

## Briefing Memo

The purpose of this column is to respond to reader interests in security issues and at the same time to promote a greater understanding of NIDS.

A “briefing” provides background information, among others. We hope these columns will help everyone to better understand the complex of issues involved in security affairs. Please note that the views in this column do not represent the official opinion of NIDS.

### **North Korea’s Missile Launches and Its Nuclear Strategy**

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On July 5, 2006, missiles launched by North Korea fell into the Sea of Japan. Since North Korea had announced a freeze on missile launch tests in September 1999, and had promised to continue the missile launch test freeze in the Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration of September 2002, followed by a reconfirmation of this promise at the Second Japan-North Korea Summit of May 2004, the missile firings sent a shock wave around the world. Unlike the launch of a Taepodong-1 on August 31, 1998, this latest test was reported by the media to consist of seven missiles, including Scud, Rodong, and Taepodong-2 missiles. A Taepodong-2 was the third missile launched, but it did not appear to have flown its designed trajectory distance. The missile launches attracted the world’s attention just before a ministerial-level meeting between North and South Korea scheduled in Pusan on July 11, and before a summit meeting of the world’s major powers in Russia on July 15, and occurred on the same day as the US Independence Day holiday and US Space Shuttle launch. Although the details are still unclear, this brief paper examines North Korea’s aims and the military background to its missile development.

#### **Three Aims**

The missile launches have three aims. First is a political aim. On July 6, 2006, the North Korean Foreign Ministry admitted the missile launches with unprecedented speed, stating that “this is a part of normal military training, and missile tests will continue in the future. Missile launches are a legal right of sovereign states, and this legal right is not bound by bilateral or multilateral agreements.” When we consider that the launches occurred even as world attention had been focused on North Korea since May, that North Korea wanted to appeal to the world with its missile launches is unmistakable. The Rodong missile has a range of 1,300 kilometers, which can reach nearly all of Japanese territory. The Taepodong-2 is believed to have a range of around 6,000 kilometers, capable of reaching as far as the US state of Alaska. It is not hard to see that North Korea had calculated that

Japan and the United States would view the missile launches with great seriousness.

In regards to the United States, in particular, North Korea appealed for the need for direct talks. After a freeze was placed in September 2005 on North Korean-related accounts at Banco Delta Asia in Macao, the activities of North Korean trading companies were impeded. When representatives of the Six-Party talks gathered in Tokyo in April, including North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan, the North Koreans attempted to get an agreement for direct talks with the United States and an end to the economic sanctions. But the United States took a hard-line stance, saying that the “economic sanctions are a legal procedural issue,” and no direct talks were realized.

On June 1, a spokesman for the North Korean Foreign Ministry said, “We are fully ready for discussions on items in a joint declaration, including the issue of abandonment of nuclear weapons as well as normalization of bilateral relations, peaceful coexistence, the signing of a peace agreement, and provision of a light water reactor, based on the principle of ‘action for action,’” and then added that “if the United States continues to view us as an enemy and to boost the pressure, we shall have no choice but to protect our rights to existence and sovereignty and to take an ultra-hard line action,” a hint at a missile launch. North Korea took steps to raise tensions for the aim of getting US attention for the North Korean belief that “direct US-North Korea talks are needed.” Even though a missile launch invited the risk of the United States strengthening its sanctions, creating increased tensions was a gamble that the result would be the start of direct US-North Korean talks.

For Japan, on the day of the missile launches, representatives from its mass media were visiting Pyongyang for the purpose of reporting on the abduction issue that is of such interest in Japan. North Korea, which had been saying that “we want to bring an end to this abduction issue and improve Japan-North Korea relations,” appears to have concluded that the increased tension in Japan-North Korea relations immediately after the missile launching means that Japanese society believes that “there are other important issues besides the abduction issue between Japan and North Korea.” In fact, discussion about North Korea within Japan shifted to national security issues once the missiles were launched.

Second, North Korea had technology needs for the development of weapons of mass destruction. In the past, North Korea had tested a new missile about once every five years or so, but this time eight years had elapsed since the Taepodong-1 test in 1998. In order to develop the “Taepodong-X” missile capable of traveling 12,000 to 15,000 kilometers and reaching the US capital, North Korea probably needs to be able to test the missile body alloys and fuel systems, etc. In order to achieve this, it needed success for a missile with a 6,000-kilometer trajectory. North Korea probably fired off multiple missiles during this latest test, considering the damage incurred in the failure of the Taepodong-2 test and then firing off a few launch-ready Scud and Rodong missiles in the same time frame because their chances of success were sufficiently high.

The third aim is from a longer-term, strategic perspective. After last year’s announcement of a nuclear deterrent, North Korea had to convince the United States that it actually was engaged in the development of weapons of mass destruction as a deterrent force. The weapon that could deter US

intervention would be an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the east coast of the United States. This would create a scenario in which if war broke out on the Korean Peninsula, the US Congress and American people would ask, “should the United States be doing a military intervention for the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula when the east coast of the United States is a target for a North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile?” As a result, North Korea could not allow the Taepodong-2 test to fail, and a repeat launch is quite likely.

