Beijing's Pyongyang Dilemma: Encouraging International Patience with a Troublesome Ally

Strategic Insights, Volume V, Issue 7 (September 2006)

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Strategic Insights is a bi-monthly electronic journal produced by the Center for Contemporary Conflict at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Introduction

Beijing's cautious approach to defusing recent international tension over North Korea's ballistic missile launches underscores the dilemmas it addresses in its difficult relationship with Pyongyang on the one hand and its interests with respect to the United States on the other. The missile launches were conducted in the midst of China's renewed diplomacy to revive the stalled Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear programs. Beijing is now likely to redouble efforts to revive the talks as the most effective mechanism to resolve the issues of both Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs.

Beijing's initial public response to U.S. official warnings and ROK and Western media reports that Pyongyang on July 4-5 had conducted a series of missile launches, including an unsuccessful test launch of a long-range Taepongdong-2, was low-key and seems intended to encourage Washington and other capitals previously engaged in the Six-Party Talks not to overplay their responses. The official *Xinhua News Agency* cited foreign media sources in reporting the North Korean launches July without comment. On the 5th, the Foreign Ministry acknowledged that Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing had "exchanged views" with counterparts in Washington, Tokyo, Seoul, and Canberra. Also on the 5th, Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao expressed Beijing's "serious concern" about the situation and urged all sides to remain "coolheaded and restrained" in their reactions and to avoid steps that will "make the situation more tense and complicated." Liu added that Beijing in the past had made "unremitting efforts" to promote the Six-Party Talks and pledged to continue to "play a constructive role" in this regard.

Before the North Korean missile launches, Beijing's public posture in response to apparent preparations to test a Taepodong-2 long-range missile had sought both to discourage Pyongyang from escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula by proceeding with its test launch and to encourage restraint on the part of Washington and other capitals in the region. Beijing's initial reaction to U.S. official statements and foreign media reports that Pyongyang was preparing a test launch of the Taepodong-2 came on June 20, when a Foreign Ministry spokesman denied "complete understanding" of the situation and urged all sides to work together to preserve "peace and stability" on the peninsula.

Two days later, the Foreign Ministry spokesman Jiang Yu stated that Beijing was "very concerned" about the possible North Korean test, noted that Beijing was maintaining "close contacts and communication with all parties" to the Six-Party Talks, and urged all sides to "proceed from the overall situation, overcome current obstacles, adopt a more flexible attitude, and make more efforts to improve mutual trust." In New York, PRC United Nations representative Wang Guangya stated on the 22nd that Beijing "does not want to see" a North Korean test launch. On the 27th, the Foreign Ministry spokesman stressed the need to "try to defuse the confrontational atmosphere." Finally, on the 28th, Xinhua's Hong Kong subsidiary *Zhongguo Tongxunshe* cited Premier Wen Jiabao—in Beijing's most authoritative statement to date—urging in a press conference in Shenzhen "all parties" to "proceed from the overall situation on the Korean peninsula, continue to exercise restraint, and avoid a deterioration of the situation."

Six-Party Talks

The North Korean missile launches and the international tensions that preparations for them provoked came in the midst of a new, concerted effort by Beijing to get the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear programs—stalled since November 2005—back on track. Since May, Beijing engaged in a new round of quiet diplomacy to revive the talks, including talks with Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso, ROK Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on May 23 and with Assistant Secretary of State and U.S. delegate to the talks Christopher Hill on May 24. Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing, State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan, and Premier Wen Jiaobao then received the DPRK Foreign Minister Paek Nam Sun in Beijing in late May and early June. On June 1, China's top party and state leader Hu Jintao personally called President Bush to urge U.S. acceptance of a North Korean invitation to send Assistant Secretary Hill to Pyongyang for talks preceding a new session of the Six-Party Talks. Finally, on June 28, Xinhua and South Korean news service Yonhap reported that Li Zhaoxing and Ban Ki-moon had put together a new joint proposal to present to Pyongyang and Washington to break the impasse in the Six-Party Talks.

