

North Korea's Missile Launches – Did Kim Jong Il Gain or Loose?

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North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's decision to break his moratorium on the testing of ballistic missiles has shocked, confused and angered the international community. Pyongyang is paying a huge price for this decision. Washington and Tokyo are now convinced that they must continue their hard line stances toward North Korea by intensifying economic pressure on Pyongyang. Pyongyang's action have embarrassed North Korea's closest supporters in Beijing and Moscow, and made it more difficult for them to defend their ally North Korea. Even Seoul must now harden its stance toward North Korea. It will not send food aid and fertilizer to Pyongyang, and former South Korean President Kim Dae Jung will not visit Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang.

We must try to understand why Kim Jong Il has sacrificed international respect and accepted international condemnation. It is too simplistic to dismiss his actions as those of a lunatic or of an irrational person seeking attention. Kim is not crazy. He is smart like a fox. That is why his tiny poor country is able to have such a profound impact on the international community. One way to better understand his actions is to analyze the circumstances that influenced his decision.

Kim Jong Il's message behind his decision to end the moratorium on ballistic missile tests was maybe that he wished to demonstrate that the international outrage and economic pressure would not influence him. North Korea has endured US economic sanctions since its soldiers attacked into South Korea in June 1950. Ever since, North Korea has worked to make the sanctions ineffective by relying on the diplomatic and economic support of Moscow and Beijing. In recent years, North Korea has come to rely on South Korea for economic assistance and food aid. Consequently, Pyongyang has been able to negate the effects of US and Japanese sanctions.

But recently, both Seoul and Beijing have pushed North Korea not to resume its tests of ballistic missiles. South Korea backed up its pressure by threatening to discontinue its humanitarian aid and provision of fertilizer to North Korea if Pyongyang broke its missile moratorium. Even Beijing expressed dissatisfaction with Pyongyang's preparations to launch its missiles. This confronted Kim Jong Il with a choice: either bow to international pressure or ignore it and proceed to test his missiles.

At the same time, President Bush repeatedly warned North Korea of serious consequences if it ended its missile test moratorium. Soon afterward, former Clinton Administration Defense Secretary Perry and his aide Aston Carter wrote an article for the *Washington Post* in which they urged President Bush to launch a pre-emptive attack on North Korea's missile facilities. One can be certain that North Korea's generals quickly informed their "supreme commander" of this military threat.

Again Kim Jong Il was confronted by a dilemma: would he bow to such threats and pressure by canceling the missile tests, or would he demonstrate courage and resolve to carry out the test and ignore the possibility of a pre-emptive US military strike?

In both cases, Kim Jong Il obviously felt that he had to demonstrate his resolve to defend North Korea's "national sovereignty" by disregarding the foreign pressure and threats by proceeding with the Taepodong test.

By doing so, Kim Jong Il demonstrated to the North Korean people, particularly his nation's powerful generals and party leaders, that he has the courage and determination not bow to foreign pressure. In other words, Kim's decision was aimed at convincing his subjects, the North Korean people, that he is equal to his father when it comes to standing up to international pressure and the American and Japanese "imperialists."

What appears to be irrational to us is perfectly rational to Kim Jong Il and his followers. He decides his priorities, not the international community. His foremost goal is to defend North Korea's "sovereignty" and to keep the respect of the North Korean people. He does this by standing up to international pressure. Only when the international community gives him something does Kim Jong Il soften his stance and exchange concessions. But for him to give the international community what it wants without receiving anything in return would appear to be appeasement of the "imperialists" in the eyes of his generals and Korea Worker Party officials. In the context of North Korea's political heritage, this would be similar to treason.

For Kim Jong Il, his priority is to keep the respect and loyalty of his followers, not to win international approval. He clearly demonstrated this by conducting the missile tests regardless of the intense negative international reaction. The missile tests gained Kim Jong Il what he seeks most – the respect of the North Korean people, even though it cost North Korea dearly in terms of international condemnation.