

The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

N. Korea nuclear test: Will it spoil Obama's disarmament plans?

By Howard LaFranchi, February 15, 2013

A visitor walks past North Korea's Russian made Scud-B ballistic missile (C in grey) and South Korea's US made Hawk surface-to-air missiles at the Korean War Memorial Museum in Seoul Friday.

President Obama may have dreams of advancing his ambitious nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament goals in his second term, but North Korea's third nuclear test this week risks spoiling that vision by setting off a nuclear race in an increasingly uneasy Northeast Asia.

In the wake of Pyongyang's latest nuclear blast – and its hints that it intends to carry out additional nuclear tests in the coming months – political leaders and media in both South Korea and Japan are suggesting that the pressure to fight fire with fire and go nuclear may be too hard to resist.

And any moves in the region to build nuclear arsenals in response to a belligerent North Korea would no doubt have repercussions in China, nuclear experts say, especially since Beijing – already involved in a tense territorial dispute with Japan – would likely respond by augmenting its own nuclear arsenal.

RECOMMENDED: War with Iran? 5 ways events overseas could shape Obama's second term.

“There are a lot of clocks running here, but they're all counting down towards the same outcome, and that's the nuclear cliff,” says Henry Sokolski, executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center (NPEC) in Arlington, Va..

Both Japan and South Korea have security treaties with the United States that place them under the US nuclear umbrella. In effect that means they shouldn't need their own nuclear arsenals because the US is obligated to defend them in the case of an aggression.

But the North's nuclear test has led to public musings in both countries that maybe their no-nukes policies need to change.

Want your top political issues explained? Get customized DC Decoder updates.

In South Korea, conservative members of the National Assembly and like-minded media have said the country must consider matching the North. One lawmaker declared that stones are not good enough for fighting a gangster with a machine gun. South Korea's soon-departing president, Lee Myung-bak, described the recent calls for South Korea to go nuclear as "patriotic" in a newspaper interview.

"I don't think the comments are wrong because they also serve as a warning to North Korea and China," President Lee told the Dong-A Ilbo newspaper.

In Japan, the nationalist and surging Japan Restoration Party has been the main source of calls for developing nuclear weapons – to counter not just North Korea, party leaders say, but also nuclear powers China and Russia.

Officially Japan's position is that, since it is prohibited in its constitution from developing an offensive military capability, its counter to regional aggression is the US-Japan security alliance. But Japan's new prime minister, Shinzo Abe, has lent support to the idea of amending the constitution to allow for a more robust defensive posture. Some Japan analysts say that move is aimed at least in part at opening the way to a nuclear arsenal.

One explanation for the recent surge in warnings of a "no other choice" recourse to nuclear weapons is a desire to – as South Korea's Lee suggests – jolt China into pressuring its allies in Pyongyang, some regional experts say.

"Surely Beijing could understand why South Korea and Japan would find it hard to calmly accept a nuclear North Korea," wrote Doug Bandow, a foreign policy fellow and Asia expert at the CATO Institute in Washington, in a recent post on the CATO website. Were Pyongyang to remain on its current path of nuclear arms and missile development, he adds, the US might decide that the best defense would be for Japan and South Korea to develop their own "countervailing nuclear weapons."

"Then [China] would share the nightmare of proliferation in Northeast Asia," he said.

The NPEC's Mr. Sokolski agrees that some of what's going on is an effort to pressure China into doing something to halt the North Korean regime's nuclear train. But he sees little chance of such pressure being successful.

"Don't kid yourself, China is not going to do very much," he says. "And even if they did, it's not going to be enough to turn this off."

Why? While North Korea may be the immediate cause of the nuclear jitters, Sokolski says, the rivalries and tensions among China, Japan, and South Korea are an underlying critical element.

Noting that the South Koreans consider Japan to already be among the world's nuclear-capable countries, he says, "In South Korea, they say, 'We are living between two nuclear-arming countries, North Korea and Japan.' It's justification for moving farther down the nuclear road."

This is where the US comes in. South Korea wants to renegotiate its atomic energy deal with the US to allow for "reprocessing" of spent fuel from the country's nuclear plants. The US, worried that reprocessed fuel could eventually be used to build nuclear weapons, has been cool to the idea.

But South Korea argues that Japan already has the right to reprocess its nuclear fuel. And when the US and South Korea sit down to consider revising the existing nuclear energy deal – sometime after President-elect Park Geun-hye takes office later this month – South Korean officials are likely to complain about their perception that Washington has favored Tokyo over Seoul in this area.

Despite the troubling prospects of a nuclearized Northeast Asia, some regional experts say there are alternatives. One option, apparently favored by Russia, would be for China to agree to join any future round of US-Russia nuclear arms reduction talks. China is mum on the size of its nuclear arsenal, although it is considered to have many fewer warheads than the US or Russia. Seeing Beijing willing to discuss its arsenal and at least consider reductions could reduce proliferation risks, experts say.

But Sokolski notes that Northeast Asia's nuclear scenario will remain complex and tense – and the US will stay in the middle of it all.

Both Japan and South Korea support in principle a denuclearized Korean Peninsula and universal nuclear disarmament. But he says they also see the US reducing its warheads in accords with Russia, even as no one knows for sure what arsenal China has. “And they say, ‘OK, maybe it’s time for us to develop our own option.’ ”