



Between a Rock and a Hard Place Reacting to the North Korean Rocket Launch

by Niklas L.P. Swanström

The North Korean test launch has sparked a crisis between North Korea and the international community at large. Unfortunately, increased sanctions will most likely have the opposite effect and further increase the isolation of North Korea. Although there is little hope of success, the only way forward is for the parties to find new avenues of communication.

A Note From the Directors

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Best Regards,

Svante Cornell and Niklas Swanström

The North Korean rocket launch on April 5 has sparked a crisis between North Korea and the international community at large. Even China and Russia have been critical of the test and condemned it in a joint statement from the UN Security Council, though they have not gone so far as to support greater sanctions on North

Korea in the UN, as proposed by the U.S. and its allies. Japan, the European Union, the U.S., and South Korea have called the North Korean test a provocation and a disregard of its international obligations, and in thus doing, have called for strong measures both in the UN and bilaterally.

China and Russia, on the other hand, have instead called for calm and restraint in a difficult situation, and even if they have agreed that the test was a violation of Security Council resolution 1718, which was adopted in October 2006 and forbids North Korea from carrying out ballistic missile activities, Russia and China are not likely to come to the conclusion that North Korea should be targeted with further sanctions. North Korea, on its part, regards the rocket launch as part of its sovereign right and insists that since this was not a military test, it was not a violation of the UN resolution. In fact, the positions of the parties could not be further apart and can be divided into two or more camps where increased tension puts an already unstable region at risk of further destabilization.

Seen from the perspective of South Korea, Japan, the EU, and the U.S., some form of increased sanctions is regarded as necessary, and it is more than likely that such will be implemented. The North Koreans will react strongly to any such moves perceiving it as an act of aggression against their sovereign rights. It has become increasingly difficult for either side to step down and decrease tensions. Finding itself closer to the middle, China has tried to mediate between the different sides even if it remains deeply concerned with the development on the Korean Peninsula. This has proven a difficult stance to adopt and hardly earns China any credit for attempting to do so, failing to elicit favorable responses from North



Korea or its critics as neither is in agreement with the Chinese position regarding a compromise.

Further isolation and tension

The problem emerging today is that the current development of tension and perceived aggression not only risks putting the region in a more unstable situation, but could even threaten the very existence of the Six-Party Talks and the few informal and ad hoc channels that presently exist. Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi has argued that dialogue is necessary and that the Six-Party Talks need to be resumed as soon as possible if further negative trends are to be avoided. In fact, this is a grave underestimation of the need for communication between North Korea and its critics. North Korea has ever since its founding been estranged from the international community, and even in the cases of China and Russia – which have forged closer relationships with Pyongyang – communication has at times been less than constructive with relatively few channels of communication in place. Despite this, President Obama, among many, has argued that China needs to put more pressure on North Korea through the contacts between the Chinese Communist Party and the North Korean Workers Party, an argument that sounds hollow in Beijing where they have long since lost political clout over North Korea, if in fact this did exist.

It is often argued that Russia, but in particular China, should use their economic leverage over North Korea to force Pyongyang to bend to international will. The reality is that even China has very limited economic leverage over North Korea, and secondly, in the areas where it could exert influence, such as in energy and food supplies, China and Russia argue that this could threaten the stability of the country. China has therefore showed great restraint and reluctance in applying too much pressure, as viewed from Beijing the consequences could very well result in an implosion of the North Korean state or a military conflict with massive insecurity, refugee flows, and widespread starvation. These scenarios are far more serious than a situation of status quo for China. Moreover, North Korea's actions will most likely become increasingly aggressive if boxed further into a corner. This is not something that will be positive for long-term interaction with the North Korean regime, an uncomfortable scenario that the U.S. and others should heed in spite of the almost unanimous negative perception of North Korea. The UN Security Council statement of April 13 will undoubtedly elicit some

reaction from Pyongyang with which dialogue will be negatively affected, and in the worst case, will see increasing military tension in the region.

