

North Korea's Missile Launches Declare Kim Jong Il's
Strategic Decision to the International Community

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Introduction

North Korea's July 4 launching of ballistic missiles stunned the international community, particularly journalists. Racing against deadlines and pressed by editors for dramatic headlines, reporters around the world turned the launchings into a nearly earth shaking event. Absent from the multitude of press reports was perspective to explain North Korea's action and purpose, as well as predict what might come next. Here we pursue perspective to better understand Kim Jong Il's motives so that we might better understand how to influence his future actions. Whether Kim acted in an appropriate or moral manner is not our concern. In matters of national security, morality, issues of right and wrong, are of secondary concern. Foremost must be the goal to better understand our adversary so that we can deal most effectively with them. Otherwise, our security will be at greater risk in the future.

The Missiles' Messages

Kim Jong Il's launching of seven missiles, and the international reaction to it, illustrate several key points about the situation in Northeast Asia. Most obvious is the extent of the misunderstanding between North Korea, on the one hand, and the United States and Japan on the other hand. The launchings confirm that North Korea and its leader Kim Jong Il are determined to reject international pressure while pursuing its own priorities, including the building of a "nuclear deterrence" capability. Domestically, Kim Jong Il cannot bow to international pressure without risking the appearance of betraying his father's commitment to defend North Korea's sovereignty at all costs. For Kim, sustaining this commitment is vital for the survival of his regime. Also, Kim's defiant act confirms that President Bush's "pre-emptive attack" strategy and reliance on pressure tactics rather than engaging in negotiations has achieved the opposite of their intended purposes. North Korea today is stronger, militarily and economically, and more hostile and defiant than when President Bush assumed office in 2001.

A Strategic Decision

President Bush has and continues to urge Kim Jong Il to make a “strategic decision:” either to give up his arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and cooperate with the international community, or face international isolation and condemnation. Integral to Bush’s demand is that the United States will not “reward” or “appease” North Korea by engaging it in negotiations or promising it anything in return for cooperation with the international community. Bush’s demand is an “all or nothing” proposition void of the flexibility vital for negotiation. This has and continues to be the position of the United States in the Six Party Talks process.

Kim Jong Il’s decision to launch his ballistic missiles vividly illustrates his strategic decision. It also is a response to the economic pressure and threats of the Bush Administration as well as the international community. Kim’s actions followed mounting international pressure, even from Seoul and Beijing, aimed at deterring Pyongyang from breaking its 1999 self imposed moratorium on the testing of ballistic missiles. South Korea backed up its pressure by threatening to discontinue humanitarian aid and the provision of fertilizer to North Korea if it tested its long range missile. Beijing for the first time publicly expressed dissatisfaction with Pyongyang’s missile launch preparations. Numerous other nations urged North Korea to maintain its moratorium.

The United States and Japan were most adamant in their warnings. They warned that international condemnation and more economic sanctions would follow the end of the missile moratorium. Rather bizarrely, even former Clinton Administration Defense Secretary William Perry and his aide Aston Carter urged the Bush Administration in an essay for the *Washington Post* 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.

The international community’s recent warnings apparently confirmed to Kim Jong Il that the international community had united behind President Bush’s demand that North Korea make a strategic choice between capitulation or isolation. The choice confronted Kim with a dilemma: would he submit to the international community and bow to its threats and pressure by canceling the missile tests, or would he assertively demonstrate his courage and resolve to defend his nation’s “sovereignty” by disregarding the foreign pressure and carry out the test, even if it posed the possibility of a pre-emptive US military strike?

Kim Jong Il is a very determined and purposeful man. His actions since inheriting his father’s mandate to rule North Korea make this clear. He is neither crazy nor irrational. On the contrary, during the past decade, he has led his country away from the brink of famine, financial collapse and diplomatic isolation. This is quite evident in the fact that China and Russia moved quickly to strike a balance between Washington and Tokyo’s call for UN sanctions and much less strident UN action.

Declaration of Independence

Kim's choice of July 4 clearly was intentional. It recalls the date that South and North Korea issued their first joint statement after talks between Korea's two dictators, Pak Chong-hee in Seoul and Kim Il Sung in Pyongyang. In this statement, they agreed the two Koreas would not allow "foreign influence" to interfere in their efforts to achieve national reconciliation. Thirty five years later North Korea's "Supreme Commander" Kim Jong Il commemorated this anniversary with a display of military might by launching three kinds of ballistic missiles.

The kind of missiles launched is also significant. Three kinds of missiles were tested on July 4: the short range Scud C missile, medium range Nodong and the long range Taepodong. The Scud can hit any U.S. military base in South Korea, the medium range missile is designed to destroy U.S. military bases throughout the Japanese islands, and the multiple-stage Taepodong is designed to hit U.S. military bases on Guam Island, and possibly as far away as Alaska and Hawaii. (I am grateful to Professor Hiraiwa of Shizuoka Prefecture University for this insight which he expressed during a July 6 interview with NHK news.)

