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Editorial: Avoiding the traps set by North Korea

China holds key to U.S. efforts to defuse nuclear threat.

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Americans honoring past and present sacrifices on Memorial Day were rudely reminded of the need for a strong national defense when news broke that North Korea had successfully tested a nuclear device that was significantly more powerful than its initial test blast in 2006. Showing it had the means to deliver nuclear warheads, it also test-fired six missiles and threatened to strike South Korea if it stopped and searched any of its ships as part of the American-led Proliferation Security Initiative. To top it off, North Korea said it "no longer feels bound" by the 1953 armistice, which its leaders previously pegged as a "useless piece of paper."

Even by North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's unstable standards, it's been quite a tantrum. This has led many to speculate that the show of nuclear power reflects an internal battle as Pyongyang ponders who will be the next "Dear" or "Great" leader, as Kim Jong-il and his paternal predecessor,

Kim Il-sung, were known.

"These moves are probably part of a succession process," said Richard C. Bush III, director of the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution. He cautions that patience will be needed. "So if we expect fundamental change in behavior, we will probably have to wait until it is over, as it could take years."

North Korea is "the closest thing to a communist monarchy," said Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the conservative Cato Institute, reflecting widespread speculation that Kim Jong-il wants his son to succeed him.

So the military moves may be an attempt to solidify support for North Korea's armed forces. But whether this week's escalation is for internal or external politics -- or both -- the danger of it spinning out of control is real, and the United States and South Korea raised their watch condition to the second-highest level for only the fifth time since the end of the Korean War.

All of this becomes yet another test for President Obama. For years North Korea has wanted bilateral talks with America instead of the existing diplomatic structure of six-

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party talks, in which North Korea's neighbors -- China, Japan and South Korea, along with Russia -- have joined the United States in trying to convince or coerce North Korea to denuclearize.

Obama should avoid that trap. And he can by delivering on diplomacy, which has been a hallmark of his first few months in office.

Much of Obama's diplomatic efforts have to be focused on Pyongyang. But because China has the closest relations with North Korea, the real lever of power is in Beijing. Wary of the West interfering in its internal affairs, China has often been reluctant to approve or enforce United Nations sanctions.

But it could aid the cause now. "They could stop their fuel going to North Korea, they could stop their financial assistance and they could help enforce the sanctions that the U.N. Security Council decided on in 2006 after the first nuclear test," suggested Brookings' Bush.

And they might just be ready. "The Chinese in particular prefer quiet diplomacy, and their reaction here is not that quiet," said J. Brian Atwood, dean of the Humphrey Institute, referring to China's anger over this week's saber-rattling.

Obama, who won the presidency in part by promising a more internationalist, diplomatic approach to world conflict, should resist Kim's bait for a bilateral confrontation, and instead use his considerable political capital to convince China -- and the rest of the world -- that unified diplomacy is the smartest and safest way to defuse a nuclear North Korea.

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