



North Korea's Missile Launches and South Korea's Response



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Essay by Moo-jin Yang

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I. Introduction

Moo-jin Yang, a Professor at the Graduate School of North Korean Studies who majored in international politics and specializes in inter-Korean relations, writes, "South Korea has to take decisive steps in response to the provocative behavior of North Korea, but must also prepare an "exit" too. To stop the tension from rising further on the peninsula, we have to find ways to resolve the problems peacefully through dialogue. That is, we must maintain the basic dynamic force of inter-Korean relations and strengthen solidarity within the international community for the quick return to the Six-Party Talks."

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II. Essay by Moo-jin Yang

- North Korea's Missile Launches and South Korea's Response
by Moo-jin Yang

Despite twists and turns, inter-Korean relations have progressed vigorously. But cold water has been poured on them. Dark clouds are once again hanging over the Korean peninsula. This is due to the aftermath of North Korea's recent missile launch. Under the current situation, when the next round of Six-Party Talks will be held cannot be known, as the missile issue has taken us out of the frying pan and into the fire.

On July 5, North Korea launched 7 missiles: six are presumed to have been Scud (range: 500 km) or Nodong (range: 1,300 km) class missiles, fired from Gidaeryeong, Anbyeon county, Gangwon province; and one is presumed to have been of the Taepodong class (range: 2,500 km), launched from Taepodong, Hwadae county, North Hamgyeong province.

The United States and Japan stipulated that North Korea's launching of missiles is provocative conduct directed at the U.S., Japan, and international community, and they are puzzling over imposing sanctions against North Korea. South Korea stipulated that intensive political pressure seeks to change the situation between North Korea and the United States in regards to North Korea's nuclear issue, and Seoul itself uses a strategy of pressure inside the framework of dialogue.

Expert analyses roughly describe North Korea's intentions regarding the missile launch as twofold. First, North Korea wants to pressure the U.S. into bilateral talks. Second, North Korea wants to pressure Japan into bringing the worsened Megumi Yokota issue to a close, and into reconvening normalization of relations talks as quickly as possible. The former focuses on the Taepodong's effective range and timing of the missile launch--which coincided with Independence Day in America (July 4th)--and the latter focuses on the Nodong class missile's effective range and direction.

North Korea heightened the crisis through the missile launch. Heightening the crisis induced interest about North Korea, and this interest finally could lead to the negotiation table. However, recently, the possibility of negotiation is not high due to the heightened crisis in U.S.-DPRK and Japan-DPRK relations. Rather, what is higher is the possibility that the United States and Japan will lead North Korea to dialogue through direct and indirect pressure. North Korea is also aware of this possibility.

If it is so, North Korea's launching of missiles was not merely intended to pressure the U.S. and Japan. There could be something else. The sale of missiles is one other possibility. Since September 2005, North Korea has suffered financial sanctions from Western nations, along with the United States, on its transactions with Banco Delta Asia Bank of Macao. Recently, North Korea has even been sanctioned from remitting and withdrawing cash from Vietnam and Mongolia.

Even in these conditions, North Korea needed U.S. dollars. Pyongyang may believe that the export of missiles is a method that can satisfy this need for hard currency. The problem is groping for missile purchasers. Purchasers must be actual states, and North Korea must consider these Countries' relationships with both China and Russia.

Some experts guess that one purchaser could be Pakistan. Pakistan is the competitor of India. International political scientists are assaying that in order for the United States to contain China, the

U.S. is pursuing a strategy of augmenting Japan's military power in Northeast Asia and India's military power in Southwest Asia. Beijing is aware of this U.S. strategy toward China, and therefore it is known to be continuing its friendly relations with North Korea to keep Japan in check in Northeast Asia, and likewise cooperative relations with Pakistan to keep India in check in Southwest Asia.

Even if there are purchasers, such as Pakistan or other Middle East countries, it does not mean that missiles can be directly exported. The stumbling block is the performance of the North Korean missiles. In August 1998, North Korea experienced the launching of one of its missiles. As we all know, it failed. We also know that, since then, North Korea, in its own way, has been obtaining technology in order to avoid a repetition of that failure. Generally, weapons systems change every 20 years. We know that the current DPRK stockpile of missiles is ten years old. Technological defects have been dealt with. Regardless, missile expiration dates approach day by day--so the missiles are useless if unused.

Whether a missile's performance test succeeds can be judged by whether the missile reaches its intended target. Because other states may misunderstand the performance test to be an attack, the state conducting the test needs to consult and come to an agreement beforehand with any other state whose territorial air space and waters are involved. With concern to the recent missile test firing, it is known that North Korea did notify, discuss, and ask for the understanding of China and Russia. Leaving out the fact that this was a matter of good etiquette among allies, it looks like the test firing is related to the performance test's intended target.

