

Policy Forum 06-57A: China's Army Yawns at Pyongyang's Missiles

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Essay by John J. Tkacik, Jr.

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay by John J. Tkacik, Jr.](#)

[III. Citations](#)

[IV. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

I. Introduction

John J. Tkacik, Jr., Senior Research Fellow in China Policy in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation, writes, "It is now incumbent upon the Bush Administration to face facts..."

Without Chinese interest in disarming North Korea, much less moderating any of Pyongyang's other odious behavior, there is no solution to the North Korean problem."

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II. Essay by John J. Tkacik, Jr.

- China's Army Yawns at Pyongyang's Missiles
by John J. Tkacik, Jr.

After initially expressing "concern" over North Korea's July 4th missile launches, China's unwillingness to work towards serious sanctions on North Korea provides further proof that Beijing has little interest in restraining Pyongyang. What are we to make of the disconnect between Chinese rhetoric and action? In many ways, it reflects a disconnect between the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA)-which almost certainly does not share any real concerns about North Korea's missile provocations-and Chinese diplomats, who have largely been kept out of the loop. At the end of the day, Washington needs to face the fact that without any Chinese interest in disarming North Korea there is no viable solution to the North Korean nuclear problem.

The PLA's Relationship with North Korea

Provocative missile launches are nothing new in the Asia-Pacific region. In March 1996, China recklessly test-fired missiles into the Taiwan Strait in an attempt to intimidate Taiwan's voters in the run-up to their first-ever free presidential elections. That series of missile tests, which for several days virtually closed the heavily-traversed Taiwan Strait to all shipping and air travel, was the brain-child of the PLA and acquiesced to by then-President Jiang Zemin, who at the time had not yet consolidated his support among China's military.[1]

Indeed, the real players in Beijing's Korea policy are the PLA leadership. There is no doubt that the PLA is in close contact with its North Korean counterparts. Article IV of the July 11, 1961, military pact (the "Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea") obliges Korean People's Army (KPA) commanders and top Chinese generals to "continue to consult . . . on all important international questions of common interests." In return, China is to "render . . . every possible economic and technical aid in the cause of socialist construction" including "scientific and technical cooperation."

Just prior to the opening of the Beijing multilateral talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons program in April 2003, North Korean Colonel General Jo Myong Rok camped out for four days in Beijing where he met with every top PLA leader. In late August 2003, just before the Six-Party talks began, the PLA's top political commissar, General Xu Caihou, made a hurried visit to Pyongyang. Those talks were a disaster-at least from the American point of view-as were all previous and subsequent sessions of the talks.

At the end of October 2005, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Pyongyang and was treated to a lavish reception by North Korea's Kim Jong-Il.[2] Supposedly, the Chinese leader was to have pressured Kim Jong-Il into moving forward on a "Statement of Principles" drafted during the September 2005 session of the Six-Party talks.[3] but none of the public statements by either Hu Jintao or Kim Jong Il even alluded to the talks. When the next round of Beijing talks ended in November, there was still no progress. North Koreans instead accused Washington of sabotaging the talks with financial sanctions imposed on North Korean bank accounts in Macao that happened to be

stuffed with counterfeit U.S. currency.[4]

In April 2006, Chinese defense minister Cao Gangchuan spent four days in Pyongyang, where according to the North Korean media, he and his KPA comrades discussed ways to "strengthen military ties" and exchanged "valuable" opinions.[5]

Significantly, General Cao was accompanied by PLA Air Force Deputy Political Commissar Liu Yazhou, whom Professor Alfred Chan calls "realist, a nationalist and a hardliner against Japan." General Liu's views on Chinese foreign policy are legendary in the PLA. In a monograph published in 2001, he praised China's improved relations with fundamentalist Islamist countries saying China "should do what the West fears." His outspoken ideas on other areas of grand strategy are equally eye-opening.[6]

Just days before the July 4 missile tests, Beijing is reported to have been the transit point for ten Iranian missile scientists who visited North Korea with the mission, according to Japanese government sources quoted in Tokyo's Sankei Shimbun, "to confirm the performance of missile-related equipment introduced by China" during launch preparations for North Korea's Taepodong 2 missile.[7]

It is likely that those ten Iranians were at North Korea's Musudanri launch base when the KPA launched the Taepodong 2 missile to mark the July Fourth celebrations, and at least some of the Iranians may have been at the Kitdaeryong base for the tests of North Korean Scuds and Nodong missiles. After all, there is no better way to "confirm the performance" of Chinese components in North Korean missiles than to observe several test firings.

News of the Iranian engineers' presence was followed up by a Wall Street Journal report detailing North Korea's sale of its newest missiles to Iran.[8] On July 6, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack, when asked about the Teheran-Pyongyang missile nexus, simply acknowledged that "one of [North Korea's] only exports aside from counterfeit bills is weapons and weapons technology. That's what they deal in. The bazaar is open as far as they are concerned."

All of this explains why Chinese diplomats evince so much frustration when speaking about North Korea. The Chinese leadership does not seem to consider North Korea's nuclear or missile ambitions to be diplomatic matters-except insofar as Beijing's foreign ministry can use diplomacy to ease outside pressures on North Korea. North Korea is a military matter, and the evidence suggests that basic policies toward North Korea are handled by China's PLA.