The Six-Party Talks had held five sessions in Beijing between August 2003 and November 2005. Their fourth session, in September 2005, had produced a six-article joint declaration in which Pyongyang pledged to abandon its nuclear programs and return to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), while retaining the right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. On its part, Washington agreed to renew efforts to assistance the DPRK's acquisition of light-water reactors (promised in the 1994 'agreed framework'), practice non-aggression toward North Korea, and work to normalize relations with Pyongyang. The fifth session of talks broke down in November 2005 over disagreement between Pyongyang and Washington about the sequence of North Korea's dismantlement of its nuclear programs and U.S. discussions about assistance with peaceful nuclear energy.

While only implicit in Beijing's authoritative comment on North Korean preparations to resume missile tests, which had been unilaterally suspended in 1999 after the Clinton Administration agreed to talks on North Korean missile programs, lower level Chinese commentary made it plain that Beijing was irritated at Pyongyang and saw renewed missile firings as a serious obstacle to the Six-Party Talks.

For example:

- On June 21, the Shanghai party newspaper *Wen Hui Bao* carried a commentary that stated that "it is not good to play with fire, and pouring oil on a fire is an act that should not be adopted. If a gun goes off accidentally, peace and stability in northeast Asia is bound to be threatened, and other countries in the region will also be involved."
- Also on the 21st, the Canton newspaper *Guangzhou Ribao* carried a commentary by China Institute of International Studies analyst Zhao Qinghai, who predicted that a North

Korean missile test would "create new factors of uncertainty in northeast Asia... Should the DPRK carry out the test, it will cause an anti-DPRK wave among the public in Japan, the United States, and elsewhere, and it is possible that U.S. and Japanese policy toward the DPRK will harden. Demonized and pushed by the United States and Japan, the DPRK may become even more isolated internationally, DPRK-ROK relations will be hurt, the process of improving DPRK-Japanese relations may be interrupted, and the DPRK tactic of engaging four (China, Russia, Japan, and the ROK) to attack one (the United States) at the Six-Party Talks will be still more difficult to carry out."

- On the 24th, the PRC-owned communist Hong Kong newspaper *Wen Wei Po* carried a commentary by Phoenix television commentator Qiu Zhenhai suggested that Pyongyang's resumption of missile testing would "not only complicate the regional security situation, but also put China and Russia in a more difficult situation and encourage hard-line forces in the United States and Japan."

Low-level Chinese commentary also made plain the hopes Beijing's official statements conveyed implicitly that Washington would respond calmly to the North Korean missile test preparations and firings. On June 21, the Shanghai newspaper *Dongfang Zaobao* carried a commentary by Fudan University's Institute of International Studies Vice President Shen Dingli, a politically well-connected academic well known to American counterparts, that urged both Pyongyang and Washington as "stakeholders" to avoid steps that exacerbate the situation. The United States, in particular, Shen observed, "as a big and powerful country should be better able to keep its cool and keep the situation under control, rather than be driven by the situation."

The Logic of Beijing's Approach

The logic of Beijing's cautionary response to the North Korean missile launches builds on the same array of interests that drives the overall policy approach to the Korean peninsula that it has pursued since the end of the Cold War. The weight of these interests, which include serious considerations for PRC security and economic prosperity, make Beijing a decidedly status quo player in the international politics of the Korean peninsula.

From a security perspective, Beijing since the founding of the PRC in 1949 has regarded North Korea as a security buffer against an American-backed South Korea and, by extension, American and potentially Japanese power. It was for this reason in part that Beijing intervened in the Korean War once American-commanded UN forces crossed the 38th parallel into the North and advanced to the Yalu River.

Although circumstances have changed dramatically with respect to the interests of all of the major external powers on the peninsula—none of the four (China, Japan, the USA, and Russia) sees an interest in renewed hostilities—Beijing retains a basic interest in a viable North Korean regime. For this reason, while Beijing nominally backs Pyongyang's calls for unification, it is not eager to see the division of Korea change, whether by negotiated unification or state collapse in the North, without clearly predictable consequences that do not jeopardize Chinese security. While Beijing's 1961 security treaty with Pyongyang is still on the books, it is effectively a dead letter. And while Beijing does not favor a unification of Korea under ROK auspices if it presents the prospects of American forces deployed under the 1953 U.S.-ROK security pact in the North, it also tacitly accepts the presence of American forces in the South today as a deterrent to renewed hostilities on the peninsula.

