

Policy Forum 06-66A: North Korea's Missile Launches and South Korea's Response



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Essay by B. C. Koh

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I. Introduction

B. C. Koh, director of the Institute for Far Eastern Studies at Kyungnam University, writes, "As long as its sense of insecurity persists and as long as it clings to the conviction that nuclear weapons provide the only real deterrents to external attacks, the North Korean leadership will likely hang on to its nuclear and missile programs. This, however, is conjecture. The only way to test the North's true intentions is to resume the Six-Party Talks and craft a package that all the parties deem reasonable, fair, and workable."

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II. Essay by B. C. Koh

- North Korea's Missile Launches and Six-Party Talks
by B. C. Koh

North Korea's test-firing of seven ballistic missiles of varying range on July 5 (local time) generated unanticipated consequences for the parties concerned, especially the North. It spawned an unprecedented unanimous resolution by the United Nations Security Council condemning the North and imposing de facto sanctions. In what ways, if any, will the incident affect the prospects for the resumption of the six-party talks?

Salient Features of the Incident

Let us begin by noting the salient aspects of the missile incident. First, it was the first time that the North had launched three different types of missiles consecutively - four Scud C missiles (range: 500 km), two Nodong missiles (range: 1300 km), and a Taepodong 2 missile (range: 6000 km or longer).[1] Second, the launch of the last-named missile, which can theoretically reach Alaska, was a "complete failure." After examining all available evidence, Japan's Defense Agency concluded that its first stage flew for approximately 40 seconds but the second stage failed to separate, falling into the Sea of Japan (the East Sea) about 640 km from the launch site.[2]

One should hasten to add, however, that "failure" does not necessarily mean that it was a total loss for the North from a technical standpoint. For "setbacks [are] a normal part of rocket and warhead science." According to Jonathan McDowell, a "Harvard astronomer who publishes the online Jonathan's Space Report, which tracks global rocket launchings," "the fact that something flies for 40 seconds before it blows up means that the design is probably fundamentally sound." "Even if failures cut short a vehicle's debut," he added, "the flight can give you an incredible amount of information about such things as how well your engines are working and what the aerodynamic stability of the vehicle is." [3]

Third, the timing of the launch appears to have been carefully calculated. It began in the wee hours of July 5, which coincided with the late afternoon of July 4 in Washington, DC, which was celebrating its Independence Day. This seems to bolster the view that one of Pyongyang's objectives may have been to induce Washington to change its policy toward the North and engage in bilateral talks, which the North hopes would lead to the easing of financial sanctions.

Fourth, the North ended up losing much more than it gained from the missile launches. In the gains column, one may include the North's demonstration of its capability to launch multiple missiles. Since all of them except Taepodong 2 appeared to have performed without a hitch, their test-firing

may have served as an advertisement to the North's customers in the global arms market. The single most important loss for Pyongyang, on the other hand, was the passage of the UN Security Council resolution with the approval of China and Russia. The Chinese decision, in particular, must have been a heavy blow to Pyongyang, something the Kim Jong Il regime had failed to foresee. The sanctions Japan imposed on the North in the immediate aftermath of the missile launches -- notably, the banning of North Korean ships from entering Japanese ports and the tightening of controls on travels to and from the North -- hurt Pyongyang. The Roh Moo Hyun government's decision not to accommodate the North's request for additional assistance -- 500,000 tons of rice, and 100,000 tons of fertilizer -- must also be counted as a loss for Pyongyang. This last-mentioned loss, however, would be offset to some extent by Seoul's provision of emergency aid for flood relief.

