Test shows N. Korea's desire for nuclear status

The Associated Press

BEIJING, Feb. 12 (Kyodo) — North Korea's third nuclear test, carried out Tuesday, apparently reflects the country's intention to push the United States back into direct negotiations with it in an attempt to ensure security guarantees and recognition of the regime of leader Kim Jong Un from Washington, which Pyongyang calls its "sworn enemy."

With the test, which appears to have brought North Korea closer to the development of nuclear-armed ballistic missiles capable of striking the United States, the North is likely to prod the United States and other countries to recognize it as a full nuclear weapons state so Pyongyang could negotiate with Washington on an equal footing.

Domestically, Kim, who came to power after the death of his father and longtime ruler Kim Jong Il in December 2011, may use what North Korea says was an act to bolster deterrence against the United States as a means to consolidating his grip on power after a successful long-range rocket launch last December raised his standing.

The detonation, which came just before the birth anniversary Saturday of Kim Jong Il, dashed hopes the young leader might pursue a different path from his father, who was known for his "Songun" military-first politics.

As North Korea claimed the atomic test involved "a smaller and light A-bomb unlike the previous ones, yet with great explosive power," the country apparently needed a test or multiple tests to improve its nuclear weapons program.

However, the latest test in defiance of U.N. Security Council resolutions dealt another blow to longtime efforts by the United States, China, Japan and other regional powers to end North Korea's nuclear ambitions, underscoring Pyongyang's earlier statement that the six-party denuclearization talks "no longer exist."

By employing brinkmanship, North Korea too calculated risks, including even tighter sanctions by the United Nations and individual countries, further international isolation and strained ties with its main benefactor China, which opposes Pyongyang's nuclear weapons development.

But North Korea appears to have decided to take those risks to increase pressure on the United States to resume negotiations and to drop what Pyongyang says is Washington's "hostile policy" toward it.

Claiming the use of deterrent force is essential to shield it from U.S. nuclear weapons and more than 28,000 U.S. troops stationed in South Korea, North Korea has been calling for replacing the Korean War armistice with a peace treaty

addressing its security concerns.

Pyongyang and Washington are technically still at war as the 1950-1953 conflict ended only in a truce.

The United States has refused direct talks with North Korea until it abides by denuclearization commitments it made in the past.

The two sides have not held direct talks since North Korea's failed attempt to launch a long-range rocket in April last year caused the collapse of a food aid for nuclear freeze deal they struck in late February 2012.

If Tuesday's test helps North Korea make nuclear warheads small and light enough to be loaded onto missiles that could reach the United States, it would raise its profile in negotiations with Washington.

The Dec. 12, 2012 launch showed North Korea has the capacity to deliver a rocket that could travel more than 10,000 kilometers, potentially putting the U.S. West Coast in range, according to defense experts.

Analysts have warned North Korea's third nuclear test, which followed tests in 2006 and 2009, may challenge international efforts to curb nuclear proliferation, especially in the context of possible nuclear tie-ups between North Korea and Iran.

"Sharing Pyongyang's nuclear test experience with Tehran similarly to how it has shared missile technologies will greatly increase the Iranian nuclear threat," U.S. nuclear expert Siegfried Hecker wrote Feb. 4 in the online edition of Foreign Policy magazine.

"If Pyongyang were to involve Iran or share its testing experience, that would change the picture dramatically," said Hecker, a Stanford University professor who visited a uranium enrichment facility in North Korea in 2010. "Should Iran make the decision to build nuclear weapons, it is more likely to do so without necessarily testing its own device."

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