



Provocation or Extortion? by Ralph A. Cossa

The latest North Korean crisis *de jour*, now that the mysterious underground facility at Kumchang-ri has proven to be nothing more than a huge hole in the ground, centers on the reportedly imminent launch of another multi-stage long-range missile. The last launch, on Aug 31, 1998, involved an overflight of Japan during an apparent failed attempt to launch a satellite.

Politicians in Washington and Tokyo are up in arms over this anticipated “provocative action.” Even South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, who tries to put a positive spin on everything involving North Korea, joined President Clinton in warning of “grave consequences” should the North launch its missile. Meanwhile, Japan has announced a list of economic and political penalties to be applied in the event of another launch.

As the world once again waits anxiously to see if North Korea can be bribed into refraining from undermining its own relations with the outside world, it might be useful to remember a few key points.

First, North Korea has a sovereign right to test long-range missiles and, from its perspective, has been provided with both the rationale and a sense of urgency to do so. According to Pyongyang, the “lesson” of Kosovo is, if you want to avoid being bombed by America, you had better develop the ability to strike back. I’m not saying this rationale is correct – in my view, not even possession of nuclear weapons would protect the North from the full force of U.S. retaliation if they launched an attack on the South. But, this seems to be North Korean thinking (to the extent anyone can determine it).

Second, the North would be violating no international agreement to which it is a party if it conducted such a launch, although international protocol dictates that Pyongyang should announce the launch (and any overflights) in advance. Of course, protocol has never been one of North Korea’s strong points.

U.S. Congressional allegations to the contrary, a launch would also violate neither the letter nor intent of the Agreed Framework pact between Washington and Pyongyang, which is aimed at halting North Korea’s suspected nuclear weapons program. While Congress has tied funding for the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) – the Agreed Framework’s implementing mechanism – to progress in halting the North’s missile program, this was not part of the original deal.

Finally, North Korea, which is a master at hiding things it does not want seen – the August 1998 launch caught everyone by surprise and caused a complete re-evaluation of the North’s missile capabilities – seems to be going out of its way to make sure everyone knows that preparations are underway for

another launch. This suggests that North Korea is once again following its “compensation for crisis” tactics which in the past have caused Pyongyang to be rewarded merely for behaving like a civilized nation.

Just because North Korea has a right to conduct another missile test does not mean it is the right thing to do, however.

First, the U.S., Japan and South Korea have just as much right to refrain from continuing their very generous hand-outs to Pyongyang. Aid from all three states will be seriously jeopardized should another launch occur.

Likewise, nothing compels Seoul to continue to permit lucrative arrangements between the North and South Korean businesses. President Kim has been struggling to keep his “Sunshine Policy” toward the North alive. Sooner or later (and the time seems to be rapidly approaching), some North Korean action could be the straw that breaks that camel’s back.

Most importantly, there is still the so-called Perry Report to deal with. This is the report on future policy approaches toward North Korea prepared by former Secretary of Defense William Perry. Perry reportedly made it abundantly clear to Pyongyang in May that his report contained two options: enhanced cooperation and enhanced deterrence. The choice was the North’s to make, and Pyongyang’s actions, as much as its words, would provide the answer.

In response to positive actions by the North – as opposed to simply refraining from negative ones – the U.S., South Korea and Japan were prepared to offer a package deal that included economic and political benefits. A signal from the North that it was not interested, however – and a missile launch certainly falls in this category – would leave Perry no alternative but to recommend steps toward enhancing U.S. deterrence against the North, recommendations that President Clinton would find politically impossible to ignore.

The ball is in Pyongyang’s court. Will it exercise its sovereign right to shoot another missile, despite the host of potential negative consequences? Or, will it just wait eagerly to see if it will once again be offered a reward merely for refraining from provocative behavior?

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