



DPRK missile launches: multiple tests, multiple failures? by Ralph A. Cossa

The July 4th DPRK Taepodong-2 missile launch, along with the firing of half a dozen shorter-range missiles, represented more than just a test of Pyongyang's ICBM capabilities. It is also a test of the policies and practices of all participants in the six-way talks, and of the international community as well. Thus far, one sees multiple failures!

The biggest failure of all, lest we forget, was the Taepodong launch itself. There are some who speculate that Pyongyang deliberately aborted the test 42 seconds after launch because it was "unwilling to let it fly so far as to trigger a U.S. military response." I find this argument less than persuasive. Recall that the previous 1998 Taepodong test was also a failure. It's one thing to build a multiple-stage rocket; it's another to make it work.

The episode also represented a test of Beijing's and Seoul's leverage over Pyongyang and this was clearly lacking. Both had issued severe warnings cautioning against a missile launch. Seoul went as far as to say that a missile launch put future aid shipments in jeopardy. *The test now will be of Seoul and Beijing's credibility.* Will there be measurable consequences as a result of this latest DPRK affront to international protocol? Or has Pyongyang rightly judged that Seoul and Beijing are both toothless tigers?

As in 1998, Pyongyang issued no warnings prior to its launch; this is a clear breach of international practice, even though (as Pyongyang was quick to point out), it has a sovereign right to conduct missile tests over international waters, especially if the missiles do not transit (or come crashing down) in another's sovereign territory. Legality aside, however, there is no question that the timing of the launch and number of missiles involved were designed to send a defiant message to all who had called on Pyongyang to refrain from such provocative actions at a sensitive time, when the Six-Party Talks (aimed at ending the North's self-proclaimed nuclear weapons program) appeared to be on the brink of collapse.

Pyongyang either was not fearful of the threatened consequences or, more likely, having flaunted international protocols so often in the past without serious repercussions – remember its February 2005 declaration that it was a nuclear weapons state? – assumed that the latest threats are also hollow.

The one nation that has thus far stood true to its warnings is Japan. Tokyo said it would appeal to the United Nations Security Council if a launch occurred and it has indeed called for UNSC sanctions against North Korea for its threatening actions. Tokyo's draft resolution calls on Pyongyang to "immediately cease the development, testing, deployment, and

proliferation of ballistic missiles" and also calls on all UN member states to prevent "the transfer of financial resources, items, materials, goods and technology to end users that could contribute to the DPRK's missile or other weapons of mass destruction programs." Tokyo also suspended ferry service between the two countries.

China's response will be a good test of its willingness to be a "responsible stakeholder." Thus far, Beijing has all-too-predictably tried to have it both ways, criticizing the missile launches but also standing in the way of harsh UNSC action while hoping that "all sides will maintain calm and restraint." One must assume that Chinese Vice Premier Hui Liangyu had issued some type of direct admonition to Pyongyang not to conduct the test when he visited Pyongyang earlier in the week (to commemorate the 45th anniversary of the two countries' mutual friendship treaty). If so, the multiple launches must also be seen as a test of China's patience and yet another test of just how far Pyongyang can push its "big brother" before suffering some visible retribution.

While Washington did not get to test its missile defense system, the presence of a DPRK ICBM theoretically capable of striking U.S. territory (not to mention its bases and its ally in Japan) did test Washington's preemptive attack policy. It was no doubt encouraging to Pyongyang that calls to strike the missile on the launch pad were quickly dismissed by the Bush administration. It remains to be seen if Washington's hardline policy of refusing to talk with Pyongyang (other than around the six-sided table) will survive the missile tests. The 1998 test brought Washington to the negotiating table; Pyongyang is no doubt hoping for the same outcome this time around.

Whether the failed missile test will result in a political success for Pyongyang will depend in the final analysis on how strongly the other five parties' actions in the wake of the test match their earlier words. Like the Chinese, the Russians are also back-peddling, opposing sanctions in favor of a "diplomatic solution." Seoul has indicated it will "withhold" 500,000 tons of rice and 100,000 tons of fertilizer the North had sought in aid this year, but it is not clear for how long, or if economic cooperation, as exemplified by a joint industrial complex in Gaesong, North Korea, will be affected. Seoul has historically opposed taking the DPRK before the UNSC.

There was a time when strong UNSC action, including the threat or actual application of political and economic sanctions, was considered a "diplomatic solution." Will this again be the case, or will the UNSC also fail the test?

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