



Easing the Military Confrontation in Korea by Leon Sigal

North Korea's launch of a new missile has set off alarm in Japan. The alarm is warranted insofar as the new missile, called the Taepodong I by U.S. intelligence, is capable of reaching Japan. Yet the launch was more likely an unsuccessful attempt to mark Kim Jong Il's formal accession to power by boosting a small satellite into space than a brazen act of intimidation. Overreaction to the test will impede diplomacy, which is the most promising way to curb Pyongyang's missile program.

North Korea has long marketed missiles and components to unsavory states in unstable locales like the Middle East and the Persian Gulf – and most recently, if U.S. intelligence is correct, to Pakistan and Iran. These missile exports, now publicly acknowledged by Pyongyang, are a purely commercial venture, one of the few ways it has to obtain hard currency.

Since 1992, North Korea has shown its willingness to trade in its missile exports for a price. On June 16, 1998, it went much further and said it was ready to negotiate an end to its missile tests and deployments as well. That is a deal worth exploring without delay.

In return for an end to missile exports, Pyongyang now wants Washington to “lift its economic embargo as soon as possible” and seeks “compensation for the losses” that would result from an end to its missile sales. That price seems affordable.

Yet clandestine shipments of missiles and missile components are difficult to detect with much assurance. A deal to end missile tests and deployments would be much easier to verify.

Until the August 31 launch of the Taepodong I, North Korea had not conducted any ballistic missile test of its own in over five years. The Rodong missile has been tested just once, in May 1993. Another new missile reportedly under development, the Taepodong II, has yet to be tested. U.S. intelligence did detect preparations for missile tests on two previous occasions – in the spring of 1994 and again in October 1996. No tests took place on either occasion after Washington asked Pyongyang to desist.

As a sign of impatience over the lack of progress in talks, the North has now resumed tests. That is intended to get Washington's attention.

Yet the fact that Pyongyang exercised restraint in ballistic missile tests for five years suggests it appreciates the critical importance of an end to tests as a verifiable basis for a deal. Moreover, without more tests, North Korea will not have new missiles for potential customers to buy.

North Korea has yet to deploy the new missiles. In the spring of 1997 press reports that the Rodong, capable of reaching Japan, had been deployed proved false. Although some U.S. observers believe Pyongyang may have deployed the missiles out of view of U.S. intelligence, there is no conclusive evidence of that.

A verifiable end to missile deployments would do much for Japan's security. With the money Japan could save by not deploying theater missile defenses, it could afford to contribute a substantial share of the compensation North Korea seeks.

Washington has made fitful efforts to negotiate an end to tests and deployments, not just sales. When Israel tried to arrange a missile deal with North Korea in 1993, the United States got it to call off negotiations. Washington changed its mind after signing the Framework Agreement of October 1994 freezing the North's nuclear program and has intermittently been exploring a deal with Pyongyang ever since. In the latest round of missile talks, it offered some easing of economic sanctions for an end to missile sales and even more for an end to missile tests. The North has now responded to that offer, and in a way reminiscent of its November 11, 1993 public offer of a package deal to resolve the nuclear controversy.

Part of North Korea's price for an end to missile tests and deployments is an easing of the military confrontation on the Korean peninsula. One step it has long sought is a new “peace mechanism” to replace the Military Armistice Commission established at the time of the Korean War cease-fire. That has just been made easier with the recent resumption of military-to-military talks at Panmunjom, long boycotted by the North. Kim Dae Jung's new government in Seoul did much to bring that about.

It would, of course, be nice if North Korea stopped exporting missile technology and developing new missiles just because we ask them not to. But North Korea is unwilling to give away something for nothing. As it showed in the October 1994 nuclear deal, however, it does not set an unreasonable price and it is prepared to live up to its end of the bargain so long as the United States does.

Pyongyang's recent actions show that. In yet another replay of its tit-for-tat strategy, it warned that it would abandon the October 1994 nuclear accord unless Washington proceeded with implementation, including timely shipments of heavy fuel oil, a speedup of construction of the replacement reactor at Yongbyon which is behind schedule, and easing of economic sanctions. The North stopped canning the plutonium-laden spent fuel at Yongbyon, but only after all the fuel rods were put in casks and only sludge remained. It said it would need to reopen the reactor for maintenance, but in the presence of inspectors.

