

NORTH KOREA'S ROCKET LAUNCH: IMPLICATIONS FOR ITS FOREIGN POLICY

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North Korea's rocket launch on April 5 raises a host of questions about its motivation and implications for its foreign and security policy. To what extent was it linked with the latter? What are the gains and losses for the regime both in the short and medium terms? What are the prospects for the resumption of the long-stalled Six-Party Talks?

An Assessment of the Rocket Launch

The launch of a *Taepodong-2* rocket by the North on April 5 (local time) marked the third time that the North had launched a long-range missile. The two previous launches occurred on August 31, 1998 and July 5, 2006, respectively. The first involved a *Taepodong-1* rocket with an estimated range of 1,550 miles (2,500 km), while the second involved a *Taepodong-2* missile with an estimated range of 4,100 miles (6,700 km). The latter, it should be noted, was a total failure, for the test rocket broke apart within a minute of launch.

Comparing the August 1998 and the April 2009 launches, one finds both parallels and contrasts. To begin with the former, both tests appeared to have been partial successes. For the third stage aimed at propelling a satellite into orbit failed in both cases, according to U.S. and Japanese military sources. In both cases, however, the North claimed success in placing satellites—*Kwangmyongsong* [Bright Star] 1 and *Kwangmyongsong* 2, respectively—into orbit; the satellites reportedly beamed patriotic songs—paean to Generals Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il—to earth.

On both occasions, the first stage of the rocket fell in the East Sea (Sea of Japan), with the second stage flying over Japan and landing in the Pacific Ocean. The third stage, as noted, failed to take off, falling into the ocean along with the second stage.

Two things, however, differentiated the 1998 and 2009 launches. First, unlike the former, the latter was marked by an unusual degree of transparency. For the North announced on February 24 that it was preparing to launch a “communications satellite,” asserting that it had a sovereign right to do so, since “outer space is an asset common to mankind, and its use for peaceful purposes has become a global trend.” On March 24, the North gave the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) notice of its plans to launch a “satellite” from April 4 to 8. The North gave the IMO “coordinates at sea where it expected the first and

second stages to splash down.” The North’s actions followed the detection of the North’s planning activities by satellites, triggering widespread alarm and concerns. In the wake of the North’s notice, the U.S., Japan, and South Korea deployed Aegis-class destroyers equipped to intercept missiles.

Second, although both the 1998 and 2009 launches were rated as failures by the U.S., the latter nonetheless displayed an improved North Korean capability. For the total distance traveled by the rocket was twice as long in 2009 as was the case in 1998—2,175 miles (3,500 km) as opposed to 1,060 miles (1,700 km). In this connection, it is worth noting that much can be learned from failures; the North appeared to have learned a lot from both the 1998 and 2006 launches and is certain to obtain valuable information from the 2009 launch as well.

Linkages to Foreign and Security Policy

In what ways can the North’s action be linked to its foreign and security policy? A major foreign policy goal of the DPRK is to improve, and ultimately, normalize, relations with the United States. Although the North made some headway during the second term of the George W. Bush administration, going so far as to have its name dropped from Washington’s list of state sponsors of terrorism, the process entered an impasse over a dispute over a verification regime pertaining to the North’s disablement of its nuclear facilities.

The advent of the Obama administration, however, may have raised Pyongyang’s hopes, for during the campaign for the Presidency, Obama appeared to favor a more conciliatory approach to Washington’s adversaries, including the North. To the latter’s dismay, the Obama administration became so preoccupied with the gargantuan challenge of dealing with the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression that it all but ignored the DPRK. Against this backdrop, the latest missile launch may be construed as the North’s attempt to get Washington’s attention, placing the North squarely on Washington’s agenda.

As far as security policy is concerned, the North’s eagerness to fortify its long-range missile capability is not hard to understand. Coupled with its rudimentary nuclear capability, long-range missiles can serve as a potent deterrent. Should the two can be combined—that is to say, should the North succeed in miniaturizing nuclear warhead, the North can strengthen its threat or deterrent power. If the warhead’s weight is reduced 2,200 pounds and if it can be mounted on a long-range missile, the warhead can travel some 3,700 miles, which will be far enough to hit Alaska. An 1,100-pound warhead mounted on a *Taepodong-2* missile can travel 5,600 miles, which would give the North the capability to hit targets on the West Coast of the continental United States.

