, and then China, which took decades to acquire. It is only in the early nineties, according to most estimates, that North Korea was able to possess the wherewithal to derive its nuclear option. Is North Korea likely now to 'cap, rollback and eliminate' its nuclear program after having come this far, and after so arduous a journey.

Pessimism is warranted since other options to reverse North Korea's nuclear quest have been explored and have failed. During the Clinton era the United States sought to engage Pyongyang in a dialogue that envisaged that it would dismantle its nuclear program under IAEA supervision in return for being provided economic aid and light water reactors for meeting its power needs. That bargain failed with North Korea concealing its military nuclear activities. Thereafter, the Bush administration changed tack and followed a belligerent policy, consigning North Korea into the 'axis of evil' nations, heightening its isolation in the international system. This did not deter North Korea from pursuing its path to nuclear weapons. Barack Obama came to office with a commitment to pursue a new approach to

old problems. But his efforts to reach out to North Korea have been brushed aside by its conducting a nuclear and multiple missile tests, while refusing to meet his special emissary to discuss new initiatives to address its concerns. The question is, therefore, germane: what remains to craft a different policy to ensure the denuclearization of North Korea?

The proposal to put North Korea back on the list of terrorism-sponsoring countries is under active consideration by Washington; earlier, the Bush Administration had removed it from this list as a placatory gesture. <sup>17</sup> A seven nation group, comprising the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council, Japan and South Korea, has wrestled with this issue of broadening UN sanctions on North Korea for infracting UNSC Resolution 1718. Incidentally, Security Council Resolution 1718, passed in the wake of North Korea's earlier nuclear test, had expressly prohibited it from pursuing a nuclear weapons program and undertaking missile tests. A draft UNSC Resolution 1874 has been negotiated, which includes a total ban on arms exports and a "major expansion" of the prohibition on arms imports; new financial sanctions to limit Pyongyang's ability to fund its WMD and ballistic missile programs; a voluntary inspection regime by U.N. states for North Korean ships suspected of carrying "prescribed goods;" and designation of new entities that would face sanction. <sup>18</sup> The draft Resolution has been accepted by the larger 15-member UN Security Council, and should pass without change through the UN General Assembly.

<sup>17</sup> Global Security Newswire, "U.S. Will not keep Buying Off North Korea with Aid, White House says," June 8, 2009. [http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print\\_friendly.php?ID=nw-20090608](http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print_friendly.php?ID=nw-20090608) accessed on 6/9/2009.

<sup>18</sup> Global Security Newswire, "U.N. Security Council Unanimously Adopts New Sanctions on North Korea," June 12, 2009. [http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print\\_friendly.php?ID=nw](http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print_friendly.php?ID=nw) accessed on 13/6/09.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

The question whether the nations primarily concerned, like those involved in the Six Party talks will, in practice, search North Korean ships and aircraft suspected of carrying “prescribed goods” is vital to chastising North Korea. Apparently, China and Russia had resisted making these inspections mandatory, so it is not very obvious how effective a “voluntary inspection regime” can be.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, there is a disinclination also to proceed further and operationalize UNSC Resolution 1464, which is directed against the export of arms and WMD technologies, and this modality is also envisaged by the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). China is reluctant to support such precipitate measures due to their dubious legality in international law, but also because it could provoke North Korea into taking extreme retaliatory steps. Pyongyang has warned that any forcible attempts to search its vessels would tantamount to a declaration of war.<sup>20</sup> For its part, Russia has strongly disapproved North Korea’s fecklessness, but it is uncertain whether Russia would support pro-active measures like searching its ships for contraband. At this critical juncture, North Korea has chosen to further escalate tensions by arresting two American women journalists for allegedly entering its territory, and sentencing them to 12 years internment.<sup>21</sup>

A new factor has appeared in the international efforts being cobbled to roll back North Korea’s nuclear program, which is South Korea joining the PSI.<sup>22</sup> The earlier governments in Seoul, headed by Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, had resisted U.S. pressure to join the PSI, but had sought to improve relations with Pyongyang by pursuing a policy of engagement and

economic assistance. The present South Korean government, headed by Lee Myeong-bak, has decided to join the PSI—a global counter-proliferation measure. Its primary target had always been North Korea; hence South Korea’s support was critical. Significantly, the PSI envisages stopping, boarding and searching ships and aircraft suspected to be carrying contraband, especially WMD-sensitive materials. Will South Korea undertake these activities now to halt Pyongyang’s arms with other states of concern like Pakistan, Iran, Syria and so on? Will China back such measures by South Korea which, in turn, is being backed by the Japan and the United States? This question gains salience because North Korea has plainly warned that any inspection of its ships would spell dire consequences for Seoul.

