

How does North Korea's latest nuclear breakthrough affect U.S. options?

JOHN YANG: North Korea has again seized the world's attention with a new nuclear blast. The weekend test may move Pyongyang a quantum leap forward in its bid to become a nuclear power, capable of threatening the U.S. mainland. That, in turn, has set off a new diplomatic flurry.

Special correspondent Nick Schifrin reports.

NIKKI HALEY, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations: Enough is enough.

NICK SCHIFRIN: For the second time in a week, the Security Council today held an emergency session on North Korea. And U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley said North Korean leader Kim Jong-un had slapped the international community in the face.

NIKKI HALEY: His abusive use of missiles and his nuclear threats show that he is begging for war. War is never something the United States wants. We don't want it now. But our country's patience is not unlimited.

NICK SCHIFRIN: And for the second time in a week, South Korea today practiced an attack on North Korea. The South Korean military fired missiles it said could target North Korea's nuclear test sites.

Today, President Trump agreed to help South Korea increase the size of those missiles, sell South Korea more weapons, and South Korea said the U.S. would soon deploy a carrier strike group and long-range bombers. Those military moves provide the U.S. with options that Secretary of Defense James Mattis mentioned yesterday.

JAMES MATTIS, Secretary of Defense: Any threat to the United States or its territories, including Guam, or our allies will be met with a massive military response. We are not looking to the total annihilation of a country, namely North Korea. But, as I said, we have many options to do so.

NICK SCHIFRIN: But Chinese Ambassador to the U.N. Liu Jieyi said today pressure won't produce peace.

LIU JIEYI, U.N. Ambassador, China (through interpreter): The parties concerned must strengthen their sense of urgency, make joint efforts together to ease the situation, and restart the dialogue and talks and prevent further deterioration.

NICK SCHIFRIN: In the last few years, North Korea's missile and nuclear programs have slowly evolved. But this weekend's test is more than just another step.

JAMES ACTON, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace: I think this is a definitely significant leap in technology. A thermonuclear weapon is not just an evolutionary change.

NICK SCHIFRIN: James Acton is a physicist and co-director of Carnegie's Nuclear Policy Program. He says there's no verification yet of North Korea's claim it exploded a hydrogen, or thermonuclear, bomb, but it seems that way.

JAMES ACTON: It was a very large explosion, about 100 kilotons. That is certainly consistent with a hydrogen bomb. The day before the test, they released photos of Kim Jong-un standing next to a device that looked like a thermonuclear weapon. And we also know that they have been trying to develop the materials they would need to build a thermonuclear weapon.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Here's the difference. An atomic bomb splits a uranium or plutonium atom. That's fission. That split creates more splits, and a chain reaction that creates a nuclear blast. That's the starting point for a thermonuclear bomb.

The fission explosions create enough energy for hydrogen atoms to fuse together. That's fusion, and it makes a much more powerful bomb.

JAMES ACTON: A thermonuclear weapon can produce yields that are 10, 100, even 1,000 times bigger than a simple atomic weapon.

NICK SCHIFRIN: This was the size of the impact of the U.S. atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. And this is the size of the impact from this weekend's North Korean bomb.

JAMES ACTON: The Hiroshima test leveled the center of a city. It killed around

about a couple of hundred thousand people. This bomb is five times bigger. That kind of gives you some sense of the enormous explosive scale of the weapon that was detonated.

NICK SCHIFRIN: It's not clear if North Korea can miniaturize that kind of bomb, so it can be delivered by a ballistic missile. But James Acton says it's only a matter of time.

JAMES ACTON: If this wasn't a miniaturized thermonuclear weapon, unfortunately, I have little doubt that North Korea will be able to miniaturize it, will be able to do so in fairly short order, and then stick it on the nose cone of a ballistic missile.

NICK SCHIFRIN: A U.S. intelligence official told me today that it's too early to know exactly the bomb that North Korea detonated, but — quote — “We're highly confident that this was a test of an advanced nuclear device, and what we have seen so far is not inconsistent with North Korea's claims.”

So, for more on all this, we get two views.

Bob Gallucci had an extensive career in nuclear arms control, including as the chief U.S. negotiator with North Korea during the Clinton administration. He is a professor at Georgetown University and chair of the U.S. Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University. And Balbina Hwang served in the State Department during the George W. Bush administration. She is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University.

And welcome to you both. Thank you very much.

Bob, I will turn to you first.

Are we at a point where we only have two options, either going to war or somehow accepting what seems to be an inevitable march toward a North Korea with the ability to put a thermonuclear weapon on an ICBM?

ROBERT GALLUCCI, Georgetown University: No, we don't have only two options.

There is, I think, still a possibility. I think Secretary Mattis said there is always the possibility that negotiations might succeed. We might be able to roll back, even eliminate the North Korean threat. It is possible that we will decide, the

United States will decide to live with this, to live with deterrence, as we have with the Soviet Union, then Russia and China.