Some experts are putting out analyses that the launching pad at Anbyeon county in Kangwon province does not point toward Japan. The prediction of the missile's direction, distance, and ultimate ending point can be known through the acute angle of the launching pad. Also, experts have said that the U.S. and Japan know this angle already, but they have not made it clear. In fact, the DPRK direction, distance, and ultimate ending point of the DPRK missiles are far from what the U.S. and Japan have asserted them to be.

Anyway, North Korea's missile launches served multiple purposes: to display a show of force against the U.S. and Japan, and also to market DPRK missiles via performance tests. If the tests were carried out for the sale of missiles, then another crisis looms: That is, the realization of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Most missiles are carried by ship to the Middle East for sale. There is a growing danger that the PSI will become a reality on the Korean peninsula.

The DPRK test firing of missiles brought more pressure on the North and deepened the country's isolation. Even if the intention of the display of military force was to increase tensions and lead to bilateral talks with the United States, and put to rest the worsening public sentiment concerning the Megumi Yokota issue, it would be difficult for North Korea to obtain such results. Rather, such only makes louder the voice of hard-liners in the United States and Japan. The United States and Japan are coping more strongly with the North Korean issue at the national security level. For some time already, the problem has been submitted to the UN Security Council, intensifying the pressure on North Korea. It has also been recommended that the speed of inter-Korean relations be controlled. This is all being carried out step by step.

However, in this situation, the issue is really about what decision South Korea will make. This is not the time for South Korea to remain idle and watch the provocative behavior of the North, such as the launching of missiles. On the other hand, now is the time to carefully consider the effect hard-line countermeasures toward North Korea's missile test firing might have on South Korea. South Korea is standing at a crossroads, and must choose how to respond to this dilemma.

Of course, the South Korean government has to take clear and decisive steps in response to the recent DPRK test firing of missiles. Recently, President Roh Moo-hyun mentioned "security" as the top priority of inter-Korean relations. The DPRK missile launch is an enormous issue, as it threatens South Korea's security. The South Korean administration pointed this out strongly to North Korea. Also, Seoul has to show its decisive attitude through real action. Only this will convince people. Even if they are for military training or the marketing of missiles, or targeted toward the U.S. and Japan--and not South Korea--all of these North Korean actions are provocative behaviors made to increase tensions. If this kind of behavior is ignored, it might encourage more provocative North Korean behavior.

The nature of the nuclear and missile issues are essentially different. True, missile launches do pose a grave threat to the Korean peninsula and the international community. This granted, North Korea's missile launches do not violate any international laws or agreements. It is difficult to deny that a country has the right to develop and test its own missiles. For now, the test firing will remain a hot international issue; but as time passes the issue could grow dimmer as China and Russia oppose placing sanctions on North Korea.

In the future, even with sufficient expectations for the progress of this situation, it is better not to modify all of South Korea's policies toward the North. This would be too emotional a response. Cool-headed judgment is required. If South Korea participates imprudently in the international community's resolute opposition toward North Korea, South Korea could lose control over the conflict on the Korean peninsula. If this happens, the tension on the peninsula will rise higher and fly further out of South Korea's control, and in the short term we will lose the space for solving the missile issue. Over the long term, it will become more complicated.

In addition, the stopping of inter-Korean relations, such as inter-Korean cooperation, has to be carefully examined for the ripple effect it might have. Inter-Korean cooperation like that of the Kaesong Industrial Complex is still in its early stages; even if it is halted, it would not have a big effect on North Korea. Rather, it would bring greater damage to the South Korean private enterprises that are participating in the inter-Korean cooperation. Indeed, South Korea has to be very careful not to downgrade its own foreign credit and increase the security risk. Also, we have to keep in mind the fact that if damaged once, inter-Korean relations will take a long time to recover.

Therefore, a rapid switchover of the policy toward North Korea could never be desirable. We must clearly and modestly respond while thinking about resolving the problem at hand. The more difficult the situation, the more inter-Korean relations have to be maintained.

In fact, inter-Korean dialogue could be a useful way for persuading North Korea. Inter-Korean dialogue contributed a lot to the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement made at the 4th round of Six-Party Talks. Inter-Korean relations have to be maintained, as through them South Korea can raise its voice on pending issues concerning the Korean peninsula, and carry South Koreans' desires.

The time of the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1994 interrupted inter-Korean relations. What was the result? South Korea did not say anything about issues related to its own fortune, yet it shouldered much of the costs. After that, inter-Korean relations became subordinate to U.S.-DPRK relations. This mistake of history cannot repeat itself. There is no nation as unfortunate as one that cannot find instruction from its history.

The situation is complicated and making a decision is not going to be easy, but it is clear which way South Korea has to go. South Korea has to take decisive steps in response to the provocative behavior of North Korea, but must also prepare an "exit" too. To stop the tension from rising further on the peninsula, we have to find ways to resolve the problems peacefully through dialogue. That is,

we must maintain the basic dynamic force of inter-Korean relations and strengthen solidarity within the international community for the quick return to the Six-Party Talks.

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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