The forcible regime change modality in Pyongyang, incidentally, is definitely out, since it would presage another Korean war, given Pyongyang’s desperation to secure its national interests, shorthand for the whimsicalities of its ruling Kim dynasty. It is believed that China can accomplish this mission if it wishes because of its economic stranglehold over North Korea, but is reluctant to contemplate such action since instability in that country could lead to a massive refugee influx into China that would be difficult to stop. In any case, the possibility of effecting a regime change suggests that a preliminary Sino-American dialogue would be required to explore contingency plans related to the succession issue. How realistic is this possibility?

#### **IV WHAT ARE THE INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF NORTH KOREA’S INTRANSIGENCE?**

It would be useful to realistically estimate what the threat is emanating from North Korea. What implications do its recent actions have for Northeast Asian security? What do they forebode for the international system?

It would be excessive to believe that North Korea presents a direct nuclear threat to South Korea or Japan, and much less to the United States. Why? It has been assessed that North Korea’s recent nuclear test was only a

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<sup>19</sup> “U.N. Security Council Adopts Stiffer Curbs on North Korea,” *The New York Times*, 12 June, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Global Security Newswire, “Sanctions Would be Declaration of War, North Korea Says,” June 9, 2009.

[http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print\\_friendly.php?ID=nw\\_20090609](http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print_friendly.php?ID=nw_20090609) accessed on 10/6/09.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Global Security Newswire, “South Korea Joins Proliferation Security Initiative,” May 26, 2009.

[http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print\\_friendly.php\\_nw-20090526](http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print_friendly.php_nw-20090526) accessed on 27/5/09.



qualified success, and that it may not be able to miniaturize its nuclear weapons for carriage by a missile or aircraft. North Korea does not require nuclear weapons to attack South Korea or Japan, assuming that its unpredictable regime wishes to pursue this disastrous policy. Its long-range artillery and short/medium range missiles can wreak havoc on South Korea and Japan. In fact, Seoul, which houses almost one half of South Korea's total population of some 80 million, is only 40 miles south of the DMZ separating the two Koreas. Pyongyang would also have to configure the inevitability of a devastating counter-attack into its calculations by the United States, South Korea and Japan, while support from China and Russia would remain problematical. In other words, the 1950 scenario when North Korea initiated the Korean War with the support of the two Communist giants is unlikely to be feasible. While the use of nuclear weapons by North Korea is not credible, it could use other tactics that it has used in the past against South Korea like infiltration, subversion and assassination.

The danger from North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities arise for other reasons that are more subtle and indirect:

○ Firstly, they generate a permissive atmosphere, encouraging other nuclear aspirants to derive their nuclear option by clandestine means. The regional candidates are South Korea and Japan, but also Taiwan that have the capability to deploy a nuclear arsenal. They have not done so because they have sheltered under the umbrella of extended deterrence provided by the United States. Should their confidence in US ability to continue providing extended deterrence weaken, South Korea and Japan, but also Taiwan, could rethink their earlier decisions to forsake their nuclear option, despite their vociferous denials that this question will not arise under any circumstances.

○ Secondly, if North Korea deploys its nuclear arsenal, the extra-regional nuclear aspirants like Iran and Syria would feel encouraged to pursue their nuclear ambitions. Collectively, all these

developments would greatly weaken the international nuclear regime that is under considerable strain already, with the next Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty slated for next year in 2010. For its part, North Korea has never been averse to assisting other nuclear aspirants to derive their nuclear option or develop their missile capabilities. For instance, Iran has an intelligence-sharing arrangement with North Korea that includes avionics, propulsion systems and missile components.<sup>23</sup> Pakistan's linkages with North Korea are well known that had envisaged the barter of its uranium enrichment technology for missiles from North Korea. Its transfers of nuclear technology to Syria are still unraveling. It is believed that some 10 % of its revenues are derived from clandestine arms exports, which is a considerable proportion of its revenues, given its cash-strapped situation. After the application of more extensive sanctions it is possible that North Korea feels even less inhibited and begins selling its nuclear and missile technology with greater vigor to earn some revenues.

