

The Obama Administration and North Korea: Pyongyang's Aims and Washington's Dilemmas

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Contrary to widespread expectations, the advent of the Obama administration in Washington failed to bring about any notable change for the better in U.S.-DPRK relations, which had entered a stalemate in the waning days of the George W. Bush administration. On the contrary, the bilateral relations have markedly deteriorated since the North's rocket launch on April 5 and second nuclear test on May 25.

Pyongyang's Aims

These two events had the effect of thrusting North Korea to the top of the Obama administration's foreign policy agenda before it was really ready -- that is, his nominee for a top policy-making position in the State Department was still awaiting confirmation by the Senate. Among Pyongyang's probable aims, getting Washington's attention may have loomed large. For Obama's campaign slogan of change in internal and external policies alike may have raised the North's expectations. Saddled with the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, coupled with the daunting challenge of fighting two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively, however, Obama had not gotten around to addressing the North Korea issue until he was jolted by the April 5 rocket launch.

One must hasten to add that as is true with most of Pyongyang's external behavior, both the rocket launch and the nuclear test most probably had multiple aims, both internal and external. A major internal aim, as many observers have speculated, may be linked to the political dynamics of succession in Pyongyang. The deteriorating health of Kim Jong Il, who is believed to have suffered a stroke late last year, may have led to his decision to begin laying the groundwork for succession, of which most important is cementing the support of the military that favor the fortification of missile and nuclear capabilities, both pivotal elements of the North's deterrent power.

Fortifying its "deterrent power" has both internal and external dimensions. Internally, the North has set the goal of entering the threshold of *kangsong taeguk* (powerful and prosperous nation) by 2012, the centennial of the late Kim Il Sung's birth. Missiles and nuclear weapons -- and their combination, that is nuclear weapons that can be miniaturized for loading on ballistic missiles -- will go a long way toward fulfilling the goal of making the North a "powerful" nation, in its own eyes if not in those of other

nations.

It needs to be stressed that North Korean rhetoric often exaggerates or distorts actual outcome. Take the rocket launch first. Like its predecessor -- the August 31, 1998 launch of the *Taepodong 1* missile -- the April 5, 2009 launch of the *Taepodong 2* missile was only partially successful. For, according to U.S. and Japanese military sources, the third stage aimed at propelling a satellite into orbit failed in both cases. In both cases, however, the North claimed success in placing satellites -- *Kwangmyongsong* [Lode Star] *1* and *2*, respectively -- into orbit; the satellites allegedly beamed patriotic songs -- paeans to Generals Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il -- to earth.

As for the nuclear test on May 25, whether it succeeded -- especially what its magnitude (yield) was -- remains to be confirmed. As of this writing, neither the Korean Institute of Nuclear Safety (KINS) nor the U.S. Defense Department had been able to detect any signs of the radioactive isotopes that would confirm the nuclear test from multiple air samples taken from the cloud from the North's purported nuclear test. This raises the possibility that the yield from the May 25 test may have fallen short of 4 kiloton as had been estimated earlier. In the first test in October 2006, the yield was below 1 kiloton -- which compares poorly with the median yield of 22 kiloton recorded by the first tests of the seven members of the nuclear club (excluding Israel).ⁱ Pyongyang's transparent aim of gaining international recognition as a nuclear weapons state remains elusive. U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, in fact, warned the North on May 30 that the U.S. "would not accept it as a nuclear weapons state."

Another external aim worth noting pertains to the North's export of missiles and missile parts to the Middle East and Asia. The cash-starved country counts missile exports to such countries as Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen as a major source of hard currency. A demonstration of its improved missile technology may have been intended to reassure its existing customers and attract new ones.

The May 25 nuclear test, should it turn to have been a moderate success, may have moved the North a step closer to the day when it may be in a position to sell nuclear weapons and technology to other states and entities in the illicit global marketplace. This is a nightmare scenario for the United States, its allies, and even China.

Washington's Dilemmas

Compelled to respond to North Korea's escalating provocations, the Obama administration was swift and stern in condemning them both unilaterally and in concert with the other key players with high stakes in the game -- namely, Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing and Moscow. Obama lost no time in issuing a strong statement, his first dealing specifically with North Korea. On the same day the North launched the *Taepodong 2* missile, in the midst of a visit to Prague, Obama denounced Pyongyang's action as 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,” he added, “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 the matter before the UN Security Council in consultation with Japan, South Korea, and members of the Council, Obama 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.”

The UN Security Council, however, failed to reach a consensus on a resolution, settling on a non-binding Presidential statement. The latter, nonetheless was not totally devoid of bite, for it “condemned” the “launch” -- without specifying what was launched, that is whether a ballistic missile or a satellite -- and called on the “Sanctions Committee” established by the UNSC Resolution 1718 (2006) to report to the Council on what entities should be placed on the UNSC sanctions list. Compliance with this mandate, which named three North Korean state enterprises -- Korea Mining Development Trading Corp, Tanchon Commerical Bank, and Korea Ryongbong General Corp—triggered a vehement reaction from Pyongyang.

On the day (April 14) the UNSC issued the presidential statement, the DPRK Foreign Ministry issued a statement denouncing the Council action as not only “hostile” but also an “intolerable insult to our people” and an “unpardonable crime.” Underscoring that all this was a flagrant violation of the September 19, 2005 joint declaration adopted by the Six-Party Talks -- which calls for respect for sovereignty and equality of parties -- Pyongyang declared that the UN action had turned the talks into a useless exercise. The North would therefore refuse to participate in them and would not be bound by any of the agreements the talks had produced.

