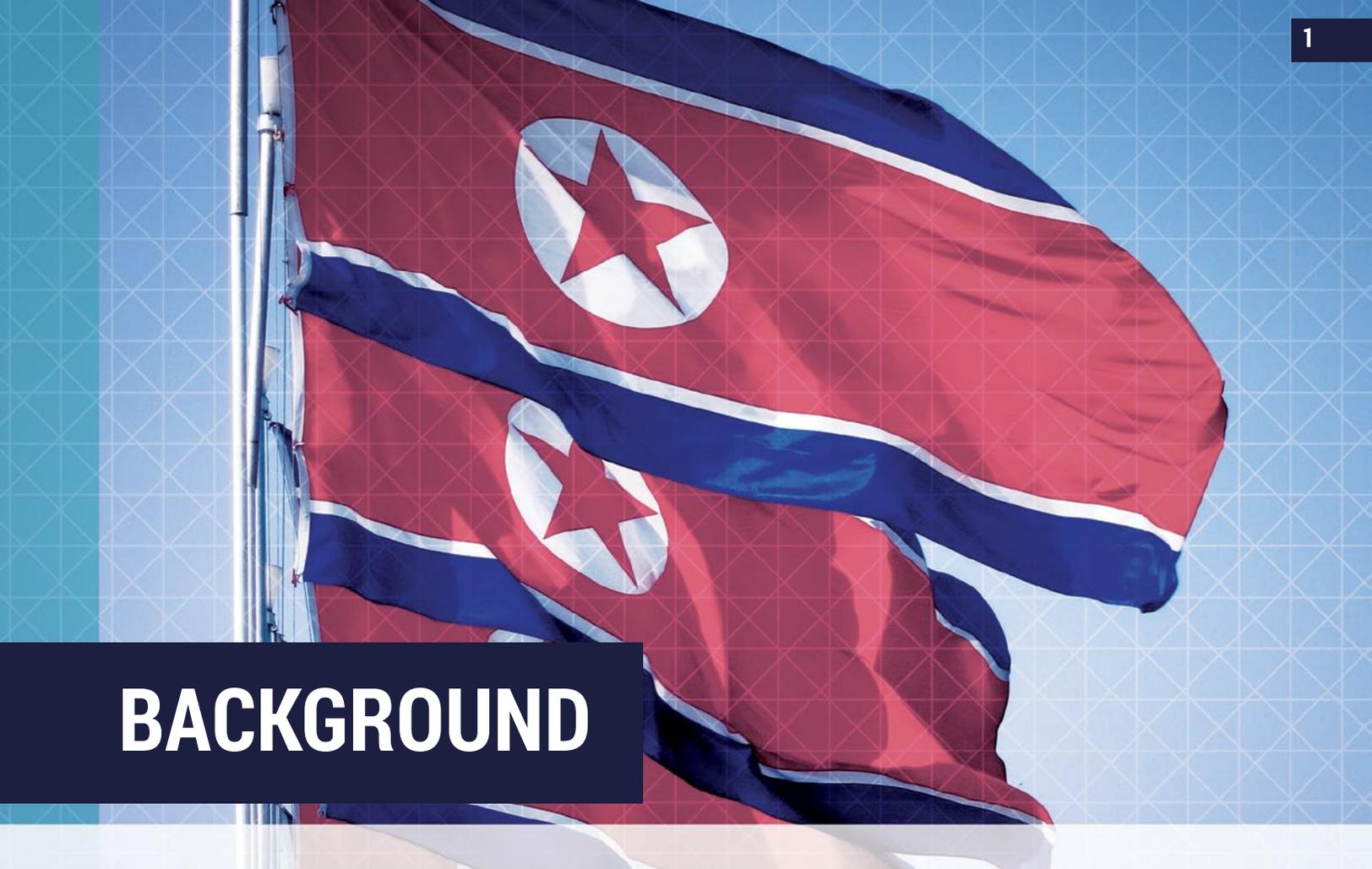




CHINA'S STRATEGIC CALCULUS IN NORTH KOREA

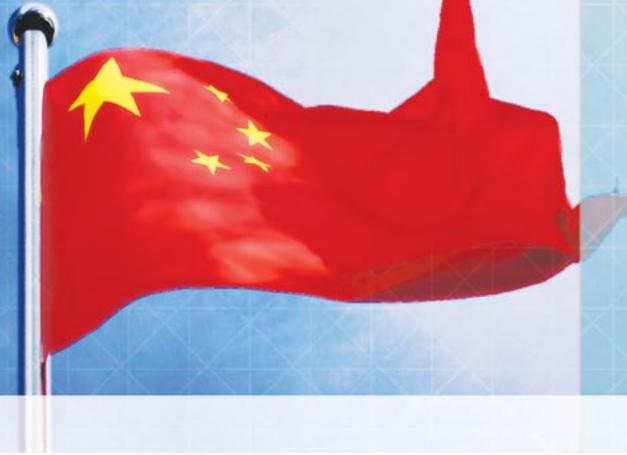
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BACKGROUND

On Wednesday, January 6, 2015, North Korea conducted its fourth-ever [nuclear weapons test](#) – the second since Kim Jong-Un took power. The underground detonation of what is estimated to have been a [10 kiloton nuclear weapon](#) – smaller than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – was met with widespread [international criticism](#). The U.N. Security Council has also said it [“strongly condemns”](#) the weapons test and pledged [new punitive sanctions](#) against Pyongyang.



CHINA'S RESPONSE SO FAR

As after North Korea's nuclear weapons tests in [2006](#), [2009](#) and [2013](#), China has joined the chorus of international condemnation. [Echoing language used in response to previous tests](#), the Foreign Ministry issued a written statement expressing "[resolute opposition](#)" and calling on Pyongyang to "honor its denuclearization pledges." Moreover, China looks set to join the other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council to back an additional resolution against North Korea.

CHINA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN A DENUCLEARIZED NORTH KOREA

The direct threat to China from the possible aggressive use of North Korea's nuclear weapons is in practice non-existent. Notwithstanding a recent [deterioration in bilateral ties](#), China and North Korea have a long and ongoing history of solidarity and support, including decisive Chinese military assistance to North Korea during the Korean War and crucial [aid and economic support](#) – even in recent years. Although North Korea is unlikely to ever threaten China, the country's nuclear weapons program is nevertheless a grave indirect diplomatic and strategic liability for Beijing.

