

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1142
July 5, 2006

Responding to North Korea's Missile Provocation

Michael A. Needham

Adding an international relations angle to America's Independence Day celebration, North Korea fired six missiles yesterday, and at least one more today, into the Sea of Japan. Among these missiles was the Taepodong 2 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), which failed approximately 40 seconds into its flight. These launches, while a provocation that will further isolate North Korea from the rest of the world, should not lead the United States to alter its approach to confronting the bad behavior of the Kim Jong-Il regime. America should continue to work with its partners in the Six-Party talks to compel Pyongyang to cease its belligerent behavior. Further, the U.S. should join with Japan and other nations to impose additional economic sanctions on North Korea, both unilaterally and through the United Nations Security Council. Finally, U.S. policymakers should recognize that North Korea's missile tests underscore the importance of developing a comprehensive ballistic missile defense system.

Seven Missiles

At approximately 3:30 AM local time (2:30 PM EDT, just minutes after the launch of the space shuttle Discovery), North Korea began its testing of seven missiles. Six appear to have fired successfully; these were Scud and Nodong missiles, which have been part of the North Korean arsenal—and available for sale on international markets—for years.

The remaining missile was a Taepodong 2, which has been on its launch pad since May. A fully functioning Taepodong 2 missile could potentially strike the western United States, according to defense estimates. But North Korean ICBM technology is not yet fully functional. Roughly 40 seconds into its flight, the Taepodong 2 failed and crashed approximately 200 miles west of Japan in the Sea of Japan. This is good news in the short term, but the North Koreans will be able to analyze what went wrong and use that information to attempt to fix it. This test, despite the missile's failure, is a step towards an operational North Korean ICBM.

The United States ballistic missile defense system is reported to have been "on alert" to intercept a threatening ICBM on a trajectory towards U.S. territory.

A successful launch would have proven the Taepodong 2 technology functional, which North Korea had hoped would impact the Six-Party talks. Further, it would have enhanced the marketability of the North Korean arsenal among international weapons buyers.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/asiaandthepacific/wm1142.gfm

Produced by the Center for Asian Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

The launches were intended to return North Korea to the front of international security discussions, a position more recently held by Iran and Iraq. Beyond providing Kim Jong-Il with the attention he craves, Pyongyang seeks to extract further concessions from the international community—particularly if the United States could be compelled to engage in bilateral negotiations outside of the framework of the Six-Party talks.

That appears unlikely. The United States has responded to North Korea's missile tests by dispatching Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, the top American negotiator in the Six-Party talks, to the region and has joined Japan in calling for the United Nations Security Council to discuss the situation at a 10 AM meeting today.

Next Steps for the Administration and Congress

Neither the successful launches nor the unsuccessful Taepodong 2 test is an immediate crisis. That North Korea possesses usable Scud and Nodong missiles is old news; that the Taepodong 2 failed is evidence of the difficulty of perfecting ICBM technology. America's commitment to the Six-Party talks stems from a belief that they provide the best framework for dealing with North Korea. This calculus is not altered by any temper tantrum Kim Jong-Il might throw now or in the future.

As part of its commitment to the Six-Party talks, America should work with its allies to confront the North Korean threat and appropriately punish North Korea for its unannounced missile launches. The U.S. should join the Japanese in imposing additional sanctions on the North Korean regime, with the aim of pressuring Pyongyang to reengage in the Six-Party talks. Further, the U.S. should push the United Nations Security Council to punish North Korea's belligerent behavior with more than just a presidential statement. The Security Council has failed to live up to its responsibilities to control North Korea in the past—for example, it could do no more than “express concern” in 2003 when North Korea pulled out of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. North Korea's recent behavior provides the Security Council with an opportunity to

address North Korea's abandonment of international norms. Given China's public statements last week urging North Korea not to test its Taepodong 2 missile, Security Council action may be more likely now than in the past.

Finally, Pyongyang's unpredictable behavior highlights the need for a fully functioning, comprehensive ballistic missile defense system. While the United States would have been wise to attempt an intercept of a missile launched in the direction of U.S. territory, the United States currently has a very limited capability to shoot down ICBMs. Congress and the administration should immediately revisit the Global Protection Against Limited Strikes (GPALS) proposal made in 1991 by the then-Director of the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization, Ambassador Henry F. Cooper, and current National Security Advisor Stephen J. Hadley. The GPALS system could engage up to 200 individual missile reentry vehicles and destroy ICBMs such as the Taepodong 2. North Korea will probably one day have the capability to strike the United States; the United States must develop a defensive capability able to protect itself from Pyongyang's unpredictable behavior.

Conclusion

North Korea's July 4 missile launches do not fundamentally alter the challenge of confronting North Korea's provocative behavior. They do, however, provide Pyongyang with useful information on its Taepodong 2 ICBM technology, violate the North Korea's 1999 self-imposed moratorium on missile launches and further isolate North Korea from the other nations in the Six-Party talks. While keeping yesterday's events in the proper perspective, the United States should use this opportunity to encourage the international community to take a stronger approach towards Pyongyang and to underscore the importance of a ballistic missile defense system as part of a comprehensive American national security strategy. Finally, America must remain committed to the Six-Party talks no matter how Kim Jong-Il lashes out.

Michael A. Needham is Director of the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.