

Missile Mania: US and Japan Threaten North Korea

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The hysteria surrounding the potential launch of a North Korean missile has generated an artificial crisis. For all the ballyhoo of a threat, there is in fact no danger other than that of U.S. reaction. It is claimed that North Korea's Taepodong-2 missile has a range that would allow it to strike Alaska and possibly the U.S. west coast. The Federation of American Scientists, however, estimates its range as far less. (1) Little concrete information is known about the as yet untested Taepodong-2 missile, and its range is a matter of conjecture. For that matter, U.S. officials have admitted that they cannot be certain that the missile in question is a Taepodong-2. (2) And some reports have indicated that the missile is estimated at just over 30 meters in length, whereas the Taepodong-2 is thought to be 35 meters long. Mention of a Taepodong-2 missile is based on supposition, not evidence.

U.S. and Japanese officials have threatened to impose additional sanctions on North Korea if it goes ahead with a missile launch. There has even been talk of a naval blockade, an act of war under international law. The Bush Administration has not spelled out its precise intent, but Peter Rodman, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, warns, "We would seek to impose some cost on North Korea." (3)

Meanwhile, there are those who advocate military measures. The U.S. has activated its anti-missile defense system, and there is talk of using the North Korean missile as "target practice." (4) The only concern expressed over such a provocative action is that the U.S. might suffer embarrassment should it fail to intercept the missile. Worse yet, prominent Democrats have sought through reckless posturing to pressure the Bush Administration from the right. William Perry, former defense secretary in the Clinton Administration, and his assistant, Ashton B. Carter, wrote an opinion piece in the *Washington Post*, advocating a cruise missile strike on the North Korean missile as it sits on the launching pad. Former Vice President Walter Mondale quickly followed by urging the Bush Administration to tell North Korea to dismantle the missile or "we are going to take it out." Mondale regards North Korea as "so dangerous" because of its "paranoid leader." One wonders just who it is that is being paranoid here. (5)

The impression given by U.S. officials and the news media is that there is something uniquely sinister and threatening in a missile launch. South Korean officials point out that the open manner in which North Korea has prepared the launch indicates that the intent is to put a satellite in orbit, a routine enough activity for a number of nations. (6) North Korea's previous launch of a satellite, atop a Taepodong-1 in 1998, ended in failure. What is overlooked is that North Korea has the right under international law to launch a satellite or even to test a missile. That this should be so openly disregarded in such an emotional manner is indicative of the low state of political discourse in the U.S. today.

North Korean Deputy UN Ambassador Han Song-Ryol offered to calm the situation through dialogue. "The United States says it is concerned about our missile test launch. Our position is, 'Okay then, let's talk about it.'" (7) Predictably, his suggestion was quickly rebuffed by the Bush Administration, which remains opposed to one-on-one contact with North Korea. U.S. Ambassador to the UN John Bolton blustered, "You don't normally engage in conversations by threatening to launch intercontinental ballistic missiles, and it's not a way to produce a conversation because if you acquiesce in aberrant behavior you simply encourage the repetition of it." (8) Neither Bolton nor anyone else commented on the U.S.' own "aberrant behavior" when it test fired a Minuteman III ICBM on June 14. The missile flew 4,800 miles, before its three warheads struck the Kwajalein Missile Range in the Marshall Islands. (9) For U.S. officials and media to condemn North Korea for preparing a launch even while the U.S. was conducting its own test was merely one more stunning example of hypocrisy.

The Bush Administration has correctly pointed out that for North Korea to launch a missile would violate its moratorium on medium and long range missile testing. That commitment, however, was unilateral. North Korea's moratorium was implemented in 1999 after the U.S. agreed to lift some economic sanctions, a promise that failed to materialize.

The agreement on general principles reached at the six party talks on nuclear disarmament in September of last year obligated the U.S. to begin normalizing relations with North Korea. Instead, it chose to impose additional economic sanctions, ostensibly because of counterfeiting. First the Bush Administration pressured a Macao bank to close North Korean accounts, despite protestations by the bank that its financial dealings with North Korea were legitimate and commercial. Then it followed by imposing sanctions against eight North Korean import and export firms. Seeing the result of actions taken against the bank in Macao, other banks dealing with North Korea severed relations after receiving warnings from the U.S. Treasury Department. "The impact is severe," observed Nigel Cowie, general manager of the Daedong Credit Bank. "I can't speak for what everybody was doing, but I can say that in our case, a lot of legitimate business has been hurt." The sanctions, said U.S. Treasury Department Under Secretary Stuart Levy, placed "heavy pressure" on North Korea, and had a "snowballing...avalanche effect." (10) Under the circumstances, North Korea's continued adherence to a moratorium on missile testing was beginning to appear decidedly one-sided.

Vice President Dick Cheney has rejected calls for a cruise missile attack on the North Korean missile, responding, "Obviously, if you're going to launch strikes at another nation, you'd better be prepared to not just fire one shot." (11) It is recognized that the North Korean military would be a tough opponent, and any attack is likely to trigger a responding strike at a U.S. military target. Events could rapidly escalate into military conflict, which the U.S. could ill afford at a time when the Iraqi resistance is tying up so many troops. Yet the situation remains precarious. Other mooted actions, such as shooting down the missile after launch or imposing a naval blockade, are acts of war and as such, risk inviting war. In the days to come, the Bush Administration may find pressure from the media and Democrats for military action impossible to resist. Cooler heads are needed, but those are in short supply among a political leadership accustomed to saber rattling.

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