

Kim's Second Test is Xi's First by Ralph A. Cossa

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North Korea's new supreme leader Kim Jong Un conducted two missile tests last year. The first, in April, failed. The second, in December, was by all accounts a huge success. But it was not just a test of North Korea's ability to put an object into space. Kim's second test was also the first test of the new Chinese leadership. To date, it would appear that Chairman Xi Jinping has passed Kim's test with flying colors. . . at least in North Korea's eyes. The rest of us are not too sure.

Some, myself included, have argued that we should not have been so quick to judge Kim Jong Un and his policies by the April 2012 rocket launch or the Feb. 29 "Leap Day Agreement" that preceded, and was subsequently undermined by, that missile firing. Both actions had clearly been mandated by his father, Kim Jong Il, before he died, and these dying wishes had to be honored. That logic no longer applies. While the North still proclaimed that the December launch was carrying out "the last instructions" of the Dear Leader, this decision rests squarely on Kim Jong Un's shoulders. Those hoping that the Boy General would lead his country in a new, less confrontational direction will need to await another sign.

Alas, those hoping that the new Chinese leadership would be more willing to hold Pyongyang accountable for its actions have also been left disappointed thus far. While it's true that Xi Jinping will not formally take the reins of government until he is sworn in as president this spring, by all accounts he is already calling the shots as head of the Party, the Central Military Commission, and the Party's Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group, which exercises supervision on foreign affairs. As a result, watching how China responds to the December missile activity, at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and elsewhere, will tell us if a new, more balanced Chinese approach toward Pyongyang is in the cards under Xi's leadership. Thus far, it appears not!

True, the UNSC was quick to condemn the launch, branding it "a clear violation" of Security Council resolutions, a statement lauded by US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice as "one of the swiftest and strongest – if not the swiftest and strongest – that this council has issued." But this condemnation did not come in the form of a binding Security Council resolution or even a Presidential Statement (a milder form of rebuke, which has been used in the past) but in a toothless *Security Council Press Statement on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*.

That Dec. 12 statement further asserted that "the Security Council will continue consultations on an appropriate response, in accordance with its responsibilities given the

urgency of the matter." We are still waiting for the "appropriate response." As Ambassador Rice noted at the time, "Members of the council must now work in a concerted fashion to send a clear message that [North Korea's] violations of UN Security Council resolutions have consequences." Five weeks later, we are still waiting for the UNSC to spell out the consequences. So much for a sense of "urgency." The hang-up – surprise, surprise – is the veto-wielding PRC, which has thus blocked any meaningful action, arguing instead that the response should be "prudent and moderate."

Some have argued that a strong UNSC response may result in a harsh North Korean response, most likely in the form of a nuclear weapons test; indeed preparations for such a test appear underway at their underground test facility. But let's be honest, if Pyongyang has already decided that it wants/needs another test, it will conduct one regardless of what the UNSC says or does. If it can't blame the UN, it can always blame Washington's or Seoul's "hostile policy."

In his New Year address this year, Kim Jong Un boasted that the rocket launch "clearly showed that Korea does what it is determined to do." Not stated, but clearly implied by this statement, was Pyongyang's rejection of UNSC Resolutions which ban "all missile activity" by North Korea, including "any launch using ballistic missile technology."

Pyongyang does not fear UNSC resolutions because there have thus far been very few consequences when it violates them. Had previous resolutions been strictly enforced, the North would have been incapable of firing even one, much less two, long-range ballistic missiles last year. China's refusal to first allow, and then to strictly enforce, harsh sanctions has rendered the UNSC impotent in dealing with Pyongyang. This forces Washington, Seoul, and others to act unilaterally, actions that Beijing then condemns. All eyes will now be on New York to see if the current UNSC debate will result in meaningful, enforceable (and enforced) sanctions in response to this latest violation or if the new Chinese leadership will merely continue the current farce.

I, for one, believe that a new, more creative approach is needed in dealing with North Korea and its missile and nuclear weapons challenge. The Pacific Forum's founder, 96-year old retired RADM Lloyd "Joe" Vasey has suggested one: a mini-Marshall Plan for North Korea that offers real incentives for cooperation, economic reform, and denuclearization and credible consequences if Pyongyang rejects or reneges on this grand bargain. The problem is not with the incentives: Pyongyang has willingly accepted them before and most likely would again. But if the consequences for failing to live up to its end of the bargain are not credible – and thus far they have not been – the end result of any new approach will be watching the North Koreans once again take the money and run.

The new leadership in China under Xi Jinping has an opportunity to restore the UNSC's credibility by demonstrating to Pyongyang that its rejection of international norms and obligations has real consequences. This will not only send a strong message to Pyongyang that future violations (such as a nuclear test) will not be tolerated. It will also set the stage for more creative approaches to dealing with the overall challenge once leadership transitions in China, Japan, and South Korea are complete and the new foreign policy team is in place in Washington.

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