

# Web Memo



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## A North Korean Missile Test: Implications for the U.S. and the Region

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According to international intelligence reports, for the last five weeks, North Korea has been steadily moving towards a test launch of the Taepodong 2, an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) with a range up to 6,000 kilometers – enough to reach Alaska. Satellite intelligence reveals that Pyongyang has loaded booster rockets onto a launch pad in Musuduan-ri, in the North Hamkyong Province of northeastern North Korea, and moved fuel tanks in preparation for fueling. This action is in violation of North Korea's international agreements and appears designed to goad the United States into direct bilateral talks. The U.S. must not take the bait. No good will come from rewarding North Korea for its belligerent behavior.

A missile test is problematic for the region and the United States because it would end North Korea's 1999 self-imposed moratorium on long-range missile tests – a moratorium that was reiterated in the Pyongyang Declaration when Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in September 2002. The test would spell further trouble for the stalled Six-Party negotiations over the North's nuclear ambitions. More broadly, a test would raise questions about the

future stability and security of the region and North Korea's enduring role as the region's troublemaker.

If the missile test does occur, the Bush Administration must not succumb to pressure to enter into bilateral talks with North Korea. The United States has been clear that all diplomatic negotiations must go through the Six-Party framework involving North Korea, the United States, South Korea, Russia, Japan, and China. The Bush Administration should make clear that aggressive behavior by the North Koreans will not cause the United States to alter its position.

### Why Test?

North Korea last tested a long-range missile in August 1998, when it fired a Taepodong 1,

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with a range of 2,000 km, over northern Japan. That test took many by surprise and confirmed that North Korean capabilities had progressed beyond previous estimates. A launch of the Taepodong 2 would put North's Korea's military efforts back into the spotlight and demonstrate that it now has a missile with the range to reach the U.S. mainland.

Knowledge of the Taepodong 2 is limited, in part because the system has never been tested. A 2001 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate forecast that a three-stage version of the missile could reach North America carrying a sizable payload. It could be fitted with a chemical or biological warhead but probably not a nuclear payload, because North Korea has likely not yet developed the capability to miniaturize a nuclear weapon.

The United States – along with Japan, South Korea, and Australia – has urged North Korea to abandon its plans to test the missile, stating clearly that a launch would be dangerous and provocative and damaging to North Korean interests. But Pyongyang may have reached the opposite conclusion. From a North Korean standpoint, a missile test launch would further three goals:

- Pyongyang's strategic objective is to raise the stakes for the Six-Party talks, which have stalled since North Korea's refusal to return to the table last November. With little incentive for Washington to relent on its long-standing insistence that Pyongyang must first agree to return to the talks without preconditions and the global perception that Iran has become Washington's top priority, a missile test would raise the level of tension and bring focus back to North Korea. Further, a test launch would put yet another issue on the negotiating table and, Pyongyang hopes, distract attention from the core issue of its nuclear weapons program.
- North Korea wants to test years of investment in missile research and development. Ultimately, the only way to

prove that a missile works is to test it. A test would not only serve as a stern warning to the region about the strength of North Korea's ballistic missile capabilities, but also would enhance the legitimacy of North Korean missiles in the weapons proliferation marketplace. In part due to the U.S. crackdown on North Korea's illicit financial activities, a major source of income of the Kim Jong Il regime, Pyongyang may turn its attention elsewhere, such as the lucrative weapons and missile markets. The missile test preparations are being conducted in open view of foreign satellites; Pyongyang is clearly showing off.

- Domestic pressure may also be at play. A missile test would demonstrate the military's supremacy in national policymaking. A launch could also be a tremendous morale boost for the North Korean public. The regime has been testing engines for a new missile since at least 2002, and a successful test would bolster Kim's claims that he is developing advanced technology for his people. This would have the added benefit of boosting nationalism as a counterweight to increased international pressures on the regime.

### Regional Response

Is Pyongyang fully prepared for the negative repercussions of a launch? Japan is deeply concerned about a launch that it would consider a direct threat to its security. North Korea's Taepodong 1 test over Japan in 1998 was a wake-up call that led Tokyo to cooperate with Washington on a missile defense system. A new launch would not only bolster Japanese efforts to erect defensive capabilities against North Korea but would also likely spur the U.S. Congress to increase its support for missile defense efforts. Furthermore, such aggression from North Korea could play a role in selecting the future leadership of Japan. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is

preparing to step down in September, and polls indicate that Shinzo Abe, who has taken a strong stance against North Korea and China, trails moderate candidate Yasuo Fukuda. A North Korean missile test could aid Abe's campaign, reducing the possibility of a diplomatic reconciliation between North Korea and Japan.

Seoul's reaction is more uncertain. A North Korean missile test would further undermine President Roh Moo Hyun's policy of engagement with Pyongyang, which is already under pressure due to the North's lack of reciprocity. A test launch would attract criticism both domestically and internationally. Former President and Nobel laureate Kim Dae-Jung would have to cancel his scheduled trip to Pyongyang on June 27th. Yet, it is unclear if a missile launch would be enough to turn public opinion against engagement with the North. While critical voices will grow stronger, a new missile test will be perceived much the same as the previous one was in 1998: an abstract concern that does not directly threaten South Koreans.

North Korea may hope that South Koreans will focus on strongly negative U.S. and Japanese reactions rather than the North Korean threat, thereby driving a wedge between Seoul and Washington. There is precedent: The 1998 missile launch did not slow down Kim Dae Jung's "Sunshine Policy."

### Options

Unfortunately, the range of policy options for the international community should Pyongyang proceed with its test are limited. Washington and Tokyo already have strict economic sanctions in place, and there is little additional economic leverage they could exercise. They can, and likely will, continue to pressure the North Korean regime by aggressively targeting its illicit activities, but unless China and South Korea decide to halt their economic assistance to the North, this will have limited effect. A military option – such as shooting

down the North Korean missile with responding interceptors – should be kept on the table. In the event of a launch, the U.S. should bring North Korea's aggression before the United Nations Security Council. While UN sanctions would have minimal practical impact, they would carry important symbolic value.

The United States and its partners in the Six-Party process must not succumb to North Korea's manipulation and brinkmanship. Undoubtedly, one of Pyongyang's goals is to put pressure on Washington to re-engage in direct bilateral talks to resolve not only the missile issue, but its nuclear programs. North Korea has some reason to believe this will work: After its missile launch in 1998, the Clinton Administration engaged in concerted high-level bilateral efforts with Pyongyang over its missile programs – to no avail. The Bush Administration, therefore, should continue to insist that the diplomatic process must occur within the context of the established multilateral format. It should not allow aggressive North Korean actions to alter this.

The five parties engaging with North Korea agree that a North Korean missile test would be a dangerous act and only isolate Pyongyang further from the rest of the international community. Ironically, such isolation is an important step towards successful conclusion of the Six-Party process.

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