



North Korea's Rocket Fizzle Creates New Dangers

Marcus Noland discusses the widespread fear that an unstable North Korean leadership will search for scapegoats and be compelled to test a nuclear weapon.

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Steve Weisman: North Korea's highly publicized attempt to send up a rocket has fizzled out, but there's been an explosion of reaction around the world. Marcus Noland, deputy director of the Peterson Institute, has been blogging and commenting on this. Marc, what do you make of this latest episode with the world's strangest country?

Marcus Noland: It would be easy to gloat about the failure of the North Korean missile launch, but actually I think it puts the world in a more dangerous place, to a degree that is probably almost incomprehensible to either of us or any of our listeners.

This is a truly momentous occasion for the North Koreans. It is the 100th anniversary of the birth of the founder of the country, Kim Il-sung, who is revered as a god within North Korea. His grandson, a young man, Kim Jong-un, has just taken power and this is his first big thing coming out of the box. So this is in the context of an extraordinary national celebration, and a young untested leader.

Unlike the past when they did missile tests, when the likelihood of an upcoming test was only known to intelligence analysts who were examining satellite photography, this time they broadcasted it to the world. They told the world when they were going to do it and indeed invited a gaggle of reporters to go take a look at the rocket and tour the control room.

So the degree of public visibility of this failure and the momentousness of this occasion is such that this is simply a tremendous humiliation. And as a consequence the most likely response on the part of the North Koreans is going to be push forward with a third nuclear test. They're going to need to do something to regain domestic and international credibility. Unfortunately, I think a third nuclear test next month is the way they're going to try to do it.

Steve Weisman: What are the possible signs of instability in the leadership in the wake of this failure?

Marcus Noland: I think that this is a political culture that is quite harsh and has a tendency to scapegoat individuals for policy failures. Of course this is speculative on my part, but I expect there will be scientists and engineers associated with this failure who will be executed or will be put in the political prison camp system.

Steve Weisman: It's not unprecedented. A couple of years ago, you and I discussed the finance minister's execution because of a botched currency plan.

Marcus Noland: It happened at the time of the currency reform. It's happened with athletic teams that embarrass the country. So I think there will probably be some individuals associated with this failure who will be scapegoated.

Steve Weisman: What should the United States do?

Marcus Noland: Unfortunately, the pattern in the past is for the North Koreans to do a missile launch, the UN Security Council to take weak action, and then the North Koreans take that as a signal of no real penalties for belligerence and then follow it up with a nuclear test.

If we had conducted this interview 24 hours ago, I would have told you that I expected the North Koreans to launch their missile; for the UN Security Council to do little; and then for them to follow up with a nuclear test.

Now I think a nuclear test is virtually guaranteed because I think unfortunately, despite the clear violation of UN Security Council resolutions, there will be an attitude among some, probably the Chinese, that, "Well, no real harm was done," sort of no harm, no foul: the fact that this thing blew up and didn't do what it was intended to do means we shouldn't penalize the North Koreans so severely.

I think that Obama administration is probably going to have to bide its time, get prepared for the other shoe to drop next month, which will be a third nuclear test, and then I think there is a much greater likelihood of more severe economic sanctions and possibly other actions as well.

Steve Weisman: The United States had very little choice in terms of suspending the food aid that was promised a month ago, do you think?

Marcus Noland: I think this is an extraordinarily unfortunate situation. I think there really is humanitarian need in North Korea. But I think that the North Koreans created a situation that would simply be politically suicidal for the Obama administration to go forward, regardless of the logic or equities.

I think they created for opponents of aid a very good argument. I'm not entirely persuaded, but nevertheless it's a good argument. This says that you simply can't trust the North Korean commitments. So if the North Koreans say, "Well, we'll allow you to monitor or whatever with food aid," after having this experience, you can't take those arguments seriously.

So I think food aid is off the table and I think it's just another indication of the fact that this regime really does not care about its own people, that they would act so recklessly.

Steve Weisman: Thank you, Marc.

Marcus Noland: Thank you.