Domestically, Kim demonstrated his determination to defend North Korea's sovereignty at all costs, even if it means alienating the international community. This is of particular importance to him politically. Lacking his father's long record of having taken up arms to fight the Japanese and American "imperialists," Kim Jong Il must repeatedly demonstrate through his policy decisions that he is his father's equal when it comes to fending off international pressure, particularly when it emanates from the American and Japanese "imperialists." Such conduct assures his nation's powerful generals and party leaders that he has the courage and determination fulfill his pledge to them to defend the nation's sovereignty. Integral to this commitment is Kim's continuing pursuit of a "nuclear deterrence capability" consisting of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. As Pyongyang's Foreign Ministry declared on July 6, the missile tests were part of a routine military exercise. Such statements are valid when viewed in the context of Kim Jong Il's decision to continue building his nation's deterrence capability.

Pyongyang's Consistency

The end of North Korea's missile test moratorium and defiance of international pressure should not have surprised the international community. If anything, Kim Jong Il is consistent in his goals and negotiating demands. Beginning in 1998, Kim Jong Il proclaimed his determination to transform his weak and starving domain into a "strong and great nation" (*kangsong taekuk*), a phrase that echoes Japan's 1868 Meiji Restoration goal of "fukoku kyohei" or "prosperous and strong nation." The international community greeted Kim's announcement with skepticism. But North Korea's economic revitalization continues to make impressive progress and famine no longer haunts the land. Kim has restored good relations with his nation's two closest allies, China and Russia, and made significant strides toward reconciliation with South Korea. North Korea today has broken out of its isolation and, as a member of the United Nations, has

been able to normalize diplomatic and commercial relations with most members of the European Union, Canada, and several South American nations.

Achieving normal bilateral diplomatic and commercial relations with the United States and Japan, however, remain elusive goals. Toward this end, Pyongyang insists upon a *quid pro quo* agreement with the United States that would exchange the normalization of relations for an end to Pyongyang nuclear weapons programs and possibly also its ballistic missile exports and development program. Pending the attainment of this goal, Kim has also pursued a “military first” (*songun chongchi*) to characterize his domestic priorities. This puts national defense before all else, and ensures the military that it will receive first priority in the allocation of national resources. Kim explained, and continues to claim, that his “military first” policy is a consequence of perceived United States “hostile policy” as evidenced by US economic sanctions and the virtual encirclement of North Korea by US military forces and those of its allies.

Washington’s Inconsistency

President Bush’s election at the end of 2000 ended a decade of rapprochement between the United States and North Korea. The new president surrounded himself with so-called “neo-conservatives” (neo-cons) who accused the Clinton Administration of a policy of appeasing and propping up the Kim Jong Il regime. Their hostility and distrust of North Korea echoed a half century of mutual misunderstanding, military rivalry and intense distrust that dates from the Korean War of 1950-53. These neo-conservatives include Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, former Deputy Defense Secretary and current World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz, US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton and several other ranking officials still serving the Bush Administration. They insisted that North Korea is unworthy of diplomatic dialogue with the United States, and that its breaking of promises to the international community should not be “rewarded” with bilateral negotiations. Their priority was and remains “regime change,” which means to bring about the end of the Kim Jong Il regime either using a combination of diplomatic and economic pressure, or using force if ultimately necessary.

Bush’s Dual Track North Korea Policy

Bush personally favored their point of view, but nevertheless sought to strike a balance in his policy toward the DPRK because of South Korea’s and China’s concerns. These nations fear that “regime change” could create political chaos on the Korean Peninsula that might result in a second Korean War. Bush sought to appease his conservative supporters by using tough rhetoric to belittle Kim Jong Il as a “tyrant who starves his people,” etc. Shortly after the September 11, 2002 Al Qaeda attack on the United States, Bush declared in December the “sovereign right of “pre-emptive attack” on any nation that threatened the United States. He listed North Korea as a potential target. A month later in January 2003, Bush included North Korea in the “axis of evil” along with Iraq, Iran, and Libya. Within a few weeks, he invaded Iraq for the avowed purpose of overthrowing its leader to destroy his arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. North Korea promptly concluded that it might be next on Bush’s pre-emptive attack list. The

North Korean people were told to prepare for possible war with the United States and Kim Jong Il went into hiding for several weeks.

China Intervenes

China for the first time in modern history launched an unprecedented diplomatic campaign to head off an armed confrontation between the United States and its close ally and neighbor North Korea. The immediate cause for China's concerns was President Bush's rejection of Pyongyang's offer to engage in bilateral negotiations to end North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Intense Chinese diplomacy initiated the Six Party Talks which brought together the two Koreas, Russia, Japan, the United States and China at a meeting in Beijing in July 2003. North Korea reluctantly participated because of China's diplomatic pressure and considerable economic inducements. The participants quickly agreed to pursue a negotiated end to North Korea's nuclear weapons programs. led by China and centered in the Six Party Talks followed.

