Security Council Condemnation of North Korean "UFO" Deepens Korean Crisis

Gavan McCormack

Security Council Condemnation of North Korean "UFO" Deepens Korean Crisis

Gavan McCormack

On 13 April (14 April East Asian time), Claude Heller, the Mexican president of the United Nations Security Council, read a "Statement" on behalf of the Council. He condemned North Korea for something described as a "launch" it had conducted on 5 April, demanded it desist from any further such act, reaffirmed the principles of a 2006 Security Council resolution (No 1718, adopted in the wake of North Korea's missile and nuclear tests of 2006, banning any "missile-related activity"), directed the UN Sanctions Monitoring Committee to take further steps to secure compliance and to advise on possibly widening the sanctions list, and called for early resumption of the Beijing Six Party negotiations on the North Korean problem.[1]

Notably, the Council nowhere spelled out what North Korea might have launched, for the simple reason that its members could not agree: some thought missile, some thought satellite. Unable to agree on a noun, it therefore compromised with the verb "launch." The Council's strong and peremptory diplomatic language - "condemns," "demands," etc – was therefore oddly out of kilter with its inability to decide what it was condemning. Essentially it was saying North Korea was not to launch any more unidentified flying objects, or "UFOs." "Whatever it was you launched," said the Security Council in effect, "you should not have and you must not do it again."

UN Security Council

It was a bizarre outcome, one that made the Council look somewhat foolish, a hollow triumph for Japan, and a step likely to set back the very cause to which the Security Council made formal acknowledgment: "peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and in northeast Asia" through dialogue.

Although a non-permanent member, and indeed only occupying a Council seat it secured by persuading Mongolia to stand aside, Japan had been accorded the privilege of a week of exclusive consultations with the permanent members, "haggling" (as the New York Times put it)[2] in the desperate effort to secure a binding new Resolution denouncing North Korea and imposing punitive new sanctions. Faced with opposition from Russia and China, especially the latter, it eventually gave up, instead contenting itself with the "Presidential Statement." If Japan could not carry the day in

New York, however, it could in Tokyo, where on 10 April the Chief Cabinet Secretary announced that what had till then been termed a "flying object" would henceforth be known as a "missile."[3]

What was it that North Korea launched: Taepodong-2 (an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of, and perhaps designed to threaten Japan and the US), or Kwangmyongsong-2 (an experimental communications satellite, designed for various research purposes and to broadcast revolutionary songs)? The mystery object attracted the world's attention, and an enormous concentration of hostile military force – up to nine Aegis destroyers, submarines, surveillance aircraft, satellites and radar systems of the US, Japan and South Korea – before disappearing, either into space or into the Pacific Ocean.

The US and its allied countries state that the rocket sank into the western Pacific Ocean at a point about 3,000 (later revised to 3,800) kilometers from its origin. North Korea insists it went into orbit nine minutes after launch and since then has been circling the earth every 104 minutes 12 seconds at altitude between 490 and 1426 kms, broadcasting the "Song of General Kim Il-sung" and "Song of General Kim Jong-il" on 470 MHz wavelength.[4] Before the launch, US intelligence indicated it thought the launch object was probably a satellite, not a missile. [5] After it, South Korea's Defense Minister said the trajectory appeared to have been configured to thrust a satellite into orbit.[6]

A week after the event, the best scientific opinion seems to be that the rocket's first and second stages fired according to plan, taking the launch object temporarily to an altitude of about 50 miles, just above the outer reaches of earth's atmosphere, but that the third stage failed to separate, so that it fell back into the sea.[7] The International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the international agency in charge of radio frequency allocation for satellites, dismissed North Korea's claim to have put a communications satellite into orbit, and South Korea's Satellite Technology Research Center likewise could detect no signal emanating from 470 MHz.[8] It is of course possible that the mystery object might really be in orbit and a telescope somewhere might one day detect it in the night sky, but that seems increasingly unlikely.