○ Thirdly, North Korea's intransigence throws into high relief the weakness of the counter-proliferation regime. North Korea has proven that it can bargain with its neighbors and the United States by threatening to either develop and/or transfer nuclear weapons or by collapsing as a national entity. The collapse of North Korea presages large-scale refugee movements into China and South Korea; hence, they are not prepared to let it fail. South Korea, moreover, no longer wishes to reunify the Korean peninsula, fearing that the absorption of North Korea would entail huge economic costs; besides, it would inherit Pyongyang's nuclear legacy, with all its adverse consequences; hence it is more greatly inclined now to deal with North Korea as a separate entity.

In other words, the threat of nuclear proliferation and/or failing as a nation state

<sup>23</sup> Global Security Newswire, "Iran, North Korea Cooperating on Missile Programs, Says U.S. General," 12 June, 2009.

[http://gsn.nti.org/siteservice/print\\_friendly.php?ID=bw\\_20090612](http://gsn.nti.org/siteservice/print_friendly.php?ID=bw_20090612) accessed on 13/6/09.

has been used by North Korea, like Pakistan, to leverage economic assistance and political support. The parallel between North Korea and Pakistan is worth emphasizing. Pakistan has bargained successfully for several decades by threatening to collapse unless it was provided financial assistance. It has also raised elemental fears that, if it collapses, its nuclear weapons could fall into the hands of Islamic fundamentalists like the Taliban and al Qaeda and/or jihadist organizations like the Lashkar-e-Toiba and the Jaish-e-Mohamed.. This policy, colorfully described as 'bargaining with the pistol held to one's own head,' has yielded rich dividends for Islamabad--\$ 23.6 bn. in international aid commitments according to one estimate - <sup>24</sup> but this has simultaneously expanded its nuclear arsenal. According to a US Congressional Report on Pakistan, it has approximately 60 warheads, but it is further establishing two new plutonium production reactors to augment this arsenal.<sup>25</sup>

## **V WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR INDIA?**

It has been argued that these developments in Northeast Asia have little relevance to India and South Asia. But this comforting thesis is seriously flawed in the light of the conclusions reached above. North Korea's aberrant behavior threatens to unravel the international non-proliferation regime. The linkage, for example, between Pyongyang and Islamabad—both blatant proliferators—could strengthen in future. These general possibilities would have profound implications for India's national security. Three particular developments, which, admittedly, lay out worst case scenarios are of special significance.

First, North Korea's intransigence will boost Iran's nuclear ambitions, and encourage its exercise of the nuclear option, sooner rather than later. An unbroken chain of nuclear weapon states would then be established extending from Pyongyang to

Beijing to Islamabad, New Delhi and Teheran. This proliferation chain would, almost inevitably, extend further into the Gulf and Middle East region—witness their avid quest now for atomic power reactors, ostensibly to assure their energy security, despite the abundance of oil and gas reserves in their territory. Very obviously, there are exploring their own nuclear options to counter an emerging nuclear Iran.

Second, a quantum increase in the number of nuclear armed countries in India's neighborhood raises the specter of nuclear weapons being used in anger, but also the possibility of nuclear accidents rising exponentially, and the likelihood of these weapons falling into the hands of non-state actors. Murphy's Law has obvious application here, but it stands to reason that the rising number of nuclear actors—both state and non-state—exponentially raises the possibility of nuclear weapons being used. Such scenarios are continually being conjured up in the case of Pakistan, despite their being hotly contested by Islamabad, and explain the serious reservations and angst existing in the international community. A Catch-22 situation is obtaining in Pakistan. For ensuring a robust deterrent posture the threat of nuclear retaliation must remain credible at all times. But considerations of nuclear safety make it necessary that nuclear weapons be dispersed to ensure that they are not destroyed in a first strike. Dispersing these weapons and/or their components over several locations raises the consequential danger of their falling into undesirable hands.

Third, the long-standing and close nuclear and missile transfer relationship between North Korea and Pakistan is well-documented with, among others, the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto <sup>26</sup> and the

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<sup>24</sup> Brahma Chellaney, "The Nuclear Nightmare," *Japan Times*, 3 June, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> *CRS Study*.

