

DANGEROUS CROSSROADS: US-JAPAN CONFRONT NORTH KOREA: Tension ahead of Pyongyang Missile Test

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As China declares fresh warnings of retaliation against any strike on Iran [1], the regime in Pyongyang shows no signs of aborting its upcoming controversial satellite launch, scheduled to take place on April 12th through to April 16th. The Kwangmyongsong-3 satellite will be launched southward from the Sohae satellite launch station in Cholsan County, North Phyongan Province, using a long-range Unha-3 rocket; North Korean officials assured the international community that it would “strictly abide by relevant international regulations and usage concerning the launch of scientific and technological satellites for peaceful purposes.” [2] As Barack Obama and South Korean President Lee Myung-bak insinuate that Pyongyang’s upcoming satellite launch is a pretext to expand a program of nuclear terrorism [3], North Korea has invited the space agencies of eight countries, including Japan, the United States, China and Russia, and the European Space Agency to observe the launch [4].



While North Korea attempts to assure the transparency of its space program to the international community, the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration and Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency have both declined the invitation from Pyongyang [5]. Additionally, Japan has announced the extension of unilateral sanctions on North Korea for another year [6], including a trade freeze and visa ban, while the US has announced a suspension of 240,000 tones of food aid to North Korea, reportedly allocated for children and pregnant women [7]. While the feasibility of the proposed \$850 million satellite launch

is questionable given North Korea's economic instability in recent times [8], the Washington consensus has used UN Resolution 1874 to impede what may rightfully be a peaceful technological investment to monitor the country's crops and natural resources, in a move to prevent further food insecurity.

UN Resolution 1874 was passed unanimously following the underground detonation of a nuclear device conducted on May 25th, 2009 in North Korea, imposing further economic sanctions on the country and authorizing UN member states to inspect North Korean cargo and destroy any materials suspected to be involved with the Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program [9]. While the 2009 test produced seismic activity measured at magnitude 4.7 [10], the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization's (CTBTO) announcement that no [radionuclides](#) had been detected following Pyongyang's test makes it difficult to prove that nuclear technology was in fact used at all [11]. Following a 2004 visit to North Korea's Yongbyon Nuclear facility, US nuclear scientist Siegfried Hecker testified before US Congress that he saw no evidence of a nuclear bomb [12]; after visiting the facility again in November 2010, Hecker acknowledged the system's increased capability, however noting that the experimental light-water reactor he was shown was still in the early stages of construction [13].

The accusations of North Korea's ill-intentioned nuclear program appear highly suspect when tracing back the routes of technology it is accused of possessing. In 1994, the Swiss multinational giant Asea Brown Boveri (ABB) was awarded a \$200 million contract with the North Korean government to install two light water nuclear power stations on the nation's east coast following a deal with the US to freeze Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program [14]. Donald Rumsfeld, one of the Bush administration's most vocal opponents to North Korea, presided over the contract with Pyongyang when he was an executive director of ABB [15]. Although the US State Department claimed that the light water reactors could not be used to produce weapons-grade plutonium, Henry Sokolski, head of the Non-proliferation Policy Education Centre in Washington disputed the claims of the US Government, offering, "These reactors are like all reactors, they have the potential to make weapons. So you might end up supplying the worst nuclear violator with the means to acquire the very weapons we're trying to prevent it acquiring." [16] In 2002, the Bush Administration released \$95 million US taxpayer dollars to begin construction of Pyongyang's light water reactors, as part of the Agreed Framework [17].

