



Policy Forum 09-030: Do Not Let the Rocket Launch Block North Korean Denuclearization



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By Hui Zhang

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I. Introduction

Hui Zhang, Research Associate in the Project on Managing the Atom at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University, writes, "From China's perspective, the first step should be taken by the side with the least to lose. This is not North Korea... Washington should take the first step that will eventually lead to North Korean denuclearisation."

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II. Article by Hui Zhang

- "Do Not Let the Rocket Launch Block North Korean Denuclearization"
By Hui Zhang

Pyongyang, once again, is at the center of an international nuclear crisis and the focus of intense discussion among members of the United Nations Security Council. After almost a week long dispute about how to respond to the North Korea rocket launch on April 5, the UN Security Council issued a presidential statement, endorsed unanimously by all 15 members of the council, condemning North Korea's recent rocket launch, demanding a stop of any further launches, and calling for expanded sanctions under the 2006 resolution. While Tokyo and Washington have been pursuing for tighter sanctions, Beijing called for a cautious response. Beijing pointed out that launching a communication satellite—as North Korea claims it did—is the right of all countries as part of the peaceful use of outer space. The test is qualitatively different from launching a missile or a nuclear test. Beijing is also concerned that more pressure or sanctions would run counter to efforts toward North Korean denuclearization.

The most realistic and practical option to resolve the crisis on the Korean peninsula is through peaceful, diplomatic means. Any harsh actions will only incur Pyongyang's tit-for-tat responses: North Korea would very likely further test its long-range missiles, undertake another nuclear test, or reverse its current nuclear disablement and resume its production of plutonium. The longer the crisis lasts, the more nuclear-capable North Korea will become and the higher stakes for that country. Some worry that it could even sell surplus fissile materials or nukes to Tehran or another country. Therefore, it is imperative that negotiations resume immediately on denuclearization.

The DPRK organized on Wednesday a massive rally of about one hundred thousand to celebrate what it called the "successful launch of a satellite". In fact, regardless of whether Pyongyang intended to launch a satellite or a missile, or whether the launch was a success or failure, the launch itself could have significant influences on international and domestic politics. Most importantly, the launch was meant to grab the attention of the United States in a period in which the new Obama administration is adjusting its policy toward Pyongyang and its top priorities are elsewhere. Pyongyang's Sunday launch, much like its 2006 nuclear test which induced a new move for six-party talks, is meant to push the Obama administration to pay much more attention to the North Korea and to revive the long-suspending negotiations over the country's nuclear program. Pyongyang hopes to increase its bargaining leverage by escalating tension. In addition, as many experts in China believe, the launch may also have significant implications for internal politics in North Korea further stabilizing the power of the Kim's leadership (particularly after the reports of his health problems), inspiring and unifying the whole nation to face challenges from internal economic crises and external security threats.

What North Korea really wants is direct talks with the United States in order to obtain a reliable security assurance. The most tangible and vital security assurance the US can provide is to normalize relations with North Korea as a first step toward integrating it into the international community. Indeed, Pyongyang has repeatedly said it will abandon its nuclear program if, and only if, the US gives up its "hostile policy."

Beijing supports North Korean denuclearization and is unhappy about Pyongyang's rocket launch. China has delivered a clear message to Pyongyang: nuclear weapons are not in your long-term national security interest. Nuclear weapons will generate increasing international pressure and

economic sanctions that will further devastate the already poor North Korean economy. Given that North Korea has very limited resources, economic advancement depends on Pyongyang opening its doors to the international community, in particular to foreign investment, trade, and aid from neighboring South Korea and Japan. Pyongyang's neighbors have made it clear there will be no lasting economic cooperation or aid if the nuclear program continues.

China's interests in resolving this crisis are clear: China is concerned that the rocket launch will strengthen the US-Japan military alliance and provide a pretext for Japan to accelerate deployment of a joint US-Japanese missile defense shield, which could be used to negate China's deterrent threat. Some in China are also worried that such a launch could lead to a new arms race of long-range missiles in the region and undermine regional stability.

Whenever there is a missile or a nuclear crisis in Korean peninsula, Washington has urged China to apply more pressure on North Korea to give up its nuclear program. While it is true that China has been North Korea's ally for more than fifty years, and provides most of its fuel and food aid, Beijing does not believe Pyongyang will yield to such pressure. Even worse, Beijing could damage its relations with Pyongyang and lose the leverage it currently holds.

A nuclear North Korea by no means advances China's greatest interest: a stable environment in which to pursue economic development. To maintain regional stability, Beijing's bottom line is that war on the Korean peninsula and an abrupt collapse of the Kim Jong-Il regime must be avoided because both could create massive refugee flows into China and, in such an uncertain geopolitical realignment, possibly put U.S. troops at China's border.

China has played a constructive role in defusing the crisis. China has repeatedly persuaded North Korea to return to the six-party talks whenever there is a deadlock. But Beijing also understands that if Pyongyang gets nothing except more pressure it will continue to escalate the missile and nuclear crisis. Beijing believes that the key to resolving North Korean crisis is held by America itself. In Beijing's view, it is not difficult for Washington to satisfy Pyongyang's needs. Washington needs only to recognize the importance of both regime survival and the need for economic reform in North Korea.

The last several years have shown that a hard line policy will only backfire. Given that the Obama administration wants a change from Bush's unilateral policy and President Obama has committed the United States to the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons, it is time for Washington to take real actions to negotiate a way out of the North Korean nuclear crisis. Each side should take reciprocal actions to show their good-faith commitment to the North Korean denuclearization. Washington should take the most realistic option of "give-and-take" diplomacy and put a serious offer for a negotiated solution. To revive the six-party talks soon, US should have direct engagement with North Korea about the current progress toward nuclear disarmament. Given the long history of mistrust and animosity between Washington and Pyongyang, North Korean denuclearization will not be achieved in one step. What is needed is a roadmap that links North Korean denuclearization with the gradual delivery of concrete benefits including security assurances, diplomatic normalization, economic reform, and Northeast Asian security cooperation.

The good news is that disablement of Yongbyon nuclear facilities including the 5 megawatt Experimental Reactor, the Reprocessing Plant (Radiochemical Laboratory) and the Nuclear Fuel Rod Fabrication Facility has been nearly completed. However, those disablement steps could be reversed relatively quickly. More permanent steps are needed, including the dismantlement and decommissioning of those nuclear facilities. North Korea will not take such steps without something in return. In addition to economic and energy assistance, Washington should take steps toward normalizing relations with Pyongyang including establishing a liaison office and relaxing sanctions.

Finally, to get to full normalization with Washington, Pyongyang should agree to a treaty ending the development of its long-range missiles and to ending the export of missiles and missile technology. To jump start such a move, Washington should appoint a special envoy to visit Pyongyang to help break the ice.

From China's perspective, the first step should be taken by the side with the least to lose. This is not North Korea. As long as Pyongyang sees its nuclear weapons as the key to regime survival, it can't afford to give them up. Washington, however, can show more strategic flexibility. Washington should take the first step that will eventually lead to North Korean denuclearisation.

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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