

A Missile-Test Is Awakening Japan

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Tokyo's Initial Response

In response to Pyongyang's recent announcement of launching an allegedly "civilian rocket," the Aso administration has just issued, according to the Self-Defense Force Law, a directive of smashing the disguised missile if it accidentally enters the Japanese territorial space. The Japanese public has accepted Prime Minister Aso's decision as totally legitimate and legal.

On March 2, the Prime Minister declared his intent to employ Japan's missile defense system for intercepting a North Korean missile. The announced "rocket" launching will in fact be in defiance of a series of U.N. Security Council resolutions related to DPRK's missile activities and programs, although Pyongyang has tried to justify the missile as a civilian rocket loaded with an experimental communications satellite. Aso's plan at that stage was most probably intended to intercept a North Korean missile at the boost phase, flying over the high seas, given the effective range of Standard Missile III to be launched from an SDF AEGIS vessel: SM III reaches at most 300 km above the sea level. Pyongyang has immediately trashed for Tokyo's move because successful interception would not only spoil Pyongyang's international marketing effort of its missiles as a primary source of hard currency, but also corner Pyongyang's regime struggling to recover its declining authority as the consequence of Kim Jong-il's recent stroke.

Pyongyang's Bluffing

On March 8, Pyongyang bluffed Tokyo with an announcement: the interception constitutes a declaration of war against North Korea. However, Pyongyang only found that Tokyo is resolute to act. On March 12, Pyongyang publicized that it had hastily made prior notification regarding dangerous area coordinates for maritime and air traffic, to the International Maritime Organization and the International Civil Aviation Organization. This is the first time for Pyongyang to satisfy some procedural requirements under international law for rocket launching, only intended to deprive Tokyo's international legal grounds of intercepting the "rocket." However, the notification is readily judged as Pyongyang's act of deception since the regime neither possesses civilian on-ground facilities for satellite communication nor has registered a

necessary radio frequency at the International Telecommunication Union.

Moves by Beijing

On March 17, North Korea's Premier Kim Yong-il made an official visit to Beijing, consulting Chinese top leaders about how to cope with Tokyo, now unexpectedly parting from longtime passivity and inaction. Beijing is reported to have told Pyongyang that it refrain from the scheduled provocation. Apparently, Beijing has been compelled to withdraw a green light to Pyongyang about the "rocket" launching, even though the two regimes closely consulted theretofore. On the same day, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao abruptly notified Tokyo of his government's decision to postpone Prime Minister Aso's visit to Beijing, scheduled in late March. That is contrary to established diplomatic protocols since Wen himself extended the invitation in return during his visit to Tokyo last autumn.

On March 19, Aso asseverated his tack to impose additional unilateral sanction measures on Pyongyang's regime, when it carries out the missile test. He made it clear that he would not yield an inch. On March 20, Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie told his Japanese counterpart during their meeting in Beijing that Japan should take a coolheaded attitude on the issue of the "rocket" launching, virtually demanding that the Aso administration return to longtime passivity and inaction.

During the intense diplomatic interplay, Tokyo took an independent stance vis-à-vis Washington, without relying on the senior alliance partner to intercept a North Korean "rocket" on its behalf. Certainly, Tokyo communicates and coordinates closely with Washington, to the extent that the two share military information, including U.S. satellite early-warning information, and cooperate for diplomatic initiatives to pass a U.N Security Council resolution denouncing a North Korean "rocket" launching when it actually occurs.

Moves by Washington

However, it is clear that Washington does not want to antagonize the relations with Beijing, including the issue of Pyongyang's regime survival. Last February, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton did not at all mention about China's human rights issues during her official visit in Beijing, when Washington's political capital runs record-low amid the financial crisis and the quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan. Washington is now so inundated that it can hardly care about North Korean issues, at

least at this timing. Also, Washington was reluctant to confirm its mutual defense obligation under the Japan-U.S. security treaty to the Senkaku Islands over which Beijing also has a territorial claim. On March 5, Tokyo publicized the fact that Washington gave the confirmation only after Tokyo inquired the matter through diplomatic channel.

Aso's Hard Line Signifying an Independent Course in Northeast Asia?

Prime Minister Aso has so far played a game of chicken with Pyongyang and Beijing fairly well. Although the current missile defense system cannot yet fully guarantee successful missile interception, the risk is well controlled since interceptor missiles will be launched only when incoming North Korean missiles intrudes Japan's territorial space. Currently, Prime Minister Aso faces the divided Diet and suffers from a very low approval rate. Thus, the failure to intercept the missile will possibly jeopardize the Aso administration to hold power. On the other hand, on March 29, Secretary of Defense Gates declared that the U.S. would not attempt interception, unless the missile reaches to U.S. territories, especially Hawaii; there is slim chance that the U.S. bears risks. Aso's hard line supported by the evolving Japanese public opinion may signify the quiet advent of an independent and proactive Japan in international power politics, centered in Northeast Asia.

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