



Policy Forum 06-51A: North Korea Stands to Lose with Missile Launch



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Essay by Cheong Wooksik

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I. Introduction

Cheong Wooksik, representative of the Civil Network for a Peaceful Korea, writes, "The fear of another test not only diminishes the increasing demand for changes to North Korean policy but also covers up the discussion of the issue regarding North Korea's invitation to Bureau of East Asian and

Pacific Affairs Assistant Secretary Christopher R. Hill."

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II. Essay by Cheong Wooksik

- North Korea Stands to Lose with Missile Launch
by Cheong Wooksik

U.S. set to use warning to its advantage to get support for missile defense system

South Korean and international media are reporting that North Korea has fueled their missiles and is ready to test them. Of the all information gathered on North Korea by the United States and Japan, the governments of both nations are said to be concerned the most with North Korea's missile movement. Those governments confirmed they believed the North is about to do a test launch to send a warning message. The South Korean government is also reportedly concerned about the situation.

If North Korea proceeds with the long-range missile test, the subsequent political and military backlash appear to be huge. North Korea's action to fire its missile in spite of the South Korean government and the international community's serious concern is an expression of hopelessness on its dealings with the Bush administration and an intention to strengthen the North's military deterrence.

Speculation of a missile test is not something new to this region. After North Korea fired the Taepodong 1 in August, 1998, the United States and Japan have continually predicted future North Korean test fires. The North Korean missile threat has been the backbone of justifying dollars for the U.S. missile defense (MD) program and has fueled a long cherished hope of the U.S. hawks to strengthen U.S.-Japan relations.

U.S. defense officials have repeatedly said North Korea will test their missiles near the review of important legislation or budget decisions related to MD. However, North Korea has suspended any ballistic missile tests since the 1998 launch, disappointing U.S. military hawks.

The North's test effected U.S. policy in two ways. Some insisted on increasing the military power in preparation for a possible North Korean threat. Also, the Kumchangri underground nuclear facility was seen as more threatening than before. The other effect was a new comprehensive review of U.S. policy on North Korea. After the 1994 Agreed Framework, the United States was reluctant to fulfill its promise because of an understanding that North Korea would collapse before the United States would need to fulfill its end of the bargain to help the struggling North build nuclear facilities for energy. In spite of such anticipation, North Korea fired a three-stage rocket that is known to only be developed in advanced countries.

The Clinton administration and Congress appointed the former Secretary of Defense William Perry as the special envoy to Pyongyang to review the policy on North Korea and create the "Perry Report," based on engagement. South Korean President Kim Dae-jung administration's involvement played a huge role in outlining this report.

As a result, the North Korea missile test played a dual role of promoting the development of the MD program and stimulating policy on North Korea at the same time.

Can a North Korean missile reach the United States?

The missile the North is preparing is an ICBM that could possibly reach U.S. soil. If Pyongyang tests the ICBM, the U.S. outlook on the North Korean threat could rise to a different dimension.

But it is unclear if North Korea has succeeded in developing an ICBM. U.S. intelligence appears inconsistent. Until 2000 in the Clinton administration, intelligence agencies were convinced the North Koreans could not develop an ICBM until 2015. The United States' assessment of the North's capabilities completely changed after the 2000 election of President George W. Bush, who supports funding the MD program. Analysts gave little explanation on how North Korea had accelerated their ICBM program.

There are some technological questions that have not been answered as well. To build a successful ICBM program, three major engineering hurdles must be crossed: building a three-stage rocket using solid fuel; constructing a space launch vehicle (SLV) that can place a warhead in the Earth's orbit; and the designing the warhead so that it can reenter the atmosphere without sustaining damage from the high temperature.

In the 1998 test, North Korea demonstrated that it built a successful three-stage rocket. But the projectile failed to place a small satellite in orbit. Also, there is no proof that the satellite was capable of reentry -- the most difficult ICBM technology to perfect.

Therefore, it is likely that Pyongyang's missile know-how and abilities have been exaggerated by the Bush administration, possibly to justify military spending. Washington is also claiming the North is nearing advanced stages of developing a nuclear weapons program.

North Korea has been using its cloak of mystery about its military intention as diplomatic leverage.

Pyongyang's missile test may backfire on the communist nation.

As the expectation of a test fire comes around just about every month, Washington and Tokyo's hyper-concerns over the fallout has become much like the tale of the shepherd boy crying "wolf."

North Korea can pressure the Bush administration to consider undoing its imposed economic sanctions. Also, as the U.S. military presence in South Korea is withdrawing from the border and realigning its forces, the North can capitalize on the perceived weaker border.

But if North Korea fires a missile, the test is likely to do more harm than good for the communist nation. The Bush administration will continue its hard-line policy towards the North. Washington and Tokyo will not only raise the level of sanctions, but also demand South Korea and China join the effort to apply pressure on Pyongyang. The Bush administration will also demand more domestic and international support for the MD program and Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI).

From a military perspective, it is almost impossible for North Korea to secure deter a U.S. possible attack. The United States spends about 200 times more money on procurement, possesses 10,000 nuclear weapons, has precision attacking capabilities and is developing MD technology.

Perhaps, the U.S. military's announcement of a possible North Korean missile test is a calculated political move by the Bush administration. Intentional or not, the Bush administration may have already gained what they needed by talking about the warning. The fear of another test not only diminishes the increasing demand for changes to North Korean policy but also covers up the discussion of the issue regarding North Korea's invitation to Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs Assistant Secretary Christopher R. Hill.

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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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