

Regional Responses to the DPRK's Satellite Launch

Written by Benjamin Habib

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BENJAMIN HABIB, APR 7 2012

In March 2012, North Korea's external propaganda mouthpiece Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) announced the upcoming launch of a satellite, the Kwangmyongsong-3, during a four day launch window timed to coincide with the centenary of regime founder Kim Il-sung's birth on April 15.[1]

Regardless of whether a satellite is actually placed in orbit, most foreign observers believe the satellite launch is a cover for a long-range, multi-stage missile test. A North Korean missile test would contravene a number of United Nations Security Council resolutions, along with the recent agreement signed with the United States in February in which North Korea agreed to suspend nuclear and missile tests and uranium enrichment activities, under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) supervision, in exchange for food aid from the United States.[2]

Does this matter? All parties in Northeast Asia have expressed varying levels of condemnation following Pyongyang's announcement.[3] For a guide as to how regional states will respond after the Kwangmyongsong-3 launch, one should look back on the reactions of regional states to past North Korean provocations. Despite an abundance of strong rhetoric, the actual responses of regional states have been underwhelming and incoherent, reflecting the differing strategic priorities of each regional state. Regional responses following the actual launch are likely to follow the same trend.

The Stick: Constraints on Punitive Action

To use the 'carrot and stick' metaphor, the international community approaches North Korea with a poor tasting carrot and a broken stick. Let's consider the stick first, the ability of regional states to punish North Korean bellicosity.

The United States does not have a credible strategy for obtaining or compelling North Korean acquiescence, stemming from constraints on the capacity of the US military to act decisively in the Korean theatre.^[4] If we consider the proximity of the South Korean capital to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and the estimated cost of war should an American military action escalate to full-scale war, the risk is too high to justify the desired gain. Furthermore, a united front among regional states is vital if military options are to achieve their desired goals, a united front that clearly does not exist in a region characterised by an emerging hegemonic contest between the United States and China, and strategic hedging among the other regional actors between these two main protagonists. For these reasons, the threat of violence against North Korea is not credible enough to enforce North Korea's compliance.

The ability of regional states to influence North Korean behaviour through economic sanctions has been similarly ineffective. The US has saddled North Korea with a variety of economic sanctions since the Korean War, which have severely restricted the DPRK's trade to interaction with only a handful of countries, limiting its export income.^[5] Nonetheless, the sanctions regime has been ineffectual because North Korea has limited links to the global economy over which the US government has leverage, and where linkages do exist, other Northeast Asian states have shown muted enthusiasm in enforcement.

The Carrot: Trojan Horse, Poisoned Chalice?

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From the North Korean perspective, one can make a strong argument that regional states, particularly the US and its allies, have very little of substance to offer Pyongyang. While this idea likely sounds disingenuous to Western ears, some empathic thinking will help to tease out the proposition.

North Korea has been a borderline failed state since 1991, when the collapse of the Soviet Union and a series of natural disasters combined with long-term decay of the country's command economy and totalitarian political architecture to bring the Kim regime to the brink of collapse. Kim Jong-il was able to preserve the regime through this difficult period on the back of international aid and a series of ad hoc economic adjustments.[6]

To underwrite its efforts at systemic maintenance, Pyongyang has pursued a coercive bargaining strategy, in which deliberate, directed provocations put pressure on the US and regional states to provide material inducements.^[7] Once a crisis has been engineered, Pyongyang issues new demands or restates previous claims as conditions for de-escalation and a return to negotiations. The aid, concessions and development assistance acquired through this process has been critical in plugging holes in the North Korean economy, allowing the regime to avoid substantive economic reforms.

For inducements to be effective, regional states have to offer North Korea something of roughly equivalent value to trade for denuclearisation. The problem is that there is no equal trade to be made: the international community can offer no suite of incentives that can match the strategic, economic, bureaucratic and political utility of the North's nuclear and missile programs.[8]

Lacking the Means to Compel

Regional states lack the necessary viable military options and economic leverage, be it individually or as a collective, to decisively influence North Korean decision-making. Regional states have specific and differing priorities that shape their interactions with neighbouring countries, ranging from the strategic imperatives that stem from each country's unique geography, competing domestic interests in the foreign policy milieu of each state, and the historical baggage each brings to regional interactions. The strategies of each regional player for dealing with North Korea must fit into this wider strategic matrix. This lack of regional consensus gives Pyongyang a great deal of leverage in regional diplomacy and ensures that the regime will continue to engage in provocative behaviour, in the knowledge that its bellicosity is likely to go unpunished.

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[2] Steven Lee Myers and Sang-hun Choe, "North Koreans Agree to Freeze Nuclear Work; U.S. to Give Aid," *New York Times*, 29 February 2012.

[3] Jack Kim and Jeremy Laurence, "N.Korea's plan for rocket launch stirs regional concern," *Reuters*, 16 March 2012.

[4] Steven Brams, *Negotiation Games: Applying Game Theory to Bargaining and Arbitration*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003). 139-40.

[5] Karen Lee and Julia Choi, "North Korea: Economic Sanctions and U.S. Department of

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Treasury Actions 1955-September 2007," (National Committee on North Korea, 2007), 50.

[6] Young-chul Chung, "North Korean Reform and Opening: Dual Strategy and 'Silli (Practical) Socialism'," *Pacific Affairs* 77, no. 2 (2004): 286.

[7] Victor Cha, "Why We Must Pursue 'Hawk' Engagement," in *North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies*, ed. V Cha and D Kang (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 72; Won-hyuk Lim, "North Korea's Missile Tests: Malign Neglect Meets Brinkmanship," *Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development*, 7 August 2006.

[8] Benjamin Habib, "North Korea's nuclear weapons programme and the maintenance of the Songun system," *The Pacific Review* 24, no. 1 (2011).

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