

How best to deal with a desperado

(A short note written for the Asymmetric Threats Contingency Alliance (ATCA) dated 6 July, 2006)

With a collapsed economy and a dictatorial regime, North Korea has more than 600 Scud missiles with a 300 – 500 km range and 200 Nodong missiles with a 1,000 to 1,400 km range. Eight years ago it test-fired a long range Taepodong-1 missile over Japan with a range of 2,000 -2,300 km. It is developing a Taepodong-2 series of long range missiles with a range in excess of 3,000 km encompassing the western coast of the United States.

Last year it caused considerable consternation by re-starting its nuclear armament programme. There was a flickering glimmer of hope in the six-nation talks brokered by China as North Korea signed a conditional accord to stop making nuclear weapons and to allow international inspections of its nuclear programme. These talks have since stalled before the ink could dry.

Branded as an arch member of the Axis of Evil in the wake of the invasion of Iraq, an alarmed North Korea finds itself vulnerable as it is being increasingly ostracized. It is also piqued by the US's continuing refusal to talk bilaterally in contrast to a more flexible stance towards Iran. The US's recent criticism of its money laundering and currency counterfeiting activities is as much a revelation of the apparent depth to which North Korea has sunk as of its innate economic insecurity.

So perhaps it is not surprising that in spite of the Chinese Premier's recent warnings, a desperate North Korea wanted to give a 'two fingered salute' to the US on Independence Day, by

test-firing seven missiles to coincide with the re-launch of the US Space Shuttle. The finger language would have become more provocative if the only long-range missile fired, a Taepodong-2, had successfully demonstrated its range. It is the sign of a desperado calling for respect.

Equipped with the world's most advanced air defence systems, should the US lose any sleep over a failed Taepodong-2? Well, perhaps not yet. It depends on what a hell-bent rogue state would be up to next with improved technology and how fool-proof is US's missile shield.

While the test-firing has not breached any international rules, what is worrying is not so much the range of the missiles themselves, but the combination with a nuclear capability and the possibility of stirring up nuclear intentions in the region, if not in the rest of the world. The most threatened are those countries not counted as North Korea's best friends, notably South Korea and Japan. So a solution needs to be found, and found reasonably quickly, if only to restore calm in the international community.

In view of North Korea's idiosyncrasies and the nature and mobility of its arsenal (except the clumsier Taepodongs), a military pre-emptive strike would have incalculable and catastrophic consequences. But are sanctions and diplomacy the only options? Indeed, already severely isolated and destitute, what has North Korea got to lose by not behaving?

This of course raises the expectation that China, as North Korea's best comrade and chief economic supporter, should be counted upon to do something about its protégé, especially when China's six-nation efforts have now been rewarded with a snub.

What is more, the last thing China wants is for this to become a pretext for a nuclear Japan, let alone nuclear proliferation in the region.

In 2000, Kim Jong Il shook hands with his South Korea's Kim Dae Jung and Madeleine Albright, US Secretary of State under Bill Clinton, ushering in the so-called 'Sunshine Policy'. It will also be recalled that not so long ago, the Dear Leader was invited to visit China to see for himself what liberalisation and openness could mean to a nation's economy. More recently President Hu visited Pyongyang and officiated the launching of some China-financed factories.

This begs the question whether force and sanctions would not reinforce the very feeling of pique and insecurity that feeds this belligerence, and whether patient engagement and rehabilitation by the international community would be a better substitute. It may be necessary to build up the sort of international interdependence as seen in globalised market economies before the realisation can set in that there is much to lose in errant behaviour, and that more can be gained by international cooperation and mutual benefit. Indeed, to become a 'responsible stakeholder', it may be necessary to first raise the size of the stake to hold before any responsible behaviour can be induced.

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