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<sup>26</sup> A sensational account informs that Benazir Bhutto had personally carried the CDs containing information on the centrifuge-based uranium enrichment technology available to Pakistan on her official trip to Pyongyang in December 1993, and returned with the disassembled parts of an entire North Korean missile for the Pakistani scientists to study. This account was published in a book written

ubiquitous Dr. A.Q.Khan providing the nuclear linkage between the two countries that are of primary concern to the international community. Currently, both North Korea and Pakistan are currently being subjected to minute scrutiny, but their past ingenuity suggests that their clandestine relationship could get revived. Apart from using the sea route to undertake clandestine transfers, North Korea and Pakistan could utilize the land route through China to trade with each other, but also Iran. Even if these sub rosa activities come to light, there is little prospect of these countries being punished, since the option of tightening sanctions and letting aberrant states fail, has never come on the agenda of the international system. In brief, the historical links between North Korea and Iran and Pakistan presages their closer ties, even as Pyongyang continues its intransigent policy of conducting more nuclear and missile tests. This laissez faire attitude has serious implications for South Asia, which is complicated by the region having become the hub of both secular and religious terrorism. India's national security would obviously be profoundly affected. North Korea's aberrant actions, therefore, must attract India's serious concerns. India should pose some counterfactual questions to the United States, China and Russia: How could the financial instrumentality be fashioned to halt North Korea's nuclear program? If this is considered impractical, why is this policy being pursued with Pakistan? If North Korea and Pakistan continue with their nuclear programs, how is it proposed to persuade Tehran to forsake its own nuclear quest?"

## VI SOME AFTERTHOUGHTS

North Korea's nuclear and missile tests have defied the nations that joined the Six Party talks to denuclearize Pyongyang. The

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by Shyam Bhatia, a former classmate of Benazir Bhutto in Oxford, after her assassination in February 2008 Cf. Global Security Newswire, "Bhutto took Nuclear Data to North Korea, Book says," [http://www.nti.org/d\\_newswire/issues/2008\\_6\\_2](http://www.nti.org/d_newswire/issues/2008_6_2) accessed on 26/10/08.

incapacity of these countries to deflect North Korea from pursuing its nuclear option has been amply demonstrated. Realistically only China can pressure North Korea at this stage since it provides some 90% of its fuel and most essential goods. China is cognizant, however, that if the North Korean state were to fail, a large refugee exodus could be expected that would be unstoppable. It is hard to guess, therefore, what concrete steps China will take against Pyongyang—Will it only indulge in rhetoric and, thereafter adjust itself pragmatically to these new realities? However, at the same time, North Korea's ability to influence its regional neighbors and the major international powers has ebbed away. Its repeated nuclear and missile tests are not yielding any intelligible results, revealing that a law of diminishing returns also governs nuclear brinkmanship. North Korea, instead, has subjected itself to strictures and sanctions, and to adorning the list of 'rogue nations,' 'states of concern' and 'pariah' groups of countries. It could, therefore, be left severely alone by the international regime to, figuratively, 'stew in its own juice.'

In conceptual terms, however, a new phenomenon confronts the international system, which is the difficulty in dealing with nations that have no use for international norms and practices. North Korea, like Myanmar, Somalia and Iran, has deliberately isolated itself, and is quite willing to suffer the ravages of sanctions that will cause economic misery, deprivation and distress. A distinction must be drawn between its ruling elites, who remain unaffected by the ravages of sanctions, and their long-suffering population, which is constantly being exhorted to make sacrifices to meet unspecified threats from abroad. Insulated from the rigors of international sanctions, the ruling elites in North Korea, Myanmar and Somalia have no dis-incentive to refrain from whimsical and intransigent conduct, indulging in aberrant and reprehensible behavior, and ignoring the discipline and civilities of international life. By coincidence, these nations also fall into the list of failed and failing states recognized by the international system.<sup>27</sup> Their failure as

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. The Failed States Index 2007, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com> accessed on 7/9/2007.

## Special Report

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functioning states presents a kaleidoscope of security challenges to their neighbors and the international system--the most immediate being large-scale migration of population fleeing from conflict or economic distress or food shortages and so on.

The question now arises, for which there is no satisfactory answer yet: what can the international regime do to induce the ruling elites in these aberrant and failing states like North Korea to abide by accepted international norms and practices? A convincing answer to this question would allow a more effective policy to be crafted for dealing with North Korea. Otherwise, the creeping nuclearization of North Korea forebodes radical changes in the strategic landscape of Northeast Asia. South Korea and Japan would come under immense pressure to establish their own nuclear deterrent; at the least they would deploy missile defenses against North Korea. Taiwan, too, could revisit its nuclear option, which it had abandoned in the early seventies under U.S. pressure. The rationale for the continued American military deployment in Northeast Asia would also become questionable, leading to redoubled pressures within these countries, but also in the United States, to wind down its overseas bases in the region. China would be most affected, however, by the overt deployment of nuclear weapons by North Korea. A nuclearized Northeast Asia, including South Korea, Japan and Taiwan can hardly be reassuring for China's security.