

Policy Forum 06-52A: North Korean Fireworks?



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Essay by John Feffer

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I. Introduction

John Feffer, co-director of *Foreign Policy In Focus* , writes, "The Bush administration should listen to its Republican allies-Weldon, Murkowski, Lugar-and get serious about negotiating with North Korea. Renew the offer to satisfy Pyongyang's satellite desires. It might just get Kim Jong Il to listen."

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II. Essay by John Feffer

- North Korean Fireworks?

by John Feffer

No foreigner, with the possible exception of Simon Cowell, can get the attention of Americans like North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. In the middle of June, the North Korea government began preparations to launch a long-range rocket. Though Pyongyang's intentions were far from clear-even to the point of whether it would go through with the test-some otherwise level-headed people went ballistic. William Perry, the architect of the better-late-than-never engagement policy of the Clinton administration, recommended that the Bush administration take out the missile site with a preemptive attack. The epitome of sober politics, Walter Mondale, seconded the motion. It was up to Dick Cheney, no friend of North Korea, to urge that calmer heads should prevail.

Kim Jong Il's latest gambit comes at a particularly murky time in U.S.-North Korean relations. The Bush administration has tightened the financial stranglehold on Pyongyang by cracking down on suspected money laundering and counterfeiting operations. As a result, multilateral talks have ground to a halt, despite a September 2005 agreement on the eventual denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and steps toward bringing North Korea into the international community. Iran has meanwhile seized the media spotlight and maneuvered into a better negotiating position on the basis of a nuclear program considerably less advanced than North Korea's. And both Congress and the Pentagon are contemplating troop withdrawals from Iraq, which could signal greater focus on security in Northeast Asia.

Nothing clarifies politics so much as a rash act. North Korea's launch preparations-real, pretend, or something in between-have illuminated the difficult corner into which the Bush administration has painted itself. The proposals to attack preemptively, given the well-known and horrific consequences of such actions, reveal how impatient even previously moderate voices have become-with not only Kim Jong Il but with George W. Bush as well.

North Korean Intentions

In 1999, a year after testing a Taepodong long-range rocket and failing to put an intended satellite into orbit, Kim Jong Il declared a moratorium on all missile testing. North Korea offered this carrot-and the 2002 moratorium extension-to advance a deal that would have traded its missile program for a package of various goodies. Since the Bush administration never followed up on this initiative and since rocket launches don't violate any international agreements, Pyongyang's decision to abandon its moratorium comes as no surprise.

Still, nobody is exactly thrilled with the idea of North Korea setting off its own fireworks celebration. Condoleezza Rice summed up the view of many governments by calling the launch a "provocative act." Combined with a nuclear program of still unknown dimensions, such missile launches strike fear into every country within their range.

For the time being, though, range remains very much in the eye of the beholder. As defense analyst William Arkin recently pointed out in *The Washington Post*, North Korea's missile program, like the rest of its straitened military, is not worth getting exercised over. The 1998 missile test failed; the country's ability to cobble together a missile that can reach the United States is seriously under question; and no one has any evidence that Pyongyang has the miniaturization technology to fit a

nuclear warhead onto a missile or deliver it with even minimal precision.

If North Korea can't be certain of success, why make the effort? By arranging a very visible rocket launch, Kim Jong Il is not only trying to get the attention of the international community, he is reminding the North Korean military that he has their interests at heart. North Korea is still under a "military-first" regime. With all the recent emphasis on economic changes-the introduction of market mechanisms, the creation of an industrial zone in Kaesong with South Korean capital-the North Korean military may well feel the need for a shot in the arm (or a shot in the sky).

The launch preparations also came just before the United States conducted one of its largest military exercises in the Asia-Pacific in decades. "Valiant Shield," which had been months in planning, brought together three aircraft carriers, 30 ships, 280 aircraft, and 22,000 troops for five days of maneuvers. More critically, China for the first time had observer status for the exercises. From Pyongyang's point of view, it's bad enough that Japan, South Korea, and the United States all test their toys together. But when they invite China to the playground as well-even in the interests of overall conflict management-don't expect North Korea to sit quietly on the sidelines.

U.S. Responses

Pyongyang has long been a thorn in the side of the Bush administration, not as painful as the gaping wound of Iraq or the festering sore of Afghanistan but aggravating nonetheless. Discreet efforts to promote regime change through economic means, elevation of human rights concerns, increased funding for cross-border radio broadcasts, and military provocations such as spy plane flyovers have not produced the intended effect.