The UN Security Council Resolution

The resolution the UN Security Council adopted on July 15, 2006 was the product of a compromise. Japan and the U.S. had co-sponsored a draft resolution invoking Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which would have authorized the use of force in enforcing sanctions on the North. After threatening to veto it, China, in cooperation with Russia, proposed a rival draft that neither invoked Chapter VII nor included the kind of sanctions that were in the Japan-U.S. draft. Subsequent negotiations produced a compromise draft: in exchange for the omission of any reference to Chapter VII, China and Russia agreed to a tougher text. To cite a few examples:

"Acting under its special responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security," the Security Council "condemns the multiple launches by the DPRK of ballistic missiles on 5 July 2006 local time" and "demands that the DPRK suspend all activities related to its ballistic missile program, and in this context re-establish its pre-existing commitments to a moratorium on missile launching." The Security Council also "requires all Member States|to exercise vigilance and prevent missile and missile-related items, materials, goods and technology being transferred to the DPRK's missile or WMD programs." The Security Council further "requires" Member States not to purchase any missile, missile-related materials and technology from the DPRK. Finally, the Security Council "strongly urges the DPRK to return immediately to the Six-Party Talks, without precondition, to work towards the expeditious implementation of [the] 19 September 2005 Joint Statement." [4]

How may one account for China's unprecedented decision to approve the preceding resolution? The main reason appears to have been Beijing's profound disappointment at Pyongyang's refusal to heed its advice not to launch missiles. In the days following the launches, China sent Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei to Pyongyang "to persuade North Korea to freeze its missile tests and return to [the six-party talks]." [5] Wu was a member of a Chinese delegation headed by Vice Premier Hui Liangyu. An article in the August 2006 issue of the monthly magazine *Zhengming*, published in Hong Kong, asserts that on July 11 the North sent Yang Hyong Sop, a vice-chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, to Beijing bearing Kim Jong Il's letter to Hu Jintao requesting an increase of annual Chinese aid to the North from 12 billion yuan (about \$1.5 billion) to 30 billion yuan (about \$3.8 billion). Hu reportedly underscored to Yang the importance of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, the need for the DPRK to return to the Six-Party Talks, and Pyongyang's need to play a proactive role in building mutual trust in inter-Korean relations. Although Hu dispatched Vice Premier Hui Liangyu and Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei to Pyongyang in order to explain to Kim Jong Il that China would be willing to accommodate the North's request for increased aid should China's conditions be met, the North made Hui and Wu wait at a guesthouse for six hours before informing them that Kim Jong Il was on an inspection tour and unable to meet them. They returned to Beijing empty-handed on July 15 (local time), which would be a day before the crucial vote was taken at the UN Security Council. [6]

Immediately following the adoption of the UN Security Council resolution, according to the same

magazine article, DPRK Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan summoned PRC ambassador Wu Donghe to lodge a strong protest. Kim allegedly told Wu that both the ruling party and the government of the North had been "shocked by the action of the Chinese government that was tantamount to a betrayal of trust." On the same day DPRK ambassador to China Choe Jin Su requested a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing but was told that Li was tied up with an important matter. Choe subsequently returned to the Chinese Foreign Ministry with ten other North Korean diplomats and military attaches but the Chinese refused to see them. After waiting for two hours, the North Koreans reportedly returned to their embassy.[7]

Other signs of new strains in Beijing-Pyongyang relations included a reported freezing of North Korean accounts in the Macau branch of the Bank of China; Beijing's decision to allow "three North Korean refugees who had been holed up at a U.S. Consulate [in Shenyang] to travel to the United States"; Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing's initiative to hold a multilateral meeting (with foreign ministers from ten countries) on Korean issues without North Korean participation at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Kuala Lumpur on July 28; Li's commitment to Japanese Foreign Minister Aso Taro, made at a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the ARF, not to object to Japan's raising the abduction issue at the Six-Party Talks; and admissions by Chinese officials that all was not well in China-North Korea relations.[8]

During a three-day visit to Seoul in early August, the chief spokesman for the PRC Foreign Ministry, Liu Jianchao, acknowledged that disagreements emerged between Beijing and Pyongyang over the missile launch issue. His government's position, Liu said, was that the launches should not have occurred under any circumstances and that they not only aggravated the situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula but also had a negative effect on North Korea itself. While insisting that "good neighborly relations" between China and North Korea remained intact, Liu revealed that China didn't know much about the conditions and developments within the Korean People's Army and that the North listens neither to Chinese words nor to their own words. The latter was construed by the South Korean press as a reference to the North's failure to keep their words. Liu's remarks were corroborated by General Guo Boxiong, vice-chairman of China's Central Military Commission, who, during a visit to Washington, DC, told his American hosts that China actually obtained much information on the North's missile program from the U.S.[9]

