



Written by [William P. Hoar](#) on June 22, 2009

## North Korea Tests U.S.

*Diplomacy — backed by stiff sanctions — is the only hope for walking North Korea back from the brink. And for now, China — not Washington — is the prime player. It is time for China (host of the six-party talks scuttled by Pyongyang) to exercise the leadership it has long shirked. As the North's main oil and food supplier, it has more leverage than any other country."*



*The "goal," commented the Times, "[is] to get nuclear inspectors back into North Korea and North Korean officials back to the bargaining table. President Obama has said that he is committed to the six-party talks — which also include Japan, South Korea and Russia — and aides say to eventual bilateral negotiations."*

**Item:** *"The game has changed with North Korea," said Defense News for June 1. "Despite years of intense diplomatic efforts, the isolated rogue nation is more determined than ever to possess nuclear weapons, whatever the risks."*

*Defense News continued: "The key to this controversy is China. Normally a reliable defender of its neighbor, Beijing issued an unusual public rebuke of Pyongyang for its latest nuclear test. That the underground test was conducted in the mountains of Kilju, close to China's border and site of North Korea's 2006 test, might have served as a wake-up call to regional realities."*

**Item:** *Writing in the Korea Times for June 3 for the Scripps Howard News Service, author and Carthage College professor Arthur Cyr contended: "As the international community grapples with the latest thundering threats from North Korea, which for the second time in three years have been accompanied by a nuclear explosion, the principal forum is the United Nations." The UN is also, he asserted, "the primary mechanism for restraining that provocative power" Iran.*

*"Derided in the United States from the start by isolationists, a very powerful domestic political constituency into the 1950s, the global organization has endured and in many respects become stronger*



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*over the decades since the founding conference in San Francisco right after World War II.”*

*Today, said the professor, “Iran, North Korea and the few other remaining national renegades in the world are increasingly isolated — especially in economic terms — because of the comprehensive reach of U.N. credibility.”*

**Correction:** For the United States to rely on China’s ministrations with its fellow communist dictatorship next door in North Korea, or to trust the amalgamation of anti-U.S. regimes in the world body to have our interests at heart, is worse than foolish. It borders on suicidal.

This is not to say that North Korea’s latest nuclear test or spate of missile launches are necessarily preludes to an attack on the U.S. heartland. However, the North’s growing military assets are significant threats to American troops in the region and potentially to Alaska in the near term, and to the rest of the country thereafter. If North Korea does export its nuclear and other military technology, as it has repeatedly done in the past, prospective customers include decidedly unfriendly nations and non-state entities, otherwise known as terrorists.

This is not a new game, as the *Defense News* editorial above suggests. North Korea’s tantrums have again attracted attention to itself. As usual, its missile-firings — the latter-day version of shots across the bow — have led to much posturing, most of it impotent. Diplomats meet and brandish strong adjectives. Then, if the pattern holds, the West looks for ways to make concessions to get Pyongyang back to the negotiating table where it has whipsawed its adversaries for more than five decades.

China and the UN will not protect the United States. That is the mission of the Pentagon. So what happened after the last North Korean provocation? Astoundingly, the Obama administration put a cap on the U.S. missile defense program. Said Defense Secretary Robert Gates: “We will not increase the number of current ground-based interceptors in Alaska as had been planned.”

This seems like a dangerous decision. Though the third stage of Pyongyang’s Taepo Dong-2 missile launched earlier this year may well have been a failure, the second stage made it about 2,400 miles, representing a quantum leap over the previous performance. Unsurprisingly, Pyongyang was not deterred by the promise of a great brotherhood of man, violating a number of United Nations resolutions. Again.

The moves also represented a thumbing of the nose at the Bush administration’s removal of Pyongyang from a list of states that sponsor terrorism. That, recall, was supposed to endear ourselves to this dictatorship. That reward to Pyongyang was heralded by the liberal establishment in this country. The North again bought time with its strategy, and grew stronger.

The UN, United States, and many of our supposed allies continue to make talking with the North the ultimate goal — as if Pyongyang is going to discard its nukes when they are virtually the only thing that makes that regime worthy of attention. The North is an accomplished extortionist that recognizes and responds to power, not fuzzy diplomatic principles. The regime also knows that its tactics work. Whenever it gets around to granting some meaningless gesture or making a mendacious promise, the U.S. State Department will relent whatever pressure may have been applied and rush to make concessions — as if the same gambits hadn’t been used for decades. Robert Joseph, a former undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, saw this at first hand. He recently recalled:



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Kim Jong-il also understands well the rules of the diplomacy game. For North Korea, there are no penalties. It never gives up its plutonium, it never gives up its reprocessing facility, it never gives up its reactor (even though it is willing to shut it down and receive handsome compensation for Potemkin steps such as demolishing the cooling tower at Yongbyon), and it never allows effective verification of what it is willing to promise in exchange for the assistance that keeps the regime in power. In other words, North Korea prolongs its survival with each successive crisis. Kim knows an unfulfilled promise, no matter how many times given, can be traded for fuel oil and other assistance.

