Policy Forum 06-53A: North Korea’s Missile Tests: Malign Neglect Meets Brinkmanship

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Essay by Wonhyuk Lim

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I. Introduction

Wonhyuk Lim, *Nonresident Fellow* at the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution, writes, “If pre-emption is too risky and malign neglect is too ineffective, the

only remaining alternative is to establish a credible red line and negotiate seriously with North Korea through bilateral and multilateral talks… Otherwise, North Korea is sure to produce more fissile material and perfect its missile technology, escalating tension every once in a while to draw attention."

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II. Essay by Wonhyuk Lim

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by Wonhyuk Lim

When diplomacy is stalled, North Korea escalates tension to break the deadlock. The latest example is its missile tests on July 4. Firing a barrage of short-, medium-, and long-range test missiles on America's Independence Day is a rather unconventional way to seek dialogue, but the North Koreans have reasons to believe it will work.

In 1994, when its nuclear negotiations with the U.S. hit a snag, North Korea threatened to reprocess plutonium. This pushed the Korean peninsula to the brink of war, but the two sides soon resumed the talks and signed the Geneva Agreed Framework. North Korea agreed to the phased dismantlement of its nuclear program in exchange for multilateral energy assistance and the normalization of relations with the U.S. In 1998, when U.S. concerns about North Korea's missile program and underground facilities at Kumchangri delayed the implementation of the Agreed Framework, North Korea launched a multi-stage rocket and shocked the world. This prompted an extensive review of the U.S. policy toward North Korea (known as the Perry Process), and led to a series of bilateral talks and meetings to speed up and broaden engagement, including negotiations to stop North Korea's missile development.

Starting in 2001, under the motto of "anything but Clinton," the Bush Administration tried a new policy of "malign neglect" toward North Korea, but Pyongyang made sure it could not be ignored. When the Agreed Framework collapsed over the allegations of North Korea's highly enriched uranium program in late 2002, Pyongyang kicked out international monitors and restarted its plutonium program. This precipitated a crisis, but soon led to the establishment of a diplomatic process known as the six-party talks. When these talks stalled in early 2005, North Korea declared it had nuclear weapons, retracted its self-imposed moratorium on missile tests, and de-loaded its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon to produce more fissile material. Contrary to the expectations of many casual observers, this provocative action resulted in the first serious bilateral talks between the U.S. and North Korea under the Bush Administration. In sum, as twisted as the North Koreans' logic may be, it is based on their negotiating experience with the Americans. North Korea's brinkmanship is the evil twin of America's half-hearted engagement.

This time is no different. Last September, after producing a joint statement of principles on denuclearization, normalization, cooperation, and peace-building, the six-party talks went into a holding pattern as sharp disagreements re-emerged over the sequencing of concrete actions to be taken by the U.S. and North Korea. Whereas the U.S. wants North Korea to abandon all its nuclear programs first, .North Korea insists on "simultaneous action," as its Foreign Ministry made clear on June 1. The Ministry openly invited the chief U.S. negotiator to Pyongyang to resume bilateral talks, but when this invitation was rebuffed, North Korea went back to its old playbook and proceeded with the missile tests.

How should the U.S. respond this time? One option is to take a pre-emptive strike before North Korea's threat matures. Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, two highly respected former defense officials, justify such a military strike under the notion of preventive defense (Washington Post, June 22).. They add that given the military balance on the Korean peninsula, it would be suicidal for North Korea to retaliate. But there are two problems with this argument. First, if it would be suicidal for North Korea to attack South Korea, it would be even more suicidal for North Korea to deliver a mortal payload to the U.S. The logic of deterrence should keep the situation in check just like in the days of the Cold War. Second, how could the U.S. convince North Korea that its pre-emptive strike would not be followed by a decapitation campaign or a full-blown offensive? Send a special envoy to Pyongyang? Again, according to the logic of deterrence, it would be suicidal for Kim Jong Il to attack first, but it would make sense for him to fire away in response to a pre-emptive strike and take out American, Japanese, and Korean lives with his own.

Another option is to ignore North Korea's brinkmanship and bide time until Pyongyang does "something really stupid" so that multilateral sanctions could be imposed. This would be in line with the current policy of making life difficult for Kim Jong Il and hoping for his downfall-what may be called "Cubanization of North Korea." But there are two problems with this approach. First, international nonproliferation and missile-control regimes have significant loopholes, and in the absence of serious diplomatic efforts to define and maintain "a red line," what constitutes "something really stupid" would be unclear. Back in 1994, through direct talks with North Korea, the U.S. made sure that reprocessing plutonium would constitute a red line, and the Agreed Framework helped to sustain this red line. Similarly, back in 1999, the U.S. was able to establish a red line on North Korea's missile tests after serious bilateral negotiations. In short, these red lines were shaped through diplomacy. But, after years of malign neglect, no one knows where the line is drawn anymore. Can North Korea continue to produce fissile material as long as it does not transfer this material to a terrorist organization? Second, North Korea has taken tentative measures for economic reform and greatly improved its relations with China, South Korea, and Russia since 2000, and these neighbors are unlikely to go along with punitive sanctions unless they are convinced that the U.S. has given diplomacy a fair chance. North Korea would like to stabilize its external environment by normalizing relations with the U.S., but, if it must, it can get by on decent relations it has with its neighbors. In the meantime, while Washington hardliners pretend they are making life miserable for Kim Jong Il, the U.S. position in Northeast Asia is being eroded.

If pre-emption is too risky and malign neglect is too ineffective, the only remaining alternative is to establish a credible red line and negotiate seriously with North Korea through bilateral and multilateral talks. The U.S. should end what North Korea regards as "hostile policy" toward it, and North Korea should dismantle its nuclear program under inspection in a phased and reciprocal manner. Through various efforts to improve relations and promote economic cooperation, the six parties should build peace in Northeast Asia. Otherwise, North Korea is sure to produce more fissile material and perfect its missile technology, escalating tension every once in a while to draw attention.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

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