

North Korea: Time for a New Approach

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Ho-hum! Another United Nations Security Council (UNSC) pronouncement “demanding” that North Korea cease and desist all missile activities and verifiably give up its nuclear weapons program. Another “declaration of war” by the North against anyone who would dare criticize (much less enforce sanctions against) Pyongyang, this time accompanied by the expulsion (yet again) of international inspectors from its nuclear facilities which it (once again) threatens to rebuild. It is truly *deja vu* all over again!

The latest North Korea-generated crisis began with its April 5 “satellite launch” using a long-range ballistic missile which overflew Japan but apparently failed to put an object into orbit (if that was its real intent). Never one to let reality stand in the way of propaganda, Pyongyang not only claimed a successful launch but swears the satellite is broadcasting revolutionary songs extolling the virtues of its Dear Leader, and garnering worldwide acclaim for its accomplishment; apparently North Koreans are also able to hear the sound of one hand clapping!

The North claims that all nations have the right to conduct peaceful satellite launches under a United Nations space treaty and, technically speaking, they are right. But Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo (among others) claim that North Korea lost that right as a result of UNSC Resolution 1718, passed after their 2006 missile launches and nuclear weapons test, which forbid “all ballistic missile activity,” and the UNSC finally (and reluctantly, after a week of intense diplomatic negotiations) agreed. That agreement took the form of an April 13 UNSC “Presidential Statement” rather than a more binding Resolution due to strong Chinese and Russian objections.

Beijing and Moscow had initially maintained that the launch was not a violation but finally joined the chorus proclaiming the launch “in contravention” of UNSCR 1718. Had they been willing to take such a stance prior to the launch, they may have helped to avert it, but Beijing in particular keeps talking about how it wants to avoid “alienating” the North (even as Pyongyang seems to be going out of its way to alienate everyone else).

The UNSC Presidential Statement is a disappointment to those who were hoping for something stronger; the Japanese press is asserting that Japan “had the ladder pulled out from under it by U.S.-China collaboration,” expressing anger at Washington’s failure to hold firm on their initial demand for a binding UNSC Resolution (a stance which would have likely

resulted in no UNSC action at all and an even bigger propaganda victory for Pyongyang).

But the Statement is not without some potential teeth. It calls on all members to comply fully with their obligations under UNSCR 1718 and agrees to “adjust the measures imposed by paragraph 8” (which outlined what couldn’t be sold to the North and what firms should be sanctioned), thus providing an opportunity to tighten international restrictions against Pyongyang; initial sanctions efforts, aimed at keeping sufficient technology and hardware out of Pyongyang’s hands to prevent another launch, obviously failed. It remains to be seen how serious member states (and especially bordering China and Russia) will be in ensuring that the flow of military technology and “luxury goods” truly ceases.

Pyongyang has seized upon the UN statement to walk away from the moribund (although technically still alive) Korean Peninsula denuclearization talks, declaring that it “will never participate in the talks any longer nor will it be bound to any agreement of the Six-Party Talks” (involving North and South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the U.S.). It has also threatened to “bolster its nuclear deterrent for self-defense in every way” and to restore its currently “disabled” nuclear facilities at Yongbyon “to their original state . . . putting their operation on a normal track and fully reprocess the spent fuels churned out from the pilot atomic plant as part of it.”

While this represents a big step backward, it is not cause for immediate alarm. Estimates are that it will take six months to a year or more to get Yongbyon back into full operation, after which it could at best produce about one bomb’s worth of plutonium annually (to add to the 6-8 bombs worth they are believed to already possess). A smart, well coordinated response is thus much more important than a quick one.

Most North Korean specialists seem to agree that Dear Leader Kim Jong-il’s motivations for the launch were as much domestic as international. He wanted to demonstrate his continued virility and defiance of the international community and underscore the feeling of crisis that warrants the continued sacrifice of his people in the face of the external threat that only he can guard them against. The primary international objectives seemed to be killing the Six-Party Talks in favor of long-desired bilateral U.S.-North Korea negotiations and the time-honored (and once again successful) tactic of driving wedges between and among the other five collaborators while distracting them from the denuclearization goal.

Thus far the Obama administration has (wisely) not taken the bait. It continues to insist on the six-party format for working the problem; the Presidential Statement calls for its “early resumption” and for “full implementation” of previously negotiated commitments including “the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner.” Pyongyang seems to have missed the part in

President Obama's inauguration speech which said he would extend a hand to those who were "willing to unclench [their] fist." Pyongyang has elected instead to give the U.S. (and the rest of the world) the finger; this hardly seems to be the best way to win friends and influence people.