PRC-DPRK army-army consultations appear to exclude China's diplomats. They are simply out of the loop. In public, the diplomats are simply ordered to repeat talking points drafted directly by a Politburo "small group" on North Korea. In private, they muse with supposed authority about what they wish China's North Korea policy was-often misleading their foreign friends.

Senator Joseph Biden (D-DE) told CBS News the day following the North Korean missile launches that his top Korea policy aide was assured privately by the top Korea negotiator in China's foreign ministry that he was "sure that North Korea was not going to launch." There is every indication that Mr. Biden's aide believed his Chinese diplomatic interlocutors told him the truth as they wanted to believe it. And Mr. Biden continues to assume China really did try to discourage the North Korean launches. "It's going to be interesting," the Senator continued "to see whether or nor [the Chinese] respond."

China's Response to the Missile Launches

The Chinese have responded, but not the way Senator Biden had hoped. On July 6, China blamed the United States for the missile tests. Vice Minister Wu Dawei told interviewers that "this latest act" by the North Koreans "was in large part caused by American financial sanctions." [9]

Blaming Washington while covering for Pyongyang has been Beijing's consistent stance since the North Korean nuclear contretemps began in October 2002. For the three weeks prior to the July Fourth missile tests, the Chinese foreign ministry could only admit to "noting" unspecified "positions of various parties" and having "serious concern" over unspecified "current developments." The day after the missiles flew, the foreign ministry demurred that "we have already expressed serious concern" about "the affair" and "hoped that all the parties concerned will be cool and restrained . . . and refrain from adopting actions that would cause further tensions or complications." [10]

Even to the untrained ear, the clear message is this: In view of the fact that North Korea's "tensions and complications" are done with, China now is more concerned about the United States or Japan "causing further tensions and complications." Beijing's official statements show that Beijing steadfastly refuses to "condemn" or "criticize" Pyongyang on the missiles or anything else.

But hope springs eternal. On July 6, President Bush called his Chinese counterpart, President Hu Jintao. According to the Chinese press, President Bush told Hu "We appreciate all the efforts China has exerted for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, and we wish to maintain channels with the Chinese side." [11] To the U.S. media, Mr. Bush insisted that other world leaders, including the Chinese one, "like me, are concerned." [12] "Concerned" was the lowest-common denominator—specifically, the Chinese denominator. When the State Department spokesman's assertion about North Korea's neighbors "being united in their condemnation" was challenged by reporters, he backtracked, "We would encourage China" as a country that "might have diplomatic leverage . . . to use that leverage." [13]

Instead, China is using its leverage on the U.S. As a substitute for criticizing its North Korean allies, China's leaders have dispatched a vice foreign minister for Northeast Asia, Mr. Wu Dawei, to accompany Vice Premier Hui Liangyu to Pyongyang. Vice Minister Wu's mere presence in the delegation is supposed to reflect some more profound level of "concern."

But Vice Premier Hui, in fact, expressed no "concern" whatever. He brought Mr. Kim a personal message from Chinese President Hu Jintao that offered "warm felicitations" and averred that "Over the last 45 years both China and the DPRK have jointly accelerated the cause of socialist construction and defended the peace and stability of the region, respecting and supporting each other and closely cooperating with each other on the principle and spirit of the treaty." China's leader also reaffirmed that "It is a steadfast strategic policy of the Chinese Party and government to steadily develop the Sino-DPRK friendly and cooperative relations." [14] These words speak for themselves.

Conclusion

Beijing's giant yawn at Pyongyang's antics is surely too big to escape notice, even in Washington. It is now incumbent upon the Bush Administration to face facts. Fact one: Beijing is not interested in restraining North Korea's behavior. Washington should listen carefully to the words of Vice Premier Hui and Vice Minister Wu on July 11 while they celebrate China's nearly half-century of alliance with North Korea. Those words will be spoon fed from the Politburo in Beijing. If there are no sharp words in public, then Washington can be assured there were no sharp words in private, either.

Fact two: Those in Beijing (and in the Chinese embassy in Washington) who wring their hands and claim to credulous American interlocutors that China has little leverage over North Korea are not

telling the truth. Beijing supplies at least 90 percent of North Korea's petroleum, and without petrol, North Korea's armies cannot move. U.S. estimates are that China gives \$500 million in food to North Korea each year. China controls all North Korean land transportation.

China does not really fear a sudden inrush of North Korean refugees should its economy collapse. North Korea's economy has nowhere lower to fall. As of August 2003, China had deployed 150,000 regular army troops at the Korean border to discourage crossings. And China's protestations that it does not believe in economic sanctions would be incredible to Taiwanese businessmen and to Mongolians who found their only railroad link to the outside cut in November 2002 during the Dalai Lama's visit. If Beijing believes North Korean nuclear and missile threats are as dangerous as the Dalai Lama, rail and pipelines into North Korea would have been shut down long ago.

Finally, fact three: Without Chinese interest in disarming North Korea, much less moderating any of Pyongyang's other odious behavior, there is no solution to the North Korean problem. It is now a fact of life. America's new problem will be to retool its foreign policy to confront a world where China abets the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems while the U.S. tries to rein them in.

III. Citations

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- [14] See "Greetings from Chinese Party and State Leaders," Korean Central News Agency, July 10, 2006, at <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2006/200607/news07/11.htm#2>

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[Return to top](#)
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