

An Analysis on the Underlying Factors of North Korea's Threat to Conduct a Third Nuclear Test

Chon Hyun-Joon

Senior Research Fellow, KINU Center for North Korean Studies

Online Series CO 13-05

On January 23, 2013, the United Nations (UN) Security Council unanimously imposed sanctions against North Korea for launching a long-range rocket on December 12, 2012. After the sanctions have been imposed, whether or not North Korea will conduct a third nuclear test has become a pressing concern for the international community. Such a test would fit the pattern of first two nuclear tests, both of which was forewarned and preceded by rocket launches and international condemnation. Also, it can be said that North Korea's third nuclear test is imminent as Kim Jong-un, the First Chairman of the National Defense Committee (NDC), proposed 'critical measures at the national level' and 'detailed task' at the first squad conference meeting. The meeting was held on January 27, 2013 to address issues of national security and foreign affairs. Further, it has been confirmed that Kim Jong-un, the First Chairman, 'made an important decision to secure the autonomy of North Korea' at the Central Military Commission Conference with Enlarged Membership, reported on February 3, 2013. The only difference between first two tests and the imminent test is that; in the case of first two tests, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on North Korea after a nuclear test was conducted, where as in the recent case, the UN Security Council applied sanctions against North Korea before a nuclear test was conducted. All in all, it is most likely that the North will conduct a third nuclear test.

Then why is North Korea trying to conduct yet another nuclear test in defiance of international condemnation? It could be said that North

Korea's policy of ensuring its regime survival through the possession of weapons of mass destruction is the one of the most important reasons behind the nuclear test. Regime survival is not maintained by a single factor, but rather, by a complex set of internal and external factors. Internally, it is maintained by national integration and externally, by deterring military strikes. In this regard, it could be said that North Korea's threat to conduct a third nuclear test is also a result of following complex set of factors.

First, it is to carry out the dying wish of Kim Jong-il. It is known that Kim Jung-II has left a long dying wish on October 8, 2011. In his dying wish, Kim Jong-II emphasized that regarding the nuclear issue, "Development and possession of nuclear weapons, long-range missiles, and chemical and biological weapons is the solution to maintaining peace on the Korean Peninsula." In North Korea, the legitimacy of a successive leader is given by the nomination of the previous leader. Under such political culture, a new leader has to follow the policies of the previous leader. If the precedents are not followed, the legitimacy of the new leader is likely to weaken or dissipate. Kim Jong-un is no exception and will need to carry on the policies of his father, Kim Jong-il, and fulfill his dying wish. Further, unless the Cold War structure remaining on the Korean Peninsula is dismantled, Kim Jong-un is likely to retain policy of 'path dependency.' This is because changing previous path when no path changing factors such as war or revolution occur could result in unanticipated disasters. Although dictators realize that there might be a better offer if they choose to change their path, they prefer to maintain status quo in fear of an unexpected crisis or threat.

Second, it is a result of the need to show off its military strength in its confrontation with the U.S. and the South Korea. North Korea has a tendency to assume worst-case scenarios. For instance, regarding its security environment, North Korea has a 'partisan-like' perception and assumes that, being surrounded by the great powers and South Korea, it can only survive if it breaks through the siege. Likewise, the North Korean leadership assumes that all it needs in order to survive is military, national unity, and great military strategists. Factors such as strategic wisdom and bravery to break through all difficulties are required in order to qualify as a great leader, or a successor of the great leader. Kim Jong-un is going through a learning process and has the burden of proving his qualification as the next great leader. In particular, he is afraid that he might lose his title as the great leader and be regarded as a 'chicken' if he loses in North Korea's chicken game with the U.S.

Third, it is the result of the need to enhance North Korea's nuclear capability. North Korea seems to have acquired the technology that uses plutonium to fuel its nuclear bomb through the first and second nuclear test. North Korea became a de-facto nuclear power as a result of its first two nuclear tests. After the death of Kim Jong-il, North Korea amended its constitutional preamble to claim nuclear power status during the fifth session of the twelfth meeting of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), held on April 13, 2012. After the amendment, North Korea succeeded in launching an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in December 12, 2012 that shows off its possession of devices that could transport nuclear devices. In contrast to its previous position, the NDC announced on January 24, 2013 that the target of its satellite and ICBM is the U.S. The main issue here is whether or not North Korea is trying to miniaturize the nuclear device so that it is small enough to be mounted on a long-range missile. To this

date, there is no clear answer. Thus, for North Korea, there was a need to test its efforts to miniaturize the weight of the nuclear device to less than one ton. In such case, it is predicted that North Korea may try to launch a ballistic missile with multiple nuclear warheads.

Fourth, North Korea is pursuing a nuclear test to enhance the self-esteem of the North Korean people and national integration. With the diplomatic isolation and economic hardship, North Koreans have low morale and are in a constant state of apprehension. Moreover, the supreme leader Kim Jong-un is young and has hardly any leadership experience. Therefore, something that can enhance the self-esteem of North Koreans and alleviate the in survival is needed. The best solution would be to enhance the living condition of North Koreans through economic reform and opening. However, in reality, this is a difficult policy to choose. As an alternative, North Korea can only strive to enhance self-esteem of the North Korean people as well as cultivate national integration by launching missiles and possessing nuclear weapons. If North Korea can succeed in miniaturizing the nuclear device, in addition to launching ICBMs and possessing nuclear weapons, the North Koreans' allegiance towards the state and the regime will increase, and the pains of hunger will be forgotten, at least for a while. On the other hand, North Korea is already encouraging patriotism and a 'holy war' by emphasizing 'sun-gun' (military first policy in North Korea) through its media outlets such as Rodong Sinmun and Pyongyang Broadcast since the UNSC sanctions on January 26, 2013. Also, the regime is trying to enhance national integration by encouraging the North Korean youth to voluntarily enlist in the military. North Korea is placing its blames for the economic hardship on external factors by emphasizing that it has no choice but to give up trying to overcome the hardship with the sanctions against North Korea imposed by external actors. In short, the success of rocket launch and is used as a tool to enhance the self-esteem of the North Korean people and the external sanction is used to enhance national integration.

Lastly, the need to forge negotiations towards normalization of relations with the U.S. is another underlying external factor of North Korea's nuclear test. North Korea has long perceived the U.S. as the number one threat to its regime survival. In other words, U.S. is perceived as its main enemy. Therefore, North Korea has long sought a peace treaty to replace the armistice agreement through U.S.-North Korea bilateral negotiations. In this regard, North Korea judged that it needs to develop nuclear weapons, the primary concern of the U.S., in order to bring the U.S. to the negotiation table. However, in reality, the U.S. is not moving along the intentions of the North. Rather, the U.S. is tightening its sanctions against North Korea through the means of UN Security Council. North Korea believes that it cannot give up its nuclear capabilities in order to not capitulate to the U.S. Based on its past experiences, the North Korean leadership has a 'path dependent' mentality and thinks that only the so-called 'brinkmanship' will work. During their lifetime, both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il emphasized that only a hard-line policy will bring the U.S. to the negotiating table.

Based on the above reasons, North Korea will continue to conduct nuclear tests to possess high-level nuclear device unless regime security is ensured by the U.S. and other states. This means that South Korea alone cannot prevent a third nuclear test by North Korea as South Korea, alone, cannot ensure the security of the North Korean regime. This is why South Korea needs to coordinate its foreign policy with

the U.S. and other neighboring states in the region. Sanctions and dialogues can both be included as a part of the international cooperation. © KINU 2013

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely that of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).