



February 12, 2013

ISIS Statement on North Korean Nuclear Test

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On Tuesday, February 12 at 2:57 GMT/UTC, North Korea claims that it tested its third nuclear device. The official KCNA news agency [stated](#): “It was confirmed that the nuclear test, that was carried out at a high level in a safe and perfect manner using a miniaturized and lighter nuclear device with greater explosive force than previously, did not pose any negative impact on the surrounding ecological environment.” The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization [recorded](#) a seismic event 5.0 in magnitude and the U.S. Geological Survey [recorded](#) a shallow earthquake of 5.1 in magnitude. The test occurred at Punggye-ri, site of its 2006 and 2009 tests, which recorded magnitudes of 4.1 and 4.52, respectively. ISIS [assessed](#) on February 3 that North Korea was likely preparing for a third nuclear test based on preparations at the site visible in overhead satellite imagery.

While much information is still unknown about the nature of North Korea’s nuclear test, several key points should be made:

North Korea’s stated miniaturization capability, if true, should not be a surprise. It should not come as a surprise to the international community that North Korea may now have the capability to explode a miniaturized nuclear device. ISIS (and key members of the U.S. intelligence community) have assessed for some time that North Korea likely has the capability to miniaturize a nuclear weapon for its 800 mile range Nodong missile. Although more information is needed to make a sound assessment, this test could, as North Korea has stated, demonstrate this capability. ISIS has also assessed that North Korea still lacks the ability to deploy a warhead on an ICBM, although it shows progress at this effort. North Korea would need to conduct missile flight tests with a re-entry vehicle and mock warhead, increase the explosive yield of the warhead, possibly requiring its further miniaturization, and improve the operational reliability of the warhead and missile.

North Korea does not appear to have detonated a more sophisticated nuclear device, such as a thermonuclear device. Before the test, concern was expressed by some analysts that North Korea could test a more advanced nuclear weapon. The data from this test so far indicate that this is not the case. One important question is whether the nuclear test used only plutonium or involved highly enriched uranium either alone or in combination with plutonium.

It is time to accelerate efforts to stop North Korea's foreign procurements for its nuclear programs and increase efforts to halt its proliferation financing efforts. North Korea's efforts to procure nuclear and dual-use goods and raw materials for its nuclear programs must be addressed by targeted countries through improved United Nations sanctions resolutions and domestic trade control laws and the enforcement of those measures. North Korea continues to improve its nuclear programs through its access to such goods and materials, particularly through trading companies and citizens located in neighboring China.

The United Nations Security Council should incrementally increase proliferation financing sanctions on North Korea as a result of this test.

The international response to the test should be measured and should circle back to engagement. Despite the likely demonstration of an improved North Korean nuclear capability, the international response to the test should be carefully constructed. Ironically, North Korea's previous nuclear tests, despite being followed by sanctions and international condemnation, eventually paved the way for engagement. North Korea's historical use of brinkmanship to gain concessions is well documented. A new formulation is necessary to break this cycle of provocation/engagement that has too often ended with a more advanced North Korean nuclear weapons program. A strategy of engagement that does not reward the test but seeks to moderate the regime's behavior through sustained dialogue may be most productive going forward. A key element is for the United States to deepen cooperation with China and resist seeking renewed bilateral U.S./North Korean dialogue. There are signs that China is listening more to U.S. concerns about North Korea's nuclear provocations. A goal must be the United States developing common positions with China, along with South Korea and Japan, making it harder for North Korea to play China against the United States.

A response must not provoke even worse behavior. Faced with a draconian response to this third nuclear test, it is possible that North Korea could retaliate by causing minor military skirmishes with its neighbors, conducting another test, or even deploying nuclear-tipped Nodong missiles. Remaining cognizant of the need to prevent and mitigate worse behavior by North Korea should be the goal of any international or regional response. This again argues for seeking solidarity among China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States.