Had North Korea wanted to renege it could have thrown the IAEA inspectors out and resumed reprocessing. Instead, it began clearing the ground for an underground facility which U.S. intelligence has assessed to be the site of a reactor and reprocessing plant. No construction has begun so it is difficult to know for sure, but even if that assessment is correct, such an installation would take years to build – hardly a sign that Pyongyang is eager to renege. After talks in New York in early September, Pyongyang is resuming the canning and taking steps to reassure Washington about the underground site. North Korea's brinkmanship makes it more difficult for those who want to deal with it to muster political support, but it is not evidence of deal-breaking, just Pyongyang's perverse way of bargaining.

Political and Economic Engagement with the North

The missile deal is a sign of North Korea's larger purposes: to extricate both sides from their current impasse and to end its lifelong enmity with the United States. The American embargo, dating from the Korean War, is a monument to that enmity. Perpetuating it impedes the economic and political engagement that North Korea wants in return for its cooperation in unwinding the armed confrontation in Korea. Its intentions should be put to the test by phasing out the embargo. With 37,000 American troops and their families in harm's way, that is in the national security interest of the United States.

The United States nearly stumbled into war with North Korea at the height of the nuclear crisis in June 1994 when President Clinton approved the dispatch of substantial reinforcements to Korea, a fateful step that was likely to trigger mobilization by Pyongyang and risk a conflict neither side wanted. Incidents like the recent incursion of a spy submarine should remind us that the lives of thousands of Americans and millions of Koreans remain in jeopardy.

Four-party talks among the United States, North and South Korea, and China could do much to reduce the risk of war on the peninsula. That, not a peace treaty to write a formal conclusion to the Korean War, is the main point of the talks. Yet much more extensive economic and political engagement is needed to prepare the ground for North Korea to negotiate military disengagement.

By the same token, North-South dialogue cannot get very far without progress in US-DPRK relations. That is why Kim Dae Jung believes, as he said before the June 10 summit with Bill Clinton in Washington, that "it would be desirable for the United States to ease its economic sanctions on North Korea."

Seoul won't get very far with Pyongyang if it is in the driver's seat and Washington sits on its hands alongside.

Some easing of sanctions would reassure Pyongyang that Washington is prepared for further engagement. By husbanding every scrap of political and economic inducement as a quid pro quo for four-party talks, Washington is losing sight of the larger import of engagement: thoroughgoing political and economic ties are a political prerequisite for the cooperative security arrangements that are needed to unwind the conventional military tangle in Korea. How can

Pyongyang be expected to cooperate on security matters while the "Trading with the Enemy Act" impedes relations?

A critical first step was the American pledge to meet its share of North Korea's food needs. Now it should take other modest steps to ease the embargo, like permitting some private investment and encouraging private efforts to supply the North with fertilizer and other assistance to grow more of its own food. At the same time the United States should stop delaying implementation of the Agreed Framework and take up North Korea's offer to negotiate an end to its missile sales, tests, and deployments in return for a lifting of the embargo and other compensation. That would give both sides something to show for their efforts and improve the political conditions in Pyongyang and Washington for negotiations to defuse the conventional military confrontation in Korea.

Tokyo has not helped. It was slow to put up its share of funding for construction of the replacement reactor and drew back from signing an accord with KEDO after the missile test. It has yet to offer food and other help. In short, it has been far too reluctant to engage in "cooperative threat reduction," in the well-chosen phrase of Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar.

Hawks stress the need for deterrence to keep Pyongyang at bay, but deterrence alone won't keep the peace in Korea, especially if North Korea begins to fall apart. Reassurance is essential. It will take sustained political engagement and military reciprocity by Washington, Seoul, and Pyongyang to avoid a military tragedy in Northeast Asia.

Mr. Leon V. Sigal is a consultant at the Social Science Research Council in New York and author of "Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea" (1998). This article is reprinted with permission from the November 11 Special Report in the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network (NAPSNet) of the Nautilus Institute. A fuller report can be found at http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/fora/22A_Sigal.html, and NAPSNet invites your response to this report (napsnet@nautilus.org).