

North Korea's Testing Decade

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A decade has passed since North Korea first tested a nuclear weapon, on October 9, 2006. It conducted its fifth nuclear test last September, and there are rumors that a sixth will come within weeks or months. The United States has tried to both negotiate with and sanction North Korea while strengthening deterrence with South Korea and conducting shows of force to underscore the U.S. commitment to South Korean defense, but these measures have not halted, much less reversed, North Korea's nuclear program.



A rally celebrating the success of a recent nuclear test is held in Kim Il-sung square in this undated photo released by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency in Pyongyang September 13, 2016. (Photo: KCNA via Reuters)

Instead, following the leadership transition from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un, North Korea has elevated its nuclear program to a primary strategic commitment, reigniting debates among U.S. experts over whether the U.S. goal of “[complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization](#)” is feasible. North Korea has conducted four tests during the Obama administration, and the president reiterated after the latest one that the United States “[does not, and never will, accept North Korea as a nuclear state.](#)” Yet the longer that North Korea is able to expand its nuclear delivery capability, the more empty U.S. condemnations may become and the closer North Korea will edge toward winning de facto acceptance of its nuclear status.

North Korea is believed to have twelve to twenty nuclear bombs and recently successfully tested intermediate-range ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Its latest nuclear test was estimated to yield ten to fifteen kilotons, and U.S. and South Korean intelligence officials believe that the country now has the capability to miniaturize warheads to fit them on Nodong class medium-range missiles.

Amid these developments, a review of North Korean and U.S. official statements surrounding each of North Korea's nuclear tests over the past decade is useful for understanding the evolution of North Korea's threat.

North Korea's Initial Intentions

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At least eighteen months prior to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) first nuclear test, in October 2006, its foreign ministry signaled Pyongyang's intentions to carry one out. On February 10, 2005, the ministry announced that North Korea was compelled to “[bolster its nuclear weapons arsenal](#) in order to protect the ideology, system, freedom, and democracy chosen by the people.” The following month, the DPRK declared that the [Six Party Talks](#) on its denuclearization (negotiations between the United States, China, Japan, Russia, North and South Korea) should be transformed into mutual disarmament talks. It had interpreted the Bush administration's nuclear posture review as implying that Pyongyang could become a target of U.S. nuclear weapons. It said that the United States should rescind what it called a policy aimed at toppling the DPRK through nuclear war as a prerequisite of its own denuclearization.

Although a Six Party Talks joint statement from September 2005 envisioned the DPRK denuclearizing in return for steps toward U.S.-DPRK and DPRK-Japan diplomatic normalization, economic assistance, and the establishment of a permanent peace regime, subsequent talks were stalemated after the U.S. Treasury designated Banco Delta Asia (BDA) a “[primary money laundering concern](#)” and froze more than \$25 million in North Korean funds.

North Korea presented its decision to conduct the test in 2006 as a response to U.S. efforts to “[isolate and stifle](#)” the regime. At the time [it stated](#) a no-first-use nuclear posture, asserted that it would prevent the transfer nuclear weapons and technology, and pledged to “do its utmost to realize the denuclearization of the peninsula and give impetus to the worldwide nuclear disarmament and the

ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons.” The foreign ministry reaffirmed its willingness to return to negotiations.

The Evolution of North Korea's Nuclear Statements

North Korea's statements following subsequent nuclear tests, in 2009, 2013, and 2016, have portrayed them as enhancing its self-defense capabilities and improving peninsular peace and stability. They have also included assurances of safety regarding potential nuclear fallout. After each test, North Korea has claimed dramatic increases in its capability of one or another facet of its nuclear program: ability to independently develop its own technology ([2006](#)), explosive power and technology ([2009](#)), miniaturization ([2013](#)), hydrogen bomb ([2016](#)), and standardization of a warhead, which essential to building a strategic nuclear force ([2016](#)).

At the DPRK's seventh Workers' Party Congress, in May 2016, Kim Jong-un put forward the idea that North Korea's policy emphasizing the country's nuclear development would be a “[permanent strategic line](#),” but also presented the country as a “[responsible nuclear power](#)” that would only use nuclear weapons as a retaliatory measure against a nuclear attack.

The DPRK statement accompanying its September 2016 test shows that North Korean strategic objectives had evolved from defensive deterrence to the capability to pursue nuclear retaliation.

How the United States Has Responded

President George W. Bush responded to North Korea's 2006 nuclear test by vowing to coordinate a [UN condemnation](#) of North Korea, warning of the dangers of North Korean nuclear proliferation, and reassuring U.S. allies in Asia that the United States would continue to meet its security commitments in the face of a growing nuclear threat. Bush also reiterated his administration's commitment to diplomacy, signaling a desire to return to the Six Party Talks.

The talks reconvened in Beijing in December of that year, and, in February 2007, its members reached an agreement on initial actions toward denuclearization. North Korea would declare its nuclear facilities in exchange for the United States easing sanctions and removing it from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism.

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Obama too has consistently said that North Korea's nuclear testing is unacceptable, repeated the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea, and characterized the nuclear testing as a self-prescription for isolation and, eventually, regime failure.

U.S. allies, including Japan and South Korea, have consistently sought assurances that the United States will honor its commitments to defend against North Korean nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, China has promoted a return to diplomatic negotiations. In response to North Korea's first nuclear test, Chinese State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan traveled to Pyongyang to facilitate North Korea's return to the negotiating table. These mediation efforts have foundered, however, since North Korea abandoned the Six Party Talks in 2008. In the process, the DPRK also discarded the "[action-for-action](#)" approach that had been embraced by the Six Party Talks, in which it would denuclearize in exchange for normalized diplomatic relations with the United States. Instead, North Korea insisted that the United States abandon its hostility toward its regime as a prerequisite for arms-control discussions. This has shut down prospects for renewed negotiations.

North Korea's Efforts to Shape U.S. Choices

North Korea's nuclear sprint in 2016 appears designed to gain survivability of its nuclear deterrent. It also seems to reinforce the country's intention to develop a direct-strike capability on the United States to overcome Pyongyang's vulnerabilities and reframe the U.S.-DPRK relationship as one between two nuclear powers. North Korea believes this sprint will enable it to:

- 1) reduce its remaining vulnerabilities from its currently limited nuclear deterrent vis-à-vis the United States by enhancing the credibility of its threats and the range of a potential strike;
- 2) exploit potential South Korean concerns that the United States might abandon its commitment to defend South Korea if it fears that North Korea could conduct a retaliatory nuclear strike on the United States; and
- 3) claim to domestic audiences that North Korea has achieved at least one part of its goal of being a "[strong and prosperous state](#)" by 2020.

North Korea has long seen U.S. and South Korean political transitions as opportunities to test the mettle of new leaderships as it pursues its strategic objective of winning acquiescence to its status as a nuclear state.

Kim Jong-un likely believes that he can survive as leader and North Korea will prosper if he can win U.S. acquiescence to a nuclear North Korea, and it is not surprising that he might see this course as a viable

pathway forward. After all, North Korea has successfully exploited divisions among the China, South Korea, and the United States for a decade now while steadily improving its nuclear capabilities.

Still, the United States has kept North Korea in the penalty box as an outlier state due to its pursuit of nuclear weapons. But if its goal of North Korea's denuclearization is indefinitely suspended, the nonproliferation norm embodied by the [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty](#) will undoubtedly be weakened. Absent China's willingness to cut off its economic lifeline to North Korea, North Korea will continue to survive as a parasite, living off of Chinese fears of its collapse or disappearance.