What North Korea’s Missile Test Means

The NAPSNet Policy Forum provides expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia. As always, we invite your responses to this report and hope you will take the opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis.

Recommended Citation

Leon V. Sigal, "What North Korea’s Missile Test Means", Policy Forum, July 27, 2006,
https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/what-north-koreas-missile-test-means-2/

Essay by Leon V. Sigal

Policy Forum Online 06-62A: July 27th, 2006

I. Introduction

Leon V. Sigal, Director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council, writes "The hard-liners believe Pyongyang is determined to arm and will never trade away its weapons. Their conviction is not just faith-based: it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Without a serious U.S. effort to negotiate, they are certain to be right."

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 Leon V. Sigal

- What North Korea's Missile Test Means
by Leon V. Sigal

The unanimous U.N. Security Council resolution condemning North Korea's Taepodong-2 missile test give both North Korea and the Bush administration an excuse not to negotiate. As such, it misses the point.

The Taepodong-2 test is no bolt from the blue just to get attention. It is Pyongyang's reaction to backtracking by Washington in the ten months since a breakthrough was reached in six-party talks.

Last September, under pressure from Japan and South Korea to negotiate in earnest, the Bush administration grudgingly accepted a joint statement drafted by China that embraces the main goal it sought, a strategic decision by Pyongyang to abandon "all nuclear weapons and existing weapons programs."

Does North Korea mean what it says? Nobody knows, with the possible exception of Kim Jong-il. But the surest way to find out is sustained diplomatic give-and-take to implement the accord. That requires Washington to take phased reciprocal steps to reconcile -- end enmity -- as Pyongyang eliminates its nuclear programs, as agreed in the joint statement.

That is just what hard-liners in the Bush administration refuse to do. When China first circulated a draft of what would become the September joint statement before the February 2004 round of six-party talks, it was rejected by Vice President Dick Cheney. "We don't negotiate with evil," he told a meeting of top officials. "We defeat it."

Hard-liners identify diplomatic give-and-take with rewarding bad behavior. Their stance rests on a fiction they propagate that Kim Jong-il duped President Clinton by halting its plutonium program while starting a covert effort to enrich uranium for bombs, or as President Bush put it on March 6, 2003, "My predecessor, in a good-faith effort, entered into a framework agreement. The United States honored its side of the agreement; North Korea didn't. While we felt the agreement was in force, North Korea was enriching uranium."

The trouble is, the United States reneged on the 1994 Agreed Framework first by failing to reward North Korea's good behavior. Washington got what it most wanted up front -- a freeze of Pyongyang's plutonium program, a program that by 2002 could have generated enough plutonium for at least fifty bombs. Washington did not live up to its end of the bargain, however. When the Republicans won control of Congress in elections just days after the October 1994 accord was signed, they denounced the deal as appeasement. Shying away from taking them on, President Clinton backpedaled on implementation. He did little easing of sanctions until 2000. Washington promised to provide two nuclear power plants "by a target date of 2003," but did not even pour concrete for the foundations until August 2002. It did deliver heavy fuel oil as promised but seldom on schedule. Above all, it did not live up to its pledge in Article II of the Agreed Framework to "move toward full normalization of political and economic relations" -- end enmity and relax sanctions.

In 1997, after Washington was slow to fulfill the terms of the accord, Pyongyang threatened to break it. Its acquisition of gas centrifuges to enrich uranium from Pakistan began shortly thereafter. That was a pilot program, not the operational capability U.S. intelligence says it moved to acquire in 2001 after the Bush administration rejected talks and instead disclosed that it was a target for preemptive nuclear attack. When the administration retaliated in November 2002 by halting shipment of heavy fuel oil promised under the Agreed Framework, North Korea, in turn, restarted its plutonium program.

Since September, the hard-liners have been at it again. The ink on the joint statement was hardly dry when Cheney and his hard-line cabal struck back, reneging on U.S. commitments and hamstringing U.S. negotiators.

Under pressure from South Korea, Japan, and China, Washington had agreed to "respect" Pyongyang's right to nuclear power and "to discuss at an appropriate time the subject of the provision of light-water reactors" it had promised in 1994 but never delivered. Yet, in closing

remarks just after accepting the joint statement, Hill announced a decision, dictated by the hard-liners, to "terminate KEDO," the international consortium set up to construct the reactors. Later that day, Secretary of State Rice implied that the "appropriate time" for the discussion of providing reactors was when hell freezes over: "When the North Koreans have dismantled their nuclear weapons and other nuclear programs verifiably and are indeed nuclear-free ... I suppose we can discuss anything."

