



North Korea's Missile Test and the Road Ahead

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With Pyongyang declaring an to end its participation in the Six-Party Talks and threatening to restart its nuclear reactor and strengthen its nuclear deterrent following the adoption by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) of a nonbinding presidential statement condemning North Korea's April 5 missile test, the fate of the on-going effort to denuclearize North Korea is a matter of immediate policy debate.

North Korea's motives for the launch are open to speculation: a demonstration of its ability to reach out and touch the United States; test-marketing to Iranians who are reported to have observed the launch; a "remember me" welcome to the new Obama administration; or some combination of "all of the above." Whatever the motive, it is important to set the missile test in a broader North Korean political context – the process of political succession that is now underway in Pyongyang.

Kim Jong-il, judging from recently released official KCNA photographs, is almost half the man he used to be. He has survived last summer's health scare, and recent high-ranking Chinese visitors to Pyongyang reported Kim to be in good health. Nevertheless, even the Dear Leader has to understand the actuarial tables are running against him. Assuring regime stability to allow for secure dynastic succession is the political imperative in Pyongyang.

The missile test speaks to the continuing political clout of the Dear Leader, whatever his physical condition, and strengthens his hand in ordering succession. It is in this context that the issue of denuclearization should be viewed. While the denuclearization of North Korea remains the *raison d'être* of the Six-Party Talks, realizing that objective will almost certainly have to await the arrival of the Dear Leader's successor. With succession looming, for Kim to trade his nuclear arsenal for diplomatic promises of good will would demonstrate a political naïveté that would significantly weaken his hand in ordering succession.

In this context, the policy question is how to respond, to the missile test and to threats to the Six-Party Talks. The Goldilocks prescription, "not too cold; not too hot; just right" would stand U.S. and allied diplomacy in good order.

Going to the United Nations Security Council is a good first step in an effort to mobilize international opinion and concern, but failure to secure a resolution imposing sanctions highlights the continuing differences among the U.S., the

ROK, Japan, China, and Russia. As is the case in the Six-Party Talks, both Russia and China, while sharing the ultimate objective of denuclearization, place a higher priority on stability in North Korea at this time. Underscoring this reality, China, despite the adoption of UNSC resolution 1718, which imposed sanctions on North Korea for its nuclear test of October 2006, has honored its commitment more in the breach than in the observance – last year China's trade with North Korea grew 41 percent over 2007.

Parenthetically, the U.S. shares an interest in an orderly succession in North Korea. Regime failure and attendant instability could open the door to worst case security scenarios – loss of central control over weapons of mass destruction (WMD) – and increase the risk of proliferation from the Korean Peninsula, which has been recognized as the greatest threat posed by North Korea to U.S. national security interests.

The missile test, however, provides an opportunity to intensify trilateral policy coordination among Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. Securing this cooperation is critical as the Obama administration begins to address the multiple contingencies that could be triggered by a failed succession in Pyongyang. For several years, policy makers in all three capitals have recognized the need to deal with a wide range of contingencies, including the breakdown of internal order; refugees; dealing with/disarming the Korea Peoples Army; and the securing of WMD. Yet, a whole of government coordinated approach remains sadly lacking. U.S. and ROK military plans have been updated but exist in a political and diplomatic vacuum. From a planning perspective, it is important to be ahead of the curve and let reality play catch up. Attempting to play catch up with reality is, almost always, a vain endeavor.

With our allies, the time to begin comprehensive planning is now. Doing so may engage China in the discussion. Shortly after North Korea's 2006 nuclear test, Chinese officials quietly probed U.S. officials for their views as to how the U.S. might respond, "if in a crisis in North Korea," China should see it necessary "to cross the border" to deal with refugees and to secure WMD. Recently, when the issue of such contingency planning has been raised, Chinese officials have taken the position that such discussions are "premature."

At the same time, the administration should publically make clear its commitment to extended deterrence to both Seoul and Tokyo. Confidence in the U.S. commitment is central to managing the evolution of the security environment in Northeast Asia.

As for the Six-Party Talks, it is conceivable that the missile test was aimed at short-circuiting the current diplomatic framework and engaging the U.S. in a direct bilateral negotiation. It would be a mistake for the

administration to fall for this bait and switch ploy – North Korea’s missile arsenal threatens not only the United States, but Japan, the Republic of Korea, China, and Russia as well; they need to be in on any talks.

But more to the point, the administration should not lose sight of the ultimate objective of the Six-Party Talks – the denuclearization of North Korea. Neither should it engage in a time-consuming search for new initiatives, new sweeteners, to bring Pyongyang back to the negotiating table. The effort would simply be a waste of time. Pyongyang knows full well what’s on the rewards menu, and its actions have made clear that, at present, it has other preferences. Given the succession dynamic this is understandable.

Our approach should be that the Six-Party Talks will continue, among at least five of the parties, and that the door to the room will remain open for Pyongyang to rejoin the talks when it is ready to do so. In effect, we are playing for time, for a stable succession in the hope that a new leader in Pyongyang may have a different understanding of North Korea’s security and prosperity.

Does this mean living with a nuclear North Korea? The answer is “yes.” But living with it is not the same as accepting it. The goal of our diplomacy remains denuclearization; this will take time, while our security strategy must deal with the world as it is. Our commitment to extended deterrence is critical in supporting both our diplomacy, security strategy, and our allies.