Diplomatically, the North Korean nuclear weapons program risks [straining ties](#) between Beijing and Washington, Seoul, Tokyo and other key powers. With China as one of North Korea's few friends, there is widespread disappointment in the international community that Beijing does not do more to persuade Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons program. Additional North Korean nuclear weapons tests deepen this diplomatic isolation on the part of China. By highlighting the impotence of Beijing's opposition to the North Korean nuclear weapons program, such tests are also a [diplomatic embarrassment for China](#).

Strategically, the costs of the North Korean nuclear weapons program for China are even higher. By provoking instability in East Asia, North Korean nuclear tests risk triggering two trends that China would consider strategically disastrous:

1. First, the threat of the nuclear weapons program understandably drives South Korea and Japan to [call for greater U.S. military presence in North Asia](#) as an insurance policy against potential North Korean aggression. With China intensely suspicious of the projection of U.S. military power in its neighborhood and supportive of [less U.S. involvement in Asia's security](#), the North Korean nuclear program makes more likely precisely the outcome that China wants to avoid.

2. Second, China is deeply concerned about the apparent threat posed by so-called [“Japanese remilitarization.”](#) Given the history of enmity between Japan and North Korea, Pyongyang’s nuclear program equally increases the likelihood that Japan will pursue precisely the type of more muscular defence policy that China is so fearful of.

CHINA’S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN AN ONGOING NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR WEAPONS PROGRAM

Rather than a nuclearized Korean Peninsula, the worst-case scenario for China would be the [collapse or removal of the North Korean regime](#). In such an event, China would have on its border a politically and socially unstable and highly militarized nation of roughly 25 million. Even worse, in the event of the absorption of North Korean territory into a reunified Korea, China would face the prospect of bordering a U.S.-aligned nation in which tens of thousands of U.S. troops are stationed. Both of these scenarios would be seen by Beijing as strategic disasters.

