

Why Did Pyongyang Break its Moratorium on Missile Launches?

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For
Mainichi Shimbun
July 6, 2006

North Korea once again has captured the attention of the international community by launching several ballistic missiles on July 4, 2006. This ends Pyongyang's self imposed moratorium on the testing of ballistic missiles. It first promised the United States in 2000 that it would not test its ballistic missiles so long as the United States engaged in diplomatic dialogue with it. North Korea's leader then promised Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi at their September 2002 summit to continue the ballistic missile moratorium. Those promises have been cancelled.

Once again, speculation is rampant about how North Korea's leadership thinks. The attention focuses on one person: Kim Jong Il. Some personalize Kim's decision. They claim he is mentally unbalanced, impulsive or hungry for attention. Other observers claim that Kim Jong Il is trying to frighten or force the United States to engage in diplomatic negotiations with North Korea.

We should broaden our focus and look beyond Kim Jong Il as we try to better understand North Korea's actions. We would only trick ourselves if we believe Kim Jong Il rules North Korea alone. Policy making and politics in North Korea is much more complicated than the mind and actions of a single man. Kim Jong Il holds the title "supreme leader," but he cannot maintain his power alone. Nor can he make decisions without listening to information and advice from others.

The recent missile launches suggest several important things about North Korea's policy priorities and its domestic politics. North Korea is paying a huge diplomatic price for ending its missile test moratorium. Washington, Tokyo, Seoul and finally even Beijing pressed Pyongyang not to launch its missiles. Now that North Korea has done this, even Beijing and Moscow cannot defend it against the growing chorus of international criticism.

Kim Jong Il's decision to launch the ballistic missiles suggests that he is less concerned about international criticism and pressure than other considerations. His greater priority appears to have been to demonstrate his firm resolve not to bow to international pressure and to preserve North Korea's "national sovereignty." Who then is Kim Jong Il trying to impress and why?

Since inheriting power from his father in 1994, Kim Jong Il's foremost priority has been to preserve North Korea's "national sovereignty." Toward this end, he has faced a dilemma. Should he emphasize diplomacy and give up his military capability in exchange for the normalization of diplomatic and commercial relations with the United States and its allies? Or should he accent the building of a nuclear deterrence based on nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles? Kim Jong Il's decision to break the missile moratorium suggests that he has given up on diplomacy to preserve his nation's sovereignty through either the Six Party Talks or direct negotiations with the United States.

Instead, the resumption of missile tests strongly indicates that Kim Jong Il has decided to emphasize military methods to preserve North Korea's "national sovereignty." It also suggests that he will rely primarily on his military generals' advice, and that he will give them the materials and political support they need to continue building an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. Such a stance is consistent with Kim's "military first politics" which he first adopted in 1998. It is also compatible with his avowed goal to build a "strong and rich nation."

At the same time, this would mean that North Korea will rely on diplomacy only as a secondary strategy. In other words, the end of the missile test moratorium suggests that Kim has little interest in returning to the Six Party Talks. He appears to have concluded that these talks would limit his "sovereignty" with little gain for North Korea. If North Korea does eventually return to the talks, Kim and his closest advisers can be expected to demand huge concessions, both in terms of security guarantees and economic assistance, from the international community in exchange for giving up North Korea's nuclear deterrence capability.

Finally, Kim Jong Il's decision to restart missile testing indicates that he has a political weakness. He must maintain his father's tradition of not bowing to international pressure, especially from the United States. His father's long history of fighting against the Japanese and United States occupation of Korea earned Kim Il Sung the full loyalty and support of the Korean People's Army. This allowed Kim Il Sung some flexibility during diplomatic negotiations. But Kim Jong Il cannot claim such a record because he never fought against foreign imperialism. The only way for him to earn the respect of the Korean People's Army is to demonstrate his resolve not to bow to international pressure.

In short, Kim is caught in the middle between the need to satisfy his generals, on the one hand, and the international community on the other hand. The end of the ballistic missile moratorium strongly suggests that Kim has decided that he needs the loyalty of his generals more than the respect of the international community to maintain his control over North Korea.