



## North Korea's mixed signals

By: Ted Galen Carpenter – March 13, 2013

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North Korea's nuclear test in mid-February, coming on the heels of its December 2012 launch of a satellite (in reality, a test of a multi-stage rocket) is causing considerable consternation in the international community. The United States and its East Asian allies successfully pushed for a new round of UN economic sanctions against Pyongyang. Even China is becoming impatient with Pyongyang's frequent disruptive actions. Beijing's criticism of the nuclear test was especially pointed, and China supported the latest UN Security Council resolution tightening sanctions.

There may be an excessive focus, though, on North Korea's flamboyant, provocative measures and not enough on the more encouraging gestures that sometimes occur alongside those provocations. It's understandable to regard with alarm North Korean threats to turn Seoul into "a sea of fire," or to devastate US cities, even though Pyongyang has made similar wild threats on numerous occasions in the past. But there are also signs that such saber rattling is not the whole story. There are subtle and inconclusive, yet intriguing, indications that new North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un may be serious about wanting his country to join the international community and benefit from diplomatic and economic integration. At a minimum, the United States and the nations of East Asia should probe to see whether the hints of reform and conciliation are real instead of just assume that Pyongyang will forever remain a rogue actor.

Kim Jong-Un seems to want a different course for his country than the insular strategy that his grandfather and father embraced. Kim's New Year's address called for a "radical turn" in North Korea's domestic economic policies, and expressed a desire to unleash an "industrial revolution" that would seek to improve the standard of living for the North Korean people. That approach was in marked contrast to the emphasis on "*Juche*" (national self reliance) which was the hallmark of the economic strategy that both Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il pursued throughout their reigns. Boosting the living standards of ordinary North Koreans certainly was never a priority for those previous governments. The military always had first claim on, and received the lion's share of, the country's meager economic output. Outright famine occurred in the countryside during especially lean years.

Kim's speech and subsequent similar comments could, of course, be empty rhetoric. But there are also subtle signs of actual policy change. Most notably, there seems to be receptivity to greater economic flexibility, both at home and abroad. Private markets are again cropping up in the country after the political blight that caused such green shoots to wilt a few years ago. Kim Jong-Un's government also has taken initial steps toward greater diplomatic and economic connections with the outside world. For example, Pyongyang has told Canberra that it wishes to re-open its embassy in Australia, which

Kim Jong-Il's regime closed abruptly in early 2008. And perhaps most important, North Korean officials show greater interest in China's successful economic reforms than they have ever exhibited before.

If those constructive changes prove real, the missile and nuclear tests become somewhat less alarming. Indeed, they may be part of a larger strategy — showing the world that North Korea is a country that is capable of defending itself and its interests from any potential adversary, including the United States. By demonstrating improved missile and nuclear capabilities, North Korean leaders can (at least in their own minds) negotiate from a position of strength as they begin to integrate their country's economy into the larger global economy as well as become more involved diplomatically in the region and beyond.

At the least, Washington and the nations of East Asia should avoid a knee-jerk reaction to the missile and nuclear tests or Pyongyang's shrill threats that followed the UN Security Council vote. Toughening sanctions will not likely achieve better results this time than with previous rounds over the past two decades. Moreover, while Pyongyang's tests are flashy achievements, they change the overall military environment very little. The United States has thousands of nuclear warheads mounted on missiles that are several generations ahead of anything North Korea can deploy. Even the South Korean and Japanese militaries are far more sophisticated and potent than North Korea's. Pyongyang's possession of a handful of longer range missiles and a tiny nuclear deterrent will not significantly alter the strategic equation.

This is a delicate time, and it's important for Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul to try to view North Korean developments in a wider context. Beijing has argued for years that the United States and its allies need to pursue a policy of trying to engage Pyongyang, rather than constantly attempting to increase North Korea's isolation. Chinese leaders have a point that a policy that emphasizes more carrots and fewer sticks would probably get better results. Given the intriguing hints of constructive economic and diplomatic change coming out of Pyongyang, it would be wise to heed China's suggestion.