

## **No good options to curb Pyongyang**

Rory Medcalf  
The Australian  
16 April 2012  
P. 8

North Korea's Friday the 13th missile test was a failure, but Asia is still in the danger zone. In fact, a botched launch may bring more perils than a successful one.

It cannot be good for the stability of the new and untried leadership of the young Kim Jong-un. It also raises the likelihood that Pyongyang will take the more provocative step of testing something that explodes when it is meant to -- a nuclear bomb.

The launch of a long-range missile dressed up as a rocket was meant to help the young "Bright Leader" prove his ability to assert North Korean power against the US and others. It was also intended as a display of technological prowess to mark the 100th birthday of his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, revered founder of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea. But these fireworks fizzled. Previously, the regime could blithely lie its way out of such disappointments. This time Pyongyang has realised it cannot fully hide the dismal results, and has acknowledged a degree of failure, even to its own confused people.

Perhaps believing its own propaganda, North Korea had brought in foreign media. There was also the weight of expectation from the 100th anniversary celebrations, and the increasing access of some North Koreans to information from the outside world.

The peculiar logic of North Korea's provocation diplomacy may also be at work. The US has responded to the missile test by cancelling a food aid deal. Pyongyang may conclude the way to compel the US back to the table is a fresh outrage, not a lurch back to concessions.

This would fit the historical pattern in which Washington was willing to return to talks with the North after or despite its serial acts of defiance or aggression: nuclear and missile tests in 2006 and 2009, naval and artillery attacks in 2010. The North may be planning another atomic explosion, anyway. There have been reports emerging from South Korea of a new tunnel at a known nuclear test site.

Like its missiles, Pyongyang's big bombs are still far from perfect. A first nuclear test in 2006 was mercifully a dud, and a second in 2009 still unconvincing by the hellish standards of nuclear deterrence: a fraction the size of the Hiroshima blast. The North's previous tests were plutonium weapons, but it may want to prove a uranium design.

All of this underscores that the change of leadership with the death of Kim Jong-il last December has left North Korea's attitudes to diplomacy and force unchanged. The world still has no good options to stop North Korea's quest to perfect the world's most dangerous weapons and the missiles to carry them. Those ambitions remain a threat to Japan, South Korea and the stability of the whole Asian region -- and thus the world.

Friday's fragmented splashdown in the Yellow Sea was a failure not only for the hapless rocket scientists of the Democratic Peoples Republic, but also for US diplomacy. The Obama administration had placed much store in its recent efforts to secure a moratorium on missile testing in return for food aid.

Yet the real problem is the belief that change in North Korea can come by an avenue that does not involve China.

So far Beijing has refused to ratchet up pressure on its unruly little brother, for fear instability on the Korean Peninsula would spill over into its territory. China's nightmare remains a unified Korea aligned with the US, bringing American forces to its border.

There has been a genuine debate among China's diplomatic and nuclear theologians on how to solve a problem like Korea. In 2009, it was resolved in favour of tolerating North Korea's bad behaviour. But

each reckless act by Pyongyang will bring Beijing a step closer to reopening the argument. That is because each time Japan and South Korea feel threatened by North Korea they become more determined to tighten military ties with the US.

This includes not only the so-called nuclear umbrella -- Washington's willingness to defend allies with nuclear arms -- but also a strengthened system of radar and interceptors to down incoming missiles. All of this deeply unnerves Beijing because it could neutralise Chinese weapons, too.

Asia's nuclear tangle is not confined to the Korean peninsula. It defies credulity to imagine China and Washington have done all they can together to unravel it.

Beset with internal dramas, Beijing is unlikely to craft a new Korea strategy soon. But if Kim Jong-un's latest stunt has one positive effect it is this: North Korea will be high on the agenda when the next leadership in Beijing sits down with the next US administration.

---

Rory Medcalf is director of the international security program at the Lowy Institute. This article is based on a research report on Asian nuclear deterrence to be released this week