North Korea insists that its goal is to become a "strong and prosperous country" by 2012, and that its April launch (or launch attempt as it might better be called) was within its legal rights. The Outer Space Treaty of 1967 guarantees all nations the absolute right to scientific exploration of space, and North Korea observed the necessary legal niceties, including advance notice to the appropriate international maritime and aviation bodies (IMO and ICAO), though not the necessary permit from ITU.

However, major governments – notably Japan, South Korea and the US – denied that North Korea had such a right, insisting that, even if the launch object was a satellite, it was forbidden under Security Council 1718. US President Obama was surely oversimplifying things when he declared (on being wakened at 4:30 in the morning in Prague with news of the "launch") that "rules must be binding" and "violations must be punished," since there clearly were two different and conflicting sets of "rules" in this case – under the 1967 treaty and under the 2006 resolution - and also because what applies only to one country can scarcely be considered a "rule." Even if what North Korea had launched was indeed a missile, the world had seen over 100 such launches during 2008 (even without including American ones), without giving rise to any Security Council or presidential concern.[9] Why was it, President Obama needed to reflect, that only North Korean missiles mattered under the "rules"?

After the launch, Japan pursued the issue with

great vigor, demanding that the Security Council take appropriate punitive measures. China and Russia, however, both with veto rights, were not persuaded that the 2006 Security Council resolution could extinguish a right guaranteed by the 1967 treaty. China appears to have refused outright to contemplate a new resolution, but accepted with some reluctance the milder formula of a Presidential Statement. The 2006 resolution had been mostly ignored, with not a single country reporting any step in its implementation for over a year, and it was not clear that restatement would make much difference. In any case, the larger issues concerning North Korea still remained to be addressed in Beijing, at the Six-Sided conference, rather than in New York at the UN.

The global media was quick, on the whole, to condemn North Korea. Such is that unfortunate country's image that most, in fact, were ready to condemn it in advance. However, apart from the technical question of interpretation of conflicting rules, the launch has to be seen within a broader context. There is little basis for the view that North Korea poses a threat of aggression. Rather, it is obsessed with security in the form of an absolute guarantee of immunity from attack by its far more powerful enemies. It is a kind of "porcupine state," resisting foreign bodies by stiffening its quills, not an expanding or rampaging one. Second, blame for the breakdown in the multilateral Beijing negotiations and the stalling of Phase 2 of the February 2007 agreement attaches to other parties at least as much as to Pyongyang. It protests that it meticulously performed its agreed obligations only to have the US add fresh, and unacceptable, demands (on verification). It was also angry and disappointed that the Obama administration, coming to power promising negotiations and "new" diplomacy, instead went ahead during March with US-South Korea war games, mobilizing 50,000 men and an armada of ships and fighter planes to rehearse renewed peninsular war. To Pyongyang, that was provocation, just as to Japan and the US, its April launch was provocation.

History shows that North Korean interest in negotiations diminishes as other parties attempt to narrow the focus to its nuclear and missile programs (or, in the Japanese case, abductions) and grows as the agenda incorporates comprehensive normalization, a treaty to end the Korean War, multilateral economic cooperation, and Japanese reparations for colonialism. The current impasse owes largely to factors beyond North Korea's control: elections and new governments in the US and South Korea and peculiar Japanese domestic considerations, factors that combined to narrow the focus to North Korea's disadvantage.

North Korea has learned that nothing succeeds so much in attracting American attention, even earning a grudging respect, as in the maintenance of high-level military preparedness. As Leon Sigal wrote (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, January 2009), "Whenever the United States fails to keep its side of the bargain, North Korea is quick to retaliate – in 1998 Pyongyang sought the means to enrich uranium and test a long-range Taepodong missile; in 2003 it reignited its plutonium program; in 2006 it test-launched a Taepodong and conducted a nuclear test; and last August it suspended disablement of its Yongbyon facilities and threatened to resume plutonium production." In other words, if its Taepodong brought the US to the negotiating table in 1998 and its nuclear test opened the way towards comprehensive agreements in 2006, could not a similar outcome be expected in 2009? Its tactics would therefore be better seen not as recalcitrance, blackmail, or belligerence, but as a calculated response to American and Japanese intimidation.