While the administration responded to the potential missile launch more temperately than some, it still did its best to demonstrate "resolve." If Kim Jong Il wants to boost the salability of his missile products with a public display, so too does the Pentagon want to increase allied confidence in its anti-missile umbrella. The administration justified its expensive missile defense system in no small part on the basis of North Korea's missile threat. Now, Air Force Lt. Gen. Henry A. Obering III, director of the Missile Defense Agency, has expressed confidence that the United States can hit their bullet with our bullet. This confidence might be a wee bit exaggerated. The Pentagon claims a 50% success rate in its last eight tests, but the tests have been carefully rigged to achieve even this modest number. The Pentagon's own chief weapons evaluator estimates only a 20% likelihood of success under real-world conditions.

The administration's coy approach to negotiations has irritated what would ordinarily be its avid supporters. Curt Weldon, a hawkish Republican on the House Armed Services Committee, has long pressed for a diplomatic solution to the current crisis. In the Senate, the Armed Services Committee is now considering an amendment to the Defense Authorization Bill that would essentially launch a review (read: adult supervision) of Bush policy toward North Korea. Lisa Murkowski, Republican senator from Alaska and reliable Bush supporter, recently criticized the administration for focusing on counterfeit currency rather than a legitimate nuclear threat. And Republican head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Richard Lugar is designing legislation to get negotiations back on track with Congressional support (something conspicuously absent from the 1994 Agreed Framework). Lugar has also called for direct negotiations with North Korea, which the Bush administration has repeatedly and quixotically rejected.

There have been rumors of a brand new approach from the Bush administration. In mid-May, someone in the State Department leaked a new "more for more" grand strategy that would offer the North a formal peace treaty to end the Korean War. As usual when it comes to North Korea, though, the administration does not appear to be unified in supporting such an approach.

South Korean Anxieties

South Korea has invested a lot in its "slow-motion reunification" efforts with the North, though more in the currency of hope and national pride than in concrete financial assistance. Seoul's reaction to the launch preparations has been cautious to the point of denial, an approach in keeping with earlier skepticism toward U.S. allegations of North Korea's highly enriched uranium program and the counterfeiting of U.S. currency. South Korean civil movements continue to stress the value of diplomacy and sheer idiocy of military confrontation.

Despite the chill atmosphere between North Korea and the United States, South Korea has still managed to make some headway in a peninsular thaw. While the United States has declared North Korea to be unworthy of engagement, South Korea has created an industrial zone in the North, negotiated the reconnection of a long severed railroad, and facilitated hundreds of exchanges, including one that would have brought former president Kim Dae Jung to Pyongyang to meet Kim Jong Il.

The missile preparations have not made these engagement attempts any easier. Kaesong remains a relatively small zone of only a dozen South Korean companies, and what investors would want to sink money into a country that Walter Mondale wants to attack? Even before the missile imbroglio, North Korea stepped back from fully reconnecting the rail line. And Kim Dae Jung recently cancelled his trip. North-South relations are temporarily at ebb tide.

Nor is Seoul's relationship with Washington much better. When the missile issue first arose, Bush called the leaders of Japan, Russia, and China. He neglected to phone South Korean president Roh Moo Hyun, though South Korea is a key ally in the region. The two presidents haven't talked by phone for nearly a year even though, in addition to the missile crisis, the two countries are in the midst of a major restructuring of the military alliance and a proposed free trade agreement. A summit in Washington has been hastily patched together for September, but Bush will not likely escort the South Korean leader to Graceland as he did for Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi. The harshest blow that the Bush administration can strike against this government it doesn't particularly like is to withhold any support for South Korea's policy of engaging the North.

Pyongyang has long profited from driving wedges between its adversaries. This potential missile launch has appeared to do the opposite. In Japan, support for missile defense and the North Korea-bashing prime minister hopeful Shinzo Abe has spiked. And, as Asia specialist Ralph Cossa argues, the launch would accomplish what many months of Bush rhetoric and maneuvering have failed to achieve: pushing Seoul and Beijing closer to Washington and Tokyo's way of thinking. China has already declared that it is "very concerned" about the potential launch, which is the understated way that allies communicate vein-popping outrage to one another.

In crisis, as the Chinese say, there is opportunity. North Korea genuinely wants to circle the earth with a satellite. The current satellite gap in East Asia, with China, Japan, and South Korea all working hard to get geosynchronous, is not in North Korea's favor. So serious is Pyongyang about getting in on the space race that the United States nearly negotiated away North Korea's missile program at the end of 2000 by offering to launch Pyongyang's satellites (plus an undisclosed amount of cash).

The Bush administration should listen to its Republican allies-Weldon, Murkowski, Lugar-and get serious about negotiating with North Korea. Renew the offer to satisfy Pyongyang's satellite desires. It might just get Kim Jong Il to listen-and William Perry and Walter Mondale to keep their mouths shut.

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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