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North Korea's 4th Nuclear Test: a starting point for the abolition of nuclear weapons?

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Following the tests of 2006, 2009 and 2013, the fourth nuclear test by North Korea "successfully conducted" on January 6 2016 at 10 a.m. (local time) represents in the words of a North Korean media release published in imperfect English - "a giant stride ... towards the final victory of the revolutionary cause of Juche" i.e. communism and marxism-leninism as reviewed and corrected by the founder of the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) Kim Il-Sung.

The facts

An artificial earthquake with a magnitude on the Richter scale of between 4.9 (according to the Chinese seismology centre) and 5.2 (the US Geological Service) was detected at that time. According to South Korea's Institute of Geological and Mineral Sciences, its epicentre was 30 miles (49 km) from the Punggye-si site where the DPRK conducted its earlier tests.

The North Korean government describes it as an H-Bomb, the first of this kind tested by the regime and obtained exclusively through North-Korean science, technology and determination.

John Carlson, who was for over twenty years director of the Australian Bureau of Security and Non-Proliferation, thinks that we must wait to see the analysis of the gases emitted by the explosion before we can confirm that North Korean claim, and this could take some days. Indeed the relatively limited size of the earthquake (similar to the previous one, in 2013) does not seem to correspond to an H-Bomb explosion.

But the North Korean statement speaks of a "smaller H-Bomb", in which case John Carlson says it would be "a major challenge", especially if it is a miniaturised version, which would require even greater expertise than an "ordinary" H-Bomb. This challenge is even more concerning because the A-Bombs previously tested by Pyongyang were probably too big to be transported in missiles, whereas a miniaturised bomb could be. As we know, North Korea has a considerable space programme, and the tests for that (along with the 3rd nuclear test) had a notable role in provoking the "North Korean Missile Crisis" which lasted through the first half of 2013.

It is possible, nevertheless, that the North Koreans exploded a low-powered device « boosted » with tritium, in which the hydrogen isotope underwent partial fusion - this would enable them to call it a hydrogen bomb and to claim a greater mastery than they really have. That is the opinion of a South Korean expert, Yang Uk, a member of the « Korea Forum for Defense and Security », who says : « They could have tested a device intermediate between an A-Bomb and an H-Bomb, but unless they provide clear evidence of this it is difficult to believe».

On the other hand we should not underestimate the capacity of North Korea which, despite or rather through its tactical swerves, has so far shown a beautiful constancy, if not a terrible stubbornness.

The North Korean Vision

According to North Korea's government, the test was carried out "in a sure and perfect manner", "the most perfect in all history" and had "no adverse effect on the ecological environment", despite the picture of a handsome mushroom cloud broadcast on North Korean television, as if that image corresponded to this test, which was surely conducted underground. It represents "a higher stage of the DPRK's development of nuclear force" and shows that the DPRK

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"proudly joined the advanced ranks of nuclear weapons states possessed of even H-Bomb", by acquiring "the most powerful nuclear deterrent."

This test is "a measure of self-defense the DPRK has taken to firmly protect the sovereignty of the country and the vital right of the nation from the ever-growing threat and blackmail by the US-led hostile forces and to reliably safeguard the peace on the Korean Peninsula and regional security."

In the view of Pyongyang, « the US is a gang of cruel robbers which has worked hard to bring even a nuclear disaster to the DPRK, not content with having imposed the thrice-cursed and unheard-of political isolation, economic blockade and military pressure on it for the mere reason that it has differing ideology and social system and refuses to yield to the former's ambition for aggression..."

« The Korean Peninsula and its vicinity are turning into the world's biggest hotspot where a nuclear war may break out since they have been constantly stormed with all the nuclear strike means of the US imperialist aggressor troops, including nuclear carrier strike group and nuclear strategic flying corps."

That is why there « will neither be suspended nuclear development nor nuclear dismatnlement on the part of the DPRK unless the US has rolled back its vicious hostile policy towards the latter.»

Other nations' vision

The Pyongyang government is apparently the only one to hold this opinion. But it sticks to it, convinced of its rightness.

Condemnations around the world have multiplied. On the request of the USA and Japan, the UN Security Council is meeting today to react to the North Korean "provocation" and perhaps to impose new sanctions. China also "is firmly opposed" to this testing which it was not warned about, and is pressing its turbulent ally to "respect its promises to denuclearise and to stop all action that might aggravate the situation". But it is not said that the Chinese authorities are having any effect on Kim Jong-un, any more than the international economic sanctions which in the past did not bend him or his father Kim Jung-Il, or his grandfather Kim Il-Sung, and which create the likely risk of hurting North Korea's population even more, while seeming to validate the view of the Pyongyang government.

