


Policy Forum 09-028: Reading North Korea Right

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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 09-028: Reading North Korea Right", NAPSNet Policy Forum, April 07, 2009, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/reading-north-korea-right/>

Reading North Korea Right

Policy Forum Online 09-028A: April 7th, 2009

By Stephen Noerper

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I. Introduction

Stephen Noerper, Senior Fellow at the EastWest Institute and a Nautilus Institute Senior Associate, writes, "A Chinese adage suggests that a 'cornered dog bites.' President Obama and the international community should signal that we are not simply responding to a crisis or 'managing' the North Korean problem. It is time to address and, where possible, eliminate problem areas with North Korea-while maintaining a 'stern and unified' stance on the core issues."

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II. Article by Stephen Noerper

- "Reading North Korea Right"

By Stephen Noerper

Despite warnings from U.S. President Barack Obama, North Korea went ahead with its planned rocket launch.

Pyongyang maintained it was only sending a satellite into space; its critics are convinced this was a test launch of a missile that, in the future, could be used to deliver a nuclear payload. But if most international coverage has focused on what this would mean for North Korea's ability to threaten a strike against Japan or possibly Alaska and Hawaii, there are other, more basic questions to consider: Why now? What does North Korea have to gain from this action?

To place the test in its proper context, it is important to remember that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is poor, isolated and-at its core-weak. With a per capita annual income below \$1,800-some 15 times less than South Korea-North Korea has hobbled through the last two decades of post-Cold War transition. Nearby Mongolia, with a population one-seventh the size, enjoys twice the DPRK's per capita income-now that it is no longer trapped in a Stalinist system. China still provides North Korea with a fairly steady stream of fuel and foodstuffs, but Beijing and Moscow-the North's one-time patrons-are now far more involved economically with South Korea.

North Korea's dismal economy relies heavily on international good will-including, somewhat ironically, aid and trade from South Korea. The \$1.2 billion in annual trade makes South Korea the North's second largest trading partner after China. But inter-Korean relations remain difficult: Pyongyang recently closed the Kaesong Industrial Zone just north of the Demilitarized Zone and it keeps berating Seoul at every opportunity. Nonetheless, South Korea continues to believe that the "unification tunnel"-a policy of encouraging gradual unification-will pay more dividends in the long run than responding in kind.

As isolated, weak and insecure as it is, North Korea has only one card to play: its nuclear program. Missiles imply delivery capability, but the 1998 Taepodong 1 and 2006 Taepodong 2 tests were not great successes. So, too, with the low-yield 2006 nuclear test, which was greeted with international concern but suggested that North Korea still doesn't qualify as a full-fledged "nuclear weapon state." Artillery, chemical and biological weapons stores and a special warfare component also warrant continued international concern. Its "million man" army may be more a jobs program than a serious force, but its sheer size is troubling. If history is any guide, we will find, as we did in the Soviet Far East, discarded hardware that may prove to be more of an environmental hazard than conventional threat.

With all that in mind, the "why now" and "what for" become easier to decipher:

North Korea sees an opportunity to challenge Obama on his first trip abroad, hoping to make itself the center of international attention. It surely remembers how John F. Kennedy, another young Democratic president, confronted his own missile crisis back in 1962. As self-absorbed as it is, Pyongyang may genuinely believe it can provoke a similar sense of crisis-despite the huge differences between these two situations.

North Korea hopes to push Obama into a direct bilateral dialogue and eventually gain the recognition (and respect) it sorely desires. North Korea has felt aggrieved since China and Russia, its former patrons, recognized South Korea almost two decades ago. Pyongyang hasn't been able to achieve a similar result with the United States. Now that Washington is making overtures to Iran, Pyongyang may see itself as next on the list. Besides, just as Iran did last year, North Korea is claiming it's only launching a communications satellite. The U.S. State Department has pointed to Libya's abandonment of its nuclear program as a model for North Korea. Pyongyang probably believes its payoff could be a peace treaty, normalization and U.S. aid and investment-in that order.

North Korea sees the six-party talks as too often "5+1." Seeking to sow discord among the others, it hopes to play on the low popularity of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak and Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso. At the same time, it hopes to strengthen its hand with China in the wake of the recent meeting of the North Korean and Chinese premiers. Pyongyang also casts a concerned glance at the recent improvement of long-strained U.S.-Russia relations.

North Korea sees the test as a very public way to dampen speculation about a power vacuum after reports of leader Kim Jong Il's stroke last August. But the missile test could also mean that top military leaders are putting on a show while Kim remains at least partially incapacitated. If this is the case, we are likely to see a further ratcheting up of tensions, with the possibility of accidents or miscalculations as competing factions jockey for internal control. These aspects of timing and motivation should condition the "stern and unified" response President Obama called for at the G-20 meeting in London. Accordingly:

We should be careful not to overreact and to jump to conclusions about what the missile test really represents until all the detailed military assessments are in.

We should resist a downgrade of the multilateral dialogue mechanism-which ultimately needs to be expanded beyond the denuclearization mandate to cover development, infrastructure, energy and the environment. This implies an acceptance by the five other players in the six-party talks that differing, flexible tactical approaches may be need to achieve strategic objectives.

We should move toward full U.S.-North Korea normalization, not to reward bad behavior, but to open channels for dialogue and curb the potential for mishaps with a regime that is undergoing an uncertain-and dangerous--transition.

A Chinese adage suggests that a "cornered dog bites." President Obama and the international community should signal that we are not simply responding to a crisis or "managing" the North Korean problem. It is time to address and, where possible, eliminate problem areas with North Korea-while maintaining a "stern and unified" stance on the core issues.

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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