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How Pyongyang may have over-played its hand A Lesson in Strategic Defiance

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UNDER pressure from the United States though for different reasons, Myanmar and Iran have moved to cement closer relations with Beijing to counter-balance the US. As they do so, however, they may want to take heed of Pyongyang's lesson from the current North Korean missile crisis; there is a thing or two to be learned about Beijing's attitude towards countries that take its support from granted.

Pyongyang's pressure tactics

The media has portrayed the missile crisis as either a strategic "Chinese game" to protect Pyongyang, or a case of China having lost its significant influence over its "client state". However, another picture is emerging: Pyongyang may, on the contrary, have over-played its hand against its "mentor" by putting undue pressure on Beijing to protect it. The consequences thus far have been damaging for the North Koreans as Beijing instead turned its back on the Kim Jong-Il regime -- a scenario which Pyongyang may not have predicted. In its own strategic tussle with the US and Japan, Pyongyang wants to use Beijing (and Moscow) to force Washington into recognizing *de facto* the regime and "softening" its financial sanctions. But there are indications that Pyongyang may have pushed its luck a bit too far -- with dire consequences.

Contrary to expectations, Beijing did not throw its full support behind Pyongyang and instead "turned the tables" against Pyongyang when it allowed the United Nations Resolution to pass at the expense of North Korea. As a result the Bank of China (BoC) is reported to have frozen North Korean accounts at its Macau branch, following the footsteps of Washington which cracked down on the Macau-based Banco-Delta Asia for alleged money-laundering for Pyongyang.

Strategic miscalculation

It was probably a strategic miscalculation on the part of the North Koreans that Beijing and Moscow would ultimately protect it from the pressures from Washington, Japan and the EU when it decided to defy all warnings and went ahead to fire seven missiles on 5 July. The timing was significant for its insult to the Americans as it coincided with their Independence Day of July 4. Pyongyang had also ignored the numerous international appeals, including from Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao himself.

Indeed, Pyongyang did not even bother to alert in a timely manner the Chinese and Russians before test-firing the missiles. Russian President Vladimir Putin reacted negatively in a televised interview by describing it a “disappointment”; the timing was particularly bad for Russia, as the G-8 it was hosting was about to gather at Saint Petersburg within a week.

The timing was just as bad for Beijing. The week of 10 July was the celebration of the 45th anniversary of the Friendship Treaty between China and North Korea which Mao Zedong had signed with Kim Il Sung in 1961. A Chinese delegation, led by Deputy Prime Minister Hui Liangyu was in Pyongyang that whole week, just as Yang Hyong-sop, Vice-President of the North Korean Supreme People’s Assembly, was on a visit to Beijing. But Hui was not received by Dear Leader Kim, whereas Yang was received by President Hu Jintao.

According to a senior academic, an editor of a major Chinese daily and an official at the Foreign Affairs Ministry whom I met in Beijing that same week, the incident was “a total embarrassment” and perceived as “undue pressure” on China to defend the North Korean regime at all costs. It was probably perceived by the Chinese leadership as an open challenge to them to “toe Pyongyang’s line”, which another academic saw as “North Korean leaders holding the Chinese leadership hostage”.

This move could have also been interpreted by China as causing it to “lose face”, especially when President Hu himself appealed to Yang in Beijing to return to six-party talks which has been stalled since November 2005 since Pyongyang pulled out. As the two delegations returned to their respective capitals in Beijing and Pyongyang (with Hui’s apparent failure to convince Pyongyang not to stray too far), the Chinese consented to the UN Security Council resolution. Beijing’s decision must have caught Pyongyang by surprise, judging from its strong reaction.

Why Beijing plays game of surprise

There are four reasons why Beijing played the game of surprise.

Firstly, Beijing never takes it well when smaller countries try to exert “undue pressure” by holding it to ransom or taking it for granted. In a way, it manifests China’s big power mindset, acting negatively against “perpetrators of defiance”. Some observers say that “the dragon must never be pulled by its tail”, lest one gets scorched by its breath of fire.

Secondly, the undue pressure exerted on Beijing constituted a loss of face for Beijing and its top leadership. When the missiles were launched by Pyongyang in spite of all warnings, Beijing was initially at a loss, though it tried shielding Pyongyang from Tokyo and Washington. Pyongyang’s timing of the launch with the 45th anniversary of diplomatic relations with China “unjustly” (as perceived by Chinese leaders) added insult to injury.

Thirdly, Beijing could, nonetheless, use the issue to demonstrate its status as an emerging Asian power (by labeling Tokyo’s initial reaction and its threats as an “over-reaction”). It could also show itself to be an internationally responsible power, which fits into the “stakeholder theory” recently propounded by Washington. China’s stakeholder role was reiterated in terms of a “co-partnership” when Hu visited Bush at the White House in April. In fact, by ultimately not vetoing the UN Security Council’s resolution, after having threatened to do so (should Article 7 have remained), Beijing demonstrated its Perm-5 status openly to both Pyongyang and the rest of the world.

Lastly, Beijing would also have emphasized its key role in the Six-Party talks vis-à-vis Moscow, Washington and Tokyo over the Korean Peninsula. It would also have scored a vital point with Seoul, as this incident probably made it quite clear to the other five parties (and the world) that Seoul would ultimately outweigh Pyongyang in Beijing's strategic calculations on the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, this should contribute to further weaning Seoul away from the preponderant influence of Washington (and Tokyo), which could also be Beijing's ultimate goal in this region.

Based on these four factors, it could be concluded that Beijing had made a significant strategic gain even as Pyongyang had faltered by over-playing its own hand. There is truly a thin line between strategic defence and strategic defiance, as Pyongyang has discovered.

Myanmar, Iran and other conflict-afflicted countries in Africa which intend to play the "China card" may want to take serious heed of this recent episode, as there is clearly a strategic and diplomatic lesson to be learned.

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