As for South Korea, it is of course the most affected by events in the North, but has little capacity at the moment to influence events because South-North relations are at a nadir,

having degenerated steadily following the election of the Lee Myung-bak government at the end of 2007. North Korea is angry at the efforts of the Lee government to distance itself from "Sunshine" politics, even to the extent of being unwilling to honor the joint South-North declarations on cooperation of June 2000 and October 2007.

South Korean society, however, has a decade of unique experience of engagement with its northern compatriot and nobody, conservatives included, wants a return to the hostile confrontation of the Cold War. On the eve of the launch, therefore, President Lee Myung-bak sounded positively reconciliatory in an interview with the Financial Times, where he said, "Our ultimate objective is to convince North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons and usher in an era where the two Koreas are able to co-exist. For us to go the other way, taking a harder stance, I don't think that would be helpful in achieving that ultimate objective." [10] Following the launch, President Lee was active in helping mediate a compromise procedure between Japan and China. Many in South Korea may also have been impressed that Pyongyang had stolen a march on it, since a southern satellite launch attempt (heavily reliant on Russian cooperation) is not expected till July.[11] The vision of a national space program under a future united Korea must also have exercised some attraction across the political spectrum.

South Korea did, however, threaten one specific, hard-line response to the launch – that it might join the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (a Bush era project to intercept shipments to North Korea of nuclear weapons, missiles, or related materials). For South Korea's navy to try to stop, board, and inspect North Korean or North Korea-bound ships on the high seas while technically a state of war still existed would seem very provocative, and North Korea responded that it would regard it as a "declaration of war." Indications from Seoul one week after the launch, however, are that it might indeed be about to take this step.

(Cartoonist: Jang Bong-goon)

"No Missile," Hankyoreh Geurimpan**, 6 April 2009**

In the flurry of anger and denunciation that followed the launch, perhaps only in South Korea was it possible to see a funny side. The butt of this 6 April cartoon, from the Hankyoreh, entitled "No Missile," is Japan's Prime Minister Aso Taro, shown here disappointed at the spectacle of Kim Jong-il emerging like a Fortune Cookie from the rocket, says "You were going to intercept me, weren't you?" "No fish" is a Korean sweet bean fish-shaped pastry known as pung ap bang. When loosely translated, it means fish bread that has no fish. "No missile" is a projectile that contains no missile."

For Japan, North Korea has been a major preoccupation at least since Taepodong-1 flashed unheralded across its skies in 1998.[12] Yet Japan's stance differs crucially from that of other parties at Beijing. It alone fiercely opposed the late Bush government's switch to negotiations and the thaw that it brought to the US-North Korea relationship. It tried long, though unsuccessfully, to persuade the US to share its

view that the abduction of its citizens three decades ago should be included on the Beijing agenda, while to its own people it insisted that the abduction issue was more important than nuclear weapons or missiles. In its meetings with North Korea since February 2006, Japan has declined to discuss anything but abductions. After the 2007 agreements in Beijing, it made huge diplomatic efforts to block or delay their implementation, first pressing the Bush administration not to remove North Korea from the list of terror-supporting states and then refusing to meet its own obligation to provide heavy oil to North Korea. In the lead up to the launch, media and political figures joined in spreading fear, as if North Korea was planning a missile attack on Tokyo. Japan alone hinted that it might try to shoot the rocket down; only softening its stance slightly when North Korea said it would see that as an act of war to say only that it would shoot down any debris falling over Japanese territory (something that technical experts have insisted is impossible). In the immediate wake of the launch, the term "flying object" (hishotai) was adopted by government and media, but five days later, the government announced, and the media with one voice adopted, the word "missile." Of the parties to the Beijing Talks, Japan alone took this view. The government offered no explanation other than that the North Korean claim of satellite had not been borne out. In rejecting the logical alternative - the explanation widely accepted in other countries: that North Korea had attempted but failed to launch a satellite – the Japanese government was repeating a pattern noted earlier in matters to do with North Korea: "meddling in scientific matters … in a desperate effort to make up for what has become a diplomatic failure."[13]