Sticks that break and a crisis of communication

Needless to say, from the perspective of North Korea's detractors, action needs to be taken against what are perceived as illegal acts and irresponsible behavior: conduct which contravenes international legal regimes needs a response. The dilemma is that wielding too large sticks will hurt the international community as a result of the increased insecurity, especially in terms of the development of North Korean nuclear weapons. Moreover, this is likely to hurt the North Korean population more than it will the North Korean regime, as most sanctions tend to do. Military analysts and decision-makers in Pyongyang were aware that the launch would most likely be severely criticized outside North Korea, but also that a successful launch would be more positive than negative domestically and serve to boost the regime's legitimacy. The launch, however, seems to have been a miscalculation on the part of the North Koreans as even Russia and China do not seem to view the launch as a success.

Regardless of whether the launch was actually "successful" or not, it is crucial that whatever actions are taken not only need to have a domestic and international focus, but more importantly that they encompass a better and clearer understanding for the North Korean regime's motives as well as for the reactions of North Korea's critics. It is evident that North Korea has been largely misunderstood for a long time, but also that North Korea often misinterprets the actions of the international community. It is apparent that the North Korean worldview and perception of what is "right" and "wrong" differ to a large degree from their adversaries' point of view, and further clashes will only reinforce this perception.

Greater need than ever for communication

North Korea's isolation and refusal to accept "international" norms and values do not decrease the need for contacts, but on the contrary only increases the need for more effective communication. Avenues of communication and possibilities to influence North Korea's actions are already limited, and with the North



Korean regime threatening to cut the few contacts that do exist, there is a risk of pushing North Korea even further away from the international community. Further isolation would not only reduce the amount of available information about developments in North Korea, but also further strengthen the impression within North Korea that the outside world is inherently aggressive and against it. In turn, this may serve to further the North Korean population's hostility to the outside world and so potentially further consolidate the North Korean regime's firm grip over its 23 million citizens.

This is of course not to say that North Korea's refusal to act according to international rules and regulations should go unpunished if it is perceived to be illegal, but rather that there is a need to act with care so as not to burn the already tenuous bridges needed for contact and increased information sharing.

Building bridges

The combined effort by the critics of the North Korean launch to obtain a strengthened resolution and further sanctions in the UN Security Council is likely to be vetoed by China and Russia, but the effects of the attempt to further the resolution and the joint statement from the Security Council can still be far-reaching. If the discussion on increased sanctions continues in the UN, the Six-Party Talks will risk being cancelled for a lengthy period of time, if not even permanently abandoned. Moreover, it is likely that North Korea will further isolate itself and increase efforts to advance its nuclear weapons program. This will not only have a detrimental effect on the discussion of North Korea's nuclear program but also on internal developments in North Korea with the potential for famine if the coming harvest fails. The retraction of North Korea from the international community could not only potentially arm North Korea over the long term but also aggravate further instability in an already unstable state.

The situation demands that China will have to take a renewed and stronger responsibility in trying to open up and initiate new contacts between North Korea and the outside world, whether this be through the Six-Party Talks or other fora. This is made much harder now when China, seen from the North Korean perspective, has sided with the U.S. and its allies. Moreover, China serving as a go-between can only artificially breathe air into a prospective dialogue between North Korea and its critics. More importantly, North Korea and primarily the U.S. and South Korea will have to find new avenues for communication

both bilaterally as well as multilaterally. As this will be extremely difficult due to the already tense relations between South and North Korea and in light of the current political developments, there is little hope that the actors will be able to achieve the above.

The most likely option in the short term is to increase academic contacts, informal if needed, between North Korea and the outside world. The application of sticks only will not coerce North Korea into reversing its policy; instead North Korea needs to be involved within the framework of a larger geopolitical discussion that guarantees its development, both politically as well as economically. Unless this is done there will be limited, if any, reason for the North Korean regime to engage in increased contacts with the outside world. The problem is exacerbated, moreover, by the diverging perceptions on the part of the North Korean regime and those of the rest of the world. The present climate demands construction of new paths of communication in a time when official contacts between Pyongyang and other governments are severely constrained. This will take time.

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