

Policy Forum 06-67A: South Korean Civil Society's Response to the N.K. Missile Tests Follows Predictable Ideological Divides



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Essay by Yi Kiho

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I. Introduction

Yi Kiho, Director of the South Korea office of the Nautilus Institute, writes, "What we can understand from the responses of each sector of civil society is that neither group is focused on the military threat posed by the missile launches? Instead of using the missile tests just to criticize the North Korean policies of the United States (in the case of progressives) or South Korea (in the case of conservatives), it would be more productive for South Korean NGOs to provide constructive alternatives. It is high time for South Korean civil society to put aside long-standing ideological differences and work together on building a peaceful future for the Korean Peninsula."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by Yi Kiho

- South Korean Civil Society's Response to the N.K. Missile Tests Follows Predictable Ideological Divides

by Yi Kiho

On the American Independence day (4th of July U.S. time), North Korea launched several missiles without any notice to China or South Korea. For North Korea, nuclear weapons and missiles are not only military matters but also diplomatic tools, as they seem to be Pyongyang's only negotiating cards with the United States. This means that despite their provocative actions, North Korea is likely to favor renewed negotiations with the United States, rather than shutting down any dialogue channels. However, North Korea also likely feels that it is negotiating from a position of strength, and will therefore attach preconditions for dialogue, like the lifting of financial sanctions.

The South Korean media has emphasized that the Roh Moo-hyun administration is likely to be the loser from the missile test. The media has criticized the government's North Korea policy, arguing that the South Korean government is losing the initiative in its relations with both North Korea and the United States, while being dragged along by a North Korean regime increasingly governed by hawks according to the "military-first policy." In response, Unification Minister Lee Jongseok, in a statement strongly supported by President Roh, argued that the North Korea policy that has failed the most is that of the U.S. The media countered that this was an inappropriate statement that demonstrated that the Roh regime lacks good communication with Washington.

So far, South Korean NGOs have been relatively silent compared to previous incidents involving North Korea. Immediately after the missile tests, there was a short joint statement published by People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), the Korea Youth Corps (KYC), Peace Network, Women Making Peace, YMCA, Korean Federation of Environmental Movements (KFEM), Green Korea, and Korea Women's Associations United (KWAU). The main points of the statement are as follows:

"We express regret that, despite concerns from South Korea and the international community, North Korea proceeded with missile tests... The missile launches were an

unwise action which raised the security stakes on the Korean Peninsula while also increasing the leverage of hawks in Washington and Tokyo...

We are also deeply worried about the adoption of a hard-line response, both domestically and internationally, towards North Korea. President Bush ceased negotiations regarding North Korea's missiles as soon as he took office...

We also find it problematic that domestic politics and the media define the North Korean missile launches as a failure of South Korea's 'engagement policy' and initiate a hard-line approach toward the North. The current North Korean missile launch crisis is the result of the U.S. government's hard-line policy and North Korea's improper response to it."

This joint statement is very cautious and criticizes the positions of all governments, while strongly arguing that efforts at dialogue and engagement must be continued. However, this position is not very influential and has been largely ignored by the media. Instead, the voices of conservative civil groups were emphasized by the major daily newspapers like the Chosun, Joongang, and Donga. Their main argument is that the North Korean missile test was a provocative action that proves that the Sunshine (or engagement) policy of the South Korean government has failed. They thus call on the South Korean government to fundamentally reconsider its North Korean policy, recognize that the Sunshine Policy is a failure, and strengthen its relationship with the U.S.

What we can understand from the responses of each sector of civil society is first that neither group is focused on the military threat posed by the missile launches. Rather, both groups recognize the tests as a political or diplomatic gesture. Progressives worry about how these events could change the cooperative relationship between South and North Korea, and that they might cause a breakdown of the Six-party Talks. On the other hand conservatives eagerly want to utilize this momentum for a change in North Korea policy to put security and human rights considerations ahead of economic cooperation and exchange programs.

Secondly, both groups are critical of the Roh administration's attitude toward North Korea. Progressive groups have argued that despite the missile crisis, food and fertilizer aid should continue; while the government suspended 500,000 tons of rice loans and 100,000 tons of fertilizer grants. These progressive NGOs argue that this suspension threatens the food security of the North Korean people, while the government considers it as a powerful sanction to compel North Korea. At the same time Conservative groups allege that the present engagement policy will never change the North Korean regime and society. Thus they argue that the government's North Korean policy should be fundamentally changed, and that South Korea should strengthen its alliance with the United States.

Thirdly, progressive groups think that North Korea should not remain an isolated state, but should be helped by South Korea to gradually open their economy to the outside world. Conservative groups, however, believe that this kind of policy will eventually isolate not only North Korea, but South Korea as well. The most unfortunate part of this situation is that, just as with the different governments, it is very difficult to create a dialogue among the different groups.

Instead of using the missile tests just to criticize the North Korean policies of the United States (in the case of progressives) or South Korea (in the case of conservatives), it would be more productive for South Korean NGOs to provide constructive alternatives. Both groups of civil society organizations should present more persuasive visions and roadmaps about North-South Korean relations and regional security and cooperation, with more detailed scenarios. It is high time for

South Korean civil society to put aside long-standing ideological differences and work together on building a peaceful future for the Korean Peninsula.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@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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