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It's time for U.S. to rev up negotiations with North Korea

By Leon V. Sigal

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North Korea is preparing to test its Taepodong-2 missile in the guise of a space-launch vehicle that puts a satellite into orbit. In response, Washington intends to seek UN Security Council sanctions.

What will sanctions do to stop Pyongyang from conducting further missile tests? Absolutely nothing.

Quite the contrary, sanctions are likely to provoke the North to conduct more missile tests or another nuclear test, or worse, restart its plutonium program to make more bombs.

The only way to get Pyongyang to stop is to resume negotiations. That was what President Bill Clinton did after the North launched its first Taepodong in 1998 in a failed attempt to put a satellite in orbit. Talks in 1999 led the North to accept a moratorium on test launches and more. In a meeting with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in October 2000, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il offered to end not just tests, but also deployment and production of longer-range missiles.

North Korea often floats offers on a sea of threats. It did so in 1998 and it is doing so again now. It says it wants missile talks. President Barack Obama should take up that offer and resume talks promptly.

President George W. Bush did just that in October 2006 after North Korea conducted its nuclear test. Three weeks later, U.S. negotiator Christopher Hill met bilaterally with his North Korean counterpart and proposed a compromise end to the financial sanctions imposed in 2005.

Bush's turnaround opened the way to sustained diplomatic give-and-take culminating in an October 2007 six-party accord. In return for energy aid, delisting as a state sponsor of terrorism and relaxation of sanctions under the U.S. Trading with the Enemy Act, North Korea agreed to declare its plutonium program and disable its plutonium program by removing the spent fuel from its reactor and disposing of its replacement fuel rods. The agreement made no mention of verification.

Doubts about the accuracy of the North's plutonium declaration, however, prompted Washington to press for verification. In bilateral talks, the North gave negotiator Hill an oral pledge to allow sampling and other measures at the declared sites at Yongbyon.

But that was not good enough for hard-liners in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo, who insisted the pledge be put into writing. Without something in return, Pyongyang refused. In response, Seoul, with backing from Washington and Tokyo, suspended promised shipment of energy aid, renegeing on the October 2007 six-party agreement. Now North Korea has retaliated.

Moving the goal posts is no way to make progress with North Korea. Trying to pressure Pyongyang will lead to nothing but trouble. Diplomatic give-and-take is the only way out.

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