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Yes, North Korea is a nuclear power

By Donald Kirk
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WASHINGTON - The United States will have to stop refusing to "recognize" North Korea as a nuclear power after the North's second underground nuclear test on Monday appeared to have caught it entirely by surprise.

Although the test was widely anticipated, it came much faster than expected by American as well as South Korean officials. Nor does a report that North Korea notified the US secretly in advance of the test remove the sense of shock at the speed with which the North carried out the explosion.

Russia has confirmed the underground test near Kilju in the north of the country as about equal in power to the atom bomb dropped by the US on the Japanese city of Nagasaki in 1945 at the end of World War II.

"[North Korea] successfully conducted one more underground nuclear test on May 25 as part of the measures to bolster up its nuclear deterrent for self-defense in every way," its official KCNA news agency said.

North Korea may have also launched a short-range missile soon after the nuclear test. The North fired a missile with a range of 130 kilometers, South Korea's Yonhap News reported, citing an unidentified diplomatic source.

South Korean military experts had been saying almost since North Korea launched a long-range Taepodong-2 missile on a test flight over the Pacific on April 5 that North Korea could conduct a nuclear test in two to six months. Some analysts gave it another year.

The only advance notice South Korea could claim was a brief word from the Defense Ministry reporting the magnitude of a blast that had occurred in northeastern North Korea around the same place where the North conducted its first underground nuclear test on October 9, 2006. The

ministry said the North Korean test was of a magnitude of 4.5 - actually two tenths of a percent above its real magnitude but more than one third again as big as the first test.

North Korea had said a week earlier that it would conduct the test to "bolster its defense" against the US, but the secrecy and speed with which the North made good on its threat raised serious questions about the capability of allied intelligence.

While analysts were wondering how much credibility to give to the Defense Ministry statement, Pyongyang's Korean Central News agency removed all doubt by saying that "our scientists and technicians say our republic has successfully conducted another underground nuclear test on May 25".

The question was how did North Korea get away with all the preparations for the test with no one noticing by satellite observation or intelligence reports from operatives, perhaps [defectors](#), on the ground. A corollary question was what kind of timetable is driving North Korea's ailing leader [Kim Jong-il](#) - and what are the reasons why the North wants to risk upsetting so many countries.

One immediate answer is that North Korea sees the test as forcing the US into bilateral dialogue - and recognition of North Korea as a full-fledged nuclear power. "The second nuclear test is purposeful maximum pressure to the [government](#) of President [Barack] [Obama](#)," said Paik Hak-soon, head of North Korean research at the Sejong Institute in Seoul. "The aim is to force him to make a critical choice - to understand the political character of the problem."

If Obama "does not take this seriously enough", said Paik, "North Korea will choose to remain a nuclear power."

So doing, North Korea's nuclear test raises fears of a nuclear arms race in northeast Asia. Analysts believe Japan may finally decide it is time to produce nuclear weapons - an easy step from the nuclear power plants Japan already has.

Paik warned of "the likelihood that Japan will choose to go nuclear" in "an arms race even though North Korea will eventually be the loser because it doesn't have the resources to compete with Japan".

Perhaps most disturbing, the threat of a nuclear Japan poses an immediate threat to China - which already has nuclear warheads and would prefer to remain Asia's only nuclear power.

Then too, analysts believe Taiwan also may want to develop nuclear warheads - another kind of threat to China, which sees Taiwan as a breakaway island province over which it hopes someday to gain control.

North Korea appears to have defied China by conducting the test - possibly without notifying Beijing.

"They didn't give any hint about it," said Ha Tae-keung, president of Open Radio for North

Korea, which beams two hours of news and views from Seoul into North Korea every day and also has informants inside the North.

Ha never had any doubt, however, that North Korea would maintain its nuclear program even while joining in six-party talks until last December. These talks, involving the two Koreas, the US, Russia, China and Japan are aimed at curtailing North Korea's nuclear program.

"They always keep the dream of becoming a nuclear power," he said. "The six-party talks are only a means for them to make money."

North Korea, in the run-up to the latest nuclear test, has said it would "never" return to six-party talks. The North's response turned decisively more confrontational after the United Nations Security Council agreed on a statement of condemnation after launch of the long-range Taepodong-2 missile on April 5.

The missile is especially worrisome since analysts assume North Korea is developing the technology for a nuclear device small enough to serve as a warhead that could conceivably reach the Hawaiian Islands or Alaska - or even the US West Coast.

The test is also seen as reflecting a power struggle inside North Korea - as North Korea's ailing leader Kim Jong-il shows his generals he's still in charge. Kim wants to make way for his third and youngest son - still in his 20s - to succeed him. Some analysts believe the internal power struggle for succession to Kim Jong-il was the overwhelming factor behind the speed with which the test was conducted.

"The internal situation is most important," said Ha. "There is some struggle inside regarding the inheritance issue. Kim Jong-il feels his health is not good. He is in a hurry to give power to his son [Jong-un]."

It's clear that Kim Jong-il hopes the emergence of North Korea as a serious nuclear power will not only force the US and others to recognize it as such but will draw Washington into bilateral dialogue.

Toward that end, said Ha, Kim Jong-il "wants to be able to pass on a new relationship with the United States to his son, and that relationship is being recognized as a nuclear power."

Choi Jin-wook , senior North Korean analyst at the Korea Institute of Unification Studies, said the test proved what he and others had long assumed about North Korea's determination to remain a member of the global "nuclear club".

"I don't think North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons," said Choi. "They only joined the six-party talks under pressure." This included pressure to sign agreements for disablement and dismantlement of all nuclear activities in return for a vast infusion of billions of dollars in aid.

Choi sees the test as a reflection that "North Korea is in a desperate situation and wants to do something" to attract the attention of the US. The object, he said, is to bring the US into dialogue

- and then negotiate for elimination of the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council after the first North Korean nuclear test.

"They want a big dramatic switch in US policy," said Choi. "They believe it can happen." This even if the UN Security Council winds up passing a much stronger resolution than it did after the first nuclear test. "They are gambling," he said, "but the chances are very slim it will work."

In the meantime, Choi shares the widespread view in South Korea that the North will stage attacks or incidents intended to show the weakness of the South.

One logical battle ground is the Yellow Sea, the scene of bloody battles between North and South Korean vessels in June 1999 and June 2002. With June the height of the crabbing season, South Korean defense officials are braced for attacks next month. They have frequently vowed to defend the Northern Limit Line in the Yellow Sea - the mark on maps below which North Korean vessels are banned.