With the North Korean nuclear weapons program imposing exceptionally high costs on any U.S.-supported South Korean attempt at regime change, it provides the Kim dynasty with a valuable deterrence that arguably safeguards the regime’s survival. Although Beijing would on balance prefer that Pyongyang did not conduct destabilizing nuclear weapons tests, China may nevertheless have a limited strategic interest in a nuclear-armed North Korea. To the extent that the weapons program helps safeguard the status quo in North Korea and prevents political, social and strategic instability on China’s doorstep, it may be in part a strategic benefit to China.

HOW WILL CHINA RESPOND?

Even if Beijing has strategic interests in the survival of the North Korean regime, it has few if any strategic interests in destabilizing nuclear weapons tests. Consequently, like other influential great and middle powers, China is likely to continue to publicly admonish North Korea. Having supported U.N. Security Council resolutions against the North Korean regime in the wake of previous nuclear weapons tests, China is also likely to stand in lockstep with its fellow U.N. Security Council members as they move to impose fresh sanctions. China is equally likely to continue to express its grave concerns and objections to the North Korean government – including to its ambassador via [face-to-face meetings](#).

However, despite unambiguous calls from U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry for Beijing to abandon its [“business as usual”](#) approach to Pyongyang, the international community should not expect China to significantly toughen its stance on North Korea. The long history of solidarity between the Chinese Communist Party and the Workers’ Party of Korea – combined with China’s strategic interests in the stability and survival of the North Korean regime – count strongly against abandoning Beijing’s comparatively supportive bilateral relationship with Pyongyang. Moreover, even if China was to harden its stance on North Korea, the international community should not simply expect the regime to abandon its nuclear weapons program. North Korea might be the junior partner in the historically close relationship, yet it shows little inclination to defer to its senior. Recent episodes, such as the [execution in a purge of China’s main conduit within the North Korean government](#), seem to demonstrate Beijing’s limited leverage over Pyongyang.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



THE UNITED STATES

The United States should continue to reassure regional allies and partners and emphasise that it will not tolerate any North Korean aggression. A symbolic show of U.S. military might (e.g., conducting sorties of nuclear-capable B-2 stealth bombers over South Korea) would simultaneously calm nerves in Seoul and Tokyo, and remind Pyongyang of the real risks of any aggression.

Although results have thus far been limited, Washington should continue to encourage stronger efforts from Beijing to rein in Pyongyang. Beijing's diplomacy has been rapidly maturing under President Xi Jinping. China is taking on growing responsibility for international peace and security and the management of the global economy. The Chinese pledge of an [additional 8,000 troops for U.N. peacekeeping missions](#), ongoing participation in [multilateral anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden](#), the range of [Belt and Road investments across Eurasia and Africa](#), and the establishment of global financial institutions like the [Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank](#) and the [BRICS Development Bank](#) are symptomatic of China's willingness to assume more of the burdens for safeguarding global peace, security and prosperity. Given this apparent Chinese willingness to assume greater international responsibility, the time may be ripe to push China to adopt a more proactive approach to coaxing North Korea down the path towards peaceful denuclearization.



SOUTH KOREA

Owing to South Korea's proximity to North Korea and the ongoing history of conflict between the two nations, Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program poses the greatest threat to Seoul. Reflecting this heightened threat level, South Korean lawmakers have suggested that their country should [develop its own nuclear weapons program](#) as a direct deterrence against a North Korean nuclear strike. Instead of policy responses of this kind, which risk provoking further nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and raising fears in China, South Korea should leverage [President Park Geun-hye's exceptionally warm relationship with President Xi](#) to persuade China to distance itself from North Korea and adopt a more pro-South Korean position vis-à-vis the weapons program.

Meanwhile, South Korea should continue to rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella and the presence of U.S. troops on its soil for protection. Seoul should carefully coordinate any additional responses with key powers – most notably Beijing, Tokyo, Washington, Moscow, London and Paris – to ensure that its policy choices complement the international effort to deescalate tensions and ultimately denuclearize North Korea.



JAPAN

Similarly, Japan should not pursue its own nuclear weapons program in response to the North Korean threat, and should instead continue to rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Given deep-seated concerns in China about the apparent threat of "Japanese remilitarization," Japan should be equally careful to avoid any responses to the weapons test that could raise fears in China and increase strategic tension in North Asia more broadly. Like South Korea, Japan should carefully coordinate any additional responses with China, the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom and France to minimize the risks of escalation and maximize the chances of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.



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