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Newslines Weapons and warfare

North Korean nuclear fallout

Experts outline possible responses to test; U.S. forces in S. Korea maintain readiness

By Kelly Kennedy
STAFF WRITER

As experts struggle to determine whether North Korea tested a nuclear weapon Oct. 9, Army officials say it's business as usual in South Korea.

For soldiers there, the constant threat of military action, mixed with skirmishes such as the seven Scud missiles North Korea launched in July, means stress for their families. But it doesn't necessarily mean troops will ramp up for the latest threat to make headlines in the U.S.

"Each autumn, Kim [Jong] II does something to worry the world with his political power," said Sgt. Maj. Jack Hagan, of the 39th Special Forces Detachment, Detachment Korea, by e-mail from South Korea. "He does this so that he can bargain for rice and heating oil concessions from world powers to take him through the long winter. If he didn't, his country would starve or freeze."

Gen. Burwell Bell, commander of U.S. Forces Korea, made the same point in a letter to those under his command: "I want to make it clear to all that we are executing daily operations and maintaining our readiness at appropriate levels. At this time there is no reason to change this approach."

There are 29,500 American service members in South Korea, down from 37,000 two years ago, and tens of thousands more in the years following the Korean War. There are also 50,000 American troops stationed in Japan.

An Army spokesman in South Korea said that whether the military is on alert in Korea is an "operational security matter." As a matter of policy, he said, Army officials would not release any change of that status.

But the latest threats trouble experts. North Korea's proven use of nuclear weapons could lead to an arms race in Asia and Iranian officials are watching the situation carefully to see how the U.S. handles countries with new nuclear arms capabilities, said William Perry, who served as defense secretary under President Clinton. North Korea also could sell nuclear arms to other countries, he said.

As the U.S. continues downsizing its forces in South Korea, some analysts said there need to be direct negotiations between the Bush administration and Kim's government, as well as a military response plan, to address the latest threat.

President Bush has rejected face-to-face talks.

Retired Brig. Gen. David Grange, former commanding general of the 1st Infantry Division in Germany, told Army Times on Oct. 12 that Kim has chosen the nuclear game because that's what's most effective for a small rogue country trying to influence the U.S.

"Kim likes the attention because he's a



CHUNG SUNG-JUN/GETTY IMAGES

U.S. and South Korean soldiers keep watch Oct. 11 on the South Korean side of the Demilitarized Zone. The commander of U.S. Forces Korea says North Korea's Oct. 9 nuclear test has not affected his troops' daily operations.

snotty little punk," Grange said. "And the little countries that really shake up the world use what's effective. In the Middle East, it's terrorism. For North Korea, it's pushing the envelope with nukes."

And for the troops stationed there, Grange said, stability matters.

"They're within artillery range of North Korea," he said. "The threat is real, even if you forget the nuke part for a minute."

Potential scenarios

Anthony Cordesman, former assistant to the secretary of defense and strategy chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told Army Times on Oct. 11 that he sees three potential scenarios evolving in North Korea:

■ A massive border clash where North Korea uses prepositioned artillery to wreak chaos on South Korea.

■ North Korea continues to lash out and the situation escalates. "They have a very significant missile force," Cordesman said, including chemical weapons. "If they chose to escalate using that kind of weaponry, as well as a large special forces group, they can do damage. They can't win, but it could be extremely destructive."

■ North Korea could collapse in response to intense pressure and lash out at South Korea. "No one can predict the outcome of that scenario," Cordesman said.

In a speech from the White House on Oct. 11, Bush said he expected to ask allies to impose stronger economic sanctions against North Korea.

He outlined a plan to work with other countries in dealing with North Korea, but did not offer direct negotiations,

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