

UN Security Council convened over North Korean missile test

By Patrick Martin
6 April 2009

The United Nations Security Council held an emergency meeting Sunday in response to the test launching of a long-range missile by North Korea earlier in the day. While Japan and the United States were reportedly pressing for a new resolution, that initiative faced opposition from China and Russia, both of which have veto power.

The session ended without any action being taken, except for an agreement “to continue consultations on the appropriate reaction by the council in accordance with its responsibilities given the urgency of the matter,” said Claude Heller, the UN ambassador from Mexico, who is president of the council this month.

The three-stage missile was launched from a North Korean base on the country’s east coast. Its first-stage booster rocket fired successfully and then fell harmlessly into the Sea of Japan. That fact alone marks the test as an advance over a previous effort in 2006, when the Taeopodong-2 missile exploded shortly after launch.

The second stage propelled the missile and its payload over Japanese airspace, but reportedly malfunctioned and plunged into the Pacific Ocean about 400 miles short of the landing zone projected by North Korean officials in their pre-launch warnings to shipping traffic.

It is not clear whether the third stage, required to boost a payload into orbit, ever ignited before it too plunged into the ocean, more than 1,500 miles east of Japan.

North Korean broadcasts described the missile launching as a complete success and claimed that the Taepodong-2 missile, the country’s most advanced, had placed a communications satellite in orbit. But there was no evidence of the existence of the new satellite, which was said to be broadcasting patriotic

Korean music.

Western scientists familiar with the design of the missile said before the launch that the payload appeared to be a satellite weighing from 300 to 800 pounds. This would not be a violation of UN Security Council resolution 1718, passed in 2006 after a failed rocket test launch by the regime in Pyongyang. That resolution banned testing of offensive missiles, but not a missile launching to put a satellite in orbit.

Japanese and US government sources have claimed that the missile, whatever its payload, is being tested as a potential delivery vehicle for a nuclear warhead, one that could reach Alaska, Hawaii or even the West Coast of the continental United States. Such a missile, with a payload of at least a ton (and heat-shielding for re-entry into the atmosphere from orbit), would have to be far larger and more sophisticated than anything North Korea has so far demonstrated.

The Obama administration, Japan, South Korea and the European Union (EU) all issued statements of condemnation of the missile launch. A joint US-EU statement, prepared before the launch, declared: “North Korea’s development of a ballistic missile capability, regardless of the stated purpose of this launch, is aimed at providing it with the ability to threaten countries near and far with weapons of mass destruction.”

President Obama was reportedly awakened by his staff early Sunday morning in Prague, capital of the Czech Republic, for consultations with US officials including Defense Secretary Robert Gates, National Security Adviser James Jones and General James Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Obama incorporated an attack on the North Korean regime into the speech he delivered in Prague later that day on the subject of nuclear proliferation. He called

the missile launch a “provocative act” and said that Pyongyang has “further isolated itself from the community of nations.”

Claiming that the North Korean action had violated the Security Council resolution, Obama said, “Rules must be binding. Violations must be punished. Words must mean something.”

Japan took the hardest line in response to the missile launch, initially threatening to shoot down the missile—which was impossible, given its speed and trajectory—and then requesting a meeting of the Security Council to impose new sanctions on North Korea.

The other powers involved in the six-country talks over the Korean peninsula were much more cautious. South Korea issued a statement criticizing “North Korea’s reckless behavior,” but not calling for any specific retaliation. China had reportedly pressured Pyongyang not to carry out the launch, but issued no condemnation afterwards and opposed any sanctions measures.

The Russian foreign ministry issued a statement urging “all states concerned to show restraint in judgments and action in the current situation, and to be guided by objective data on the nature of North Korea’s launch.” Press reports from Moscow said that North Korea had informed Russia of the exact time of the launch in advance, and that Russian radar had tracked the missile’s trajectory.

There were suggestions from US officials and in the American media that the timing of the missile launch, only hours before Obama’s speech on proliferation, was a deliberate effort to upstage the new US administration. But North Korea announced the upcoming launch on February 24, giving shipping vessels in the region notice that the missile would be fired during an April 4 to April 8 time window. It was the first time Pyongyang has issued such an advance warning of a missile test.

The exact timing seems rather to have been driven by domestic political considerations. The North Korean parliament is to convene April 9 in a session scheduled to rubber-stamp the reelection of longtime dictator Kim Jong Il as chairman of the National Defense Commission, his official governmental position.

The session was postponed from its original March 8 starting date, amid reports in the international press that

Kim Jong Il was recovering slowly from a massive stroke suffered last summer, which led to his disappearance from public view for several months.

The overriding purpose of the launch seems to be an effort to exert pressure for the resumption of the six-party talks—involving the US, Russia, China, Japan and North and South Korea—and particularly for the resumption of deliveries of essential supplies from South Korea, which have largely halted since the election of a right-wing government in Seoul last year.

South Korean President Lee Myung-bak put an end to the conciliatory policy toward the North Korean regime carried out under his predecessors Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo Hyun, which included large-scale shipments of food and fertilizer. In response, Pyongyang has escalated its rhetorical attacks, branding Lee a “fascist,” canceling numerous agreements with the South and even suggesting repeatedly that a resumption of the 1950-53 Korean War was possible.

The cutoff has had a major impact on the North Korean economy, already devastated by the collapse of the Soviet bloc, its major market and supplier, imperialist-backed international sanctions, and the mismanagement and brutality of the autarkic Kim Jong Il regime. There have been reports of widespread hunger and malnutrition. A UN report last fall found that 70 percent of households were supplementing their diets with weeds and grasses.

The *Washington Post* reported last month, “Teenage boys fleeing the North in the past decade are on average five inches shorter and weigh 25 pounds less than boys growing up in the South, according to measurements taken at a settlement center for defectors in South Korea.”

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