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**HEADLINE:** Pyongyang's big bang would have worldwide reverberations

**BODY:**

THE odds on North Korea conducting an underground nuclear test are shortening, writes **Melissa** Murphy.

With North Korea declaring talks are pointless while President George W Bush remains in office, its impasse with the US is coming to a head.

On May 1, the country test-fired a short-range missile into the Sea of Japan in its first high-profile test for more than two years. This week, North Korea's foreign ministry announced that the removal of spent fuel rods from the Yongbyon nuclear reactor had been finished.

Reprocessing these rods should give North Korea material for another two atomic bombs. The International Atomic Energy Agency estimates that Pyongyang already has enough weapons grade plutonium to make six nuclear weapons.

Complementing these developments, the US claims its satellite surveillance has detected preparations for an underground nuclear test in the country's northeast.

With the odds on an underground nuclear test shortening fast, interested parties are considering their options.

In the event of a nuclear test the US and Japan might well push for an extension of the Proliferation Security Initiative, which the US, Japan, Britain and Australia recognise but is not yet sanctioned by international law.

This would allow North Korean ships to be intercepted at sea and inspected for nuclear-related materials. Such a move would clearly increase maritime conflict risks.

The US would almost certainly also push for sanctions through the United Nations with Japanese support. China, South Korea and Russia would then find themselves in an awkward position.

They have been engaging with the North, propping up its economy with food and fuel aid, in addition to encouraging investment in its economic zones.

All three have said they oppose sanctions as they would further isolate North Korea. However, a nuclear test would threaten this stance and, with China aware of its leadership role and keen to defuse conflict risks in the region, President Hu Jintao could well threaten Kim Jong-il with backing sanctions when he visits North Korea in June.

Mr Kim probably believes he needs a nuclear test to remove the chance of US military action designed to topple him as with Saddam.

If Mr Hu's visit is cancelled this would be another indication that Mr Kim intends to ignore China's leverage and conduct a test.

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