

What can be done as North Korea restarts key nuclear reactor?

By Brendan Bordelon

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Amid indications that North Korea has restarted its chief nuclear reactor, the latest sign the nation plans to renew its nuclear weapons program, policymakers confront a big question: What should be done about it?

In a report released Thursday by the U.S.-Korea Institute at John Hopkins University, researchers viewed commercial satellite imagery from mid-September showing hot wastewater flowing from an underground pipe leading from the Yongbyon reactor facility.

“The most likely explanation is that the reactor is now operating and the generators are producing electrical power,” the analysts wrote.

The institute reached a similar conclusion in early September, after steam was seen rising from the reactor itself. Thursday’s report confirms that the power-up is moving forward.

Before the reactor was shut down in 2007 under an agreement with the United States and the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Yongbyon facility was used to produce reprocessed plutonium for the production of nuclear weapons.

The agreement broke down in 2009, and in April of this year North Korea vowed to restart the reactor after the communist nation’s sabre-rattling brought tensions with the United States to new heights.

“If they restart their nuclear facility at Yongbyon, that is in direct violation of their international obligations,” Secretary of State John Kerry said at the time. “It would be a provocative act.”

Washington has so far stayed silent as North Korea powers up the Yongbyon facility, and experts see few good choices available to the Obama administration.

“The truth is, there’s not a lot that we can do at this point unless you’re willing to run a lot of risks,” Michael Auslin, a foreign policy scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, told The Daily Caller News Foundation.

Auslin expects another nuclear test from the North Korea “in a couple of months,” and believes that the Obama administration should be prepared to ratchet up sanctions.

“We need to think proactively about what we’re going to do,” he said, advocating the return of harsher, Bush-era sanctions that targeted “companies and individuals directly involved in this program.”

Ted Carpenter, a foreign policy expert at the libertarian Cato Institute, disagreed with Auslin’s prescription. “Sanctions don’t work in most cases, and they certainly haven’t worked with North Korea,” he told TheDCNF.

“I don’t think we should make this into a crisis,” he said, “it simply continues the ongoing trend of something that really has been going on for better than two decades.” North Korea has a long history of violating nuclear deals with the United States, including agreements brokered under both the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations.

“North Korea is not going to be bludgeoned or bribed into giving up this quest for a nuclear arsenal,” Carpenter explained. “That doesn’t really change the power dynamic that much because they are not usable weapons. They can scare people, but if North Korea’s neighbors won’t be bluffed, it’s highly improbable that Pyongyang would commit regime suicide by launching a nuclear attack.”

“This is an attention-getting device more than it is an effective policy in terms of regional influence,” he concluded.