Gains and Losses

What did the North gain from the latest rocket launch? What did it lose? To begin with the gains, there are both internal and external dimensions. Internally, the launch may have aimed to boost the sagging morale of the North Korean populace and bolster the legitimacy of Kim Jong Il. While Kim reportedly watched the launch first-hand, the populace was given a chance to see it on TV after the event. What both saw was only the launch of the first stage; no one in the North was told of the failure of the third stage. Some outside observers speculate that even Kim Jong Il may not be privy to what has really happened. The timing of the launch is noteworthy, for it occurred four days before the convening of a Supreme People's Assembly session, which is expected to elect Kim Jong Il to a third term as the chairman of the National Defense Commission.

Another internal gain pertains to the wealth of information the North must have obtained from the failed launch. As noted, the North has clearly made progress over the years, even though it is still a long way off from its ultimate goal. As the South Korean press has noted, moreover, the North is considerably ahead of the South in missile technology.

Turning to external gains, the demonstration of an improved missile capability may conceivably enhance the North's ability to export its missiles to countries in the Middle East, such as Iran, Pakistan and Syria. It should be noted, however, Iran may have a slight edge over the North, for it succeeded in launching a small satellite into orbit last year.

What, then, are the costs the North has paid or will pay for the launch? U.S. President Obama lost no time in denouncing it in strong terms. In a statement issued on the same day, while he was on a trip to Europe, Obama said:

“North Korea's development and proliferation of ballistic missile technology pose a threat to the northeast Asian region and to international peace and security. The launch today of a Taepo-dong 2 missile was a clear violation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1718, which expressly prohibits North Korea from conducting ballistic missile-related activities of any kind. With this provocative act, North Korea has ignored its international obligations, rejected unequivocal calls for restraint, and further isolated itself from the community of nations.”

While indicating his intention to “bring this matter before the [UN Security] Council” after consulting with Japan and the ROK as well members of the Council, Obama nonetheless underscored the importance of the Six-Party Talks for “achieving denuclearization, reducing tensions, and for resolving other issues of concern between North Korea, its four neighbors, and the United States.”

Japan was equally vehement in denouncing the launch, promptly taking steps to convene a special session of the UN Security Council. It also announced its intention to extend economic sanctions against the North for another year, instead of the customary six-months. The sanctions include a ban on port calls of North Korean



ships in Japanese harbors and export restrictions.

Due to the stance of China and Russia, both veto-wielding permanent members, however, the UN Security Council is virtually deadlocked over the North Korean issue. At this writing, the most optimistic scenario calls for the adoption of a non-binding Presidential statement by the Council, rather than a resolution condemning or imposing sanctions on the North.

In sum, the price the North has paid thus far is relatively meager—more symbolic than substantive.

Prospects for the Resumption of Six-Party Talks

The North has warned that any attempt by a state participating in Six-Party Talks to refer its rocket launch to the UN Security Council will lead to the demise of the talks. Whether the North will carry out this threat, however, remains to be seen. Depending on how the Security Council handles the issue, Pyongyang's threat may turn out to be just that—a threat that will slowly fade away.

The history of the talks suggests that breakthroughs usually were preceded by bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and the North, with the understandings reached by them being virtually rubber-stamped by the other parties. This implies that the Obama administration, too, will have no choice but to engage the North directly. That the new chief U.S. delegate to the talks is Ambassador Sung Kim, who served as the number two delegate on the U.S. team headed by Christopher Hill, is a good omen, as is the appointment of Ambassador Bosworth as special envoy on North Korea.

One may hazard the guess that Six-Party Talks will resume sooner or later. The North's dire economic situation, including the severe food shortage, coupled with China's considerable leverage over the North (not to mention its vested interest in the success of the talks as its only host thus far) may justify cautious optimism.