**Gates Issues Warning to North Korea**

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SINGAPORE — Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/g/robert_m_gates/index.html?inline=nyt-per) warned [North Korea](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/northkorea/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) on Saturday that the United States would not accept it as a [nuclear weapons](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/science/topics/atomic_weapons/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) state, as Asian security officials struggled to find a new way to deal with the isolated Communist nation.

“We will not stand idly by as North Korea builds the capability to wreak destruction on any target in Asia — or on us,” Mr. Gates told a major defense conference here that has been dominated by [North Korea’s test this week](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/25/world/asia/25nuke.html) of a nuclear device and the firing of at least six short-range missiles, all in defiance of international sanctions.

Mr. Gates said that he did not consider [North Korea’s nuclear program](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/northkorea/nuclear_program/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) “a direct military threat” to the United States, but added that its progress “is a harbinger of a dark future.” One of the chief concerns among United States officials is that North Korea will sell its nuclear technology.

Although Mr. Gates said that the administration was planning to discuss with its Asian allies how to move forward with the six-party talks aimed at persuading the North to give up its nuclear weapons program, he acknowledged during a question and answer session that “it would be hard to point to them at this point as an example of success.”

In Washington on Saturday, a senior American official confirmed South Korean news reports of indications that the North was preparing to ship an inter-continental ballistic missile toward a missile testing site on the Sea of Japan, a sign that Pyongyang might be planning another long-range missile test. It would likely take several weeks for the missile to reach the site and be put in place, and there is still no evidence that the North Koreans have the technology to create a nuclear device small enough to fit atop a missile.

The North Koreans have conducted two such tests before, [including one over Japanese territory](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/06/world/asia/06korea.html), and American officials are particularly concerned about Japanese reaction to another test. Such missiles are theoretically capable of reaching Alaska and Hawaii.

A [C.I.A.](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/c/central_intelligence_agency/index.html?inline=nyt-org) assessment has concluded that North Korea has built one or two nuclear weapons and harvested the fuel for six or more weapons.

Throughout the day at the annual conference in Singapore, called the [Shangri-La Dialogue](http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/), Mr. Gates met with defense officials from China, South Korea, Japan and other Asian nations to try to begin pulling together an international consensus on how to proceed. [James B. Steinberg](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/james_b_steinberg/index.html?inline=nyt-per), the deputy Secretary of State, attended a number of the meetings, as did [Dennis C. Blair](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/dennis_c_blair/index.html?inline=nyt-per), the director of national intelligence.

There was talk of toughening economic sanctions on North Korea and a widespread view that long-running six-nation talks aimed at getting North Korea to give up its nuclear program had failed. Beyond that, nothing specific emerged.

“There’s no prescription yet on what to do,” said a senior American defense official who asked for anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly. The official said that one “prudent option” was “what should we be thinking about in the event that we need to start enhancing our posture, our defenses?” But the official said that it was premature to talk of building up American forces in the region — an echo of [comments from Mr. Gates on Friday](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/30/world/asia/30gates.html) that the United States had no plans to reinforce some 28,000 American troops based in South Korea.

Late in the day, Mr. Gates had a three-way meeting focused on North Korea with the defense ministers of South Korea and Japan, a precursor to more detailed discussions to occur next week in Tokyo, Seoul and Beijing about North Korea’s nuclear test. Mr. Steinberg is to lead the American team at those meetings; the group will include Stuart Levey, the [Treasury](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/t/treasury_department/index.html?inline=nyt-org) Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, an indication that tough economic measures against North Korea will be a significant part of the discussions.

Military officials traveling with Mr. Gates said the tough talk was aimed in large part at increasing worldwide pressure on North Korea as well as reassuring allies in the region, particularly Japan and South Korea, that the United States was committed to their defense should North Korea make good on its talk of war this week. On Wednesday, North Korea threatened military strikes against the South.

Mr. Gates met early on Saturday with the highest-ranking official sent to the conference by China, Lt. Gen. Ma Xiaotian, the deputy chief of the general staff of the People’s Liberation Army. American Defense officials said after the meeting that China, the country that has the most influence over North Korea, clearly viewed the nuclear test seriously, a reflection of General Ma’s public remarks at the conference.

“We are resolutely opposed to nuclear proliferation,” General Ma said, adding that “we hope that all parties concerned will remain cool-headed and take measured measures to address the problem.”

The United States has been pressing the Chinese government for a tough response, but it remains unclear if China is willing to engage in a heightened showdown with North Korea. In the past, China has feared the collapse of North Korea’s government could lead to refugees pouring across its border.

In Moscow, the Kremlin issued a statement saying President [Dmitri A. Medvedev](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/dmitri_a_medvedev/index.html?inline=nyt-per) and Prime Minister [Taro Aso](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/a/taro_aso/index.html?inline=nyt-per) of Japan had agreed on the need for a serious response to the nuclear test, Reuters reported.

In Mr. Gates’ formal remarks at the conference, his first as an emissary of [President Obama](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/o/barack_obama/index.html?inline=nyt-per), he made clear that the new administration had limited patience with North Korea’s bellicose words and behavior.

“President Obama has offered an open hand to tyrannies that unclench their fists,” Mr. Gates said. “He is hopeful, but he is not naïve. Likewise, the United States and our allies are open to dialogue, but we will not bend to pressure or provocation.”

Military officials acknowledged that the United States had only limited information about what was really happening inside North Korea and suspected that its leader, [Kim Jong-il](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/k/_kim_jong_il/index.html?inline=nyt-per), was in the midst of political maneuvers to make his youngest son, Kim Jong-un, his successor. The officials described the country’s leadership as unpredictable and bizarre.

Although North Korea was the “hot topic” at the conference, as Mr. Gates put it, the defense secretary also used the forum to appeal to Asian allies for help, both financial and military, with the war in Afghanistan.

“I know some in Asia have concluded that Afghanistan does not represent a strategic threat for their countries, owing in part to Afghanistan’s geographic location,” Mr. Gates said. “But the threat from failed or failing states is international in scope.”

The defense secretary said that extremists in Asia who have engaged in terrorism in Bali and guerrilla warfare in the Philippines “are inspired by, and at times have received support directly from, groups operating along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border — the ungoverned space from which this threat ultimately emanates.”

Failure in Afghanistan, Mr. Gates said, “would have international reverberations — and, undoubtedly, many of them would be felt in this part of the world.”

In representing Mr. Obama, Mr. Gates sought to draw a distinction between the new president and his predecessor. Mr. Gates noted that Mr. Obama had spent part of his childhood in Indonesia and that it was the first time “that we have had a president with such a personal connection to the region.”

Mr. Gates concluded that the United States, “in our efforts to protect our own freedom, and that of others” had “from time to time made mistakes, including at times being arrogant in dealing with others.” Mr. Gates did not name names, but then said, “We always correct our course.”

*David E. Sanger contributed reporting from Washington.*