

## Why Did North Korea Fire Missiles on the Fourth of July?

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On America's Independence Day, North Korea test-fired seven missiles in the direction of the US. The missile launch looked as if it targeted the US and South Korea's policy towards the North. There has already been some analysis that North Korea's intention was to press on the issue of bilateral talks with the US. Then, what kind of talk is North Korea after with such an acute military act?

The North Korean authorities are in a desperate situation. They cannot find the appropriate means to tackle the extremely difficult socio-economic situation. Black markets flourish due to economic difficulties, which consequently generated a breakdown of social control and a disintegration of social order. Kim Jong Il has now come to a realization that maintaining his regime, let alone socialism, would be difficult without revitalizing the economy. To revive the economy, North Korea needs an internal reform and, more importantly, an import of production elements from the outside. However, nuclear, human rights, and counterfeiting issues have been blocking the needed supply from the outside. In the absence of a resumption of the Six-Party Talks, North Korea cannot even count on the compensation it is supposed to get with the implementation of the Joint Statement agreed to last September. North Korea blames everything on the United States.

The current difficulty would not have happened if North Korea actively fulfilled the agreed framework of Geneva and the missiles agreement under the Clinton administration and established diplomatic relations with the US. North Korea appears to have made a fatal mistake. Kim Jong Il is still delaying time without making the decision whether to give up the nuclear program or to use the nuclear card. Last month, North Korea installed a missile on the launch pad, and proposed talks with the US on the account that it had already made a strategic choice in regards to the nuclear issue.

Why did the US refuse to talk with North Korea and make North Korea press for talks by launching missiles? The official position of the US is "not rewarding bad behavior." But there seems to be more to it. North Korea's nuclear and missile issues are being employed by the US for other purposes. For instance, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korea has emerged as a military target for the US in Northeast Asia. The main target, in fact, is China, but North Korea is being a proxy for China. The Missile Defense System pursued by the US apparently targets China, but North Korea provides a convenient excuse for its development. The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which lost

its target after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, seems to have found a new target: North Korea. Since the US raised its suspicion on North Korea's nuclear weapons development in November of 1992, North Korea has certainly established itself as the main target of the US Northeast Asia military strategy, particularly with its missile launch of *Rodong-1* in May of 1993 and *Taepodong-1* in August 1998. Politicians and military leaders in the US argue that North Korea's long-range missile is a threat to the US mainland. With the launch of *Taepodong-1*, the Bush administration could justify its active development of the missile defense system, which was held back during the Clinton administration, from the start of the administration in 2001. After 9/11, the Bush administration defined North Korea as a part of the axis of evil, pushed a hard-line policy toward North Korea, and employed North Korea's nuclear and missile issues as a rationalization for its War against Terrorism.

Therefore, the US neglected North Korea's call for negotiations on the basis of its principle of "not rewarding bad behavior." On September 19 of last year, negotiations laboriously yielded an agreement in the Six-Party Talks. However, the counterfeiting issue that was timely raised put the framework of the Six-Party Talks back to a stalemate. Even though counterfeiting is a serious problem, the essential question is why this subject was brought up in the midst of negotiations regarding the nuclear issue.

The action of the US, of course, does not justify the North Korean missile launch, but North Korea has failed to assess the situation correctly. North Korea's act only strengthens the US justification - it will be employed as a rationale to further reinforce the US foreign policy of eradicating tyranny, while expanding the march of liberty within the international community and as an opportunity to validate the Bush administration's North Korea Policy.

North Korea has little to gain by firing missiles, an act based on the judgment that it has nothing to lose with already accumulating economic difficulties and isolation in the international community. In the short-run, North Korea will not win the attention of the Bush administration through this missile launch. The Bush administration has the Middle East problem involving Iraq, Iran, and Israel as the top priority of its foreign policy. Therefore, the US will simply strengthen and expand the existing financial sanction on North Korea. In the long-run, the US may eventually engage in negotiations with North Korea in order to resolve the nuclear and missile issues, but it will only be possible if North Korea proceeds with measures of conversion that would offset the missile launch.

North Korea should recognize that a way forward is to minimize a waste of time by choosing the second-best option instead of clinging on to its brinkmanship strategy for it to pay off. One way to deter North Korea's extreme brinkmanship strategy, such as the missile launch, is for the US to discard its hard-line policy and switch it to a policy of engagement. However, it is unlikely for the US as a hegemonic superpower to change its policy for something that would not be beneficial or profitable for itself. Therefore, the

South Korean government has to persuade the US. It needs to assure the US that South Korea is its alliance and will be so even after the unification and that the US troops stationed in Korea need to play a balancing role in the Northeast Asian region. The South Korean government should take the North Korean missile launch as an opportunity to reassess the nature of the international situation surrounding Northeast Asia and to reexamine the roadmap of its US and North Korea policy.