

United States and the North Korean Nuclear Test

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With the not so unexpected North Korean nuclear test on October 9, 2006 the world has entered into yet another nuclear age. Regional tension is the inevitable corollary of the new nuclear situation. Many apprehend East Asia may become a nuclear flashpoint. Quite naturally, the international community is closely watching the emergent situation. The United States (US) as a major and traditional stakeholder both in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and security management in East Asia is actively involved in diplomacy to deal with the fallout of the North Korean nuclear test.

The US, after maintaining some ambiguity, has finally, acknowledged the North Korean nuclear test. Some analysts speculated that there would be US military action to disarm North Korea. Negating such a possibility, the US has preferred to mobilise the international community in general and the great powers in particular. President Bush had contacted all major actors in East Asia immediately after the announcement of the nuclear test. Admittedly, the US adopted this position after its East Asian allies and partners were reluctant to embrace or support any military option. After issuing a condemnation of the test by dubbing it 'a serious provocation', the US became active in canvassing for a strong United Nations (UN) Security Council sanctions resolution against North Korea.

On October 9 2006, the US President dubbed the North Korean test as unacceptable, and that Washington would aim to restore the denuclearised status of the Korean Peninsula. In this address, President Bush also spelt out US commitment to diplomacy to solve the North Korean conundrum. Simultaneously, he also assured his East Asian regional allies, especially South Korea and Japan, of 'full range' of US deterrent

and security commitments. Thus, from the very beginning, the US restrained its unilateral impulse and initiated diplomacy in which multilateralism has played an important role.

The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1718 on October 14, 2006 condemning the nuclear test by North Korea. The US representative to the UN welcomed the Resolution and said that it would “send a strong and clear message” to North Korea to halt and dismantle its Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)-related acquisition and development programmes. However, the State Department spokesperson in his response tacitly implied that the US had to dilute a ‘good strong resolution’ on the North Korean nuclear test because of the need to compromise with other major powers such as Russia and China and its (USA’s) ally South Korea.

Considering WMD a threat to international peace and security, the UN Security Council Resolution 1718 expressed grave concern at the North Korean nuclear test. The Resolution also underlined that the nuclear test had challenged not only the NPT but also the nuclear non-proliferation regime. The Resolution asked North Korea to exercise restraint on any further nuclear test and launch of ballistic missiles, as well as to abandon these weapons in a complete, verifiable and irreversible way and to return to the NPT and the International Atomic Energy Agency’s Safeguards regime. The Resolution also urged the UN member-states to stop doing business with North Korea in WMD-related materials, major weapon systems, and luxury items. Under Resolution 1718 the UN members are also expected to freeze North Korean funds, financial assets and economic resources. The UN Security Council has called for joint efforts to mitigate the tension in the region as well as early resumption of the six-party talks on North Korea.

Initially, after the test, the US was confident of getting the support of China and South Korea. Soon, it recognised the resistance of these countries to its blueprint for changing North Korean behaviour. The US push for the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) did not find much support. The Chinese representative at the UN stated, “...China did not approve of the practice of inspecting cargo” to and from North Korea. He also expressed his reservations for this provision in the Resolution, and appealed for pursuing a prudent, responsible and non-provocative attitude and approach to handle the North Korean crisis. South Korea also expressed skepticism

over the interdiction of North Korean vessels. Later, Washington clarified that it did not want inspection of every ship. The US officials supported some random inspection of ships on business to North Korea. For this purpose, it emphasised information-gathering and sharing among the relevant countries.

Objectives

Of all the elements in the UN Security Council Resolution 1718, it seems the US is focusing most on preventing WMD transactions by Pyongyang. It also wants the resumption of the six-party talks. However, within the context of these talks, it also wants to raise the human rights issue of the North Korean people.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has said that the US does not want a 'quarantine' or 'blockade' to implement the UN Security Council Resolution, but wants to find a constructive solution to the supply of humanitarian assistance to North Korea. The US also does not appear to be explicitly seeking regime change in North Korea, as it did in Iraq. The idea of downplaying regime change at the moment could be to avoid raising tension in East Asia, and the strong opposition to it from China and Russia. Secretary Rice has affirmed that the US would not do anything to escalate tensions in the region. According to her, the escalation of tension in the region was solely flowing from the North Korean regime. She said the US supports practical measures to resolve the crisis.