North Korean Response

North Korea lost no time in dismissing and denouncing the UN Security Council resolution. Pyongyang's chief representative to the UN, Pak Gil Yon, declared immediately following the resolution's adoption that his country "resolutely condemns the attempt of some countries to misuse the Security Council for the despicable political aim to isolate and put pressure on the DPRK and totally rejects the resolution." Pak's U.S. counterpart, John Bolton, countered: "This has been a historic day. Not only have we unanimously adopted resolution 1695, but North Korea has set a world record in rejecting it 45 minutes after its adoption." [10]

Pyongyang's unwavering position is that as a sovereign state, it has a right to produce, possess, and test ballistic missiles. Since North Korea is not a party to the Missile Technology Control Regime, as it takes pains to point out, the only legal impediment to its missile launches is the self-imposed moratorium on them -- first unveiled in 1999 and reaffirmed in the Japan- DPRK Pyongyang Declaration of September 2002. The North, however, argues that neither of them is binding because the reciprocal obligations underlying them have not been honored. With regard to the argument that by failing to give advance notice to ships and aircraft that would be traveling in the waters and airspace affected by the missile launches, the North had posed serious dangers to their safety, Pyongyang claims that careful planning went into the launches so as to avoid any hazards, pointing to the lack of any damages reported.[11]

When U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called North Korea "a completely irresponsible state and dangerous" for the missile tests, the North reacted angrily. To quote Rice further: "When you look at them testing missiles, not telling anybody they're firing them in all different directions, and they're saying that they have a nuclear weapons capability... that they could make those together is very dangerous." She stressed that the July 15 UNSC resolution shows "that this is a problem that North Korea has with the entire international community." [12]

A commentary distributed by Pyongyang's official news agency, KCNA, characterized Rice's remarks as a reflection of Washington's "bellicose policy of putting pressure on" North Korea, labeling Rice a "political illiterate" (chongch'i munmaengja). The English translation of this phrase by none other than KCNA itself was an erroneous exaggeration - a "political imbecile." This translation was widely quoted in the English-language press, with the result that it was North Korea's image, not Rice's, that was tarnished. [13]

What is indisputable is that the net impact of the North's missile launches has been deleterious. However, before the North could fully absorb the shock of change in Chinese policy and the other adverse repercussions, both symbolic and substantive, a natural disaster of major proportions struck the country in the form of torrential rains, which inundated 24,000 chongbo (approx. 2.4 million acres) of farmland, destroyed over 16,000 dwellings and 202 bridges, and caused the drowning or missing of over 900 people as well as the injury of over 3,000 others. [14] The prolonged absence of Kim Jong Il from public view, who remained invisible for 40 days, most probably bespoke the gravity of the predicament in which Pyongyang's governing elite found itself.

Prospects for the Six-Party Talks

The Six-Party Talks have not reconvened since November 2005, when the first session of the fifth round was held for three days in Beijing. The session ended without any agreement due to the financial sanctions the U.S. imposed on Banco Delta Asia on the grounds of its alleged involvement in money laundering (including U.S. hundred-dollar bills allegedly counterfeited by the North) and other illicit activities for its long-time client North Korea. The action led to the freezing by the Macau-based bank of North Korean accounts totaling \$24 million.

This means that the Joint Declaration of September 19, 2005, the first agreement ever produced by the Six-Party Talks, remains in limbo. The commitments by the North to abandon "all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs" and to return "at an early date" to the NPT and IAEA safeguards in exchange for security guarantees and energy and other assistance are in danger of evaporating into thin air.

