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Their Rockets' Red Glare

Tim Beal

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Tim Beal's latest book, North Korea: The Struggle Against American Power, was published by Pluto Press (London and Ann Arbor) in 2005. He maintains a website on Korean affairs at <http://www.vuw.ac.nz/~caplabtb/dprk/>

America's celebration of the insurgency that led to its independence from Britain is commemorated in various ways. In the United States there was, among other things, the space shuttle launch. In Britain, I participated in a demonstration outside the U.S. missile defense base at Menwith Hill, in North Yorkshire. There the theme was independence from the United States.

That same theme was reiterated in North Korea this week with the launch of a number of rockets, seven as of July 5. Not all the launches were successful, but the message is clear. To paraphrase that famous declaration:

The history of the present Administration of the United States is a history of repeated injuries and threats, all having in direct object the overthrow of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the establishment of a client state. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world. In every stage of these threats we have attempted to negotiate as one sovereign state to another: Our repeated attempts have been answered only by repeated injury. A President whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people, or to lead them in a world of sovereign and independent countries.

A lot of excitement accompanied the build-up to the launches. Former top Clinton administration officials William J. Perry and Ashton B. Carter hit the jackpot with a suggestion, endorsed by former Vice President Walter Mondale, that [the U.S. bomb the launch site](#). This would have been an egregious act of war that would have fairly inevitably brought about a retaliatory attack by North Korea on U.S. forces in South Korea, with incalculable consequences. If nothing else it was a reminder that contempt for international law and imprudent foreign policy did not start with George W. Bush.

More to the point, there was talk of putting the fledging, but already very expensive, U.S. missile defense system to a live test. Air Force Lt. Gen. Henry A. Obering III, director of the Missile Defense Agency told reporters he had little doubt that the interceptor system would work, but his confidence did not appear to have been matched by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (who was, after all the architect of the scheme) or Vice President Dick Cheney, both of whom played down the necessity of trying to intercept the missiles.

Meanwhile, there have been lots of launches that did not capture the attention of the media and which you may well have missed.

There was, for instance, the Minuteman III ICBM that the U.S. launched from California on June 14 carrying three test warheads across the Pacific and in the general direction of North Korea. The Russians, not to be left out, launched a RSM-54 missile from a submarine on June 30. Kazakhstan joined the space club on June 18 by putting a civilian communications satellite in orbit and South Korea announced that it was going to launch a military communications satellite on August 10 from a ship in the South Pacific. Both the U.S. and China are gearing up for further manned space

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launches in the near future. No doubt there was plenty of space and missile activity—the distinction between the two is blurred—elsewhere during the period; Japan and India are two obvious candidates.

So why this myopia on the part of the media? Why is the North Korean missile launch on the front pages and those of the U.S., and even Russia, buried deep inside? Part of the reason is scarcity value. For the U.S. to test a ballistic missile is “dog bites man” while with North Korea it is more a matter of man biting dog; it just doesn’t happen very often. The last launch of a long-range rocket by North Korea was in 1999 and there must have been hundreds of launches around the world since then.

The North Koreans claimed that its 1999 launch put a satellite in orbit. The U.S. at first claimed it was a missile test, then admitted that it was a satellite launch, but said that it had been unsuccessful. In reality, it probably doesn’t make much difference in terms of rocket capabilities whether a satellite is carried or a mock warhead; it is distance and accuracy that counts. North Korea did not have rocket-deliverable nuclear warheads in 1999, and many experts are skeptical that it has them today. Nonetheless, the launch caused quite a shock, especially in Japan. The rocket passed over Japanese territory, between the islands of Honshu and Hokkaido, although whether this was an infringement of Japanese sovereignty is unclear.

However, it is quite clear that, in general, the satellite launches, and even ballistic missile testing, is quite lawful, and there is no legal impediment in international law or in agreements with the United States on North Korea. That is not quite the impression you got from President Bush or Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice? Bush is reported as saying, “The North Koreans have made agreements with us in the past and we expect them to keep their agreements, for example on test launches.” Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has claimed that a North Korea missile test would violate “the framework agreement that was signed in September of this past year between the six parties.” She is referring to the [joint statement signed on Sept. 19, 2005](#) at the conclusion of the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks held between the U.S., North Korea, South Korea, Russia, China, and Japan in Beijing. Both are being economical, even parsimonious, with the truth. The Joint Statement made no mention of rocket launches.

After negotiations with Washington in 1999, North Korea entered into a self-imposed moratorium on the testing of long-range rockets as long as missile talks continued. The Bush administration broke them off and has refused to enter into substantial bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang since coming into office. What is surprising is that Pyongyang has kept to its moratorium so long, even unilaterally extending it. When the present crisis erupted, it offered talks to allay Washington’s fears, but these were rejected. Nonetheless, President Bush has unabashedly complained that North Korea has not informed Washington of its plans.

Pyongyang’s attempted launch of a long-range rocket is certainly an attempt to push the U.S. towards bilateral negotiations aimed at removing the U.S. threat and sanctions, and securing the nuclear energy facilities promised by the Clinton administration but cancelled under Bush. Some senior members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have recently renewed calls for bilateral talks.

However, if U.S. intelligence reports are correct, and the launch of the long-range Taepodong-2 was a failure, then Pyongyang’s position is much weakened. The Bush administration has not shown any concern about Pyongyang’s claimed nuclear deterrent. If North Korea clearly cannot deliver a payload to the continental United States, then U.S. insouciance will grow.

In reality, the military situation has not much changed because the U.S. cannot attack North Korea because of Pyongyang’s capacity for local retaliation, and the political fallout that would ensue. North Korea is far weaker than South Korea, let alone the U.S. (or Japan), so an attack from the North is not on the cards. On the contrary, North Korean actions, including these launches, are an attempt to force Washington to talk peace.

The launch preparations scuttled Kim Dae-jung’s second visit to Pyongyang, and have set back South-North relations considerably. The political damage might conceivably have been worth it if the Taepodong-2 rocket had successfully placed a satellite into orbit; a wholly Korean satellite launch might well have resonated in the South. As it is, it seems a gamble that has failed. On the other hand, it must be recognized that Washington has been obdurate in its refusal to accept peaceful coexistence with North Korea, so such gambles, wise or not, are perhaps inevitable. The

message from Pyongyang is, yet again, that it holds the United States “Enemies in war, in peace friends.”

A careful reading of the Declaration of Independence, and its application to contemporary events, serves America, and the world, better than the hypocritical speeches that usually mark the Fourth of July.