Step back and consider

There seems to be unity among the P5 nuclear powers in condemning the atomic developments by Pyongyang, but has not the time come of these five permanent members of the Security Council, including the USA, to take the Pyongyang regime's word literally, i.e. to take the opposite approach.

The North Korean dictatorship is one of the worst in the second half of the 20th century, with that of the Khmer Rouge. It condemned two million of its citizens to die of hunger, maybe more, nearly 10% of its population, preferring to devote almost all the country's resources to the police, the army, and to weaponry, especially nuclear. Today the regime survives partly through fear, but also through indoctrination, training, and the adherence of indoctrinated minds. National feeling and an impression of injustice and encirclement also contribute to the militarisation of people's thinking.

And how can we not agree with the regime when it protests against the double-speak of the Americans but also, implicitly, that of the Russians, British, French and even Chinese when they claim the right to retain massacre

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weapons which they want to stop the North Koreans from having, and which they themselves brandish? How can we not notice that the rage for destruction shown by the US Strategic Air Command planners in the 1950s is certainly not outdone now by the folly of the current Pyongyang dynast?

Is it not time now to change our state of mind and our methods?

A precedent that deserves to be followed

In December 1987 in Washington, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev signed for the USA and the USSR the first great nuclear disarmament treaty, which eliminated from Europe the Intermediate Nuclear Forces. Two years later the Berlin Wall fell, and the Soviet regime, which Reagan called the "Evil Empire" fell in its wake.

It was not weaponry or hot war (plain war) that ended the Cold War. It was disarmament. Nuclear disarmament. It opened the way to the disarming of minds. Renouncing of nuclear weapons, when you have them, is showing the white foot of sincerity to the wolf opposite, it is demonstrating that you are not the Enemy, it is changing air and changing era. One of the Washington treaty negotiators said to the other: "We are doing something terrible to you: we are going to deprive you of an enemy." Although it turned out badly for his camp, his prediction was right.

And what if North Korea's 4th nuclear test, by H-Bomb or not, were to create unanimity around itself, sound the knell, and mark an increasing awareness (for all peoples and all states) of the gravity of the nuclear danger?
And what if for the five "great powers" possessing nuclear weapons and for the other equally great and fearsome ones located in other "hot points" of the planet (Israel, India, Pakistan), were to mark the beginning on a process an "unheard-of, thrice-blessed" process for the abolition of nuclear weapons?

Perhaps, after all, the best way of disarming Kim Jung-un might be for ourselves to disarm, to deprive him of enemies, to abolish the raison d'être of his military dictatorship... and of others across the world?

The "giant stride towards the victory of the Juche" could then be a giant stride ... towards a pacified world.

Should we regret it? Certainly not. Even if we must admit that, for the moment, it is cause for worry.

Jean-Marie Matagne, 6 January 2016

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Post-Scriptum, 7 January

Today morning we receive from John Derek, on behalf of Global Zero, the following message which reacts to the DPRK nuclear test exactly in the same way as we did:

Dear Acdn,

Last night, North Korea detonated a nuclear device at a known testing site in the eastern part of the country. In an accompanying statement, the government claimed to have successfully tested a hydrogen bomb.

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In response, we already see a troubling narrative emerging: The world is dangerous. Nuclear weapons keep us safe. We must cling to these arsenals â€" even race to upgrade them â€" and accept them as the cornerstone of our security.

All of that is flat wrong. Nuclear weapons anywhere are a threat to people everywhere. What happened on the Korean peninsula reinforces that our whack-a-mole approach to proliferation won't work over the long run. From the Iranian nuclear program to stolen nuclear material in Moldova1 to confrontations between Russia and the West2, we are trapped in a cycle of nuclear crisis after nuclear crisis, each one a dangerous roll of the dice.

We have to break that cycle. And we can. It requires a far more comprehensive approach â€" one that brings together key countries to eliminate all nuclear weapons and secure all nuclear materials. And we're working everyday to make that happen.

I know in moments like these, it's easy to feel powerless. The nuclear threat feels vast and we mistake ourselves as small.

But when it comes to eliminating nuclear weapons, you are more powerful than you know. The challenge we face is political: It is a matter of leaders acting with urgency and resolve. That's exactly the sort of obstacle movements like ours are built to overcome.

Acdn, our greatest adversary is the lie that the world cannot change. It can. And we're the ones to change it.

With hope,

Derek Johnson
Executive Director
Global Zero

DPRK Communiqué

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