Have the North's missile launches and subsequent developments affected the prospects for the resumption of the six-party talks in any way? Inasmuch as the main impediments remain unchanged -- namely, the North's insistence that the financial sanctions be lifted and the U.S.'s flat refusal to do so -- the prospects are neither dimmer nor brighter than they were before the missile incident. Is there, then, any chance that the North will drop its demand? In the long run, the North has much more to gain from successful negotiations in the six-party talks than from the removal of financial sanctions. This is a point the U.S. tried valiantly to press upon China with the hope that China can persuade the North to see the light. As the missile incident has demonstrated, however, China's ability to change the North's behavior is painfully limited. The possession of leverages in an objective sense -- that is, the North's heavy dependence on Chinese aid in energy and food -- is offset to a marked degree by the reluctance on the part of the Chinese leadership to use them. The costs of using them, as subjectively calculated in the inner sanctums of power in Beijing, in other words, outweigh possible benefits, also subjectively estimated.

Is there, then, any chance that the U.S. will change its policy? If the North has really engaged in counterfeiting U.S. currency, as Washington insists, then the U.S. patently has no choice but to take a hard line. For no country can tolerate a threat to the integrity of its currency. The U.S. Treasury Department's investigation of money laundering by Banco Delta Asia needs to be wrapped up as expeditiously as possible. When incontrovertible evidence emerges, the U.S. should not hesitate to share it with all the participants in the Six-Party Talks, including North Korea.

Are there any other ways to break the stalemate? One consequence of the North Korean missile launches has been to expose the gaps in the perceptions and priorities of the putative allies - the U.S., South Korea, and Japan. Whereas Japan and the U.S. always spoke with one voice -- albeit Japan sounded more alarmist and hard-line than the U.S. on a few occasions -- South Korea appeared to be closer to China than to its only military ally, the U.S. The North tried very hard to exploit such differences and to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington, with but a marginal success. ROK President Roh Moo Hyun told editorial writers for selected South Korean news organizations on August 13 that his government "is squeezed between 'stubborn North Korea'" and the U.S. "with whom communication is difficult" on issues relating to the North. He likened how the U.S. views the North to how "civilization views the savages." More important than trying to "force savages to follow the rules of civilization -- such as democracy and market economy," Roh suggested, "is fairness. But the U.S. does not treat North Korea fairly." [15]

As Morton Abramowitz recommended during his testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on July 20, Washington "must try to bridge the gulf with Beijing and Seoul." He urged the U.S. to "craft a new approach that might get real Chinese and South Korean support to seriously test the proposition that there may be some package of security assurances, political measures, and economic bait that would cause North Korea to put aside its nuclear ambitions and stop throwing missiles around." What is needed to accomplish this interim goal, he believes, is to go beyond a "Libyan like approach" that was embodied in the September 19 joint declaration. Abramowitz also believes that "any new negotiating approach should be accompanied by some dramatic measure to show [Washington's] willingness to negotiate -- not only to North Korea but to our partners as well -- such as a visit by Secretary Rice to Pyongyang or an offer to immediately begin negotiations to establish diplomatic relations." [16]

The probability that the Bush administration will heed Abramowitz's recommendations, however, is quite low. This is especially true against the backdrop of the Lebanon crisis and the newly uncovered plot by terrorists to blow up passenger planes. Not only will these developments keep Washington preoccupied, but they will bolster its hard-line policy toward the North as well.

A final question one needs to raise, although the answer remains elusive, is this: Will the North ever give up its nuclear programs? As long as its sense of insecurity persists and as long as it clings to the conviction that nuclear weapons provide the only real deterrents to external attacks, the North Korean leadership will likely hang on to its nuclear and missile programs. This, however, is conjecture. The only way to test the North's true intentions is to resume the Six-Party Talks and craft a package that all the parties deem reasonable, fair, and workable. A worst-case scenario is for the North to conduct a test of a nuclear device, a possibility that cannot be ruled out in light of reports that it may be preparing for an underground nuclear test. [17]

III. Citations

[1] Please note that "Nodong" and "Taepodong" refer to the names of localities (missile bases) in the North and are code-names used by the U.S., South Korea, and Japan. The estimates of the ranges of these missiles vary. Whereas Japan's Defense Agency estimates Taepodong 2's range as 3,500~6,000 km, the U.S. National Security Council gives longer estimates: 10,000 km (if two-stage)

and 15,000 km (if 3-stage). See Mainichi shinbun (Tokyo), July 27 and 30, 2006.

