

# Japan's alarmist reaction to North Korean missile test

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A significant aspect of North Korea's missile launch on April 5 has been the rather hysterical reaction of the Japanese government. With his popularity at record lows, Prime Minister Taro Aso exaggerated the North Korean "threat" to divert attention from the social and economic crisis at home and to boost the case for military rearmament.

Before the test, Tokyo sent two advanced Aegis class destroyers capable of intercepting ballistic missiles to patrol waters near North Korea. The Japanese military also deployed Patriot interceptor missile batteries in Tokyo and northern Japan. The security council headed by Aso threatened to shoot down the missile or any debris that fell toward Japan, provoking North Korea to declare that any such action would be an act of war.

After the missile test, Japan pressed the UN Security Council to pass a resolution declaring North Korea in breach of UN resolutions and imposing new sanctions. Pyongyang insisted that it had been launching a communication satellite, while Japan, the US and South Korea accused it of testing a ballistic missile. With China and Russia blocking any punitive action, a non-binding UN presidential statement condemning the missile launch was finally agreed on April 13.

North Korea reacted by rejecting further six-party talks involving the US, China, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas over the dismantling of its nuclear facilities. It expelled International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors and threatened to restart the process of extracting plutonium from spent reactor fuel rods. These actions will only encourage Japan's right-wing advocates of rearmament, which is deeply unpopular.

In Japan, Aso's fear campaign had an impact. Two false alarms issued on the day of the missile test further heightened the sense of crisis. In a poll conducted by the conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun* last week, 88 percent of respondents said the launch made them feel insecure and 78 percent supported strong sanctions against North Korea.

In Akita Prefecture, directly across from North Korea, Governor Sukeshiro Terata acknowledged that the chances of the missile or debris falling toward Japan were "one in a million". Yet the authorities deliberately generated a climate of fear, opening an "emergency centre" with police and rescue workers on standby. Teachers were instructed to keep radios and televisions on at all times from April 4 for any announcement of an "unexpected event".

Deep suspicion remained about the government's actions. The Associated Press reported that on the eve of the missile test, "most residents appear nonplussed" in Akita. Masami Fujiwara, a local fisherman, said he was more concerned about the government's aggressive response heightening regional tensions than a North Korean missile flying overhead. "We should never trust politicians. It's the wrong move," he said.

Eager to capitalise on the "missile crisis," Aso called for a vote last week condemning North Korea's actions. The motion passed in the lower house with the support of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which also used the issue to divert public attention from corruption allegations against its leader, Ichiro Ozawa.

Previously behind Ozawa in opinion polls, Aso has recovered somewhat. According to a *Mainichi Shimbun's* poll last week, Aso's popularity rose from 16 percent in March to 24 percent. Those favouring Aso as prime minister reached 21 percent, compared to 12 percent for Ozawa, reversing the relationship in March.

Conservatives in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have exploited the missile test to push for more defence spending and less constraints on military action. At a LDP executive meeting last Tuesday, party organiser Goji Sakamoto reportedly argued for Japan to develop its own nuclear weapons, provoking a public uproar. He was forced to withdraw his comments and the government rushed to assure the public that it would not build a nuclear arsenal.

A debate is opening up over the need for an offensive military

capacity, which would require changing or sidestepping the so-called pacifist clause of the country's constitution. Defence Minister Yasukazu Hamada was questioned in the parliament over the possibility of a pre-emptive strike against North Korea. "Regardless of whether we have the necessary equipment to attack enemy territory, a political decision would be needed," he said.

The North Korean missile threat has been grossly exaggerated. Japan has long been within the range of North Korea's Rodong-1 ballistic missiles. A three-stage Taepodong-2 rocket with a range of 4,500 kilometres does not constitute a new threat to Japan. Moreover, for more than half a century, the cornerstone of Tokyo's strategic policy has been its alliance with the US, which has included Japan under its nuclear umbrella.

Increasingly, however, Japan has been asserting a more independent stance, particularly since the 1990-91 Gulf War. Tokyo paid billions of dollars toward the cost of that war, but did not take part militarily and thus had little say in the outcome. Since then, Japanese governments have sought to circumvent the constitutional restrictions and deploy military forces to more aggressively assert Japan's strategic and economic interests.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi exploited the "war on terrorism" to support the US-led operations in Afghanistan in 2001 and then in 2004 to send ground forces to Iraq. Both moves were deeply unpopular. With the encouragement of the Bush administration, Koizumi also adopted a more aggressive stance in North East Asia, creating tensions, particularly with China.

The real concern in Tokyo is not impoverished North Korea, but China. Once far behind Japan economically and strategically, China is now the second largest military spender after the US. The Chinese defence budget for 2009 is \$US70 billion, compared to Japan's \$49 billion. Paying lip service to the constitution's pacifist clause, Japanese governments have generally observed an upper limit of 1 percent of GDP on defence spending.

China is armed with a large nuclear arsenal, which, according to the Pentagon's 2009 report, includes road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles, anti-satellite weapons and strategic nuclear submarines. "While US strategic forces still far outnumber those of China's, China would be able to inflict significant damage on most large American cities with these survivable systems," the Pentagon stated.

Japan's military limitations are not due to inadequate technological capabilities—in fact, Japan is well ahead of China.

Any return to Japanese militarism would have to overcome the persistent opposition of working people that was reflected in the widespread hostility to the deployment of Japanese troops to Iraq. Acquiring nuclear weapons would run headlong into the memories of the American atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Scaremongering about North Korea has thus played an important role in providing the pretext for a more assertive military role for Japan. Koizumi used the issue of Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s to whip up Japanese nationalism and rule out any concessions to Pyongyang. Citing the North Korean missile and nuclear "threats", Koizumi began the development of a joint-missile shield with the US and other military-related space programs.

As a result, Tokyo has become increasingly frustrated that Washington has adopted a more conciliatory approach to North Korea. American negotiators have generally ignored Japanese demands to resolve the abduction issue with North Korea. While nominally supporting Japan's demands for a tough UN Security Council resolution last week, the US was more interested in finding a compromise with China and Russia and restarting the six-party talks.

In an outburst last week, LDP Secretary General Hiroyuki Hosoda thundered that the former Bush administration was "weak-kneed" on North Korea and criticised its handling of the issue. The barrage was clearly not just aimed at Bush, as Obama has continued the main thrust of the previous administration's policies toward Pyongyang.

Although the furore over the North Korean missile test may pass for now, Japan's belligerent stance is another sign of the growing tensions between the major powers as each manoeuvres to pursue its economic and strategic interests in North East Asia.



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