



North Korea Missile Test: Will They or Won't They? by Ralph A. Cossa

Will they or won't they? That seems to be the big question dominating the news these days. Will North Korea launch a *Taepodong* missile, either as an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test or in an attempt to launch a satellite (as they claimed during their last launch in 1998)?

No one knows! And, trying to predict Pyongyang's behavior is a fool's task. But I, for one, hope that they do conduct a test, for a number of reasons.

Before explaining, it is worth pointing out an unpleasant fact that most critics seem to be ignoring: North Korea, like the U.S. or China, or even Kazakhstan (which launched its first communications satellite earlier in the month with little or no fanfare) has a right to conduct missile tests or satellite launches. There are certain international protocols that should be followed – notice to mariners, airspace closures, prior notifications, etc. – but a missile launch *per se* is not an illegal or necessarily hostile act.

Keep in mind also that North Korea's current moratorium is self-imposed; it was initiated in 1999 and was to run as long as missile talks between Washington and Pyongyang continued . . . which they have not.

True, in the 2002 "Pyongyang Declaration" signed by Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and North Korean "Dear Leader" Chairman Kim Jong-il, both leaders pledged they "would not commit conducts threatening the security of the other side" and "confirmed the necessity of resolving security problems including nuclear and missile issues by promoting dialogues among countries concerned." This hardly sounds like a binding agreement and, again, little dialogue is currently taking place (although both Washington and Tokyo have expressed willingness to enter into bilateral talks with Pyongyang, within the context of the Six-Party Talks – it is only the DPRK that refuses to come back to the Talks).

For what it is worth, while it does reaffirm the 2002 Pyongyang Declaration, there is really absolutely nothing in the September 2005 Six-Party Talks Joint Statement regarding missile tests. Nonetheless, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has claimed that a missile test puts that agreement in jeopardy since the moratorium "is clearly a part of the framework agreement that was signed in September of this past year between the six parties."

Having said all that, there is no question that a missile launch, even if designed to put a satellite in orbit, would be seen as saber-rattling at a particularly sensitive sign and at least three members of the six-way talks – the U.S., Japan, and South Korea – have firmly stated that a test would be a threat to regional stability and undermine the spirit of cooperation embodied in the September 2005 Joint Statement, and would thus have "severe consequences." China has been

conspicuously silent; *The People's Daily* is the only regional newspaper that seems unaware of missile test preparations.

So, if a test, while legal, would be so provocative, why am I for it? Primarily because it would, perhaps for the first time in several years, bring Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul back into agreement on dealing more firmly with North Korea. It would no doubt compel Seoul to cancel the planned trip of former President Kim Dae-jung to North Korea, a trip that can only add to the illusion of (false) progress in North-South relations, even though little is being accomplished beyond increased handouts and non-reciprocated gestures.

One presumes that even Beijing, despite its silence, may also finally see the wisdom in taking a harder line against Pyongyang in the wake of a missile launch, something Washington has been asking for months (if not years), to no avail. Until and unless Beijing and Seoul are prepared to join Washington and Tokyo in taking a firm stance against Pyongyang's foot-dragging and saber-rattling, there is little incentive for North Korea to change its behavior. (Apologies to Moscow; Russian support is also useful, but not nearly as critical.)

Finally, there is the question (at least in this author's mind) as to whether or not Pyongyang is even capable of successfully firing a multi-stage missile. Recall that the 1998 test failed. A missile launch would be a windfall to the American intelligence community, which continues to only guess at the *Taepodong's* capabilities.

Even if no missile is fired, a "test" is already being conducted. The presence (if reports are true) of an ICBM on a launch pad in a country with a declared nuclear (and presumed chemical and biological) weapons capability and a declared hostile policy toward the United States and Japan, constitutes a test of the U.S. doctrine of preemption, which calls for U.S. military forces to respond if a potential weapons of mass destruction (WMD) attack appears imminent. I am neither predicting nor advocating a preemptive attack – such an action would be counter-productive – but merely noting that, unlike Iraq, Washington's criteria is being met in this instance, something Pyongyang likely factored into its actions.

While the Bush administration has not threatened a preemptive strike, it has indicated that its missile defense system has been activated and is on alert for what could be its first real life test; if one questions North Korea's ability to launch a missile, questions equally abound about America's ability to shoot one down.

So, to Pyongyang I say "fire away." Who knows, it may actually give the other members of the Six-Party Talks the backbone required (and currently conspicuously absent) to finally get tough with Pyongyang and move the stalled denuclearization process forward.

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