[2] Ibid., July 30, 2006; "N.K. Missile Broke Up Soon After Launch," Korea Herald, July 31, 2006.

[3] William Broad, "Failure Can Be Successful," New York Times, July 9, 2006, p. 1, section 4 (Week in Review).

[4] For the full text of UN Security Council Resolution 1695, see the UN home page at www.un.org. Italics are not in the original but provided by the author. For the background of the resolution, see Warren Hoge, "U.N. Council, in Weakened Resolution, Demands End to North Korean Missile Program," New York Times, July 16, 2006.

[5] "China's Diplomatic Efforts in N. Korea Face Difficulties," Mainichi Daily News, July 14, 2006.

[6] "Anbori kyorui hu kinbak haetton Puk-jung kwan'gye naemak" [An Inside Story of Strained North Korea-China Relations Following Security Council Resolution], Chosun ilbo, August 9, 2006.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Myoung-Gun Lee, "Nations to Hold Talks Without North," Donga ilbo [English edition], July 26, 2006; "China Irked at N. Korea, Analysts Say," Star-Telegram.com, August 4, 2006, online at <http://www.dfw.com/mid/dfw/news/world/15197586.htm> ; "Yojum Pukhan, Chungguk maldo anduroyo" [Recently North Korea Doesn't Heed Chinese Advice], Chosun ilbo, August 7, 2006.

[9] Ibid.; "Sr. Chinese General Discusses N. Korea With US," Yahoo! News, July 18, 2006, online at http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20060718/ts_nm/china_usa_dc_1&printer=1 .

[10] Warren Hoge, "U.N. Council, in Weakened Resolution Demands End to North Korean Missile Program," New York Times, July 16, 2006.

[11] "Oemusong taeyonin misail palsanun chongsang kunsu hullyon ui irhwan" [Foreign Ministry Spokesman: Missile Launches were Part of Normal Military Training], Choson chungang t'ongsin [Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)], Pyongyang, July 6, 2006, online at <http://www.kcna.co.jp/calendar/2006/07/07-07/2006-0706-016.html> . Although these arguments were made prior to the adoption of the UNSC resolution, the North repeated them after the resolution was approved.

[12] "North Korea 'Completely Irresponsible', 'Dangerous': Rice," Yahoo! News, July 22, 2006, online at http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20060722/wl_asia_afp/usaseannkoreavie tna.

[13] "Choson Chungang T'ongsinsa nonp'yong Mi kungmu changgwan paron un tae Choson appak chongch'aek hamnihwaga soksim" [KCNA: The True Aim of U.S. Secretary of State's Remarks is to Justify Policy to Put Pressure on DPRK], Choson chungang t'ongsin [KCNA], Pyongyang, July 24, 2006, online at <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2006/200607/news07/25.htm> . For the error-ridden English translation, see "KCNA Blasts Rice's Outcry," KCNA, Pyongyang, July 24, 2006, online at <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2006/200607/news07/25.htm> .

[14] These are official statistics reported in a pro-North Korean newspaper published in Tokyo. See "3,000 myong isang ui sasangja, p'oguro inhayo kakji eso chokji anhun p'ihae" [Torrential Rains Cause 3000 Deaths and Injuries and Considerable Damage in Many Places], Choson sinbo (Tokyo), August 7, 2006, online at <http://www.korea-np.co.jp/news/ArticlePrint.aspex?ArticleID=22797> .

[15] "Chakt'ongkwon, taebuk p'yonghwa taech'o edo p'iryo" [Operational Control (Over the Military

During Wartime) Necessary To Deal With North and Peace Issues], Hangyoreh sinmun, August 19, 2006, online at <http://www.hani.co.kr/popups/print.hani?ksn=150287> .

[16] "Testimony of Morton Abramowitz, Senior Fellow, The Century Foundation, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, July 20, 2006, online at <http://lugar.senate.gov/pressapp/record.cfm?id=258964> .

[17] "Seoul Beefs Up Watch on North," Korea Herald, August 21, 2006. Emblematic of the seriousness with which South Korea views this development is its decision to "closely watch for any signs 24 hours a day."

IV. 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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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org