

## KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

## Taking Down North Korea's Missile Threat: Which Country Can Be the Israel of East Asia?

By Scott Snyder

April 10, 2012



*Scott Snyder is senior fellow for Korea studies and director of the program on U.S.-Korea policy at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), where he served as an adjunct fellow from 2008 to 2011. Snyder is also the editor of The U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Meeting New Security Challenges (Lynne Rienner Publishers, March 2012). He served as the project director for CFR's Independent Task Force on policy toward the Korean Peninsula. He currently writes for the blog, "Asia Unbound." Prior to joining CFR, Snyder was a senior associate in the International Relations Program of The Asia Foundation (2000-2004). He was also a senior associate at Pacific Forum CSIS. Mr. Snyder has worked as an Asia specialist in the research and studies program of the U.S. Institute of Peace and as acting director of Asia Society's contemporary affairs program. He was a Pantech visiting fellow at Stanford University's Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center during 2005-06, and received an Abe fellowship, administered by the Social Sciences Research Council, in 1998-99. Snyder has authored numerous book chapters on aspects of Korean politics and foreign policy and Asian regionalism and is the author of China's Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, Security (2009), Paved With Good Intentions: The NGO Experience in North Korea (co-editor, 2003), and Negotiating on the Edge: North Korean Negotiating Behavior (1999).*

North Korean preparations to conduct a satellite test using ballistic missile technology highlight international concerns regarding North Korea as a proliferation threat. Each test North Korea conducts of its multi-stage rockets, be they designed as satellite carriers or delivery vehicles for weapons of mass destruction, helps the country to improve its ability to deliver a cargo accurately, expanding the range and credibility of its capacity to threaten its neighbors. This is why former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates sounded the alarm regarding North Korean missile development in December of 2010 while on a trip to Beijing.

The Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force on the Korean Peninsula released in June of 2010 also highlighted both vertical proliferation (North Korea's indigenous development of a delivery capability for WMD) and horizontal proliferation (whereby North Korea sells or transfers nuclear material to other state or non-state actors) as priority sources of concern. Thus far, the most effective response to North Korean horizontal proliferation has been the October 2007 Israeli decision to strike a nuclear reactor under construction in Syria that could have become a plutonium factory.

## KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

Until the Israeli strike, it was not publicly known that North Korea was providing technical assistance in the construction of a reactor at a location within Syria that had no associated facilities for production of nuclear power. The Israeli strike has not put an end to North Korean horizontal proliferation efforts, as indicated by reports from the UN Panel of Experts assembled to evaluate implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1874, which puts into place an international framework for stopping instances of North Korean horizontal proliferation. But there has been no deterrent effort analogous to the Israeli strike on the Syrian facilities to stop North Korea from pursuing vertical proliferation by extending its own missile delivery capabilities.

A direct strike on North Korean facilities carries with it considerable risks, even if it might be the only effective way to send a clear message regarding the international unacceptability continued North Korean multi-stage rocket tests. This is presumably why no country has pursued this policy option despite the fact that North Korea has conducted three previous tests, each accompanied by ample advance warning through satellite reconnaissance and each accompanied by progressively stronger expressions of concern from the UN Security Council.

Neither international criticism nor the imposition of international sanctions under UN resolutions have stopped North Korea from pursuing its plans. Without teeth or political will to comprehensively implement sanctions, the apparent ineffectiveness of UN Security Council efforts to date is probably being interpreted in Pyongyang as a green light for their current launch plans.

The region's anxiety regarding North Korean satellite launch preparations is palpable. South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan have all reported that they will be on alert to shoot down satellite debris in the event that it threatens their respective territories, but there has been little public discussion thus far of options to prevent North Korea's launch from going forward. Former Prime Minister Abe raised the possibility in advance of North Korea's failed 2006 satellite launch, but such a course of action by Japan would be enormously controversial and probably would contravene Japan's peace constitution.

A South Korean civilian commission set up to review defense policy following the March 2010 Cheonan incident recommended in December of 2010 that South Korea pursue a policy of "proactive deterrence" that seemed to advocate a preemptive option in case of North Korean provocations; although the South Korean defense minister has recently underscored South Korea's will to retaliate strongly against North Korean provocations, there has been no public discussion of preemption against North Korea's satellite launch preparations.

Current Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and former Secretary of Defense William Perry controversially advocated preemption in advance of North Korea's July 2006 missile test, but there was relatively little serious indication that the Obama administration seriously considered such an option in advance of North Korea's April 2009 launch. Moreover, President

## KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

Obama's message to North Korea delivered in his Hankook University of Foreign Studies speech in Seoul signals the likelihood of a U.S. response to perceive violations of international rules, but does not signal any apparent need to take preemptive action to prevent such violations. Nor has a serious diplomatic effort been launched to convince North Korea not to undertake such actions following North Korea's announcement, given that diplomatic conversations in advance of the U.S. and DPRK Leap Day statements of February 29.

China's President Hu Jintao faced stern requests to restrain North Korea from making the launch on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul, but Beijing knows how North Korea has tied the launch to domestic factors and is unlikely to intervene to stop the test for fear of upsetting North Korea's domestic political consolidation. Also, it is not clear China-DPRK high-level communications channels are working well following Kim Jong Il's death. China's major diplomatic test will occur after the test, at which time there will be great pressure to return this issue to the UN Security Council. In 2009, China accommodated the international consensus with a Presidential Statement condemning the launch, and North Korea responded with a nuclear test. In 2010, following the shelling of South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island, China blocked discussion of any resolution condemning North Korea. A UN Security Council failure to condemn a North Korean launch in the wake of previously existing UN Resolutions would lay bare the fact that UN condemnation has no teeth.

The bottom line is that there is no country in East Asia that has the capacity or will to use force to stop North Korean provocative actions such as a satellite or nuclear test. Until there is an "Israeli option" that breaks the cycle of North Korean impunity for its destabilizing actions, expect North Korea to utilize neighboring countries' fears regarding the implications of North Korea's own internal and regional instability as its primary means by which to impose on its neighbors the increasing costs of North Korean stability and regime survival.

The *Korea Chair Platform* is made possible by the generous support of the Poongsan Corporation. The views expressed in the *Platform* do not necessarily reflect those of the Poongsan Corporation or of CSIS.

The Office of the Korea Chair invites essays for consideration for the *Platform*. For inquiries, please email [KoreaChair@CSIS.org](mailto:KoreaChair@CSIS.org).

**The *Korea Chair Platform* is published by the Office of the Korea Chair (<http://www.csis.org/program/korea-chair>) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).**