Pyongyang reacted sharply. "The basis of finding a solution to the nuclear issue between the D.P.R.K. and the U.S. is to wipe out the distrust historically created between the two countries and a physical groundwork for building bilateral confidence is none other than the U.S. provision of reactors to the D.P.R.K.," a Foreign Ministry spokesman said. "The U.S. should not even dream of the issue of the D.P.R.K.'s dismantlement of its nuclear deterrent before providing reactors, a physical guarantee for confidence-building." Alternatives to the reactors as a "physical groundwork for building bilateral confidence" or "physical guarantee for confidence-building" are conceivable, so whether Pyongyang will insist on Washington's commitment to provide reactors before it begins elimination remains to be seen. It is unlikely to do so without U.S. participation in South Korea's offer of an equivalent amount of electricity.

Even worse, having declared in the September agreement that it "has no intention to attack or invade the D.P.R.K. with nuclear or conventional weapons" and having pledged to "respect [D.P.R.K.] sovereignty," renouncing military attack and regime change, the administration backed away. Again under pressure from hard-liners, Hill undercut those commitments in testimony before Congress days later by sounding the old refrain, "all options remain on the table."

Worst of all, the administration began to impose sanctions under the Illicit Activities Initiative. The United States is right to try to prevent counterfeiting of U.S. currency and other illicit activities by North Korea by blocking its ill-gotten gains. But the measures go well beyond that to freeze many of the North's legitimate hard currency accounts and impede its foreign trade, a strange way to encourage economic reform.

In response, Pyongyang has publicly demanded the unfreezing of its accounts. More significantly, on March 7, it offered two alternatives that Washington soon rejected. One was to open accounts in a U.S. bank, the North's way of underscoring that much of its hard currency was derived from legitimate trade. A second alternative was to establish a non-permanent U.S.-D.P.R.K. consultative body to resolve money-laundering and counterfeiting problems. North Korea's emphasis on direct talks is understandable. Will the United States ever end enmity or respect its sovereignty if it does not even deign to meet one-on-one?

Irreconcilables in the administration see sanctions as the way to block diplomatic give-and-take while they wait for North Korea to collapse. Instead of moving to free up North Korean bank accounts not involved in illicit trade, they are pushing banks to close other North Korean accounts needed for legitimate trade.

The administration, says a senior official says, had decided "to move toward more confrontational measures." According to Under Secretary of State Robert Joseph, "We believe that they will reinforce the prospect for success of those talks." What does he mean by success? The answer, according to another senior State Department official, is to turn six-party talks into nothing more than "a surrender mechanism."

When Hill wanted to go to Pyongyang to jump-start talks on implementing the joint statement, he was kept from going unless the North shut down its Yongbyon reactor, assuring that no talks took place. Hill was also kept from talks with Kim Gye-gwan in Tokyo on April 11-12. Afterward, Kim was

blunt. "Now we know what the U.S. position is," he said. "There is nothing wrong with delaying the resumption of six-party talks. In the meantime we can make more deterrents."

In addition to threatening more reprocessing and a missile test, Pyongyang reached out to Tokyo. The day of Kim's comments, Song Il-ho, D.P.R.K. negotiator in talks with Japan, criticized Tokyo for trying to involve Seoul in the abduction dispute, but added, "if we are to hold talks in a frank manner about ways to deepen the understanding of the two peoples, we are ready to do so at any time." The next day, Kim Young-nam, the titular number two in Pyongyang, gave an interview to Kyodo extending an olive branch to Tokyo. "If the Japanese authorities will move toward the implementation of the Pyongyang declaration, there will be no problems that are impossible to solve" -- a reference to the abduction issue. This was an advance from the position enunciated by Kim Jong-il to Prime Minister Koizumi in their second summit meeting, "Progress in improving the bilateral relationship would largely depend on what attitude and stand the ally of Japan would take." Instead of entering into sustained negotiations, however, the government introduced a bill in the Diet to implement sanctions. Shortly thereafter, the North began preparations for the Taepodong test.

If Washington ends enmity, Pyongyang keeps saying, it will disarm, but if Washington keeps treating it like a foe, it feels threatened and will keep testing missiles until they work, and even worse, generate more plutonium for nuclear weapons.

Pyongyang had stopped testing longer-range missiles in 1998 and had offered to end tests, deployment and production of all such missiles in 2000, but the Bush administration halted talks with Pyongyang in 2001. The North had one or two bomb's worth of plutonium and the program was verifiably frozen. After six years of bluff and bluster from Bush, it has eight to ten bombs' worth.

The hard-liners believe Pyongyang is determined to arm and will never trade away its weapons. Their conviction is not just faith-based: it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Without a serious U.S. effort to negotiate, they are certain to be right.

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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (NAPSNet@nautilus.org)
Web: http://www.nautilus.org

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