Consider the nature of the regime with which Washington is dealing. The U.S. State Department quietly acknowledges that North Korea has some 200,000 political prisoners in its concentrations camps; the regime arbitrarily imprisons its own citizens, kills and tortures, carries out forced abortions, and runs medical experiments on prisoners. (See the State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*.) When a country is run by a ruthless regime that has proven willing to force millions to subsist by eating grass, the lure of "ending economic privations" for its population (as the *New York Times*' editors would have us believe) is not high among its motivating forces.

All of which lends credence to the conviction that, most of all, we should be protecting ourselves. As former Reagan administration security official James T. Hackett says, the United States needs to "strengthen our joint air, sea and regional missile defenses" and to finish "fielding all 44 interceptors in Alaska and California. All of the interceptors have been bought and are being produced. All the hardware for the additional 14 missile silos has been purchased and is en route to Alaska." Hackett notes in *Defense News* that the "cost to complete construction at the missile field for 44 interceptors is not much more than the cost to terminate the program at 30. Stopping this deployment now is a waste of money already spent and sends the wrong signal to both North Korea and China."

Meanwhile, the dictators in Beijing are not staying up late worrying about the well-being of the United States or even losing much sleep about nukes in North Korea. China will do what it can to keep the North Korean communist regime in power. Numerous experts call for the United States to play the so-called China card with North Korea, as if China didn't have its own interests in mind. It's worse than naïve for Washington to attempt to outsource its diplomatic efforts to Beijing and not realize that that comes at a very high price.

As it is, Washington has placed the United States in a submissive position with Beijing — with China being the world's largest holder of U.S. Treasuries (\$768 billion as of March). Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner was in Beijing not long ago trying to ensure that China would continue to fund the U.S. deficit. Chinese officials have publicly expressed concern about the safety of what they call "our assets," and even suggested that a new international currency should be adopted. In short, don't look for the administration to play hardball with Beijing.

China repeatedly ran interference for North Korea in the six-party talks, so why should we now expect China to endorse and enforce meaningful sanctions? Because the Obama administration asks nicely? Even *Time* magazine has pointed out: "When the North launched another long-range ballistic missile in early April, China helped promote the fig leaf at the U.N. Security Council that the rocket carried a communications satellite and thus might not be a direct violation of two U.N. resolutions calling on the North to cease its nuclear and ballistic-missile programs. The result was a toothless 'presidential statement' from the Security Council."

China can't be particularly dismayed to see the United States portrayed as ineffectual. Columnist Anne



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Applebaum, in an op-ed in the *Washington Post*, has made a reasonable case for China actually being behind the latest crisis. While acknowledging there are risks, she said:

There are good reasons for the Chinese to prod Kim Jong Il to keep those missiles coming. By permitting North Korea to rattle its sabers, the Chinese can monitor President Obama's reaction to a military threat — without having to deploy a threat themselves. They can see how serious the Obama administration is about controlling the spread of nuclear weapons — without having to risk sanctions or international condemnation of their own nuclear industry. They can distract and disturb the new administration — without harming Chinese American economic relations, which are crucial to their own regime's stability. And if the game goes badly, they can call it off altogether. North Korea is a puppet state, and the Chinese are the puppeteers. They could end this farce tomorrow. If they haven't done so yet, there must be a reason.

Meanwhile, North Korea is pulling in about \$1.5 billion a year in foreign arms-trading, according to a recent analysis by the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis. So much for all those severe UN resolutions. The arms bazaar remains open. The *Los Angeles Times* pointed out as far back as 2003 how Iran and North Korea have been working together, saying: "So many North Koreans are working on nuclear and missile projects in Iran that a resort on the Caspian coast is set up for their exclusive use."

The *Wall Street Journal* has likened the latest nuclear explosion in North Korea to an advertising campaign to such former and current customers as Syria and Iran. Said the *Journal*: "The official Korean Central News Agency said this immediately after the detonation: 'The results of the test helped satisfactorily settle the scientific and technological problems arising in further increasing the power of nuclear weapons and steadily developing nuclear technology.' This is sales talk. North Korea appears set to go into high gear and merchandise its nuclear arsenal."

Speculation? Perhaps. But the North lives by proliferating and lying. And it is too facile to excuse the succession of crises by simply saying that Kim is insane. In fact, the North's brinkmanship is to be expected, even if its timing can't always be foreseen. As a senior Air Force official and long-time Korea watcher based in the Pacific told *Aviation Week & Space Technology* recently: "All of this is utterly predictable. North Korea simply can't stand to be ignored. They have learned that we react, so they act.... They are utterly rational."

What is very likely — since this has already happened repeatedly — is that Pyongyang will share with other unsavory regimes. "Now the North seems to be gearing up for yet another test of its long-range Taepodong missile, and it's a safe bet Iranians will again be on the receiving end of the flight data," wrote columnist Bret Stephens in the *Wall Street Journal* on June 2. "Nothing prevents them from sharing nuclear-weapons material or data, either, and the thought occurs that the North's second bomb test last week might also have been Iran's first. If so, the only thing between Iran and a bomb is a long-range cargo plane."

When dealing with Pyongyang, the bogus choices that we are presented with generally involve bribing or conceding to North Korea, partnering with communist China, or strengthening the United Nations. There's another, much better answer: a strong and independent United States.



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