But within a few months, the talks had stalled. On February 10, 2005, North Korea claimed in a Foreign Ministry statement that had developed a "nuclear deterrence capability" that consisted of a "self defense nuclear arsenal" because of the United States' "hostile policy" Pyongyang had "suspended participation in the Six Party Talks." The DPRK Foreign Ministry in a March 3, 2005 "memorandum" elaborated on Pyongyang's stance. The memorandum stated that,

"We are also not bound to any international treaty or law as far as the missile issue is concerned. Some forces claim that the DPRK's moratorium on the missile launch still remains valid. In September 1999, ..., we announced the moratorium on missile launch while dialogue was under way but the DPRK-US dialogue was totally suspended when the Bush administration took office in 2001. *Accordingly, we are not bound to the moratorium on the missile launch at present.*

Subsequent intense diplomacy by China and South Korea convinced North Korea to return to the Six Party Talks. The international community cheered when on September 19, 2005, the participants in the Six Party Talks signed a joint statement that seemed to outline the path to a diplomatic end of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Two significant issues, however, remained unresolved: North Korea's insistence that it be allowed to acquire at least one light water nuclear reactor to continue its peaceful nuclear program, and that the United States remove the financial sanctions it had imposed on North Korea's banking transactions just before the joint statement's signing.

Slippery Slope

No sooner had US chief negotiator Chris Hill returned from Beijing to Washington than the Bush Administration altered its stance. It claimed that North Korea could not acquire a nuclear reactor even after it returned to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). This claim is false. According to the treaty's Article IV, paragraph 1:

Nothing in this Treaty shall be interpreted as affecting the inalienable right of all the Parties to the Treaty to develop, research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination and in conformity with articles I and II of the Treaty.

The Bush Administration, however, ever since has maintained that this provision cannot be applied to North Korea's case because of Pyongyang's previous record of not fulfilling its commitments to the international community regarding its nuclear program. The Bush Administration insists that it will not remove the financial sanctions imposed in September 2005 until North Korea halts its counterfeiting of U.S. currency. To justify its position, Washington in October 2005 intensified its campaign to label North Korea guilty of a wide range of international crimes that encompass drug smuggling and the counterfeiting of U.S. currency. Ever since, the Bush Administration has rejected as insufficient North Korea's efforts to address Washington's concerns.

Simultaneously, Japan-DPRK relations worsened primarily because of Pyongyang's refusal to address effectively Tokyo's concerns regarding the abduction issue. Tokyo consequently aligned its strategy toward Pyongyang more closely with that of the Bush Administration. In May and June, the two allies repeatedly re-affirmed support for each other's commitment to use economic pressure to compel North Korea's return to the Six Party Talks. North Korea, in its July 6, 2006 Foreign Ministry statement declared that it was not bound by the 2003 Japan-DPRK joint statement to maintain its missile test moratorium. The DPRK's July 6 statement paraphrased the United States' long maintained definition of "deterrence by declaring,

The DPRK's missile development, test fire, manufacture and deployment, therefore serve as a key to keeping the balance of force and preserving peace and stability in Northeast Asia.

Loosing Face

The joint effort by US Ambassador to the United Nations and Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe to push for UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions on North Korea back fired. Both officials have long viewed economic pressure as the key to resolving the "North Korea" problem. Their impatience caused President Bush to restrain his ambassador and the Chinese government to threaten a veto if Japanese draft resolution was rushed to a vote. Russia and South Korea also objected. President Bush was compelled to announce publicly that diplomacy in the United Nations "takes time," and called for patience. His stance was the exact opposite of the one he assumed on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

A humbled Ambassador John Bolton appeared before the international press on July 10 and admitted that Japan's resolution was "dead." Instead, Bolton continued, the United States and Japan would study the draft resolution submitted by China and Russia. Abe and Japanese Foreign Minister Aso, however, vented their frustrations by publicly

suggesting that maybe Japan should consider strengthening its defense capability to include a “pre-emptive” option. Abe and Aso’s provocative comments were to no avail. The “hardliners” in Washington and Tokyo ultimately had to accept a joint China-Russia resolution that made no mention of the U.N. Charter’s Chapter 7 which is the legal basis for mandatory economic sanctions.

The political damage caused by the rush for a UNSC vote and effort to punish Pyongyang could also have a lingering adverse impact on the Six Party Talks, if they ever resume. China, Russia and South Korea are certain to be less conciliatory toward the United States and Japan given their preference to punish rather than negotiate with Pyongyang. This could embolden Pyongyang as it strives to press China, Russia and South Korea for more inducements to win its return to the talks.

