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North Korea's aggressive pursuit of nuclear weapons and delivery systems, culminating in the May 25 test, has destabilised the region and beyond, and provoked outrage in South Korea, Japan, the US and its allies. The scene seems set for the imposition of comprehensive economic sanctions by the UN Security Council, says BHASKAR BALAKRISHNAN.

On May 25, North Korea announced and carried out an underground nuclear test. The yield, estimated at 2-5 kilotons, was some five times larger than the earlier partially successful nuclear explosion carried out in October 2006. The latest test was preceded by declarations from the North Korean authorities that they would be forced to test a device to ensure their security against hostile acts by the US and its allies. North Korea also carried out a series of test firings of short-range missiles and one unsuccessful intermediate range launcher.

This aggressive pursuit of nuclear weapons and delivery systems has destabilised the region and beyond, and provoked outrage in South Korea, Japan, the US and its allies. North Korea, with a large standing army of 1.2 million and artillery capable of destroying South Korean cities, has sufficient conventional deterrence to ensure its security. The stationing of US nuclear weapons in South Korea and Japan could be a factor behind North Korea's nuclear posture. Attempts to develop a nuclear option at enormous cost aimed at the US seem irrational and suicidal. Moreover if its missiles have a high Circular Error Probability (CEP) they would not be effective against military targets.

The UN Security Council issued a strong non-binding statement, and is considering a resolution that is likely to be more strongly worded than Resolution 1718. The options available are limited to some form of tighter sanctions, as well as threats to stop and search vessels going to and from North Korean ports. This is to prevent transfers of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and related material, as part of the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), outside the UN framework, and which has not secured full international support.

North Korea has reacted to these steps and declared itself free from the armistice agreement of July 1953, which ended the Korean War. It has also said that any attempt to stop and search North Korean ships in international waters would be sufficient cause for a war. This has further raised tensions in the region, and caused mobilisation of armed forces.

Controversial record

North Korea's nuclear programme is a long record of controversy. It has large, high quality uranium reserves (4 million tonnes, 0.8 per cent uranium content) which, logically, could be the motive for a nuclear power programme. During 1980-85 North Korea constructed a graphite moderated gas-cooled Magnox type reactor of 5 MWe capacity at the Yongbyon nuclear research centre, which could use readily available natural uranium and does not need heavy water.

This reactor is very well suited for producing fissile plutonium (high Pu-239/Pu-240 ratio) under certain conditions of low burn-up. Similar reactors were used by the UK to feed its nuclear weapons programme and their drawings were declassified.

With this type of reactor, the used fuel rods cannot be kept in storage for too long under water, due to corrosion of the cladding; therefore, reprocessing must be done in time.

The Yongbyon research centre also has a fuel fabrication plant, a storage facility for spent fuel rods, and a plutonium reprocessing facility. Thus, all the elements for an autonomous fuel cycle and

production of fissile plutonium are available to North Korea.

The reactor was apparently operated far below its full power capacity, a signal of plutonium production.

Fuel rods are suspected to have been removed during shutdowns in 1989 and 1994. Experts estimate that by reprocessing them North Korea may have accumulated some 45 kg of fissile plutonium, suitable for making several nuclear devices. The regime has also made efforts at developing other nuclear facilities, such as bigger reactors, and uranium enrichment. There are signs of tests of explosives for producing the kind of implosions required for nuclear weapons.

Compliance disputes

Under international pressure, North Korea acceded to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985, but the safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was concluded only in 1992. Disputes arose over compliance with IAEA safeguards, and suspicions of clandestine fuel rod removals and weapons development activities, and efforts to implement a 1994 agreement with the US failed. North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003, the first country to do so.

Pakistan provided North Korea with materials and technology to produce highly enriched uranium (HEU) which can be used in nuclear weapons, in exchange for Nodong missile systems and technology. North Korea delivered the missiles during 1997-98, and Pakistan provided HEU materials and technologies as late as summer 2002. Dr A. Q. Khan is suspected to have transferred nuclear weapons technology, particularly centrifuges, during a series of visits to North Korea beginning in the early 1990s.

North Korea has a highly autocratic, opaque militaristic regime, and has remained disengaged with the outside world for decades. Only China and, to some extent, Russia seem to have any real influence with the regime. After the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, Kim Jong-Il, his son, who had been groomed as successor for 22 years, became the Great Leader.

Autocratic regime

Under his leadership, the country became even more autocratic and centralised. Unlike his father, Kim Jong-Il demands absolute obedience and agreement, and views any deviation from his thinking as a sign of disloyalty. Kim Jong-Il reportedly personally directs even minor details of state affairs, and is the focus of an intense personality cult.

His personal peccadilloes, such as western movies and a luxurious, self-indulgent lifestyle, add a bizarre dimension. The coincidence of Kim Jong-Il's leadership with the development of the nuclear and missile programmes is striking. Since late 2008, Kim Jong-Il has been ailing, reportedly after a stroke, and his public appearances have been rare. This sparked off speculation about his successor.

This time, there is no clear succession plan, and there are several contenders, none of whom have adequate experience to lead the country. The worst case scenario of a partially disabled leader and no clear chain of command seems to be now unfolding. The future of the regime could be imperilled by feuding amongst various factions. This sense of uncertainty and increased insecurity could be the driver of exaggerated and aggressive responses by North Korea to actions by its perceived enemies. Interestingly, North Korea has in the past consistently sought direct talks with the US and some form of non-aggression agreement with the US.

The scene seems set for the imposition of comprehensive economic sanctions by the UN Security Council, despite hesitation on the part of China and Russia. Clearly, North Korean actions have left these countries in an awkward situation. But sanctions can only be as tight as China and Russia allow them to be, given their land borders with North Korea. Stringent sanctions would increase the misery of the people of North Korea, and perhaps cause an outflow of refugees.

The Proliferation Security Initiative enables searching of vessels registered in countries which have agreed to be part of the PSI and prevent WMD transport. But this would not apply to North Korean

vessels. One way around would be to have a UNSC-imposed ban on North Korean vessels calling at foreign ports unless they subject themselves to inspections. The situation is delicate and the UNSC has few viable options.

The North Korean situation could have important consequences for the issue of Iran's nuclear programme and how the UNSC deals with it. It would also prompt a review of the non-nuclear postures of Japan and South Korea, and drive them to put in place the best anti-missile systems.

Reports that Pakistan is adding to its capacity to produce nuclear weapons is also disturbing. Over-reaction by the non-proliferation advocates is likely to bring more calls for adherence to the NPT and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Clearly, North Korea's rattling of the nuclear sabre has sent shock waves throughout the world.

(The author is a former Ambassador to Cuba and Greece. blfeedback@thehindu.co.in)

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