

Policy Forum 09-036: Calling the Bluff or Showing Respect? Short Term Propaganda Victories and Long Term Strategic Objectives



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Calling the Bluff or Showing Respect? Short Term Propaganda Victories and Long Term Strategic Objectives

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By Rudiger Frank

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I. Introduction

Rudiger Frank, Chair of East Asian Economy and Society at the University of Vienna, writes, "If we want to discourage the DPRK from reprocessing more fuel rods, from further refining their ICBMs and from developing a functioning nuclear warhead, we should stop telling them that all their efforts so far are not enough. By ridiculing these attempts, we win a small propaganda victory but also demonstrate to Pyongyang that they must work harder on these issues."

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II. Article by Rudiger Frank

- "Calling the Bluff or Showing Respect? Short Term Propaganda Victories and Long Term Strategic Objectives"

By Rudiger Frank

The DPRK has recently announced that it would restart the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel rods, conduct more nuclear tests, and launch more ICBMs. Is this a response to the UNSC resolution, or the reflection of a policy change towards a harsher line in Pyongyang?

I would suggest answering "no". The DPRK has been known for its long-term strategy based on a high level of leadership continuity, which makes it actually much more predictable than our democracies with their frequently changing administrations. To assume that a major decision such as conducting a second nuclear test would be ad hoc and based on a UNSC resolution would not properly consider the nature of the DPRKs system. Decisions like this are part of a long term strategy. So what else has compelled the DPRK to take these measures?

Ironically, it might have been us. Pyongyang seems to do what the West is telling them. After the first nuclear test in 2006, our side was quick to announce that the blast was a minor one, a flash in the pan, a failure. The message to the DPRK was: this one does not count. But it was conducted for a number of reasons, which, as most analysts believe, includes deterrence and rising to the status of a nuclear power, both being key means to achieve objectives such as regime security, stability and economic aid. Rodong Sinmun was full of articles quoting foreigners whose statements were interpreted as acceptance of the nuclear power status. By belittling and downplaying the test, a number of critical objectives were to be achieved, no doubt. However, one effect was that the DPRK heard the message: Conduct another one, so that we can be sure.

The same story is happening to the ICBM issue. Even before the launch, failure was expected. The first news after the launch mentioned that only stage one worked. These were corrected later, since obviously stage two had worked, too, but we all know that the first news counts. So the message to Pyongyang was: Please launch another missile, until the third stage works, too, so that we can be sure.

The next issue is the spent fuel rods. Our side declared that the DPRK possesses about 50 kg of plutonium, and we started speculating how useful this would be. The bottom line was: that's not enough to be a real threat. Pyongyang hears: Please reprocess more, so that we can be really afraid.

Last but not least, the warhead. Yes, we said, they indeed conducted kind of a nuclear test, so they

have mastered the technology in principle. But oh, what a far cry this is from miniaturizing and creating a device that would function under the conditions of an ICBM launch. And this is what the leadership in Pyongyang hears: If you want us to take you seriously, please go ahead and produce a real warhead.

The DPRK feels surrounded by enemies. It is under severe economic stress, and there are speculations about leadership succession and domestic political stability. There is broad agreement about who is responsible for this situation, but that is not the point here. If we want to discourage the DPRK from reprocessing more fuel rods, from further refining their ICMBs and from developing a functioning nuclear warhead, we should stop telling them that all their efforts so far are not enough. By ridiculing these attempts, we win a small propaganda victory but also demonstrate to Pyongyang that they must work harder on these issues.

We could of course again play the risky game of forcing the "other side" to spend all their money on the unproductive military sector in a suffocating arms race. This has worked during the Cold War. But I still believe that the world was just lucky. Such a game could take a while and produce unexpected results. Maybe we should think out of the box and give them what they want.

The DPRK is bent on becoming a nuclear power anyway; let's not force them to do so at a level of development of related technology that would be really threatening. A smart policy would be to criticize a test as a test, criticize an ICBM launch as an ICBM launch, regard the existing plutonium as a threat and stop asking for a nuclear warhead. Treatment of the DPRK on the international arena should be accordingly, including well-deserved harsh criticism and condemnation, but also serious negotiations on an equal basis. The DPRK does not want to be loved; they want to be respected. With some luck, Pyongyang might be satisfied and stop (mis)investing its scarce resources to achieve something it already has. Calling the bluff is not always the best idea, even if it works. The humiliated player will learn that next time he really needs a good hand. This can't be in our interest.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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