

Will North Korea Launch a Long-range Missile?

by Daniel A. Pinkston, Ph.D.
Director of the East Asia Nonproliferation Program
Center for Nonproliferation Studies
Monterey Institute of International Studies

For the Nautilus Institute's Policy Forum Online, June 16, 2006. The Nautilus Institute's Policy Forum Online's focus is on the timely publication of expert analysis and op-ed style pieces on the foremost of security-related issues to Northeast Asia. Forum articles can be accessed at: <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/index.html>.

Over the past month, the international media have been reporting on North Korea's apparent preparations for a long-range missile launch at Musudan-ri on the Northeastern coast. If the launch goes forward, it would be the first flight test of a long-range missile since August 31, 1998 when the Paektusan-1 (Taepodong-1) flew over Japan and rattled the security order in the region. Most analysts are now focused on the international security aspects of a possible flight test, and with good reason. Satellite imagery indicates the missile is over 30 meters long and could give Pyongyang the capability to strike the continental United States for the first time. The launch preparations and test-if it occurs-are interpreted as a signal of dissatisfaction over the deadlocked Six-Party Talks aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear programs. Many analysts also believe the launch could be Pyongyang's way of warning the United States that the costs of pressing Pyongyang, either diplomatically or militarily, could be very high. This is particularly true as Washington is now preoccupied with developments in Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran.

However, the common American interpretation overlooks two important aspects of the launch preparations: the dual-use nature of long-range missiles, and Pyongyang's domestic political motivations. If North Korea conducts a flight test of its new missile, it certainly will be configured as a space launch vehicle in an attempt to place a satellite into earth orbit. Furthermore, a launch would serve multiple domestic purposes. It would appeal to North Korean nationalism at a time of continuing isolation, and Kim Jong Il would score points with military hardliners who want a long-range ballistic missile in their arsenal. A successful launch would also be excellent advertising for potential customers such as Iran, which could help address Pyongyang's hard currency problems.

Over the last year, the Bush administration has taken a number of actions to squeeze the North Korean regime financially. These efforts, such as those under the Illicit Activities



This North Korean poster reads, "If a war of aggression breaks out, we'll smash the American bastards first!"

Initiative, are described as law enforcement activities designed to reduce North Korea's illicit sources of hard currency. But they also have the perceived benefit of increasing the overall pressure on the country, further isolating it economically. The paradox is that Washington's efforts to squeeze Pyongyang are creating a greater incentive for Kim Jong Il to shore up domestic political support. Since the missile test would be configured as a satellite launch, it will be more difficult for other countries to object. Pyongyang will emphasize that the other five parties in the Six-Party Talks have active space programs and that South Korea plans to test its own space launch vehicle next year. Internationally, a flight test will be viewed as hostile and provocative, but North Korea will view any condemnation of the launch as hypocrisy and part of Washington's "hostile policy to strangle the DPRK."

While American media emphasize North Korea's food shortages, human rights violations and political repression, North Korean media portray Kim Jong Il and the Korean Workers Party as forces dedicated to the provision of national security and cutting-edge technologies that will resolve the country's economic problems. Kim Jong Il has skillfully constructed his domestic coalition of support by marketing himself as a hard-working tech-savvy politician who can thwart external threats while implementing economic reform and scientific innovation. Another satellite launch would help solidify Kim's credentials for this domestic coalition.

Some American policymakers are already viewing a flight test as a positive development because they believe it would confirm the hard-line approach of the Bush administration and that the launch would swing both Beijing and Seoul toward Washington's undeclared effort to bring down Kim Jong Il. The truth is that despite their displeasure, China and South Korea will not join the United States and Japan in any coordinated sanctions or punishment for a North Korean satellite launch. Seoul is within range of Pyongyang's short-range missiles and artillery, so this launch would not be a new direct threat to the South. South Korea is very concerned about the potential political impact of a launch, but it will not change Seoul's threat perception of Pyongyang.

China will be unhappy that the launch will probably end the Six-Party process, and does not want North Korea to provoke the United States and Japan into deploying more robust missile defense systems to the region. However, missile defense deployments are going forward anyway, so a single launch could not be blamed for U.S. missile defense deployments. In fact, Beijing's displeasure could quickly turn towards the United States if Washington is viewed as overreacting to a North Korean satellite launch.

Kim Jong Il and the National Defense Commission will weigh domestic and international factors in deciding whether to conduct the flight test. Kim knows his domestic audience better than anyone else, and he'll order the launch if the domestic benefits outweigh the international costs. If Pyongyang conducts a test, Washington would respond with tough rhetoric, but there is little Washington can do that it is not already doing to punish the Kim Jong Il regime. The only option, assuming the administration wants to keep isolating the regime, is to continue the development and deployment of missile defenses.