What is more, the North would restore the facilities in Yongbyon that had been disabled to the original condition and reprocess the spent fuel rods into weapons-grade plutonium. The North subsequently expelled both International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitors and U.S. government experts from Yongbyon and began reprocessing the fuel rods. Restoration and normalization of nuclear facilities, however, are expected to take between six and 12 months. On April 29, in response to the UNSC’s decision to place the three North Korean firms on the sanctions list, the DPRK Foreign Ministry recalled that the North had previously proclaimed that for a party on an equal footing to the Korean Armistice to impose sanctions on the North would be tantamount to an abrogation of that agreement as well as a declaration of war. The North then called on the UNSC to offer an apology to the DPRK for an infringement of the latter’s sovereignty and to nullify all the resolutions and decisions the Council had adopted against Pyongyang.

Finally, on May 8 a spokesman for the DPRK Foreign Ministry unveiled the North's assessment of the Obama administration's policy toward the North. In a word, Pyongyang saw not an iota of change; it was the continuation of his predecessor's "hostile" policy toward the DPRK -- namely "demolishing the ideology and system our people have chosen," also known as "regime change."

To return to the U.S. response to the North's second nuclear test, Obama issued a blunt statement on the same day (May 25). Referring to both the nuclear test and the launch of short-range missiles on the same day, Obama characterized them as a "violation of international law" and a "threat to international peace and security." In his words: "North Korea's behavior increases tensions and undermines stability in Northeast Asia. Such provocations will only serve to deepen North Korea's isolation." Echoing his reaction to the rocket launch seven weeks earlier, Obama pledged to work with "our allies and partners in the Six-Party Talks as well as other members of the UN Security Council in the days ahead."

On June 12 the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1874 that only condemns North Korea's May 25 nuclear test but also imposes a wide array of sanctions on the North. A product of more than two weeks of intensive, closed-door negotiations, the resolution contains a provision for cargo inspections that has been watered down due to objections by China and Russia. If the country where a ship suspected of carrying cargo related to nuclear weapons or missiles is registered "decides to reject an inspection in international waters, then the country would be required to direct the vessel to a nearby harbor for an inspection. If neither happened, the episode would be reported to the Security Council's sanctions committee."ⁱⁱ

The resolution also "calls upon member states to cut off financial services related to the North's nuclear and weapons programs, to avoid any new grants or loans to the country and to halt other trade support like export credits. Financial transactions for humanitarian or development purposes would be allowed."

Apart from a mandatory ban on arms exports, however, most of the provisions in the resolution are "recommendations rather than requirements." What is more, China succeeded in obtaining an "exemption from an arms embargo that allows China to sell small and light weapons, including the signature AK-47 used by North Korea's [People's Army]." The UNSC was expected to begin "negotiations over imposition of an asset freeze or travel ban on additional individuals and state companies linked to North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile program."

Whether and to what extent the sanctions enumerated in Resolution 1874 will produce measurable results depend on how faithfully they will be implemented and, especially, on the cooperation of China. Nonetheless, it is a potent signal not only to the North but also to states like Iran that are believed to be working assiduously on the development of nuclear weapons. How the North will react to the new resolution will

also be a key variable in the equation. Its track record suggests that it may couple vehement condemnation of the UNSC with more provocative acts such as additional missile launches and another nuclear test.

The hard-line stance of the Obama administration was underscored by Obama's comments at a joint news conference with President Nicolas Sarkozy in France on June 6. Calling North Korea's behavior "extraordinarily provocative," Obama said: "Diplomacy has to involve the other side engaging in a serious way to solve problems, and we have not seen that kind of reaction from North Korea." He continued: "We are going to take a very hard look at how we move forward on these issues. . . . We are not intending to continue a policy of rewarding provocation."

A major challenge to the Obama administration's policy of not rewarding provocation, however, is the issue of two U.S. journalists who have been detained in the North since March 17 after being arrested for allegedly entering North Korea illegally. On June 8 North Korea's highest court sentenced them to 12 years in a labor camp after a trial at which no outside observers were present. The unusually harsh sentence suggests that the North views the two journalists -- Laura Ling and Euna Lee -- as valuable pawns in a high-stakes chess game with the United States. Ling, 32, is of Chinese descent, while Lee, 36, is a native of South Korea.

If the North accepts a high-profile U.S. envoy -- such as former Vice-President Al Gore, co-founder of Current TV, a cable and Web network, for which the two women were working at the time of their arrest -- what kind of a bargain can be struck? One aspect of the case that may enhance the chance of an eventual happy ending is Ling's ancestry. For China cannot be indifferent to her fate. As the only country in the world that has some leverage over the North, China's participation with the United States in an effort to strike a bargain with the North in the case, if it can be induced, will vastly alter the prospects for a mutually beneficial solution.

Although the Obama administration insists on separating the journalists' case from the missile and nuclear issue, the two appear to be intertwined. For there is a high probability that the North will demand notable concessions on sanctions, particularly those that will hurt Pyongyang most -- such as sanctions dealing with financial transactions. Dealing with North Korea, in short, will continue to present dilemmas and headaches in the days ahead.

ⁱ B. C. Koh, "North Korea and the Bomb," *IFES Forum*, No. 06-10-18-1, online at <http://ifes.kyungnam.ac.kr>.



- ii Neil MacFarquhar, "U.N. Security Council Adopts Stiffer Curbs on North Korea," *New York Times*, June 13, 2009; Colum Lynch, "U.N. Imposes Tough New Sanctions on North Korea," *Washington Post*, June 12, 2009.