The upcoming satellite test follows the failed launch of the Kwangmyongsong-2, which had fallen into the Pacific Ocean in April 2009 [18]. Mirroring the present day scenario, the United States, South Korea and Japan then accused the launch of being an opportunity to test technology that could be used in the future to launch an intercontinental ballistic missile [19]. Following a Presidential Statement issued by the United Nations Security Council condemning the launch [20], North Korea withdrew from the Six Party Talks [21], claiming that the UNSC infringed its right to peaceful space exploration embodied in the Outer Space Treaty of 1967 [22]. The upcoming launch of the Kwangmyongsong-3 satellite coincides with the 100th anniversary of North Korea's founding deity, Kim il-Sung. Both Japan [23] and South Korea [24] have vowed to intercept the Unha-3 rocket using AEGIS warships if it flies over the country's territories. Pyongyang insists the launch does not violate any UN resolutions, following a Foreign Ministry spokesman who assured the international community that "North Korea will never give up the launch of a satellite for

peaceful purposes.” [25]

The double standards imposed on North Korea remain ever apparent, as the international community remains silent as South Korea expands its arsenal of advanced military technology in an effort to become the world’s seventh largest arm exporter [26]. South Korea intends to import 60 fighter jets from Boeing with an enormous budget of \$7.3 billion [27] and has recently agreed to an American Bunker Buster explosives arms agreement valued at \$71 million [28], while North Korean ballistic technology appears to be constructed from components of Soviet origin suspected to be largely obsolete; analysts such as David Wright of the Union of Concerned Scientists’ point out that the engines on the North’s Unha-2 launcher are based on Soviet technology developed in 1964 [29]. Upon closer examination, the threat on the Korean Peninsula is not as one-sided as the Washington consensus claims.

Following Pyongyang’s announcement in February assuring its readiness for “total war” with South Korea and the United States during joint war drills conducted near North Korea’s border and territorial waters [30], the isolated nation has yet again warned against the interception of its missile, “Nobody should dare encroach upon the sky above Pyongyang, sacred capital of the DPRK, and they are gravely mistaken if they think they can survive after attacking Pyongyang. Whoever intrudes into the territorial air and seas even an inch under any pretext and intercepts the DPRK satellite or collects its debris will meet immediate, resolute and merciless punishment by the DPRK” [31]. Furthermore, Pyongyang has accused Obama of exploiting instability on the Korean Peninsula to strengthen his re-election campaign, citing the Korean threat as a pretext to allow the US Congress to mandate further executive expansion in the Asia-Pacific region, despite the Pentagon’s serious budget shortage [32].

By allowing international experts to observe the planned launch of the Kwangmyongsong-3 satellite, Pyongyang’s attempt to legitimize its peaceful intentions should be acknowledged. Although the Obama administration would like to appear as if they are in command of the situation on the Korean Peninsula, their actions indicate the limited leverage they have to affect the situation. The threat of North Korea has proven itself to be a valuable pretext for the continued presence of US military personnel in both South Korea and Japan. The US has worked to further marginalize North Korea to contain China, as construction begins for a controversial \$970 million joint military base on South Korea’s Jeju Island [33], which would host up to 20 American and South Korean warships, including submarines, aircraft carriers and destroyers once completed in 2014.

Washington’s decision to suspend food aid to North Korea ultimately works against its objectives of weakening the regime, as many citizens would further rely on Pyongyang’s food distribution system – irrespective to the moral argument of barring nutritional necessities to a nation that has previously experienced famine and cases of cannibalism [34]. An influx of foreign currency has ensured Pyongyang’s stability under its new leadership as China secures contracts to extract North Korea’s vast natural resources such as iron ore and coal, roughly valued at \$6.1 trillion as of 2008 [35]. The US will continue to exploit the new regime’s eagerness to prove itself to the populace, as reports issued by the Council on Foreign Relations indicate its long-term program. The 2009 document entitled

“Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea” [36] advocates a military contingency plan involving the stationing of up to 460,000 foreign soldiers into a post-regime North Korea to its capture nuclear arms and ballistic missiles. The document also highlights the need to form a compliant transitional government acquiescent to market liberalization and privatization. As the potential for debilitating conflict on the Korean Peninsula remains ever present, the international community must approach Pyongyang with increased diplomacy and embrace its attempts at transparency in whichever medium.

Notes

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