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China and North Korea's Missiles: Having the Cake and Eating It?

By Nah Liang Tuang

Synopsis

Beijing bitterly opposes the deployment of US missile defence systems in South Korea, but unless it is prepared to implement sanctions which would seriously punish Pyongyang's missile aggrandisement, such deployments are inevitable.

Commentary

THE PROGRESS of the North Korean ballistic missile programme seems inexorable. If recent history is any guide, it shows that Pyongyang will order its rocket scientists and technicians to doggedly pursue their life's work until success is achieved and can be trumpeted to the international community.

Looking at the DPRK's long range missile programme, the Pyongyang regime's determination to exhibit rocketry progress is shown by failed *Paektusan* and *Taepodong* model tests on 31 August 1998 and 5 July 2006 respectively, followed by failed *Unha* model rocket launches in 2009 and 2012. Eventually, North Korea determination was rewarded with a successful *Unha* launch in December 2012. Such tenacity to showcase missile development was also displayed in the shorter ranged Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) category.

North Korean SLBMs: Same Stubborn Resolve?

In his quest to build a credible ability to threaten US Pacific territories like Guam with a nuclear strike, current DPRK leader Kim Jong-un has pushed his missile programme through five unsuccessful tests of the *Hwasong-10* IRBM between 15 April and 22 June 2016, before a successful sixth test on the same day as the fifth failure.

On 9 July 2016, Kim's missile programme attempted to test a Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM), a KN-11 or *Bukguekseong-1* SLBM. This missile exploded after reaching an altitude of about 10km and a lateral range of only a few kilometres. However, if history is any guide, this failure should not be dismissed as the North Koreans are known to disregard surrender as an option, striving for a successful test over the long run. Excluding the most recent launch, the KN-11 has already been tested nine times since October 2014 from both land and marine platforms and from submarines with varying levels of success.

While South Korea's national intelligence agency has predicted that Pyongyang could deploy an operational SLBM by 2019, it would not be surprising if this goal is reached much earlier than expected, if the rushed and eventual successful testing of the *Hwasong-10* this year is anything to go by.

Pyongyang's Missiles and China's Concerns

If the deployment of effective North Korean IRBMs and SLBMs is treated as inevitable, it would only make sense for the US-ROK alliance to deploy the US made Theatre High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile system on South Korean soil in order to intercept any missiles that the DPRK might launch in any future crisis.

However, the range of the THAAD radars and interceptor missiles also enable this system to intercept missiles fired from China, thereby eroding the efficacy of Beijing's strategic nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis the US. Hence, Beijing bitterly opposes Washington's and Seoul's joint decision, to deploy THAAD in the ROK.

However, it must be said that Beijing cannot have its cake and eat it too. In all previous nuclear or missile crises instigated by Pyongyang, China has always insisted that North Korea be reasoned and negotiated with, while concurrently persuading the US and ROK from implementing militarily punitive measures, and refusing to apply any economic sanctions that would seriously pressure the DPRK.

Cynics could argue that the Chinese leadership wants both Washington and Seoul to maintain a policy of perpetual strategic patience, and treat North Korea with "kid gloves" whilst respecting Chinese deterrence sensitivities.

Reality that Beijing Should Recognise

From past experience, it can be seen that the Pyongyang regime is all too willing to use nuclear and missile aggrandisement as part of a coercive negotiating strategy to obtain aid from the US and/or South Korea. Hence, since carrots do not work to bring about any lasting positive change in North Korea's behaviour, it is reasonable to resort to the stick.

Additionally, acknowledging that the DPRK can, given sufficient time, develop successful IRBM, SLBM and possibly Intercontinental Ballistic Missile technology demonstrators that perform well in tests, action can be taken to limit Pyongyang's strategic missile arsenal which can threaten targets beyond Japan to the low dozens or less.

Considering that previous United Nations Security Council Resolutions have already prohibited all North Korean ballistic missile tests, China as the DPRK's only significant conduit to the world, must strictly prohibit all rocket fuel or fuel production chemicals exports, along with any materials components shipments that might be useful for missile production, to the latter.

Lastly, it would be hypocritical of Beijing to object to THAAD deployment while refusing to apply coercive economic leverage in order to influence the Pyongyang regime's choices. If Kim Jong-un chooses to thumb his nose at Beijing using nuclear and missile shenanigans, perhaps a two-week closure of all land crossings and sea ports to North Korean commercial traffic would remind young Marshall Kim that just as his grandfather and father could not ignore the strategic interests and dictates of China, neither can he.

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