

Impending North Korean missile test raises regional tensions

By John Chan and Peter Symonds
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North Korean plans to launch a long-range Taepodong-2 rocket over the next week are again heightening tensions in North East Asia. While Pyongyang claims to be putting a communications satellite into space, the US, Japan and South Korea insist that North Korea is carrying out a ballistic missile test in contravention of UN Security Council sanctions.

Pyongyang has given notice that the launch will take place between April 4 and April 8. Sea lanes and air traffic in the area has been shut down. In response, the US, Japan and South Korea have, between them, sent five Aegis-class destroyers equipped with advanced anti-missile systems to the area.

The most aggressive reaction has come from Japan, which has ordered its military to be ready to destroy any projectile that threatens to fall into Japanese territory. North Korea has declared that the downing of its rocket would be an act of war. On Monday, Pyongyang blustered that it would also "relentlessly shoot down" any US spy plane that tried to monitor the launch.

While describing the rocket launch as a "provocation," the US has generally attempted to cool tensions. General Walter Sharp, head of the US armed forces in South Korea, warned in February that all options, including military action were on the table. However, the Obama administration has ruled out any attempt to bring the rocket down unless it directly threatens the US.

Japan and the US threatened to raise the issue in the UN Security Council if Pyongyang proceeded with the missile test. After North Korea tested a crude nuclear device in 2006, the US pushed through a Security Council resolution condemning North Korea and imposing a series of sanctions, including a formal ban on ballistic missile testing. China and Russia, however,

are unlikely to support any new sanctions.

China has called on North Korea to halt the missile test, but, along with Russia, has declared that North Korea is within its rights to launch a space satellite. In a meeting last month between US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, Clinton called for the resumption of stalled six-party talks—involving the US, China, Japan, Russia and the two Koreas—over the dismantling of Pyongyang's nuclear programs.

All the signs are that North Korea is utilising the rocket launch as a means of pressing for a resumption of the six-party talks and for concessions at the negotiating table from the US in particular. Pyongyang announced the planned test on February 24, but the US had released intelligence showing North Korean preparations weeks before. One of the first actions of the new Obama administration was to impose sanctions against three North Korean companies for alleged involvement in the proliferation of missiles.

The six-party talks began in 2003 after the Bush administration dramatically inflamed tensions on the Korean peninsula by listing North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" in 2002 and sabotaged a previous agreement aimed at ending Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programs. The negotiations sponsored by China dragged on for years amid sharp recriminations and a continued divide in the Bush administration over any deal.

It was not until February 2007, after North Korea conducted its nuclear test, that an agreement was reached. In return for a normalisation of relations and aid, North Korea agreed to shut down, disable and eventually dismantle its nuclear facilities. The process has been fraught with difficulties from the beginning as disagreements arose over the vague wording. While the

international press has been quick to blame Pyongyang, the Bush administration, wary about being seen to make concessions, stalled on keeping its side of the bargain.

The agreement came to the point of collapse last year. As far as Pyongyang was concerned, it had carried out all the steps required by shutting down its Yongbyon reactor and reprocessing plant. It had placed the facilities under international inspection and begun the process of dismantling them. In June, it handed over a report on its nuclear programs and, in an extra sign of good faith, demolished the reactor's cooling tower.

North Korea had expected the US to reciprocate by taking the country off its state sponsors of terrorism list, but instead Washington insisted on additional verification procedures. Amid an increasingly acrimonious exchange, Pyongyang declared that it would restart its nuclear facilities. In September, it announced that it would reopen its reprocessing plant and begin extracting plutonium from spent fuel rods. The standoff was only defused when the Bush administration finally took North Korea off its terrorism list in October.

North Korea immediately reversed its steps to restart reprocessing and allowed international inspectors back into its Yongbyon plant. But while an imminent breakdown of the agreement was avoided, the issue of verification soon re-emerged at six-party talks in December. The US claimed to have reached an understanding with North Korea in bilateral discussions in October. But Pyongyang continued to insist that only limited verification during the action-for-action process set out in the 2007 deal.

In reaction to the deadlock, the US called for a halt to the supply of one million tonnes of heavy fuel oil, or the equivalent, under the 2007 agreement. Confronted with a freeze on crucial energy supplies, North Korea threatened to slow work on disabling its nuclear facilities. As of January 2009, North Korea had taken 8 of the 11 agreed steps. Lacking any other political leverage, it seems that Pyongyang deliberately raised tensions by preparing for a rocket launch.

North Korea also condemned the annual joint US-South Korea war games last month in more strident terms than usual. Claiming that the exercises were preparations for a full-scale invasion, Pyongyang cut off its military hotline with South Korea, closed the

border and ordered its troops on alert. The hotline was re-established after the exercise concluded.

The ongoing tensions on the Korean peninsula are a product of sharp rivalries in North East Asia between the major and regional powers. The US in particular has exploited the North Korean nuclear issue as a means for justifying its own military presence in the region and for building a missile defence shield, as well as for undercutting China's influence. The result is a dangerous flash point that has the potential to spiral out of control.

If North Korea proceeds with its test in the next few days, as seems likely, it will be met by condemnations by the US, Japan and South Korea. Whether there will be a return to six-party talks is less clear. While China and the US appear to want to restart negotiations and defuse tensions, Japan's belligerent response threatens to cut across such plans. Confronting a deepening social and economic crisis at home, Prime Minister Taro Aso, whose popularity is at rock bottom, is exploiting the missile test to whip up nationalist and militarist sentiment.

Any Japanese military attempt to shoot down the North Korean rocket would rapidly lead to a military standoff. While that does not appear likely, the danger underscores just how volatile the region remains as all the major powers manoeuvre to protect their interests.

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