On 5 April, while many ordinary people enjoyed cherry-blossom parties, the launch infuriated and humiliated the Japanese establishment. Its years of efforts to squeeze Pyongyang into capitulation had been fruitless. It had got nowhere on the abduction issue, failed to persuade the US to share its hard-line or its view of the abductions as the key North Korean crime, failed to stop the launch, failed to persuade the world that it was decisively military rather than civil in character and, despite every effort, in the aftermath of the launch failed to exact the resolution of condemnation it sought from the Security Council. Furthermore, despite Japan's severe sanctions policy, North Korea's launch seemed to indicate that its scientific and military agenda was little affected. There is no evidence that it attained orbit this time, but North Korea was clearly near to accomplishing it.

Japan's much vaunted missile defense program, on the other hand, produced two false alarms, quickly cancelled. Perhaps nothing could be bitterer for Japanese bureaucrats than the prospect that North Korea might be moving towards the capacity to launch spy satellites over Japan, as Japan has regularly done over North Korea since 2003.

(Cartoonist: Kim Yong-min)

Soaring High

Seoul's Kyunghyang shinmoon responded to the launch with this 5 April cartoon, showing a forlorn Kim Jong-il of North Korea alongside a

grossly caricatured Japanese wartime figure who complains, "I was worried that you might not go ahead with the launch," while his rocket bears the inscriptions "Self Defense Forces" and "Constitutional Revision." The US rocket says "Expand Missile Defense" while the suitcase is inscribed "Military Industries."

For all the hype and calculated frenzy of the Japanese response, the fact that the launch crossed the skies above Japan – even if far above it – was not something it could ignore. Its response was notable, however, for the absence of any reflection on its own "spy" satellites, which have flown regularly across North Korean skies since 2003, or on the role of Japanese hostility in feeding the insecurity that drives North Korea to defy it.

Like those of Japan, North Korean launches take place over the Pacific, in a due-east direction, as indeed do virtually all satellite launches around the world. This is for the technical reason that the earth's own rotation provides up to 5 per cent of the speed needed to gain orbit. However, where virtually all launches elsewhere in the world occur over oceans, deserts, or sparsely populated areas, because of the geographical fact that North Korea's path eastwards to the Pacific is blocked by Japan, it has no alternative. If it insists on its right to space exploration, it must launch over Japanese territory. Such direction is scientifically, not politically, determined. The same problem arises in the case of the projected South Korean launch later this year. Just as North Korea's crossed over Northeastern Japan, South Korea's will have to cross over Western Japan, somewhere between Hiroshima and Okinawa. The only way to resolve such problems is for international agreement to provide internationally acceptable launch sites.[14]

Prime Minister Aso's tough posturing, and his orders to shoot down any debris from the launch, seem to have raised his domestic support levels and improved his prospects, however slightly, for the election that must be held in coming months. It might also help him "sell" to the electorate more of the unproven and hugely expensive missile defense systems he proposes, and perhaps boost the case for constitutional revision and full-scale Japanese rearmament (as the Korean cartoon above infers). But such steps merely threaten deeper instability for Japan or the region. History shows that Pyongyang responds tit-for-tat to punitive measures, if anything using them to tighten the screws of repression. Only when the distortions, violence and wounds of the past and present of the peninsula and its surrounding region, and the grievances of all parties, including North Korea, are addressed can there be any lasting peace and stability. These grievances include those of colonialism, war and their aftermath in the Korean peninsula.

Global reaction to these April events was notable for the lack of appreciation of the complex structural factors and widely dispersed responsibility for the present impasse.

Three exceptions may be mentioned. One was the statement issued shortly after the launch by a group of some sixty academics specializing in Korea (including this author).[15] That statement drew attention to the "growing militarism in Northeast Asia, including increased military spending, destabilizing US military exercises around the peninsula, and the bellicose rhetoric from North Korea," noting that "Japan has taken the crisis as an opportunity to accelerate its missile defense programs; South Korea is consolidating its uncompromising position…" The scholars accurately foresaw that "an overreaction to North Korea's rocket launch would only fuel North Korea's suspicions and make further negotiations difficult."

