

Commentary

Japan's Response to North Korea's Nuclear Test

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The recent nuclear test carried out by North Korea in defiance of warnings by the international community has significantly raised Japan's security concerns. The test conducted on October 9, 2006 made Pyongyang the second nuclear weapon state in North East Asia after China. It was carried out in the backdrop of already heightened tensions in the region following a set of multiple missile launches by Pyongyang on 5 July 2006. The missiles which had plunged into the Sea of Japan, had even evoked calls for preemptive strikes from a section of the political and defense establishment in Tokyo. The possession of nuclear weapons along with the requisite missiles that can hit Japan is being seen as a direct threat. The North Korean proclivity to proliferate weapons aggravates the security problems.

The North Korean nuclear test coincided with Japan's newly-elected nationalist Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Beijing and Seoul in an effort to ameliorate ties with them and is the first test of his political and diplomatic mettle. In many ways, it has become yet another reason for Japan to revisit and review its security structures and capabilities for dealing with its concerns. As an immediate step the new government has initiated a discussion in the Diet on bills for upgrading the Defense Agency to a ministry and another bill to include UN peacekeeping as one of the "primary" duties of the Self-Defense Forces.¹

Japanese Response

While the test drew widespread censure from cross the world, including US and China, Prime Minister Abe reacted sharply, terming it as "absolutely unacceptable"² and a "serious threat to the security of Japan and South Korea, and neighboring countries."³ He described the test as marking the

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onset of a “more dangerous new nuclear age.”⁴ Tokyo deployed T-4 trainer aircrafts to check the levels of radioactivity in the surrounding region, and the Japanese Diet passed a resolution condemning the test as a “major challenge to peace and stability.” It also called on Pyongyang to abandon nuclear weapons and return to the Six-Party talks. The Japanese government decided to take its own steps and imposed harsh unilateral sanctions on North Korea – a step which drew support from Washington. The sanctions included a ban on the entry of North Korean ships into Japanese ports, a blanket ban on imports from Pyongyang including seafood and mushrooms, and a strict restriction on the entry of North Korean nationals into Japan.⁵ The ban on imports from North Korea will be a blow to the latter’s economy since it was an important source of foreign currency. Japan imported goods worth \$133 million from Pyongyang in 2005.⁶ The government also resolved to join hands with the international community in its efforts to deal with the situation and called for a strongly worded UN Security Council resolution. A high security alert was sounded for the Japanese nuclear power plants, infrastructural facilities and US installations on the Japanese archipelago. The Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces have also intensified information gathering activities in the region. In response to the sanctions, North Korea warned Tokyo of “strong countermeasures,” claiming that sanctions were equal to a declaration of war.

Impact

The impact of the North Korean nuclear test on Japan has been widespread. First, and most prominently, it brought the US-Japan alliance closer as President Bush vowed to defend Japan, South Korea and other American allies with “the full range of (our) deterrent and security commitments.”⁷ The US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Tokyo soon after the test in an effort to tighten the noose around Pyongyang in cooperation with Japan, South Korea and China, and also “to affirm, and affirm strongly” Washington’s alliance commitments.⁸ Prime Minister Abe termed Rice’s visit as reassuring and said he would work towards further strengthening the partnership. The two sides led by Rice and Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso also held discussions on ways to effectively implement the UN Security Council resolution, which calls on member-states to impose economic and diplomatic sanctions on Pyongyang, as also to effectively monitor North Korean vessels. Japan will use the Japan

Coast Guard to inspect North Korean ships.⁹ Resolution 1718 expressed “gravest concern” over the test and called on Pyongyang to halt any further missile launches and tests and return to the ambit of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.¹⁰ The resolution was drafted under the leadership of Kenzo Oshima, who was the president of the UN Security Council for the month of October. Rice also expressed US support for Japan on the North Korean abduction issue.¹¹ The Japanese however have stressed that Washington’s nuclear umbrella was sufficient for Japan’s security and would provide adequate deterrence. Missile defence cooperation between the two alliance partners is going to be strengthened. Japan has allocated approximately \$1.9 billion in the fiscal year 2007 budget towards missile defence.¹²

At the regional level, the test has brought together Japan and its neighbours China and South Korea. These relations had been passing through a rough phase and deteriorated through the Koizumi period. While Abe’s visit to the two countries was originally aimed at resolving the history issue that had soured relations, that agenda has now taken a backseat. The three countries joined hands to condemn Pyongyang for its “unpardonable act.” The test proved to be an affront and failure of diplomacy for both China and the US. It was also a setback to the Sunshine Policy followed actively by Seoul under President Roh Moo Hyun, who had favoured engaging North Korea by providing economic aid.

