

Pyongyang's New Nuclear Facility Tests World Resolve

William Ide 25 November 2010



Photo: AP

A 2008 file photo of Pyongyang, North Korea, at dusk

North Korea's recent revelations about its new, modern uranium-enrichment facility stunned scientists. Asia analysts see it as Pyongyang's latest attempt to force the world to accept it as a nuclear state. With international talks about the North's nuclear program broken off, and uncertainty about whether sanctions can halt North Korea's nuclear advances, analysts say the international community has few good options to deal with the problem.

North Korea's revelation that it now has two nuclear programs - one to enrich uranium and another to create plutonium - presents the United States and its allies in the region with a new challenge, one that Asian experts say will not be easy to resolve - especially since North Korea seems increasingly unwilling to give up its nuclear programs.

Victor Cha, a former Bush administration White House director for Asia affairs, says North Korea sees its nuclear programs as its ultimate security blanket, a way to gain acceptance in the world.

"In the end, it is becoming clearer and clearer that while they are willing to negotiate in different periods of

time, portions of their program," said Cha. "They are willing to 'rent' pieces of their program for a freeze for a few years. In the end they are trying to get us all to accept that they are going to be a nuclear weapons state."

North Korea has offered to return to six-country talks on ending its nuclear weapons programs. The talks involve China, Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States. Last year, however, Pyongyang stormed out of the talks and shortly afterward carried out a second nuclear test.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, says North Korea has shown no indication it is willing to give up its nuclear weapons.

"The reality is they are a wonderful bargaining tool. They are a wonderful defensive weapon," said Bandow. "Nobody would pay attention to the North without them. And especially imagine the political dynamic in Pyongyang today: Would anyone, including the Dear Leader, want to go to the military and say we are giving away your most important weapon. My guess is that with a political transition in the offing, that is very unlikely."

Analysts note that the addition of a uranium-enrichment program will add to the difficulty of keeping track of the North's nuclear activities. Facilities used for plutonium require nuclear reactors, which are easier for satellites to monitor, but uranium enrichment plants are much easier to conceal. The products of both programs can be used to make nuclear weapons.

And if the North's nuclear ambitions were not enough, there is this week's artillery shelling, and the sinking in March of a South Korean military ship, the *Cheonan*, that killed 46 sailors. North Korea says the shelling was a defensive move - because South Korea was conducting military exercises in the same area - and the communist state also denies it was responsible for sinking the *Cheonan*.

The United States has adopted an approach to North Korea it calls "strategic patience" - that is, waiting for North Korea to come forward and agree to give up its weapons instead of using incentives to get Pyongyang to come back to the negotiating table.

Analysts note, however, that as recent events have shown, the longer the administration waits, the more time North Korea has to advance its nuclear program.

"The problem is that if we continue to insist that North Korea has to give up everything first - which may be morally correct - that simply is not going to work practically," said Balbina Hwang, a visiting professor at the U.S. National Defense University.

Hwang went on to say that "it is OK to engage North Korea, but only if we are willing to put on the table ourselves ... have a very, very serious conversation amongst the United States and the allies about what it would take to actually address North Korea's security concerns. Any other type of diplomacy is frankly just a waste of time. And I think that is what needs to happen now with the six-party talks."

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AP

U.S. nuclear envoy Stephen Bosworth (R) is surrounded by reporters after meetings in Tokyo, 22 Nov 2010

Stephen Bosworth, the top U.S. envoy on North Korea, has already met in Asia with participants in the six-party talks. He says China, the host of the talks, and the United States agree that a multilateral, diplomatic approach is the only way to realistically resolve these problems.

Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute says what is needed is a positive package that has China's support and addresses North Korean concerns such as economic aid, trade and diplomatic recognition.

"I've long thought that we should have diplomatic relations - at the very least, a consulate office there [in North Korea]," said Bandow. "It would show some sign of respect to the North, which matters to them. It would give us a small window into North Korean society. It would be a very small concession from our part [and] it might be a positive step that would be helpful."

Bandow adds that the U.S. government may even need to consider the option of accepting the North as a nuclear state in some shape or form.

"I think that the U.S. has to have as a backup option that if we could stop them from proliferating, if we could stop them from ... any further production, we could live with them [having] 10 to 12 nuclear weapons. That is not a good option, but do we want them to turn into a Nukes-R-US [a nuclear weapons proliferation center]?" Bandow asked.

Yet, without any new ideas and no good military option, analysts say the best approach is to try to get the North back into negotiations on ending its nuclear program. Again, Victor Cha:

"I hate to say that because it is so dissatisfying. But you try to get back into a negotiation with them, with the Chinese on your side, really trying to push the North to put this facility and these new capabilities on the table for negotiation," said Cha.

However, how soon and under what pre-conditions those talks may resume is unclear.

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