

WebMemo



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North Korea's Missile Gambit

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North Korea may be preparing to test-launch a long-range Taepo Dong-2 missile from its eastern coast. A missile launch, or even observable preparations for such a launch, would be the next step in Pyongyang's escalating efforts to pressure the U.S. and South Korea to soften their policies toward the North Korean dictatorship. Needless to say, it would be deeply embarrassing to the Obama Administration, which, prior to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's Asia trip, seemed to be climbing down from some of the firmer positions President Obama held during the campaign.

Pyongyang is sending a signal to the Obama Administration that, despite the change in U.S. leadership, North Korea will not adopt a more accommodating stance in nuclear negotiations. Pyongyang's increasingly bellicose campaign is also directed—perhaps primarily—at forcing South Korean President Lee Myung-bak to abandon his requirements for conditionality, reciprocity, and transparency in South Korean engagement with the North.

Target: North America. Scientists remain uncertain over the range and payload capabilities of the long-range Taepo Dong-1 and -2 missiles as well as of potential variants. A 2001 National Intelligence Estimate by the U.S. intelligence community assessed a two-stage Taepo Dong 2 “could deliver a several-hundred-kilogram payload up to 10,000 km—sufficient to strike Alaska, Hawaii, and parts of the continental United States.” The report projected that including a third stage could increase the range to 15,000 km, which would allow the missile to

reach all of North America with a payload sufficiently large to accommodate a nuclear warhead.¹

North Korea may not intend to actually launch a missile—that is, if Pyongyang seeks to achieve its diplomatic objectives without escalating tension beyond a counter-productive level. Its launch of a Taepo Dong-2 missile in 2006 angered ally China to such a degree that Beijing acquiesced to a U.S.-sponsored United Nations resolution against North Korea. Knowing that any activity at its missile test facility would be observed by satellites and interpreted as launch preparations, Pyongyang might hope that concerns over escalating tensions would cause South Korea and the U.S. to weaken negotiating positions. After all, the Bush Administration softened its position when North Korea threatened to reprocess plutonium in late 2008.

North Korea's actions may also be an attempt to trigger a resumption of bilateral negotiations which stalled at the end of the Clinton Administration. At that time, Pyongyang demanded \$1 billion annually in return for a cessation of its missile exports. The U.S. rejected the demand and sought a more comprehensive agreement. But North Korea's demand for a presidential summit and refusal to discuss details of an agreement during Secretary of State

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Madeleine Albright's October 2000 trip to Pyongyang and November 2000 bilateral meetings in Kuala Lumpur doomed the initiative.

A High Risk Gambit. A launch would be a high-risk gambit. If North Korea were to successfully launch a Taepo Dong missile, it would significantly alter the threat potential to the U.S. and its Asian allies. Pyongyang's previous Taepo Dong missile launches in 1998 and 2006 failed and its nuclear test in 2006 was only partially successful. A successful launch of a missile theoretically capable of reaching the United States with a nuclear warhead would reverse perceptions of a diminishing North Korean military threat. Pyongyang calculates that international concerns over rising tensions would soften demands for North Korea to fully comply with its denuclearization commitments. Pyongyang would seek to defuse international anger by claiming, as it did with its 1998 launch, that it was simply launching a civilian space satellite.

On the other hand, another North Korean long-range missile failure would not only once again provide fodder for late night comedians; it would also further reduce the perception of North Korea as a military threat, thereby undermining its negotiating leverage. Such failure could reduce any sense of urgency for making progress either in missile negotiations or the Six Party Talks. Pyongyang could compensate by increasing tensions elsewhere, perhaps by initiating a naval confrontation with South Korea in the West Sea as occurred in 1999 and 2002.

A missile launch would be the Obama Administration's first foreign policy test. During the presidential campaign, Barack Obama declared that "if the North Koreans do not meet their obligations, we should move quickly to re-impose sanctions that have been waived, and consider new restrictions going forward."² How will the President react to a North Korean missile launch? Will the strong words of the campaign and Secretary of State Clinton's confirmation hearing be matched by resolute action?

What the U.S. Should Do:

- Emphasize that North Korea's actions are provocative, counterproductive, and call into question Pyongyang's viability as a negotiating partner. Highlight that North Korea's threatening belligerence, not U.S. "hostile policy" as Pyongyang claims, has hindered negotiations.
- Affirm U.S. commitment to defend our allies against any North Korean provocation, including missile launches or naval confrontation in the West Sea.
- Underscore Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' pledge to shoot down the North Korean missile if it approaches U.S. territory.
- Emphasize that North Korea's missile threat demonstrates the continuing need for the U.S., Japan, and South Korea to develop and deploy missile defense systems. It is ironic that President Obama's Secretary of Defense has suggested using missile defenses that Obama would likely not have funded had he been in office during their development.
- Declare that the U.S. is willing to resume negotiations to eliminate North Korea's missile threats to its neighbors. Such negotiations, however, must comprehensively constrain missile development, deployment, and proliferation rather than simply seeking a *quid pro quo* agreement—cash payments in exchange for not exporting missile technology. Nor should such negotiations deflect attention from Pyongyang's denuclearization requirements in the Six Party Talks.
- Demand that all U.N. member nations fully implement their existing requirements. A North Korean launch would be a clear violation of U.N. Resolutions 1695 and 1718. In response, the U.S. should Washington should insist that the U.N. Security Council adopt a follow-on resolution that includes chapter VII, article 42 of the U.N. charter which makes sanctions mandatory and allows for enforcement by military means.

1. Paul Kerr, "New North Korean Missile Suspected," Arms Control Association, September 2004, http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2004_09/NK_Missile (February 17, 2009).

2. Jonathan Ellis, "McCain and Obama on North Korea," *The New York Times*, June 26, 2008, at <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/06/26/mccain-and-obama-on-north-korea> (December 8, 2008).

- Initiate a multilateral effort—comprised of financial, military, law enforcement, and intelligence organizations—to sanction North Korean and other foreign companies and government entities that are involved in North Korean missile and WMD development and proliferation.

Adhering to the above-noted recommendations will ensure that the U.S. sends a clear message to Pyongyang, America's Asian allies, and the rest of the world: A nuclear North Korea will not be tolerated.

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