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ANALYSING THE RECENT DPRK'S NUCLEAR TEST AND CHINA'S POSSIBLE ROLE

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On January 6, 2016 the CTBTO monitoring stations picked an unusual seismic activity near the DPRK's nuclear test site. The activity is suspected to be a detonation of a miniaturised hydrogen bomb by North Korea. Likewise, a state run North Korean television news channel too announced its government had tested a hydrogen bomb in an area of the country where there have been three nuclear tests since 2006. While the event is yet to be analysed fully in order to establish the accuracy of the claim, many experts are of view that, "the device may have been a boosted fission weapon, with tritium and deuterium gas added to give it more power..."¹

By definition a hydrogen bomb is expected to be more powerful than a plutonium/uranium bomb in terms of its yield. The miniaturisation of the same does not make it a real hydrogen bomb as the effect is contained and similar to that of plutonium/uranium bomb. To oversimplify the event- the recent test in

reality could be viewed as a repeat of 2006 nuclear test with a bigger bang. Of course any definitive explanation of the test would require direct scientific knowledge, which in this case at this early stage remains elusive. According to the available scientific analysis, the confirmation regarding the DPRK's claim of having conducted a hydrogen bomb test depends ultimately upon the successful detection of the argon isotope from the atmospheric sampling or an onsite inspection.²

Whether or not North Korea has mastered the enormous yield of hydrogen bomb- the political fallouts of the recent test are far too many. Clearly the recent test is signalling North Korea's will to advance its nuclear ambition. This whilst the international community takes the credit for containing nuclear Iran last year (2015) with a landmark deal.

Pyongyang's nuclear reminder is a 'to do list' for the upcoming nuclear security agendas for the US as well as for the non-proliferation

community worldwide. It is also indicative of how unworkable are the pre-emptive warnings/sanctions and diplomacy in preventing a state from going nuclear. The recent test provides an estimation of the heights the North Korean leadership aspires to attain in its nuclear programme. It implies a dedication of the country towards acquiring the second generation of nuclear bomb in future- the nature of which is five hundred times more destructive. It must be noted that last year in December (2015) the country had affirmed to master a hydrogen bomb technology. According to one of the top experts on North Korea's nuclear programme- Siegfried Hecker, the test signifies an achievement of 'greater sophistication in their bomb design'³. It is indeed bothersome to note that North Korea has continued to mature its experience of nuclear weapons capability in a constrained international environment. It is worthy to note that North Korea is one of the most sanctioned countries in the world.

As expected the event has generated a unanimous condemnation from the international community. The subsequent development is fairly obvious- a) pressure on North Korea to resume the six party talks b) series of UN sanctions would follow, perhaps this time China might want to play an active role in the '*hard hitting international response*'⁴ that UN along with US, South Korea, Japan has planned.

Indeed China can play a significant role in at least initiating any negotiating process, as a

lead by the United States at the outset would likely be counterproductive owing to the history of US-North Korea relations. Since China is the only country that enjoys cordial relations with North Korea- its condemnation of the recent test has the potential to shape the outcome on this issue.

In the recent past China has practically helped North Korea survive as a functioning state through its continued economic aid and is the main supplier of arms, food and even energy. All these years, as a UNSC member, it has stood in opposition of the harsh sanctions that international community has imposed on North Korea. However, for China, the security of the Korean Peninsula is paramount. The Chinese security concerns in the region have certainly been alarmed after the recent test. Along with these concerns, the international environment for North Korea has also depreciated- these conditions (if not sufficient) would likely generate pressure on North Korea. In a recent statement, the US Secretary of State- John Kerry has urged China to put an end to its 'business as usual'⁵ with North Korea in order to find long lasting solution to the issue at hand.

China can lead the road towards slowing down of Pyongyang's nuclear ambition by drafting the targeted nuclear related sanctions, to be imposed by the UNSC. The 15-member UN Security Council that China is a member of has collectively, condemned the test. Furthermore, the Chinese role might be more acceptable to

Pyongyang as it provides a face saving in situation of the North Korean regime's standing up against West (especially the US). China shares a different world view for North Korea in comparison to the US. In case negotiations occur, there is a clear possibility that involving China would relieve North Korea from the pressure of being attacked in the worst case scenario. The anti North Korean (American rhetoric) in all likelihood would not directly come into play if at all the talks' kick-starts

However, merely the necessity of the Chinese role does not translate it into practice. A passionate Chinese involvement cannot guarantee as denuclearisation of the peninsula as it is not a priority for China. Beijing would rather have the stability of the region maintained with an option that lets it enjoys a continued leverage on the US primacy. If at all it assumed a voluntary central role in mitigating the crisis, the most challenging task would be to manoeuvre a negotiation process alongside the domestic politics in Pyongyang that demands regime survival through a symbolism of power.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

¹ Christina Pazzanese, "Nuclear Nervousness", Interview-Mathew Bunn & Gary Samore, *Harvard Gazette*, January 7, 2016, Available at http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/01/nuclear-nervousness/?utm_source=SilverpopMailing&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=01.08.2016%20%281%29, Accessed on January 11, 2016

² Arun Vishwanathan, S Chandrashaker, L.V. Krishnan, Lalitha Sundaran, "North Korea's 2016 Nuclear Test: An Analysis, *ISSSP- NIAS*, January 2016, Available at <http://isspp.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/North-Korean-2016-Nuclear-Test-Report.pdf>, Accessed on January 11, 2016.

³ Steve Fyffe, "CISAC Nuclear Expert Analyzes North Korean Hydrogen Bomb Claims", *CISAC- Stanford Foundation*, January 07, 2015, Available at <http://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/news/cisac-nuclear-expert-analyzes-north-korean-hydrogen-bomb-claims>, Accessed on January 08, 2016.

⁴ Gabriel Dominguez, "Why Sanctions Have Failed To Deter North Korea", *Deutsche Welle*, January 07, 2016, Available at <http://www.dw.com/en/why-sanctions-have-failed-to-deter-north-korea/a-18966019>, Accessed on January 09, 2016

⁵ Matthew Pennington, "US Tells China To End 'Business As Usual' With North Korea", *Associated Press*, January 01, 2016, Accessed on January 11, 2016.