Perhaps the best thing to do now with Pyongyang is to do nothing. President Obama should consider taking a page out of the Dear Leader's play book. He should announce that the U.S. will be unable to engage in direct dialogue until Pyongyang ends its "hostile policy" toward its neighbors and that the only way to demonstrate its willingness to do this is to return to the Six-Party Talks. Until then, Washington will have no option other than to make sure that whatever is produced in North Korea stays in North Korea and that means tightening up sanctions (and their enforcement) under UNSCR 1718.

Even better than an Obama statement to this effect would be a joint statement emanating from Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo which commits all three nations to this course of action. Seoul could underscore its seriousness by stating unequivocally that it will become a full participant in the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a "coalition of the willing" formed during the Bush administration to help ensure that weapons of mass destruction did not fall into the hands of non-state actors or others who would do us harm. (Seoul had announced it would consider taking this step if the North launched its missile but has thus far refrained from confirming its participation – Japan is a charter member of the PSI).

While Pyongyang's objective may have been to drive deeper wedges between the various six-party participants, its actions have actually created an opportunity for deeper cooperation between Washington and both its Northeast Asian allies and, more importantly, between Seoul and Tokyo, if both leaders demonstrate the political courage to move smartly in this direction. The Lee Myung-Bak administration is much more comfortable than its predecessor in playing hardball with the North, which puts it in greater synch with Tokyo. Meanwhile Tokyo and Seoul's worst fear – that the Obama administration would be too forthcoming toward the North and cut a bilateral deal with Pyongyang that would put both at a disadvantage – has surely faded; Pyongyang's behavior makes this almost impossible, even if Obama was inclined to move in this direction (which he does not appear to be).

The primary focus of the Obama administration now should be to repair any damage left over from the UNSC debate and ensure that the U.S. and its South Korean and Japanese allies are completely in synch as to the best approach to take toward Pyongyang. This should include a pledge of no direct *negotiations* between Washington and Pyongyang outside the context of the Six-Party Talks. This does not rule out an eventual "special envoy" visit or use of the "New York channel" or other venues to deliver a firm joint message; it does rule out the type of bilateral negotiations that resulted in former U.S. six-party negotiator Christopher Hill announcing a verification agreement, only to have the North claim in joint session that no such agreement was ever reached.

As part of this North Korea "containment" policy, Seoul should examine the continued wisdom of pumping money into the North through the Kaesong industrial complex. The North

seems to take great delight in restricting access to Kaesong or employing harassment techniques against South Koreans working there but it has more to gain (or lose) from Kaesong than does Seoul, despite the considerable investment there. Given the South's economic trouble, wouldn't those jobs be put to better use in the South? A "temporary" shutdown of Kaesong by Seoul, until such time as the North resumed good faith negotiations, would send a powerful message.

Most effective of all would be a decision by China and Russia to get on board the containment train. Beijing could send a powerful signal to Pyongyang (and the rest of the world) about its commitment to non-proliferation by joining the PSI – Russia joined in 2004 but has not been an active participant in PSI exercises in recent years. Beijing, as Six-Party Talks host, should also schedule a plenary session, invite Pyongyang to attend, but make it clear that the meeting will take place regardless. The time is long since passed for the other five to continue giving Pyongyang a veto over their activities.

Restraining from such actions out of fear of alienating or isolating Pyongyang seem misplaced. It's Pyongyang that is doing the alienating. Had Kim Jong-il been interested in dialogue – had he wanted to reach out to President Obama's outstretched hand – he would not have conducted his missile launch in the first place. Nor would he have undermined the six-party process last fall by declaring that the North had never agreed to any type of verification regime.

Pyongyang had apparently made up its mind to end the six-way dialogue from the start; the missile launch and anticipated reaction was the vehicle for doing this and the UNSC declaration the excuse. There was (and perhaps still is) an operational need to test its long-range missile. The same holds true for testing its nuclear weapon, since the first test is generally believed to have fizzled. Therefore, we should not be surprised by another missile or weapons test. In fact, we should silently hope for them, since each event will further solidify international support behind tightening the sanctions noose and each kilogram of plutonium used up in a test is one less we will have to ultimately account for.

Pyongyang will return to the negotiating table when it perceives it in its best interest to do so. There are two ways to bring this about. The tried and true way is to dangle more carrots. This might get the Dear Leader back to the table temporarily, but only until he has eaten his full. He will then surely walk away. As one senior statesman quipped, "Clinton bought Yongbyon once and Bush bought it twice; why shouldn't Kim Jong-il think he can sell it a few more times to Obama?"

An alternative approach, which requires close cooperation among Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo at a minimum (and with Beijing, Moscow, and others preferably on board), is to increase the costs involved in his staying away through stricter enforcement and an incremental strengthening of UNSCR 1718. Perhaps it's time we tried ignoring the North's threats and demands, and started tightening restrictions to the point that the Dear Leader will either have to cooperate or will tumble from his own weight.