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A China Perspective: North Korea's Nuclear Tests Reshaping Northeast Asian Security

BY LIANG YABIN

On September 9, 2016, the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK) carried out its largest nuclear test to date; the fifth test overall and already the second just in 2016. Nuclear weapons development is a strategic tool of the DPRK with five functions in one.

Liang Yabin, Research Fellow of the Pangoal Institution and Associate Professor at the Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, explains that “Nuclear weapons greatly improve the geo-strategic position of the DPRK in Northeast Asia, which also increases the possibility of reaching a compromise and exchange of interests between the U.S. and the DPRK.”

First, the country's security issues can only be resolved through nuclear weapons development in response to the long, continuous pressure from the powerful military alliance of the U.S. and South Korea. Nuclear weapons are an “affordable” counterbalancing weapon for weak and small countries against powerful threats. **In practice, the effectiveness of nuclear weapons safeguarding state security has indeed been repeatedly validated since World War II. So far, no large-scale military strikes against a nuclear weapons state have happened. Historically, no nation with functional and proven nuclear weapons has ever given up that capability. South Africa and Iran gave up their nuclear technology before achieving successful nuclear tests.** Ukraine is the only country to have given up its nuclear weapons voluntarily, but provides a very negative example to the world of what can happen afterwards, as seen with Crimea's recent annexation by Russia and the descent of Eastern Ukraine into civil war.

Second, nuclear weapons technology is the only field that the DPRK can beat South Korea when it comes to North-South competition. Nuclear weapons, as the “proprietary equipment” of world powers, have a strong symbolic meaning and help to grow the international status of North Korea, as well as uniting the populace and consolidating the regime's legitimacy. Even as its economy deteriorated in recent decades and citizens from all levels of society suffered, nuclear weapons have been almost the only pillar to support the “powerful country” identity construction of the DPRK.

Third, when it comes to international bargaining, nuclear weapons and related ballistic missile tests have become almost the only card to play for the DPRK. The long-term closure and backwardness of the DPRK has led to it losing almost all of its chips to bargain with the external world. Thus, its only option is to firmly hold and frequently make use of this card. That tactic of the regime is also becoming increasingly common. Comparing the reign of the two recent leaders, Kim Jong-un and Kim Jong Il, the missile tests and nuclear tests conducted by the DPRK have been growing in both the number and the frequency.

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Fourth, as the U.S. is entering the critical period of its presidential election and the debates between the candidates are underway, the nuclear test helps to draw attention and raise the status of the DPRK as an election issue and affect U.S. policy in the future toward the DPRK. The future president of the U.S. has to consider how to deal with the DPRK's nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons greatly improve the geo-strategic position of the DPRK in Northeast Asia, which also increases the possibility of reaching a compromise and exchange of interests between the U.S. and the DPRK.

Fifth, the test serves to further heighten tensions in the North-South confrontation and deteriorate regional security, thereby forcing neighboring powers to choose a side and obstruct the big powers' coordination on issues like sanctions placed upon the DPRK. After the DPRK's third nuclear test in 2013, China, the United States, Russia, Japan, and South Korea achieved a certain degree of policy coordination under the auspices of the United Nations. In particular, the relationship between China and South Korea went into a honeymoon period after mutual visits of leaders. The fourth nuclear test carried out by the DPRK in January of this year had the purpose of breaking such coordination, and actually did lead to a grudge forming between China and South Korea, ultimately leading to the decision to deploy the THAAD missile defense system by South Korea. The relationship between China and South Korea deteriorated sharply. The fifth nuclear test further promotes the differentiation of big powers and increases suspicion of strategy and a sense of confrontation among China, Russia, United States, Japan, and South Korea.

The opportunity window for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue has been closed. Currently there is basically no good solution to achieve the target of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula and the powers will probably continue to rely on the available principles and methods, i.e., increasing sanctions, waiting for internal changes in the DPRK, and waiting also for policy changes of the other powers toward the DPRK. A strict implementation of sanction resolutions made by the United Nation is only a limited method that can be applied. The sanctions aim not only at promoting changes with pressure, but also at forming a “warning to others” demonstration effect, letting other countries who want to illegally develop nuclear weapons know how high a price they will pay for going down such a road. However, this method will also result in a larger scale of humanitarian catastrophe without a doubt.

Another possibility is that the nuclear weapon status of the DPRK will become accepted. The experience of India tells us that if an illegal nuclear weapons country can bear economic sanctions for about 10 years, for the sake of strategy, the U.S. may gradually relax and lift economic sanctions, and even establish cooperation with the country. One of the main reasons for the DPRK nuclear weapons dilemma is the continuous doubt from the outside about its actual nuclear capability. To date, the DPRK has conducted five nuclear tests and multiple ballistic missile tests, which basically demonstrates that its nuclear and delivery capabilities are becoming quite real. It's very likely that the future of the North Korean nuclear situation will evolve as “where hills bend, streams wind and the pathway seems to end, past dark willows and flowers in bloom lies another village”, no matter whether we would like to see it or not.

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Dr. Liang Yabin is a Research Fellow of the Pangoal Institution and an Associate Professor of the Institute for International Strategic Studies at the Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. He can be contacted at liangyb@ccps.gov.cn. The Pangoal Institution is a leading China-based think tank that is joined by renowned scholars and senior practitioners in China and elsewhere.