



North Korea: Now What?

by Ralph Cossa

Ralph Cossa [racpacforum@cs.com] is president of Pacific Forum CSIS.

Now what? Just when you thought it was safe to go back into the Six-Party Talks, the North Koreans pulled the rug out from under everyone, including themselves, by announcing a planned satellite launch to commemorate Great Leader Kim Il-Sung's 100th birthday celebrations.

Pyongyang argues that there is a difference between long-range ballistic missile tests (which it recently foreswore) and satellite launches using a long-range ballistic missile as the launch vehicle; a distinction lost on most others, very specifically including the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) which has banned "all missile activity" by North Korea, including "any launch using ballistic missile technology." While Pyongyang would like to believe that their distinction makes a difference, clearly they understand, post UNSC resolutions 1718 and 1874, that the rest of the international community is not buying this argument.

So what is Pyongyang up to? Nobody knows for sure, of course, but many are speculating that the contradiction between its Feb. 29 declaration of a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests and the announcement of an impending satellite launch reflects a power struggle of sorts within the leadership, with some accusing the North's Foreign Ministry of having gotten too far out in front of the military and party leadership. That's possible, but recall that the Leap Day announcement came a week after bilateral US-DPRK negotiations; the foreign ministry had plenty of time to vet the agreement before making the announcement.

It is at least equally possible that this was the plan all along. Raise hopes and then test the others by trying to fly a rocket through a (real or imagined) perceived loophole in the agreement. This action is sure to prompt heated debates — especially within South Korean political circles but within the US and elsewhere as well — over whether or not to yield to the North's interpretation and turn a blind eye to UNSC resolutions or to allow the Feb. 29 "breakthrough" to break down. Sound familiar? Creating divisions within and between its interlocutors has long been a DPRK ploy and with presidential elections in both the US and ROK this fall, what better time to play another round of this time-honored game?

North Korea experts (an oxymoron if I ever heard one) can no doubt come up with a dozen more explanations somewhere in between these two extremes. Announcing the decision now, for example, will draw attention away from the South's diplomatic success in hosting next week's second Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) while drawing attention to itself instead. (Pyongyang doesn't mind being despised, but it

hates to be ignored or overshadowed.) While the organizers have said repeatedly that the NSS is about the security of nuclear materials and not about North Korea, it's a pretty easy guess where the focus of at least media attention will now lie.

Rather than continuing to guess what Pyongyang is up to, however, it's more important for the rest of us to know what we are going to do in response.

Seoul has already branded the North's announcement a "grave provocative act against peace and stability," but the opposition is sure to find a way to blame the renewed stalemate not on Pyongyang's duplicity but on the Lee Myung-bak administration's "hardline" policy toward the North.

Washington has also branded the announced launch a "direct violation" of UNSC mandates, a threat to regional stability, and "inconsistent with North Korea's recent undertaking to refrain from long-range missile launches." This poses a slight dilemma for the Obama administration since it has been trying to persuade others (unsuccessfully) that the Leap Day announcements were not a "food for freeze" deal. The food aid, according to the White House, was not linked to the moratorium but based strictly on humanitarian considerations. The North, on the other hand, has trumpeted the link but claims, by its convoluted definition, that the impending "rocket launch" does not technically violate its pledge.

Such nuances notwithstanding the US has (correctly) placed the food aid "on hold" while it waits to see if the North actually attempts to place a satellite in orbit during its announced April 12-16 launch window. The odds are extremely high that they will try (but less certain they will succeed).

Some pundits have expressed surprise over the North's action, given its need to demonstrate during the April 15 anniversary celebrations that it has become a "strong and prosperous nation," assuming that outside food aid was essential to making this claim. But the promised US nutritional assistance is neither in the form nor quantity desired, comes with monitoring strings attached — recall the North just turned down an offer for food aid from the ROK because it wasn't "pure" (i.e., it included monitors) — and deliveries would not have started until well after April 15 and would have been stretched out over the following 12 months. Why put up with such indignities when Beijing continues to provide for all your needs with no apparent strings attached and despite your bad behavior?

Alas, once again, it all comes down to China. In 2009, when faced with a similar impending satellite launch, the US and ROK (and Japan and most others) made it clear to Pyongyang that this would be a violation of UNSC resolutions

and that there would be serious consequences. The Chinese (and Russians) were more circumspect. They had to be dragged kicking and screaming into a mild presidential statement condemning the activity, after the fact, as a violation. It was not until after the subsequent nuclear test that any strong UNSC measures were again taken.

This time around, the Russians are already on board, expressing “serious concern” over the North's announcement while calling on Pyongyang to avoid confrontation and refrain from actions which could delay resumption of the Six-Party Talks.

One would have thought that China, having learned the lessons of 2009, would have done likewise. One would have thought wrong. Beijing thus far has “taken note” of Pyongyang's announcement but the most we have gotten is another one of its maddening calls for “all parties” to act constructively, as if “all parties” were somehow equally to blame for yet another Pyongyang-induced confrontation.

It's time for Beijing to stop empowering the North's bad behavior. At a minimum, it should state unequivocally that any launch would be a violation of UNSC resolutions and would open the North up to new sanctions. (Enforcing current mandatory sanctions would also be a nice gesture.) It could then demonstrate its displeasure by allowing currently detained North Korean refugees to proceed on to South Korea (as Seoul has repeatedly demanded) rather than returning them home to face certain punishment or death. Beijing could also take a page from Seoul's 2009 play book by announcing in advance that a resumption of missile or nuclear tests would result in China's joining the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Rather than follow its own counterproductive past patterns, Beijing needs to join the rest of the international community in demonstrating that bad actions have bad consequences.

Otherwise, if the past is precedent, we are likely to see a North Korean missile launch, followed by a mild UNSC statement (that China will try its best to water down), followed in all likelihood by another North Korean nuclear test (to really demonstrate how strong it is), followed by a new round of UNSC sanctions (that China will endorse but then halfheartedly enforce), eventually followed (after some renewed saber-rattling by the North), by yet another “breakthrough” which will then result in renewed food aid and the resumption of Six-Party Talks (destined to go nowhere), all according to Pyongyang's plan. And they call the North crazy?

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