

# Pyongyang Phooey

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## ARTICLES

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With Pyongyang's announcement that it intends to "conduct a nuclear test" to "bolster its war deterrent for self-defense," the world has been given yet another reminder of the North Korean game plan. Paradoxically, for all its preternatural secretiveness, the regime has been practically spelling out its nuclear objectives for years, and has all but telegraphed the steps it would take to achieve them. As it has patiently explained, nuclear weapons--and the ballistic missiles necessary for delivering these into the U.S. heartland--are instrumental to achieving three goals: shattering the U.S. security architecture in Northeast Asia; breaking the U.S. military alliance with South Korea; and pursuing the reunification of the peninsula on Pyongyang's terms. The latest nuclear gambit moves Kim Jong Il's regime methodically closer to each of these goals. Scarcely less significant, the leadership sends a signal of confidence in its improbable contest against the American colossus.

North Korea has been called a "rogue state" by some, a "terrorist state" by others, and fair enough--but while those terms carry opprobrium, they lack real descriptive content. The North is better understood as a "revisionist state"--bitterly dissatisfied with the international environment it faces, and intent upon overturning that order. Its main grievances with the international system are: (1) the predominance and success of the capitalist world economy, particularly its global trade and financial arrangements, which are fundamentally incompatible with Pyongyang's Stalin-style economy; (2) the Northeast Asian security structure of military alliances built and maintained by its superpower enemy, the U.S.; and (3) the florescence of a prosperous, democratic South Korean state on the landmass that the Kim family claims the right to rule unconditionally.

These grievances are not merely aesthetic. Since each of these features of the international system places the survival of their own system in jeopardy, North Korea is exceedingly unlikely to be reconciled to them through "international dialogue." Making the world safe for Kim Jong Il requires nothing less than upending the contemporary economic, political and military order in Northeast Asia--preposterous as such an outcome may sound to South Korean, Japanese or American ears.

Nevertheless, North Korean policy is relentlessly focused on achieving just such an upending. The carefully chosen tools for the job are nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles. The point of vulnerability--the focus of these WMD--is the U.S.-South Korea military alliance. By training missiles on U.S. territory,

Pyongyang's goal of breaking the alliance would be promoted most efficiently-- and its objective of unconditional unification with South Korea would be directly advanced. Why? Because placing U.S. territory in North Korea's nuclear crosshairs inescapably undermines the credibility of American security guarantees in a time of crisis on the Korean peninsula. If U.S. policy makers were deemed unwilling to expose Seattle in order to honor commitments to Seoul, the security alliance would be worthless, America's unparalleled military might notwithstanding.

For over half a century, Pyongyang has endured the reality of U.S.-imposed "deterrence." For Kim Jong Il, the geopolitical keys to the kingdom lie in deterring the deterrer--and North Korea's otherwise puzzling and bellicose behavior should be regarded through the prism of this long-term project.

The seemingly stalled six-party talks, for example, are actually not stalled at all: North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons programs have apparently been progressing quite nicely during the three-plus years of conferencing. There is an eerie similarity between the "conference diplomacy" involving North Korea today and earlier episodes of "conference diplomacy" in Europe between World Wars I and II. While the particulars are obviously different--Germany was the strongest state in its region, while North Korea is the weakest--the dynamics are almost exactly the same: The status quo powers want to talk; the revisionist powers want to arm--and both parties get their wish.

When North Korea launched its missiles in July, the move was judged in many quarters to be impetuous, even irrational. In fact, it was coolly calculated, displaying the regime's confidence that it could manage subsequent international events while pushing its game up to a potentially much more dangerous level.

Even so, Pyongyang could not have known how much its own project--inflaming the U.S.-South Korea military alliance--would be abetted by the hapless Roh Moo Hyun government. In the immediate aftermath of the launches, South Korea's President Roh studiously avoided criticism of North Korea--and instead harshly scolded the Japanese for (among other things) bringing the matter before the U.N., averring that Tokyo's actions could "lead to a critical situation in the peace over Northeast Asia"! The Roh administration also stated that its multibillion dollar joint-venture scheme within North Korea, the Kaesong Industrial Complex, should be insulated against any political fallout from the missile episode. It continued the subsidies for the project and insisted that North Korean products "made in Kaesong" should receive privileged treatment in the pending U.S.-South Korea Free Trade Agreement.

Most portentously of all, Mr. Roh fixated on switching wartime operational control (Opcon) of the U.S.-South Korea combined forces command from U.S. to South Korean hands. It seemed to matter little to him that many military specialists in South Korea itself--including a large number of retired generals and former

ministers of national defense--went on record to warn that the South's forces were not prepared for such a transition, and that readiness might suffer. The true reasoning behind Mr. Roh's adamant Opcon lobbying may have been revealed by one of his advisers at a public seminar in Seoul last month. He argued that South Korea's control of troops during wartime is critical to maintain security on the peninsula as it prevents the U.S. military from unilaterally conducting military operations in the case of an emergency on the peninsula.

Opcon, in other words, was a proxy for the Roh government's distrust of its U.S. ally--a feeling evidently so powerful that it could not be restrained even under the pressure of North Korea's missile tests. In the light of such official South Korean reactions, Pyongyang made its own calculations about the risks and benefits in moving its agenda on to nuclear tests.

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If the flower children in charge of South Korean national security policy these days have acquitted themselves poorly, the record of the self-proclaimed grownups who took charge of Washington's policies in 2001 does not look that much better. Passive-aggressive in the face of North Korean brinkmanship, irritable and reactive in the face of mounting frictions in the relationship with Seoul, the Bush administration's main achievement to date in "alliance management" seems to have been the drawdown of U.S. forces in South Korea, with more in store. It is not even clear that our statesmen understand the stakes of the game they are embroiled in. All this, of course, will hardly dissuade Pyongyang from pressing the U.S.-South Korea alliance ever harder.

With his latest nuclear gambit, Kim Jong Il has just reset the clock on the U.S.-South Korean military alliance, moving the hands palpably closer to midnight. If we listen closely, we can hear the ticking.

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