To push the US diplomatic agenda on the North Korean nuclear issue and to consolidate the efforts to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1718, Secretary Rice travelled to East Asia from October 17 to October 22. She covered South Korea, Japan, China and Russia during her tour. Apart from bilateral meetings and statements in these three countries, Secretary Rice also managed a trilateral meeting with South Korea and Japan in Seoul on the issue. This trilateral meeting under the stewardship of the US assumes significance because of the recent drift or tilt of South Korea towards China to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. South Korea has emerged as a reluctant ally and does not favour any hardline American posture, but the US officials look confident of working out a common agenda for action with the South Korean government. It seems the US has opted to focus on organising and consolidating a unified response with its democratic allies so that it has an alternative option other than relying

on China to deal with North Korea.

Although the US has assigned the primary role to China to resolve the crisis and bring North Korea to a negotiated solution, it also feels that it would not be prudent to rely solely on Beijing. Differences between the US and China on some issues such as freezing financial transactions are also surfacing. However, despite the realisation that China is promoting its own interests in the region, the US options are limited. Since China is the principal supplier of food and oil to North Korea, the US wants it to use this leverage to bring about a change in North Korean behaviour. It does not, however, want China to stop food supply, as it falls in the humanitarian aid category permitted under the UN Security Council Resolution 1718. In the near future, the US has little option but to continue to rely on China to restrain North Korea.

On October 31, 2006, the Chinese government announced that North Korea had agreed to join the six-party talks. This was a result of the Chinese initiative in which the US envoy, Christopher Hill, actively participated. Although sanctions are still in place, the Chinese government appears to be finding some compromise for all the parties concerned. The decision has already brought some cheers in East Asia.

The US also wants the active involvement of Russia, New Zealand and Australia in the process to resolve the crisis. Russia is an important actor in the six-party talks and an old partner of Pyongyang, though its influence in the region has declined and is less compared to that of China. The current focus of America's diplomacy is to get Moscow's support for full implementation of the Security Council Resolution. The US is offering detection equipment and other technological assistance to countries to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1718.

Japan is America's most dependable ally in the region. The US would continue to persuade Japan to be restrained. The US has already affirmed its commitment to maintain its military and nuclear umbrella over Japan. It is aware that any increase in Japanese militarisation would complicate the already complex East Asian security situation. China may use the pretext of the militarisation of Japan to push for a more independent agenda in the region. South Korea too is unhappy about Japan's rising military profile. However, in the changed situation, no one can guarantee that Japan would not move towards developing an independent nuclear posture in the coming years. It may undertake the task in an opaque and covert manner.

Managing the NPT

The consolidation of the non-proliferation regime is another important challenge to the US. Its policy-makers are well aware that the NPT system is in a deep crisis. The North Korean crisis may have ramifications elsewhere. Developing additional mechanisms to strengthen the non-proliferation regime is proving to be difficult. The US policy-makers understand that the regime needs to be reformed and bolstered, and an important actor like India needs to be accommodated. Secretary Rice during her tour to East Asia reiterated India's positive role in non-proliferation.

The new US thrust on multilateralism may continue as China is giving some hope of being able to restrain North Korea. China has emerged as the principal diplomatic interlocutor for the US on the issue and the six-party talks. The US however would continue to strengthen its alliance with Japan and South Korea as it feels that North Korea could be checked only through a highly consolidated American alliance. The success of the primary American objective of denuclearising the Korean Peninsula would depend on how effectively it balances various forces that are at times acting at cross-purposes.

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