The Price of Unilateralism

Pyongyang obviously sustained the greatest damage because of its missile tests. Once again its provocative unilateral conduct outraged and rallied the international community. Most noticeably, China, Russia and South Korea publicly expressed keen displeasure. Pyongyang could have repaired much of the damage by accepting China’s overture to return to the Six Party Talks, but its rejection of this offer only reinforced the international community’s determination to condemn North Korea and to isolate it diplomatically. North Korea’s leader has made his generals proud of him, but at a substantial cost.

North Korea’s unilateralism continues to estrange it from the international community, including its allies. China’s firm public condemnation of Pyongyang is unprecedented. But Beijing’s only recourse is to attempt to entice North Korea back to the Six Party Talks. Knowing this, Pyongyang is certain to pressure Beijing to reaffirm the sincerity of their bilateral alliance. One possibility is that Pyongyang will press Beijing to convince Washington to give up its financial sanctions as a precondition for a return to the Six Party Talks.

Six Party Talks

There are only two possible options for convincing North Korea to halt the development of its arsenal of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles: confront North Korea militarily or negotiate with it. Economic pressure alone is not likely to compel North Korea to disarm. Nor is North Korea likely to soon collapse given its continuing economic revitalization and China’s preference to sustain the Pyongyang government.

The nations of Northeast Asia and the United States clearly prefer to preserve peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. This requires that North Korea be convinced to disarm. Resumption of the Six Party Talks thus remains the best available and least costly option to accomplish this, but prospects for their resumption are bleak, at least for the near future. Fortunately China remains committed to working with North Korea to restart the talks. The United States, Russia and South Korea also remain committed to the talks’

resumption. These nations can best assist China by restraining their rhetoric aimed at North Korea and instead emphasize close coordination and quiet diplomacy with Beijing. Otherwise, the failure of the Six Party Talks will intensify tensions in northeast Asia to the point of possible confrontation.

Japan's Options

Japan needs to adjust its foreign policy and priorities to the shifting balance of power in Northeast Asia. China and South Korea are emerging from a century of domestic turmoil and economic reconstruction. Their newly forged economic prosperity and international prestige fosters self confidence and a desire to assert themselves on the international stage. North Korea's development of nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities nurture its self confidence and assertiveness after a decade of economic decline and diplomatic estrangement. At the same time, President Bush since 2002 has shifted the United States' diplomatic and military focus from to the Middle East.

The Japanese people have watched uneasily these developments while its government has clung to its Cold War strategy of relying on the US-Japan alliance as the cornerstone of its diplomacy and defense posture. Prime Minister Koizumi maintained a foreign policy that essentially subordinated Japan to the United States. Japan has been a supporting participant in the Six Party Talks, accommodated Washington's reduction of US troops in Japan, sent its own troops to Iraq, and responded positively to Washington's call for assistance in the war on terrorism. Koizumi, under substantial public pressure, demonstrated initiative only toward North Korea to address the Japanese abduction issue.

But Japan's leading candidate for prime minister Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe and Foreign Minister Aso are under public pressure to adopt a more assertive foreign affairs and defense posture. Their choice is between multilateralism or unilateralism. In the wake of North Korea's missile launching, both men demonstrated a preference for unilateralism by taking the lead in the UNSC and by voicing support for a "pre-emptive" defense option.

Japan, however, should proceed with caution. Unilateralism could escalate regional tensions far beyond anyone's ability to restrain. More Japanese sanctions on North Korea are not likely to compel North Korea to bow to Tokyo's demands. Fifty years of extensive United States sanctions have failed to accomplish this. Continuing diplomatic confrontations with North Korea over the abduction issue, with China and the two Koreas over visits to Yasukuni Shrine, and with South Korea over Takeshima Island will only deflect Japan's energies away from what should be its priority – national defense.

Given the choice between unilateralism and multilateralism, and between bilateral disputes versus security needs, Japan's interests would appear to be best served by pursuing a multilateral foreign policy that accents national defense. Improving relations with China and South Korea could more effectively than unilateral sanctions focus pressure on Pyongyang to return to the Six Party Talks. Restraining rhetoric and working quietly through diplomatic channels with China, the United States, Russia and South

Korea are more likely to get the Six Party Talks restarted than a strategy of unilateral rhetoric and pressure.

Japan shares with its neighbors and the United States the preference for peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Only then can Japan and its neighbors continue to concentrate on enhancing their prosperity and resolving their differences through diplomacy. Peace on the Korea peninsula is best sustained through regional cooperation and multilateral diplomacy, not through unilateralism. Japan naturally should simultaneously improve its defense capabilities, particularly in the area of ballistic missile defense. But further talk of developing a unilateral “pre-emptive” defense option will only achieve what President Bush has already learned. Such rhetoric creates enemies, not friends, and promotes an arms race, not disarmament.