

# Much Ado about Something: North Korea's Missile Tests

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North Korea's missile tests triggered condemnations from capitals worldwide and may soon be taken up by the UN Security Council. But do these launches really represent an escalation of North Korea's threat to global security? The answer is both yes and no.

First the facts. The launch of the long-range Taepodong missile had been anticipated for weeks; the United States and Japan had already threatened dire consequences if North Korea followed through. While its estimated range includes Alaska, the rocket had never been tested, and Tuesday's failure early in its flight offers no evidence it's ready for prime time. The 1998 test of an earlier Taepodong version was more successful, overflying Japan before failing in its third stage. North Korea has successfully developed and deployed the shorter-range Nodong (Rodong) missile, several of which were also launched on Tuesday. But the accuracy and reliability of these missiles is mediocre.

North Korea almost certainly has enough fissile material for six to ten nuclear weapons and has probably fashioned at least one explosive device. The 1994 agreement with the United States freezing North Korea's nuclear program (the "Agreed Framework") collapsed at the end of 2002, freeing North Korea to expand these capabilities. But North Korea is not known to have conducted a nuclear test and is not likely to have yet fashioned a nuclear warhead small, light and durable enough to ride any of its missiles.

In short, a credible North Korean nuclear threat to North America is a long way off. Vancouver is safe. So why all the fuss?

First, if left unchecked, North Korea is on course to develop these capabilities eventually. While this prospect may be at least a decade away, uncertainty over North Korea's technological prowess shortens the "worst-case" time estimates.

Second, North Korea's missiles can now reach Japan, a core Western ally; and North Korea continues to sustain considerable conventional capabilities, including thousands of artillery tubes at the demilitarized zone that could devastate Seoul, South Korea's capital. North Korea has little rational reason to unleash these forces offensively; but their existence is threatening nonetheless.

Most importantly, though, the missile tests are a demonstration of Pyongyang's sustained will and current mood. While the North Korean regime does not respond predictably to either confrontation or overtures, its one consistent behavior over the past fifteen years has been to act provocatively whenever engagement is stalled and US interests are focused elsewhere. Such has been the circumstance this spring.

Pyongyang's diplomatic brinkmanship has born fruit in the past. The 1998 missile test deepened short-term tensions but got Washington's attention: resuscitated engagement led to North Korea's 1999 unilateral moratorium on missile tests, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's visit to Pyongyang in 2000, and negotiations (not concluded) to eliminate North Korea's missile program entirely. In 2002-3, with such engagement shunned by the more hostile Bush Administration, Pyongyang exercised a more aggressive brinkmanship, breaking out of the nuclear freeze agreement just as

Washington was gearing up for war with Iraq, thereby maximizing prospects for minimal US response. The Bush Administration blinked, and North Korea's nuclear capabilities have been expanding since.

Similar conditions prevail now. A renewed engagement effort in 2005 through the so-called "Six-Party Talks" led to a statement of agreed principles in September, but when that consensus proved fleeting the Bush administration retreated to a posture of slow siege, applying economic and political pressure where it could (such as on counterfeiting operations) but resisting direct engagement. Meanwhile, the Pyongyang regime has undoubtedly noticed how Iran, skillfully following North Korea's own playbook, has parlayed a far less advanced nuclear program into increasing attention and sweetened offers – now including the prospect of light-water reactors similar to those promised to North Korea under the Agreed Framework but terminated when that deal collapsed. A new provocation from Pyongyang was almost inevitable.

What's the best response? North Korea's frantic gesticulations do demand attention – ignoring them would simply encourage Pyongyang to escalate down the road. The question is not how seriously to take the missile tests, but rather how to take them seriously. Knee-jerk counter-threats and aggressive posturing hardly answer the need. Indeed, the compounding failure of the recent policies of the United States and its allies must be a principal focal point.

Many Bush officials came to power highly critical of their predecessors' 1994 deal with North Korea, convinced it was giving up too much for too little, and were at best ambivalent to that deal's subsequent collapse. But they have now presided over North Korea withdrawing from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), expelling International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring, recommencing nuclear fuel reprocessing, declaring itself to be nuclear armed, and breaching its moratorium on missile tests – in effect giving up much more for much less.

The call by ex-Clinton defense officials Ashton Carter and William Perry for a preemptive US attack on the Taepodong expressed a frustration with the ineffectualness of current US policy as much as with North Korea itself. This restiveness is increasingly shared by knowledgeable Republicans in both houses of the US Congress, some of whom have renounced the Bush Administration's refusal to meet North Korea directly. But what would a fresh approach entail?

A first step is to recognize clearly that the collapse of the 1994 nuclear freeze agreement allowed North Korea to cross key thresholds in its ambitions: what had been a national proliferation problem has metastasized into a regional security problem with important economic, energy and social dimensions. Previously, solving the North Korean nuclear issue has been seen as a way to catalyze greater East Asian regional security cooperation; now, such cooperation is a prerequisite. Abating North Korea's nuclear ambitions requires, more than ever, grappling with the "hermit kingdom's" long-term regional role.

From a human security perspective, this also means facing honestly the difficult dilemmas posed by the poverty and oppression millions endure just because they happen to live on the northern portion of the Korean Peninsula. Neither human rights resolutions nor unqualified food aid are long-term answers – the human security imperative compels a comprehensive solution.

An immediate need is for the United States and China to find an enduring common ground. And, indeed, the missile tests may make China more amenable to US calls for more coercive pressures. Decision-makers in Beijing are no doubt frustrated and angry, not least because Tuesday's launches (as in 1998) will bolster support for US-Japan missile defense cooperation many Chinese regard as really aimed at them. The tests were also a slap in the face, coming on the heels of the announcement that China and North Korea would soon exchange top-level visits.

But US and Chinese concerns in Korea are far from convergent; in particular, Beijing won't support actions aimed at "regime change" in Pyongyang. In Washington, though, the missile tests are likely to reinforce hardline positions that view regime change – through either pressure or patience – as a necessary prerequisite to a final solution. Many of this persuasion are also most vocal in concerns over a "rising China." Hence, the further ascendance of this approach will tend to push China farther from, rather than closer to, US positions on North Korea, neutralizing the effect of the missile tests themselves. Less directly involved states, such as Canada, can play important roles to smooth these frictions in US-China coordination.

Another pressing need is to find a way to sustain meaningful engagement between North Korea and the United States even when public diplomacy is stymied. When circumstances prevent engagement through the front door, it should be pursued around the back. Canada, with both diplomatic ties to Pyongyang and a trusted voice in Washington, is uniquely situated to facilitate such private contacts.

What is not needed are more grandiose overstatements of the threat North Korea currently poses or more chest-pounding warnings of further dire consequences to follow. That's North Korea's game. It's time to change the rules.