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North Korea's nuclear test message

David Krieger | May. 28, 2009

When a country tests a nuclear weapon, it is sending a message. It is not always clear, however, what that message is. In the case of the recent nuclear test by North Korea, some commentators have argued that the North Koreans are sending a ?pay attention to me? message to the international community and particularly the United States.

Other commentators have argued that the nuclear test was carried out for domestic purposes, to inspire the country with a display of technological prowess. A short statement from North Korea?s Korean Central News Agency suggests that both international and domestic audiences were relevant to the bomb testing message.

The North Korean announcement indicated that the test had several purposes, including to ?bolster up its nuclear deterrent for self-defense?; ?settle the scientific and technological problems arising in further increasing the power of nuclear weapons?; ?inspiring the army and people of the DPRK?; ?contribute to defending the sovereignty of the country?; and ?ensuring peace and security of the Korean Peninsula and the region around it?.? These are worth examining.

First, the rationale for virtually all nuclear tests by all states has been to bolster a country?s nuclear deterrent for the purpose of self-defense. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council, all nuclear powers, have tested nuclear weapons in total more than 2,000 times. The US alone has tested over 1,000 times. That means that North Korea, which has conducted two nuclear tests, has tested one thousandth the number of times as the five recognized nuclear weapons states have tested and one five-hundredth the number of times the US has tested.

It is, of course, dead wrong that deterrence provides a country with protection. In fact, it may lead to a country being attacked by nuclear arms.

Second, learning more scientifically about the characteristics of nuclear detonations is another principal reason the nuclear weapons states have used to justify testing their weapons. The North Koreans are unusually blunt in stating that they are looking at problems arising from developing more powerful nuclear weapons. Their first test in 2006 had a force of about one kiloton. Their recent test had a force some four times greater, roughly one-third the power of the Hiroshima bomb.

Third, the North Koreans sought to inspire their army and people with their bomb test. It is unfortunate, but true that nuclear tests seem to inspire and promote nationalism. When the Indians and Pakistanis tested in 1998, their respective populations came into the streets celebrating the ?achievement.?

The US inspired its people by conducting over 1,000 nuclear tests, including 67 atmospheric tests in the Marshall Islands, then US Trust Territories, the equivalent of one Hiroshima bomb a day for 12 years.

Fourth, the belief that nuclear tests contribute to defending the sovereignty of a country seems wildly wrong. It may send a message regarding deterrence capability, but it is more relevant that it now isolates a country and makes it a pariah state. This wasn?t always the case.

Fifth, it is also far from assured that North Korea?s test and continued pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability will ensure peace on the Korean Peninsula and beyond. There may be an argument that nuclear weapons assured peace between the US and Soviet Union during the Cold War, but this remains unproven and not subject to proof.

So taking the North Koreans at their word, they have done little more than demonstrate their technological prowess for domestic consumption and recaptured the attention of the world in a most negative way. President Obama responded to the latest nuclear and missile tests by saying that they posed ?a grave threat to the peace and security of the world and I strongly condemn their reckless action.?

North Korea?s nuclear test is pushing it deeper into isolation from the international community. The tests may play well at home, but not on the world stage. At the same time, North Korea?s justifications for its tests are no better nor worse than those of the other countries that have tested. They are modeling their testing behavior on the nuclear weapons states that went before them.

The United States and other members of the United Nations Security Council, which are so strong in their condemnation of North Korea?s nuclear testing, are not doing enough to resolve important security issues with North Korea by diplomacy, the only sensible solution. Nor are the permanent members of the Security Council setting the right example by adhering to their own obligations under international law for ?good faith? negotiations for total nuclear disarmament.

North Korea?s nuclear testing is a manifestation of a deeper problem in the international system, that of continuing to have a small group of countries possess and implicitly threaten the use of nuclear weapons for deterrence or any other reason.

David Krieger is president of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation (www.wagingpeace.org).

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