Tokyo has been responding to the North Korean missile and now nuclear test by upgrading its own security strategy. In other words, the missile and nuclear tests have served to catalyse the ongoing Japanese shift towards ‘normalcy.’ The 1998 North Korean missile test which sent ripples of shock throughout Japan had brought about the realisation of new security vulnerabilities owing to an unpredictable neighbour. The fallout was the Japanese decision to participate with the US in the development of the ballistic missile defence system and develop its indigenous spy satellites. The first two spy satellites were launched by Japan in March 2003 at an estimated cost of \$2 billion.¹³ The US too has deployed the Aegis-class destroyer *USS Shiloh* equipped with missile interceptor system at the Yokosuka naval base in Japan to buttress its defence system against missiles.¹⁴ In October this year the US has also stationed the ground-to-air Patriot Advanced Capability 3 (PAC3) missile system at the Kadena Air base in a bid to counter the North Korean missile threat.¹⁵ These measures will be in place till the time Japan is able to set up its own anti-missile

system over the next five years.¹⁶ Adding to the Japanese tribulations is the concern that the issue of its nationals abducted by Pyongyang remains unresolved. The issue of abduction of Japanese citizens has been of particular concern to Abe who has even created a special post in the Cabinet to deal with the matter.

Domestically, North Korea's nuclearisation has led to two prominent developments. It has reignited the debate on possession of nuclear weapons and also the discussion on the preemptive strike option.¹⁷ While it would not be prudent to expect Japan to go nuclear as a response, the very fact that a section of the elite within the governing and defence establishments is discussing it, is an unusual debate for a country that has been pacifist since 1945. Prominent voices that have spoken in favour of the need to seriously look at the nuclear option include former Prime Minister Nakasone, who floated the idea in a report released by his think-tank. Another prominent voice in this direction has been the Liberal Democratic Party policy chief Shoichi Nakagawa, who put forth his idea in a television talk show. Nakagawa reiterated his viewpoint that Japan should debate possessing nuclear weapons during a visit to the US. In a meeting with prominent US strategic thinkers, including former US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, he argued that this is required to "stop as quickly as possible the reckless acts of North Korea."¹⁸ A section of the Japanese media has also called on Japan to get over its "nuclear allergy."

However, Prime Minister Abe has ruled out the possibility of Japan going nuclear and expressed his intention to continue to abide by the three non-nuclear principles of not possessing, producing and permitting the introduction of nuclear weapons into Japan. In a joint news conference during Rice's visit to Tokyo, Foreign Minister Taro Aso also reassured Washington that Japan has no plans of going nuclear. There is still a very large peace constituency among the Japanese public which is not in favour of nuclearisation of the country. Besides, Tokyo's security alliance with Washington will also be a 'cork in the bottle' and the US is unlikely at this point to allow its ally to go nuclear considering the political and security repercussion such a step would have.

Among the general populace the test will lead to a weakened support for pacifism and strengthen those who want a more assertive Japan. According to public opinion polls carried by the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, as many as 81 per cent people feel that they perceive a stronger threat from

Pyongyang.¹⁹ Another poll conducted by the *Asahi Shimbun* revealed that as many as 62 per cent of voters felt “strongly threatened” by the test and that sanctions, not dialogue, should be used to deal with it. These figures showed a considerable rise from the 38 per cent which felt “strongly threatened” after the missile tests by Pyongyang in July.²⁰ Such a perception is bound to assist the Japanese government’s ongoing efforts to revise the Constitution and also to exercise the right to participate in collective self-defence under the UN auspices.

In fact, Prime Minister Abe who had made Constitutional revision a major election plank has clearly stated that “...we should revise Article 9 from the point of view that we should protect Japan, and that the country should make a global contribution (to security).”²¹ It has also brought about greater domestic support for the nationalist Abe, who came to power because of his assertive profile and his well known and professed hardliner approach towards North Korea. The *Asahi* poll gave Abe 83 per cent approval for his meeting with the Chinese and South Korean leadership.²²

Japan’s accelerated moves towards normal state is bound to cause consternation among other powers in the region such as China and South Korea, who will then feel the need to further bolster their own defence and strategic profile. East Asia has entered into an era of considerable uncertainty as a result of the North Korean test.

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