

Taepodong - What is North Korea's Intention?

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For

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In recent days reports that North Korea is preparing to launch a long range ballistic missile has captured the attention of the international community. Near hysteria ensued when the governments of Japan and the United States began warning North Korea that it would suffer serious consequences if it launched a long range Taepodong ballistic missile. The international press scrambled to report these warnings and to add information about the Taepodong's capabilities. Many political analysts also offered their guesses about Pyongyang's intentions.

Meanwhile, Pyongyang remained silent. Then its deputy permanent representative to the United Nations Ambassador Han Song-ryol on June 21 reportedly said that if the United States was so concerned, it should engage Pyongyang in bilateral discussions. The United States promptly said no.

What is North Korea's intention? First, let us examine a few facts. We still do not know for certain whether Pyongyang was preparing to test its Taepodong missile. Obviously it has not yet tested this or any ballistic missile. Also apparent is that the United States, Japan and South Korea strongly oppose a North Korean ballistic missile test.

Now we must venture into the realm of speculation. Most analysts assign one of two extreme characteristics to North Korea's leadership. They either see Kim Jong Il to be a brilliant, crafty conspirator and masterful manipulator, or an irrational and impulsive fellow. Such thinking produces many theories. Some claim Kim Jong Il planned the missile test to compel the United States to engage in bilateral talks. Others believe Kim Jong Il is jealous that Washington is giving Iran so much attention and he wants to refocus attention on North Korea. Others say Kim's goal is to drive a wedge between Seoul and Tokyo.

Actually, North Korea's intentions are not difficult to decipher. Pyongyang's officials on numerous occasions have told us their government's purpose is to build a strong "nuclear deterrent capability." At the same time, Pyongyang has repeatedly offered to engage the United States in direct bilateral talks to eliminate the need for deterrence by normalizing US-DPRK relations. When Washington ruled out bilateral talks, Pyongyang reluctantly joined the multilateral Six Party Talks. Pyongyang reiterated its stance at these talks. When the talks stalled in the fall of 2005, Pyongyang avowed that it would continue developing its deterrence capability. In statements issued by its foreign ministry, North

Korea precisely outlined its intention has been and remains to continue “strengthening” its nuclear deterrence capability. Testing a Taepodong missile would be consistent with this avowed goal.

What may be irritating Pyongyang is Washington’s contradictory strategy for countering the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), i.e. nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles and chemical and biological weapons. President Bush in 2002 created the “Axis of Evil” by listing Iraq, Iran, North Korea and Libya together because of their development of WMD. Since then, the United States has occupied Iraq and made a diplomatic deal with Libya. Most recently, President Bush has altered his stance and offered to engage Iran in diplomatic negotiations to end its nuclear program. Separately, the Bush Administration has made deals with Pakistan and India that allow them to retain their nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. But President Bush adamantly refuses to adjust his stance regarding North Korea. He continues to insist that it is “unworthy” of dealing with in a bilateral context. He also refuses to accept North Korea’s offer to give up its nuclear weapons programs in exchange for receiving multilateral assistance to build nuclear reactors to generate electricity.

Viewing the situation from Pyongyang, Washington’s stance presents Pyongyang with two options. It can either bow to US pressure, and accept Washington’s demands, or it can continue to develop its “nuclear deterrent capability.” Clearly, Pyongyang’s current preference is to continue developing its deterrence capability.

But the recent concern over North Korea’s possible missile test has convincingly demonstrated two important facts to Pyongyang. The first is that the United States and Japan are using sophisticated intelligence gathering equipment to monitor North Korea’s ballistic missile development program. More important for the international community is the fact that all of North Korea’s neighbors, including South Korea, and the United States oppose any North Korean test of its ballistic missiles.

No one can say for certain what the future may bring. But if Pyongyang’s leadership really seeks a diplomatic solution to the continuing impasse over its nuclear weapons program, it will not test the Taepodong now or in the future. Such a test would only contradict Pyongyang’s claim that it seeks a diplomatic resolution at the Six Party Talks, and bring North Korea further international condemnation.

The Bush Administration, on the other hand, needs to reexamine its stance toward North Korea. Its inflexible strategy has achieved nothing. President Bush’s refusal to engage North Korea in bilateral talks, and to allow it any concessions within the framework of the Six Party Talks, has convinced North Korea to continue development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Washington’s reliance on economic sanctions and pressure also has accomplished nothing. Instead, sanctions have intensified tensions between Washington, on the one hand, and Beijing and Seoul, on the other hand. If President Bush seeks a diplomatic end to North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, he should engage in diplomatic dialogue and the exchange of concessions with North Korea just as he did with Libya and has offered to do with Iran.