Economically, China has developed extensive relationships with all of the major northeast Asian powers that are critical to its ongoing economic development and prosperity. South Korea in 2005 was the PRC's fourth-ranking trade partner, accounting for a $112 billion total volume, and its fourth-ranking source of direct foreign investment. The United States and Japan were China's first- and second-ranking trade partners, respectively. In real terms, the engine of much of

China's impressive economic growth in recent years has been the markets and investments of three of its five partners engaged in the Six-Party Talks, and instability and renewed hostilities on the Korean peninsula can easily disturb these critical relationships.

Politically, little of substance remains of the ideological solidarity between Beijing and Pyongyang that dominated their relations in the 1950s, when both states shared similar international contexts as excluded pariahs from the American-dominated international system. Particularly after Beijing's strategic rapprochement with Washington in the 1968-1972 watershed in geopolitics, Beijing's and Pyongyang's interests increasingly diverged. With the onset of Deng Xiaoping's market-based reforms after 1978 and Beijing's increasingly explicit interest-driven foreign policy, little remained of the once prominent "sealed in blood" political relationship of the earlier era. While Beijing and Pyongyang still salute each other with ideologically-laced toasts on ceremonial occasions, low-level Chinese media occasionally conveyed Beijing's distaste for Pyongyang's "dynastic" leadership succession from DPRK founder Kim Il-song to his son, the "dear leader" Kim Jong-il and from time to time register Beijing's irritation that Pyongyang does not adopt some form of economic reform to improve its fortunes.

Given these fundamental interests, "peace and stability" has long been the watchword in Beijing's stance on Korean issues, priorities that figure as the baseline in Beijing's recent official statements on North Korea's missile tests. In service of these priorities, Beijing has pressed three tactics consistently on North Korean issues. First, it has for more than two decades pressed Pyongyang to initiate economic reform, including opening to the international economy, to strengthen itself and improve its viability. These efforts to persuade Pyongyang of the advisability of Chinese-style reforms began in the early 1980s and were visible most recently during Kim Jong-il's tour in January this year of south China, including two of China's four original special economic zones, which had served as the spearhead of China's entry into the international economy in 1979.

Second, Beijing has pressed Pyongyang to expand its international relationships to break out of its diplomatic isolation and to negotiate seriously with Seoul, Tokyo, and especially Washington, and it has shown clear irritation with Pyongyang for actions that impede this progress. And third, Beijing has counseled the other major players on the Korean peninsula on the need for patience and flexibility in dealings with Pyongyang as the best means to assuage what Beijing regards as Pyongyang's real concerns about security—especially with respect to the United States.

These tactics were evident in Beijing's approach to dealing with the escalation in regional tensions over Pyongyang's acknowledgement to U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Jim Kelly in October 2002 that it had a secret uranium enrichment program. Beijing confined its displeasure at Pyongyang to low-level commentary—usually in the communist-controlled Hong Kong press—and urged flexibility on the part of Washington and later the other regional players in response. After taking the initial position that North Korean nuclear developments should be addressed in bilateral talks between Washington and Pyongyang, but thereafter worked persistently to bring about three-party (PRC-DPRK-U.S.) talks in Beijing in April 2003 and then the six-party process that began in August 2003.

Prospects

Given the basic PRC interests on the Korean peninsula sketched above, Beijing's cautionary approach to the current North Korean provocation should not surprise. It is likely to stress that the resumption of missile launches by the North is best approached by enfolding the question into the six-party framework. For these reasons, it will also likely oppose actions by the UN Security Council and work hard to ensure that at least Russia is willing to join Beijing in vetoing UN sanctions so that Beijing does not stand alone on the issue. It will likely discourage but also tacitly acquiesce the bilateral steps to pressure Pyongyang, such as economic sanctions by Tokyo and

comparable new steps by Washington, while believing that such steps are likely to harden Pyongyang's readiness to return to the Six-Party Talks. Meanwhile, it is likely to counsel calm in response to Pyongyang's provocations and intensify diplomatic efforts to get the six-party process back on track.

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