Second was the discussion in Moscow on 6 April between three respected and widely known authorities on Korea.[16] For Alexander Vorontsov, of the Russian Academy of Sciences,

the real threat the world faces is "nuclear weapons, which exist already" rather than missiles that have been tested three times in the space of 11 years (with far from satisfactory results, as he might have added). To drive North Korea out of the Six Party talks by making a severe response, he predicted, would be to make things worse, not better. Alexander Zhebin of the Institute of the Far East noted that North Korea "has been in a serious economic crisis, its population is starving, fatigued and demoralized, while its armed forces use arms and equipment dating back to the 1960s-1970s." Georgy Toloraya, director of Korean programs at the Russian Academy of Sciences, saw the launch as reflecting North Korea's domestic political goals, in particular the need "to boost the country's sagging morale." Toloraya also described the Japanese response as a premeditated design to advance its missile defense capabilities. All three Russians found Japan's response pathological. Pressure accomplishes nothing in dealing with North Korea, they noted; what is important is readiness for dialogue and compromise, the factors that led to agreements in 1994 and 2006.

To the above may be added the analysis by Selig Harrison, a respected US expert and regular visitor to North Korea over three decades.[17] Harrison too saw little sign of North Korean "threat." Instead, the launch appeared to him "a big show by Kim Jong Il to bolster his prestige internally," and to advertise North Korean rocket technology. If that is provocative, he added, then so will be Japan's H-2 launch scheduled for later this year, and so (he might have added) South Korea's KSLV-1 in July.

The gloomiest of prophecies were born out within hours of the Security Council's announcement. North Korea reciprocated the language of the Presidential statement, resolutely condemning it for "brigandish" and "wanton" infringements of its sovereignty, declared that it would "never participate" again in the Six Party Talks in Beijing and that it would re-start its nuclear facilities. It is precisely what it had declared in advance it would do. The Security Council, driven hard by Japan, had sent the "North Korean problem" back into intractable crisis, escalated the threat of nuclearization, not only in Korea but the region, and forced the miserable people of North Korea back into the arms of their "Dear Leader."

This is an expanded and updated version of an article published in Korean in Kyunghyang Sinmoon (Seoul) on 13 April 2009.

For that text, visit here (http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/art_print.html?artid=200904131823425).

Gavan McCormack is a coordinator at The Asia-Pacific Journal. He is an emeritus professor at Australian National University and the author of Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Nuclear Catastrophe (http://www.amazon.com/dp/1560255579/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20).

Posted at The Asia-Pacific Journal on April 15, 2009.

Recommended citation: Gavan McCormack, "Security Council Condemnation of North Korean "UFO" Deepens Korean Crisis" The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 16-1-09, April 15, 2009.

See in addition the following articles on Korea by the author:

Facing the Past: War and Historical Memory in Japan and Korea (http://japanfocus.org/-Gavan-McCormack/2983)

Korea at 60 (http://japanfocus.org/-Gavan-McCormack/2869) [Korean translation available]

North Korea and the Birth Pangs of a New Northeast Asian Order (http://japanfocus.org/-Gavan-McCormack/2555)

A Denuclearization Deal in Beijing: The Prospect of Ending the 20th Century in East Asia (http://japanfocus.org/-Gavan-McCormack/2354) (Available in Korean)

Notes

[1] "Full text (http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2009/04/14/65/0301000000AEN2009041400) of U.N. Security Council's statement on N. Korean rocket launch," Yonhap News, 14 April 2009.

[2] Neil MacFarquhar, "U.N. Council may rebuke North Korea," New York Times, 12 April 2009.

[3] "Its official: N. Korea fired 'missile'," Asahi shimbun, 11 April 2009.

