



NORTH KOREA: THE STORM BEFORE THE CALM?

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Counter-intuitive as it may sound, the latest North Korean ICBM test may actually set the stage for a reduction of tensions, rather than an exacerbation of the “crisis.” It may also set Washington up for a fool’s choice if we fail to understand Pyongyang’s logic and ultimate end game.

The US, as it always does, is calling for UN Security Council action which will likely result in Washington and Beijing arguing over the next few days (weeks? months?) about the next round of “severe penalties.” But Pyongyang may already be preparing its next move.

The test, according to official North Korean broadcasts, “meets the goal of the completion of the rocket weaponry system development set by the DPRK [Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Korea, as North Korea is formally known].” Pyongyang further announced that “Kim Jong Un declared with pride that now we have finally realized the great historic cause of completing the state nuclear force.”

In short, Pyongyang seems to be telling us [my words, not theirs] “we have made our point. Now that Washington knows we can indeed strike anywhere we want in the mainland US, we MIGHT be ready to talk, provided the US and international community is prepared to reward us, not for good behavior (i.e., verifiable steps toward denuclearization), but for the absence of bad behavior (a halt in testing since the current testing cycle is complete).”

This does not mean acceptance of the Chinese/Russian “freeze for freeze” proposal which swaps North Korea missile/nuclear tests for a halt (or

reduction) in US military exercises. What Pyongyang really wants (and increasingly needs) is economic assistance and a lifting of sanctions, so Kim Jong Un can deliver on his *Byungjin* promise of nuclear weapons AND economic development. My guess – and when it comes to North Korea we’re all guessing – is that Pyongyang will soon offer to freeze further tests in return for humanitarian assistance and at least a partial lifting of sanctions. Its “compromise” will be to forego its threatened atmospheric nuclear test, which Pyongyang understands would completely galvanize the international community against North Korea. The big question is, will Washington fall for this ruse?

The Chinese and Russians will likely applaud such an offer; they can at least claim partial credit since it involves a freeze. The current ROK government, eager for an opportunity to engage with the North, is also likely to climb on board. Japanese Prime Minister Abe will likely warn against it, but his could end up being a voice lost in the wilderness.

The real question is, “Will the Trump administration, eager for a ‘victory,’ fall into this trap?” Or, will it insist on a real freeze of the North’s nuclear and missile *programs* (which requires intrusive inspections and verification) and not just a halt in testing (more easily verified but which leaves Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs intact)? A verifiable *program* freeze, while not a sure path to eventual denuclearization, would at least be a step in the right direction and would be worth pursuing, albeit carefully. A mere freeze in testing is *de facto* acceptance of the North’s nuclear and missile programs as they now stand. It undercuts the ongoing effort to compel Pyongyang to choose the right path – denuclearization in return for economic assistance – by essentially letting the North have both.

It's easy to become fixated with the crisis at hand. But, as we struggle to respond to this latest provocation, it's important to keep their, and our, end game in mind.

In the meantime, will someone please tell me what all the fuss is about Hawaii testing its civil defense alert sirens? I truly believe that the odds of North Korea firing a nuclear-tipped ICBM at the Hawaiian Islands are significantly less than one percent. If I tell you there is a one percent chance of rain today, you probably won't carry an umbrella. But if I tell you there is a one percent chance if you exit your front door in the next hour someone will shoot you, you are

likely to stay put for a while. Same odds, same likelihood, but the potential consequences tell you it's better to be safe than sorry. Preparing for the worst case is what our civil defense officials are supposed to be doing. That's why they test the tsunami warning sirens monthly as well. At least we're not asking anyone to practice crawling under their desks (yet) like we did when I was a kid.

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