

Sanctions with bite

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Once again, North Korea has ostentatiously defied the United Nations Security Council by launching a long-range ballistic missile over the Pacific in a provocation plainly designed to get the world's attention. The question now is, will the erratic regime of Kim Jong-il be rewarded or punished for its reckless pursuit of missile technology and nuclear weapons?

As in the past, the Security Council is badly divided over how to respond to North Korea's latest brazen violation of U.N. resolutions. Russia and China, the two countries with the most influence in Pyongyang, want nothing more than a mild rebuke in the form of a statement, not an actual Security Council resolution. The United States and Japan, whose air space was breached by the Taepodong-2 rocket, want binding economic and diplomatic sanctions in order to send a badly needed message that North Korea cannot continue its arms development without serious consequences.

Lamentably, the Security Council's vacillating responses to earlier provocations have reinforced North Korea's rogue actions. On multiple occasions over the last decade, Pyongyang has been rewarded for simply agreeing to stop its bellicose activities. Thus when North Korea wants fresh concessions from the industrialized world — fuel oil shipments, food assistance, economic aid — it can count on a self-initiated provocation to produce favorable results.

In fact, it is entirely possible that the weekend missile launch was intended to probe how far down the path of concessions the new Obama administration is willing to go. This makes it all the more important that the United States and Japan succeed in getting the Security Council to impose punitive measures against Pyongyang.

The Security Council's ultimate aim must be to demonstrate to North Korea that its weapons programs can only further isolate it from the world. This objective can best be advanced by a tough Security Council resolution, with sanctions that bite. Pyongyang earlier walked away from the "six party" talks aimed at dismantling its nuclear program. Until it resumes participation in the talks, it should remain a pariah state in the eyes of the Security Council and the rest of the civilized world.

It is scant consolation that the latest rocket firing was a technological flop. Despite North Korea's claims to the contrary, the missile and its payload fell into the ocean. The launch was intended to lift a satellite into orbit. Yet its failure was no embarrassment to the secretive government of Kim Jong Il. The regime told the Korean people that the satellite was successfully orbiting Earth and transmitting revolutionary music, a claim that only underscored the fantasy world that North Korea inhabits.

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