What is important when thinking about the North Korean missile issue is that North Korea has a unification policy and military strategy, and that weapons of mass destruction are tools for that policy and strategy. When North Korea states that it “will maintain a nuclear deterrent force until the US threat ends,” it means that it “will maintain a nuclear deterrent force until the United States gives up on military intervention on the Korean Peninsula and unification can be achieved under North Korean direction,” and hints at the existence of a “nuclear strategy intertwined with the policy of a North-led unification.” Nuclear weapons are not for engaging in war with the United States, but rather are for avoiding a collision with the United States, and are consistent with Pyongyang’s final goal of North Korea-led peaceful unification.

Other benefits of missile development include: (1) acquisition of around 300 million dollars annually in foreign exchange; (2) possession of weapons that offer independence from China and Russia; (3) domestic appeal by Chairman Kim Jong Il for his policies, like that seen in August 1998 when the launch of a Taepodong-1 was heralded as a “signal flare for a strong and rising great power;” (4) reduced budget for purchase and repair of tanks and warplanes; and (5) cover for delays in modernization of conventional forces. North Korea’s missiles bring with them many “by-products” for its military strategy intertwined with its unification policy.

### **North Korea’s Calculations**

Did North Korea not consider that the missile launching would isolate it from international society? Since May 2006, China had been quiet in the face of the North Korean missile uproar, with Chinese ambassador to the UN Wang Guangya stating at UN headquarters on June 19 that “actions that serve to complicate the political situation in Northeast Asia should not be taken, whether it be in the local area or in the UN Security Council.” By that time, he had already shown opposition to resolutions critical of North Korea in the UN Security Council. Since the Six-Party talks joint Communiqué of September 19, 2005, China had accelerated its joint ventures and exchanges with North Korea and, following the China-North Korea summit held in October 2005, had boosted investment and trade with North Korea and promoted a long-term development scheme for iron, graphite, manganese,

anthracite coal, and other resources. As of June, North Korea probably did not foresee that China would join the circle of sanctions against North Korea.

For South Korea, the North-South relationship has to date strengthened with cross-border rail links, the Kaesong industrial zone project, and the Mt. Kumgang tourist project, without regard for the stalemate in the Six-Party Talks. On June 15, at a ceremony marking the sixth anniversary of the North-South summit meeting, and with the director of the South Korean Ministry of Unification in attendance, the North Korean representative emphasized “national mutual assistance.” Moreover, in mid-June, when the missiles were already loaded on their launch platforms, South Korean government spokespeople continually reiterated, “we cannot tell whether they are missiles or satellites.” In view of this, when Japan and the United States took such a hard line about the missile launches, North Korea probably did not at all foresee that South Korea would join the circle of sanctions against North Korea.

In the movement surrounding the missile issue, there was an interesting choice of words used in the North Korean explanations. On June 20, Lee Byong Dok, a Japan specialist at the assistant bureau chief level in the North Korean Foreign Ministry’s Asia Bureau, told a group of Japanese reporters in regards to the missile issue that “this issue involves the sovereignty of each respective country, and no one has the right to cast aspersions.... It is a military issue and not one that we diplomats can touch.” Depending on how it is read, the statement could be interpreted to mean, “the Foreign Ministry cannot rein in the Army’s launch moves.” In that same statement, however, he also called on the United States to enter negotiations, saying, “Our deterrent force is merely in self-defense. There has been no change in our intent to implement denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula or the 9-19 Joint Communiqué. The United States needs to create the conditions and environment for confidence in talks.” This can be taken to mean, “since deterrence is for self-defense, North Korea can coexist as long as the United States does not intervene in the Korean Peninsula.” So the Korean People’s Army in charge of improving deterrence and the North Korean Foreign Ministry in charge of direct US-North Korea talks are in a mutually dependent relationship, and the idea of “confrontation between the Army and the Foreign Ministry” is rife with contradictions.

Regarding trends inside North Korea, there are those who argue that “Chairman Kim Jong Il does not hold power, and it is a group-rule system,” and others who maintain that “even if Chairman Kim Jong Il holds power, there are internal struggles and confrontations, with rivalries between the Worker’s Party and the Army, between the Foreign Ministry and the Army, and between the Kim Jong Il faction and the anti-Kim Jong Il faction.” However, Kim Jong Il is Chairman of the National Defense Commission, and the National Defense Commission is the highest ranking institution in North Korea. All of the main officers in the Korean People’s Army were promoted personally by Chairman Kim Jong Il. If it is true that “the July 5 missile launches were the result of a runaway Korean People’s Army, and Kim Jong Il could not prevent it,” then the Korean People’s Army must surely have been experiencing chaos since July 5.

## **Future Prospects**

After these latest missile launches, a number of issues are expected to arise. First, it is clear that North Korea has been continuing to extend the range of its missiles. Concern is rising in the United States that North Korea may obtain an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the east coast of the United States if North Korea succeeds in extending its missile ranges. This will certainly raise the level of discussion in the United States, since the issue would directly impinge on US security.

Second, the response of international society after the latest missile launches showed that the attitudes of the five countries of Japan, the United States, China, Russia, and South Korea toward North Korean missile development were not necessarily unified. Attention will need to be paid toward the difference in temperature between attempts by Japan and the United States to incorporate Chapter Seven under the UN Charter into any sanctions resolution, and probable opposition by China and Russia.

Third, the problem of North Korean missile exports will likely attract much more international interest than before. Every year, numerous editorials emphasize that North Korea has been strengthening its military industry for several years. Tests of new missiles probably open up the possibility of new missiles for export. If this is the case, then the latest missile launches give the North Korean missile problem the characteristics of a global issue more than ever before.

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