

[Ed. Note: North Korea's response to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) President's Statement rebuking its missile launch has elicited a great deal of commentary. Here we provide alternative views to those expressed by Jim Przystup in PacNet 28 and Ralph Cossa in PacNet 28A. With this, we will close the current series of commentary on what happens next on the Korean Peninsula but are certain the issue is a long way from being resolved.]

**“North Korea's Missile Test and the Road Ahead” –
A Response to James J. Przystup by Ey Soo Kim**

Ey Soo Kim (eysooking@gmail.com) is consul at the Korean Consulate General in Honolulu. Views expressed are his own.

In “North Korea's Missile Test and the Road Ahead” (PacNet #28, April 16, 2009) Jim Przystup argues that the recent missile test by North Korea consolidates the political clout of the Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il, strengthens his hand in managing political succession in North Korea, and the denuclearization of North Korea should be viewed in this context. With political succession looming, Kim will not trade his nuclear arsenal for diplomatic promises of good will as that would loosen his hold on the political succession process.

Przystup maintains that the nations of the Six-Party Talks may have to wait for the Dear Leader's successor to realize the goal of the talks, the denuclearization of North Korea. Given the uncertainty surrounding Kim's health, I believe it is a mistake to make a policy recommendation to discontinue the talks based on assumptions about his future health or concern over his mortality. (Note: Przystup is not arguing that we abandon the goal of denuclearization; rather he emphasizes a practical approach that focuses on proliferation and the changing political situation in North Korea.)

South Koreans still not fully recovered from the traumatic memory of the Korean War cannot imagine that they will have to live with a nuclear North Korea while the world awaits the Dear Leader's successor. Let me give another perspective on the Six-Party Talks, the Kim Jong-il regime in the process of political succession, and what the U.S. should do.

The key question in the recent discussion about a nuclear North Korea is “whether or not it is possible to *acknowledge* the reality of the nuclear North Korea without *accepting* it as the new status quo.” Some argue that the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is a thorny issue, and, if managed properly, an acknowledgement of North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons would not be a serious problem. Przystup's view that denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is unlikely due to the political succession issue in North Korea could encourage the view that it is not urgent. Accepting this view would create a large gap regarding priorities and could undermine cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea, a foundation of stability and peace in Northeast Asia.

When Przystup says denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula would be difficult until a new leader emerges in North Korea, it sounds like we may wait years until the succession issue is resolved. If it takes 5-10 years, he might as well suggest that we accept a nuclear North Korea. Kim Jong-il was 38 years old when he was appointed to second in command, and Kim Il Sung was 68 years old at the time (the same age as Kim Jong-il is now). It took two years for Kim Jong-il to be included as a member of the Supreme People's Assembly, and 14 years to fully take over the regime.

Even if we let the issue of North Korea's denuclearization slide and focus on managing proliferation, it is obvious that we cannot wait for more than 10 years to deal with the whole issue. North Korea demonstrated a technological advance in the recent rocket launch and it is highly likely that North Korea will be equipped with more state-of-the-art technology while we wait for the succession process to come to an end. It is doubtful that Japan will live with a nuclear North Korea for 14 years without joining the race for a nuclear weapon.

Przystup argues that we need to be prepared to deal with the potential proliferation of nuclear weapons since denuclearization of the peninsula is impossible now. But it is questionable whether we can stop proliferation without the elimination of nuclear materials. By extension, it is doubtful that North Korea would be governed properly during that time. Nobody knows if the detention of two American female journalists in North Korea is a coincidence since it happened right just before the rocket launch.

Przystup suggests that the five countries should carry on the Six-Party Talks even without North Korea and we should guard against North Korea's attempt at direct dialogue with the U.S. In my view, it is meaningless to carry out the talks without North Korea's participation. Furthermore, we should not be concerned about direct talks between the U.S. and North Korea as long as there is close cooperation with South Korea, within the framework of the Six-Party Talks. More importantly, the Six-Party Talks is at last moving toward the verification phase. Discussion of verification is a critical process related to such hot issues as North Korea's nuclear cooperation with Syria, its uranium enrichment program, and existing nuclear weapons. Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula through the Six-Party Talks will be a critical test not only for the stability of Northeast Asia but also for world peace. We should not give up.

After the North Korean missile launch, some U.S. commentators compared North Korea to the fictional country in *The Mouse That Roared*. In the film, a tiny country called Grand Fenwick declared war on the U.S. The country knew it would be annihilated, but its goal was to rebuild the country using generous aid from the U.S.

South Koreans see no humor in that metaphor. In the real world, there is a villainous “great leader” who would rather spend money on a rocket than feed his starving people. U.S. policy makers should understand the fears of Koreans facing a nuclear North Korea. We should not think that we can live with a North Korea with a few crude nuclear weapons as long as it does not proliferate. They should pay sincere attention to the Korean view that denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is an urgent matter that demands immediate attention.