But at this point, there is an awful lot of language being used about how we are not going to tolerate this and not going to put up with it. If one wishes to do something about the capability, certainly there is a military option, and the secretary's spoken to that, but there's also a possibility of negotiations.

NICK SCHIFRIN: And, Balbina, do you think that, that there is the possibility of negotiations? There have been negotiations in the past, and we're at a point where North Korea seems to have at least a very large bomb, if not a thermonuclear weapon.

BALBINA HWANG, Georgetown University: Well, I don't think it's necessarily mutually exclusive, either one or the other.

I think it all depends on what we want to achieve with negotiations. And, frankly speaker, while we work on whether negotiations might work or not, to establish our goals, are we trying to completely eliminate all of North Korea's nuclear weapon programs and future ambitions? That's a different story than trying to contain or slow town or even freeze or dismantle its existing programs.

NICK SCHIFRIN: I will just pose, ask another question, a follow-up, though.

The U.S. has talked about denuclearizing — denuclearizing the peninsula for a long time, and that just doesn't seem like it's going to happen, though, right?

BALBINA HWANG: Well, it's certainly very difficult to, because, how do you negotiate with a party that, first of all, has refused to negotiate, because it won't put the nuclear weapons on the table? And, secondly, that seems to be the die-hard ambition of this regime.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Bob, can you negotiate with a regime that has a die-hard ambition?

ROBERT GALLUCCI: I recollect doing so a long time in another universe around 1994. We concluded a deal with North Korea that ended what we knew of as their nuclear weapons program.

It was based on plutonium as the fissile material to drive that weapons program.

And the facilities that would produce the plutonium and separate it were shut down, closed down for eight years while the deal was in place. And that was their nuclear weapons program.

Now, they, from our perspective at least, cheated on that deal by having secret arrangements with the Pakistanis to bring them another technology for another type of material.

But I would submit to you at this point that the negotiation produced an outcome in which North Korea was without nuclear weapons, when they could have been with nuclear weapons. And the estimate from the intelligence community of the early '90s was the North could enter the 21st century with roughly 100 nuclear weapons if that deal hadn't been concluded.

OK, it ultimately fell apart. Agreed. The question is now, can you have another deal? Can you have a deal that sticks? Can we get the transparency we need?

I actually may disagree with my colleague a bit here about whether it is possible to get a deal that denuclearizes the peninsula. I don't think you can get it in one step. I think you would have a freeze, you would have a cap.

But I think if we don't have as a declared objective to have a denuclearized Korean Peninsula, then we really undercut the status of our ally South Korea.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Well — OK, sorry. Balbina, you go.

BALBINA HWANG: Well, I completely agree with that.

And I do think that we should never take off denuclearization as the goal. We should remember that it's actually the two Koreas in 1991 that signed an agreement that said that they both wanted to denuclearize.

So, that principle was in place and that was actually the basis of both what you worked on and then also the six-party talks.

NICK SCHIFRIN: But, Bob, very quickly, how can you negotiate today with that same notion of what you brought back in the '90s, when North Korea has seemingly a thermonuclear weapon?

ROBERT GALLUCCI: This is not beyond the minds of men and women to figure

out.

If the North will come to the table, if the United States will come to the table without preconditions and begin a discussion, then there are ways to dismantle, take apart nuclear weapons programs.

We did that in the case of Iraq some time ago. We had an inspection system and we took apart a pretty sophisticated nuclear weapons program. We certainly can do it in the case of North Korea, if the North Koreans are persuaded that they can achieve their security objectives, achieve their security objectives without nuclear weapons.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Very quickly, I want to ask a question to Balbina about alliances.

I want to read a tweet from President Trump. He uses the word appeasement. He wrote: "South Korea is finding, as I have told them, that their talk of appeasement with North Korea will not work. They only understand one thing."

Sorry about that. We put the wrong tweet up there. "They only understand one thing."

Is he alienating U.S. allies, Balbina?

BALBINA HWANG: Well, what is really fascinating is that there's nothing that focuses the minds of allies more than when threats seem to become imminent.

So, it's very interesting to watch what South Korea is doing and what President Moon is doing. He's defying expectations, actually. I'm rather surprised by how he's reacting to all of this. And, in fact, President Moon is showing that he really wants to strengthen the alliance.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Bob, quickly, is President Trump alienating a U.S. ally?

ROBERT GALLUCCI: It's hard to put clearly the amount of destructive impact, character that the president has accomplished with just the simple characterization of negotiations as appeasement.

He should want to preserve that option. His secretary of defense wants to preserve that option. It may not work. That may not be the solution to this

problem, but we don't want to dismiss it, and we don't want to politicize it with a word like appeasement.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Bob Gallucci, Ballina — sorry — Balbina Hwang, thank you very much.

BALBINA HWANG: Thank you.

NICK SCHIFRIN: John.

JOHN YANG: Thanks, Nick.

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