

Pyongyang and Washington: Roaring Mouse vs. Squeaking Lion

By John Feffer | August 1, 2006

North Korea's missile launches in early July created a stir in the U.S. media. Journalists went to great lengths to warn the American public of the North Korean threat, even to the point of predicting, hyperbolically, the outbreak of World War III. The Bush administration, however, has been rather cautious in its response. White House spokesman Tony Snow immediately dismissed the way the U.S. media had blown the missile launches out of proportion and reminded reporters that the government was working to calm the situation.

The average reader cannot be blamed for being confused at the discrepancy between the press reports and the U.S. government response. The Bush administration hyped Iraq's imaginary weapons of mass destruction on the eve of invasion in 2003 and has emphasized the threat that Iran's rather minimal nuclear program poses to the world community. But when it comes to North Korea, Bush has been comparatively—and uncharacteristically—silent. North Korea, after all, claims to have nuclear weapons and the capability to deliver them. It seems to have what Iraq didn't have and what Iran has yet to acquire.

Here are five reasons why the Bush administration has behaved so differently toward North Korea compared to the other two members of the "axis of evil."

1. **The Bush administration knows the real military capabilities of North Korea and, privately, realizes that the country does not pose a threat to U.S. interests.**

This would not be surprising. North Korea's military weakness is an open secret. Its weapons are old. It doesn't have enough energy to power a

modern army. It has many soldiers, but they are poorly fed and poorly trained. It doesn't have a long-range missile capability. And it may not have nuclear weapons either (it has nuclear material, but has shown no indication that it has weaponized this material).

North Korea, of course, won't admit any of this. It needs to prove that it can deter an attack. The Bush administration, too, won't admit that North Korea is militarily weak. After all, the "threat" of North Korea is a key rationale for missile defense, the placement of tens of thousands of troops in the Asia Pacific, and the stronger U.S.-Japan military alliance. If the Bush administration knows the full extent of North Korean weakness, then it realizes that the recent missile launches don't in fact pose any real present danger.

2. **The Bush administration knows the real missile defense capabilities of the United States and, privately, realizes that they can't knock North Korean missiles out of the air.**

Air Force Lt. Gen. Henry A. Obering III, director of the Missile Defense Agency, has expressed confidence that the United States can hit their bullet



with our bullet. The Pentagon claims a 50% success rate in its last 10 tests, but the tests have been carefully rigged to achieve even this modest number. The Pentagon's own chief weapons evaluator, Philip Coyle, estimates only a 20% likelihood of success under real-world conditions. He calls the system "a scarecrow defense." Given this probable failure rate, the Bush administration does not want to provoke North Korea into setting off more missiles and proving in no uncertain terms that missile defense, like Pyongyang's long-range missile program, is mostly hot air. The Missile Defense Agency has put in for a major increase in funding for 2007—up to roughly \$10 billion. North Korea's missile launches will make it easier for Congress to approve this funding. A failed intercept, on the other hand, might have led members of Congress to question whether all the money spent so far—nearly \$130 billion—has been a wise investment.

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3. War is not an option.

The Bush administration is reluctant to take any option "off the table." But there is broad consensus within the U.S. government that an attack on North Korea would have disastrous consequences. Yes, North Korea lacks the capability to launch a missile strike against the United States. Yes, North Korean military might is more exaggerated than that of the Iraqi forces before the 2003 invasion or

Soviet forces during the Cold War. But that doesn't mean that the North Korean tiger is toothless. It can defend against a ground attack and survive aerial bombardment. And it can visit great destruction on U.S. forces in South Korea and Japan, not to mention civilians and infrastructure, with long-range artillery and short-range missiles.

4. The U.S. military is not an unlimited resource.

The U.S. army and marines are tied down in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Lebanon crisis has once again distracted attention from East Asia. The U.S. Strategic Command, at Bush's request, has come up with a plan for a major bombing campaign against Iran, according to Seymour Hersh in the July 10 issue of *The New Yorker*. The administration has made little headway in resolving crises in Sudan and Somalia. The U.S. government simply doesn't have the intellectual or material resources to deal with North Korea right now. In a pinch, yes, the Pentagon can redeploy forces. But essentially, the Bush administration wishes that North Korea would just keep quiet for a couple more years.

5. Bush needs the support of China and Russia.

In his press conferences on the topic, Bush repeatedly referred to his phone calls to Vladimir Putin and Hu Jintao about the North Korea missile problem. These are the key players. Bush knows he has Prime Minister Koizumi's support—in fact, Japan has taken a much harder line on the North Korea issue. And Bush has largely ignored South Korea's position, not even bothering to coordinate a response with President Roh Moo Hyun. But to get the Chinese and Russian support, Bush has to tread carefully. It took considerable compromise to win their backing for a UN resolution condemning North Korea's missile launch (and, as Peter Hayes has pointed out in a *Nautilus* commentary, considerable finessing of the legal rationale, which was

based solely on North Korea's failure to provide sufficient advance notice). The administration has long hoped that China in particular will rein in its errant ally. Beijing has followed the U.S. lead by freezing North Korean bank accounts. It has expressed its displeasure at Pyongyang's decision to launch the missiles. Beyond this, China will not likely follow U.S. bidding.

Double Bind and Default Strategy

The administration faces a classic double bind on North Korea. An agreement with that country would open it up to conservative charges of "appeasement." A military response would generate horrific consequences. Proposals to attack North Korea and take out its missile sites—such as the tactics William Perry and Ashton Carter urged in *The Washington Post*—are not popular with the administration. But then, neither are proposals to negotiate directly with Pyongyang, as Dick Lugar, the Indiana Republican who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations committee, and others have urged. The diplomats and the generals are handcuffed.

An unpalatable third option has thus become the administration's default strategy. Instead of attacking North Korea or negotiating with it seriously, the U.S. government will continue to slowly tighten the military and financial noose around the country. It will defer the question of strong multi-lateral sanctions because of Chinese and Russian objections. It will quietly try to persuade South Korea to change its engagement policy and hope for an opposition victory in the next South Korean elections. It will wait for the North Korean government to collapse and not think too hard about the potentially dire military, economic, and political consequences.

What will it take to prod the Bush administration from its default strategy and sit down with the North Koreans to hammer out a principled agreement on denuclearization and diplomatic rapprochement? A sudden dose of comparative politics.

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The conflict in Israel and Lebanon has certainly diminished the amount of attention that North Korea hoped to garner with its missile launches. But Israel's war against the non-state actors Hamas and Hezbollah should reinforce the single most important reason why the Bush administration can and should broker a deal with North Korea. In however low regard Washington holds North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, the fact remains that he presides over a state that no longer has the desire or the capability to take over the world (or even the rest of the Korean peninsula). After September 11, North Korea offered to work with the United States against terrorism, an offer that Washington declined. As a weak state, North Korea wants to work with its neighbors and distant superpowers, not blow them up in a suicidal *jihad*.

To demonstrate that it's not a total foreign policy washout, the Bush administration needs a tangible victory. If the administration surveys the horizon, North Korea emerges as the lesser of several "evils."

A deal with Kim Jong Il might conjure up the ghost of the last agreement—the 1994 Agreed Framework of the Clinton administration—and thus outrage the right-wing base. But sitting down with a leader that such disparate politicians as Madeleine Albright and Japan’s hardliner Shinzo Abe have declared to be rational would give the Bush administration at least one lone feather in its foreign policy cap.

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