[4] Chosen shinpo, 5 April 2009. For web versions of these songs:
Song of General Kim Il-sung (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTFreay3bOA), and Song of General Kim Jong-il (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cjm5kbYoDzc&feature=related)

[5] Kim Sue-young, "N. Korea likely to launch satellite, not missile, Dennis Blair," Korea Times, 11 March 2009, quoting Dennis Blair, director of U.S. National Intelligence, and (on the configuration) Choe Sang-hun and David E. Sanger, "Defying world, North Koreans launch rocket," New York Times, 6 April 2009.

[6] Defense Minister Lee Sang-hee to a National Assembly hearing in Seoul, "S. Korean gov't admits DPRK rocket followed satellite trajectory," Xinhuanet, 14 April.

[7] Craig Covault, "North Korean rocket flew further than earlier thought (http://www.spaceflightnow.com/news/n0904/10northkorea/)," Spaceflight Now, 10 April 2009.

[8] "ITU Dismisses N. Korean Satellite Claim (http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200904/200904100004.html)," Chosun ilbo, 10 April 2009.

[9] According to Henry Obering, Director of the US Missile Defense Agency till his retirement in 2008, interview in Asahi shimbun, 27 March 2009

[10] Lee Myung-bak, Transcript (http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/b199dc66-1c43-11de-977c-00144feabdc0.html), Interview with the Financial Times, 29 March 2009.

[11] Kim So-hyun, "Seoul lags N.K in rocket technology," The Korea Herald, 7 April 2009.

[12] For a fuller discussion of the relationship, see my "Japan and North Korea: the Long and Twisted Path towards Normalcy," US-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Working Paper series, WP08-06, November 2008.

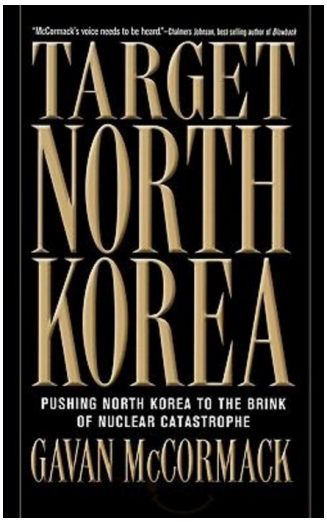
[13] "Politics versus reality," editorial, Nature, Vol. 434, 17 March 2005, p. 257 (in reference to DNA evidence on the Japanese victims of North Korean abduction).

[14] During 2000, one proposal considered was for North Korean satellites to be launched by the US in return for a North Korean pledge to suspend its own long-range missile development.

[15] Alliance of Concerned Scholars about Korea, "Statement (http://www.asck.org/)," n.d.

[16] The following compiled from two sources: Russian News and Information Agency Novosti, "Russian pundits play down N. Korea's missile threat (http://en.rian.ru/russia/20090406/120948113.html)," Moscow, 6 April 2009, and "'Kita misairu hassha' Ro no senmonka-ra 'Nihon no hanno wa byoteki (http://sankei.jp.msn.com/world/korea/090407/kor0904071900010-c.htm)," Sankei News, 7 April 2009.

[17] Selig Harrison, "Was the North Korean launch a 'provocation' (http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_opinion/349654.html)," The Hankyoreh, 14 April 2009.



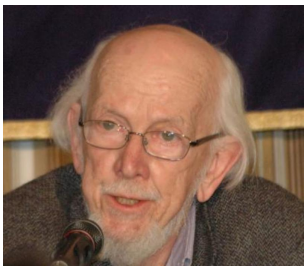
(http://www.amazon.com/dp/1560255579/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20)

Click on the cover to order.

(http://www.amazon.com/dp/184467133X/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20)

Click on the cover to order.

Gavan McCormack (/authors/view/8445)



Gavan McCormack is an emeritus professor of Australian National University and coordinator of The Asia-Pacific Journal. He is co-author with Satoko Oka Norimatsu of Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States (http://www.amazon.com/dp/1442215623?tag=theasipacjo0b-20) (Rowman and Littlefield, 2012, Horitsu bunkasha, 2013) and co-author with John Dower of the recently published Tenkanki no Nihon e – Pax Americana ka Pax Asia ka (NHK Bukkusu, 2014).