

N. Korea Missile Not a Direct Threat

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The Korea Herald, July 8, 2006

North Korea's botched attempt to launch a long-range Taepodong-2 missile is not primarily relevant as a direct threat to U.S. national security. Few observers fear a North Korean rocket attack from out of the blue, particularly when there is an obvious return address. The United States should be able to reliably deter such a brazen move. Rather, the cause for concern is the leverage that such a weapon could bestow upon North Korea in deterring the United States. Coupling a nascent North Korean nuclear arsenal with an intercontinental delivery mechanism will require American strategists to take into account more than the devastation of Seoul when analyzing war scenarios on the Korean Peninsula.

The same logic applies to Iran. Robert Joseph, U.S. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, stated in a recent interview that nuclear weapons would embolden Tehran to move forward with its aggressive designs. One underlying implication is that the United States might think twice about forcefully resisting those designs if it means running the risk of a nuclear confrontation.

What accounts for the United States being able to deter its adversary in one context, but finding itself potentially deterred in another? The answer is illustrated by the asymmetries of interest inherent in the stand-off between China and Taiwan. When push comes to shove, the United States cares more about Los Angeles than it does Taipei. In a way, this phenomenon is nothing new. During the Cold War, the United States acquiesced in numerous military operations by the Soviet Union, including the invasions of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan. Deterrence may have succeeded in a bilateral sense, but it was not exactly a model for peaceful world affairs.

The worry is that the proliferation of nuclear weapons may force the United States into similar accommodations with states like Iran and North Korea. Future conflict with these states could turn into a series of deadly games of "chicken"—imagine opposing cars speeding toward one another with bombs on their bumpers, each trying to intimidate the other into backing down. This is a particularly dangerous game to play with leaders seen as detached from reality (such as Kim Jong Il) or suspected of holding messianic beliefs (such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad).

One strategy in playing chicken is to make firm commitments not to swerve in certain circumstances. In foreign policy terms, this means drawing "red lines" that will trigger military force. As David E. Sanger of the *New York Times* reported, however, U.S. National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley eschews red lines with North Korea because it tends to step right over them. This reasoning is an implicit concession that there were no red lines in the first place, hardly serving to restrain the continued progress of the North Korean nuclear program.

A more aggressive strategy involves seeking to disable the other car before the game begins. Given the cool reaction in Washington to William Perry and Ashton Carter's proposal to carry out a preemptive strike on North Korea's missiles, though, this is unlikely to be a favored policy in the future. Conversely, a more defensive strategy would be to drive an armored car by developing missile defenses and other protective measures. This approach is hamstrung not so much by political opposition but by the technical barriers to developing a functional system.

Alongside these strategies the United States should give renewed attention to how it might be able to minimize the number of disgruntled drivers on the road looking for a challenge. This certainly includes the current U.S. effort to replicate the Libyan model by offering a "grand bargain" to Iran. However, no sticks or carrots of any size will suffice if a state believes that nuclear weapons are the sole means to guarantee their national security. More likely it will mean reaching out to try and transform the adversaries of today into the allies of tomorrow.

This is not to suggest a "soft" approach to nuclear proliferation. The United States should set clear red lines and stick to them if they are worth fighting for. But the greatest strengths of the United States are its values and fundamentally peaceful nature, which can serve as an impetus for change in even the most repressive states. What would happen if the United States opened full diplomatic relations with Iran and North Korea tomorrow? Return visits by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev dramatically

reduced tensions during the Cold War, even leading to discussions of complete disarmament during negotiations. Sometimes simple face-to-face interaction can overcome the natural human tendency to demonize the unknown.

Rather than call for an international response to North Korea's missile tests, the United States should recognize that the reason for the tests begins and ends with itself. North Korea wants to deter the United States, and it will do what is necessary to accomplish that objective so long as it feels threatened. A nonproliferation policy centered solely on buying time and not changing the underlying relationship is ultimately an exercise in futility if the future is as dim as the present.