Don't Just Do Something, Sit There!

By Mark Stout

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Give credit where it's due. While the tragic kingdom of North Korea's Kim Jong-Il lacks resources like oil, natural gas, arable land, and an educated and healthy populace, it has produced two notorious technological accomplishments: a nuclear weapons program and the concurrent development of a means to deliver those nuclear weapons. While these achievements couldn't have happened without a little help from their friends, they none-the-less give Kim Jong-Il options which he continues to play out with all the certainty of *Groundhog Day*.

Since North Korea has recently announced a range of planning dates for what they are calling an upcoming "space launch," the U.S. needs to think through all its options before the pot has come to full boil. If all goes according to announcement, the launch will be between 4 and 8 April. While the "space launch" is a fig leaf for testing North Korea's emerging ICBM capability, they have learned from Iran's recent space launch and are sticking with their story.

Now, there are several unpleasant but none-the-less distinguishable North Korean missile options to more fully examine. They fall into three basic bins: do nothing; do little; and, be bold.

The do nothing option is constrained to watching the launch with every sensor that can be reasonably brought to bear--which is going to happen regardless--and then hoping the missile fails. And why not, since launch failure is what happened last time? While it is impossible to state the likelihood of a launch anomaly, we can safely assume it is something greater than zero. The two major shortcomings of doing nothing are it makes U.S. leaders look like they're not in the game and it uses hope--the hope the missile fails--as a strategy. The major benefit is it shows restraint.

The do little option takes the do nothing option and builds on it with a diplomacy campaign. For example, this might include having a person of significant stature (say, a former U.S. president) negotiate a way ahead with the North Koreans. While this *might* delay or even resolve the crisis, the approach has not yet provided long-lasting relief. The advantage with the do little plan is it shows more U.S. leadership and engagement and, given Kim's health problems, a delay on the missile launch may provide a new North Korean head of state that isn't so recalcitrant to its neighbors' concerns. The disadvantage of this approach is if it fails, it builds on the perception of U.S. (and UN. South Korean, and Japanese) impotence to influence North Korea (and China?) using the diplomatic, informational, and economic elements of

power. North Korea will no doubt remember the U.S. resumed missile negotiations seven months after their 1998 missile launch.

Now we're down to the be bold bin. There are two be bold subsets. The more desirable bold option is for Japan to shoot down the missile; the less desirable bold option is for the U.S. to shoot it down.

If the U.S. were to encourage Japan to shoot the missile down, Japan would need to be provided much of the intelligence from the do nothing option, and especially valuable would be the infrared data coming off the Air Force's new Space Based Infrared Satellite System, SBIRS, which would cue missile defense systems on the land, sea, and air. Japan has made a large investment in missile defense, and even the most cynical missile defense hater would be hard pressed to call an actual shoot down anything but a rigorous operational test of the system. Since the Japanese operate U.S. built systems, the world could draw its own conclusions about the efficacy of missile defense. One expected outcome would be an increased demand for U.S. missile defense systems, perhaps stimulating the U.S. and global economies, and at least allowing defense contractors to spread program costs across a larger customer base.

Of course, there are several potential down sides to a bold Japanese response. Mainly, a missile shoot down would be poorly received by both China and Russia. Of lesser importance, the event would antagonize North Korea, whose logic-trail and follow-on responses have historically been hard to gauge. There is also a significant risk of wide-spread condemnation, mainly to Japan, but also to the U.S. coming mainly from anyone who would view Japan as a proxy of the United States. This condemnation could come from anywhere, but is most likely from the usual suspects, and especially those who have missiles but lack viable missile defense. Finally, while missile defense always lives with a lot of scrutiny, were the shoot-down to fail, the effectiveness, wisdom, and most importantly, the funding of *any* long-range missile defenses would be more vigorously brought into question.

The boldest and most implausible option is for the U.S. to shoot the North Korean missile down. While the advantages include all those already mentioned, the disadvantages of direct U.S. involvement exceed the let-Japan-do-it scenario. If the shoot down was successful, it would directly and uncomfortably reprove missile defense works just when we're hitting the "reset button," except that it would be done directly by U.S. forces…just like in war. Likewise, it could brand current leadership with the dreaded "unilateralist" tag.

Despite the recent guidance to 'Never let a good crisis go to waste,' expect this one to do just that. There are plenty of voices clamoring for restraint, patience, and diplomacy regarding North Korea's missile launch, so just sit there seems to be the default option. Maybe this reflects a bias towards the status quo, which tends to view inaction as safer than action. But if doing little is the safety play, likewise, there is an opportunity cost of taking no action. While this event--by itself--lacks the gravitas to demoralize friends and embolden adversaries, the cumulative effect of not doing the right things have increased missile proliferation and reduced security. As a former senior government official might have said, what's the point in having this great weapon system if you can't use it?

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