Pyongyang Freely Plies the Seas

by Bertil Lintner

In the wake of North Korea's October 2006 nuclear test, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1718, which bans Pyongyang from exporting any nuclear, chemical, and biological material, ballistic missiles and any other components of weapons of mass destruction. WMD-related sanctions were tightened under Resolution 1874 passed in June 2009 following North Korea's second nuclear test in May. Before sanctions were introduced, United States defense sources estimated that 40% of North Korea's foreign-exchange earnings came from weapons sales, of which missile exports were a major part.

It seems highly unlikely that North Korea will give up such an important source of income just because of condemnation by the world community. It is no secret that North Korea has exported missiles and missile technology to Iran, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates have at one time or another acquired missiles or missile components from North Korea or through the Middle East. It is no secret that North Korea has exported missiles and missile technology to Iran, Pakistan and North Korea has exported missiles and missile technology to Iran, Pakistan and the world community. It is no secret that the sale of these materials to other countries is a major source of income just because of condemnation by the world community. It is no secret that North Korea has exported missiles and missile technology to Iran, Pakistan and the world community. It is no secret that the sale of these materials to other countries is a major source of income just because of condemnation by the world community.

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News agency were turned back and briefly shelter from a storm. But two local Burmese officials claimed that the ship had to seek shelter from a storm. The Burmese government reported that one-on-board inspection had “found no suspicious material or military equipment.” Yet the South Korean news agency Yonhap reported that the ship had been under “U.S. surveillance” and “with an unloaded self-propelled artillery at a Burmese port.”

In April 2007, only days after the restoration of diplomatic ties between Burma and North Korea, another North Korean freighter, the Kang Nam I, docked at Thilawa port, 30 kilometers south of the former capital Rangoon. Again, Burmese officials claimed that the ship had to seek shelter from a storm. But two local Burmese reporters working for a Japanese news agency were turned back and briefly detained when they went to the port to investigate, indicating that there could have been other reasons for the arrival of the Kang Nam I in a Myanmar port.

The Kang Nam I was back in the news this summer, again on its way to Burma with unspecified cargo. It left the North Korean port of Nampo in the beginning of June this year—and was immediately trailed by American warships. U.S. authorities bracketed the Kang Nam I a “repeat offender,” known for having carried proliferation materials. The U.S. intervention attracted publicity in the international media, and on June 28 the ship turned around, just off the Vietnamese coast, in the South China Sea. It was found to be carrying 15 scud-type missiles, 15 conventional warheads, 23 tanks of nitric acid rocket propellant and 85 drums of unidentified chemicals under a cargo of cement bags.

The immediate destination was said to be Yemen, a new buyer of North Korean missiles. Pyongyang lashed out against the raid on its ship, calling it “an unpardonable act of piracy that wantonly encroached upon the sovereignty” of the North. The ship, the North Koreans said in an official statement, “was sailing for Yemen to deliver cargo in accordance with the lawful trade contract between the two countries,” and the U.S. “imperialists” were “unrivalled barbarians and aggressors ... In the end, the U.S. decided to release the lethal cargo since Yemen was seen as a “friendly nation.” Later investigations revealed that the missiles and chemicals were ultimately delivered to Libya.

Some people have questioned the extent to which the central authorities in Pyongyang are implicated in these illicit activities. In an otherwise very informative paper for the U.S. East-West Center in August, British researcher Hazel Smith argued that the authorities may not be directly involved because the ships are privately owned. Ms. Smith referred to a 1999 Singapore court announcement which stated that North Korean ship owners should not be considered as “controlled by the North Korean government just because they are domiciled in that country.” Both Ms Smith and the Singaporean authorities, however, are splitting hairs. They overlook the fact that ship owners domiciled in North Korea. Corporations such as Kumrunng Trading, the owner of Kang Nam I, are all government entities. The spider in the tangled web of North Korean proliferation, is an overt arm of the shadowy Bureau 39, the commercial wing of the ruling Korean Workers’ Party controlled by North Korean leader Kim Jong Il.

The Obama administration argues that engagement with “hostile” nations such as North Korea is more effective than antagonism. But there is also a danger in this policy, since North Korea may take advantage of a more lax attitude on the part of U.S. authorities and carry out its proliferation activities more easily. The issue is further complicated by the questionable legality of the U.S.-led “Proliferation Security Initiative,” which was implemented under the previous administration of George W. Bush. In November 2006, U.S. researcher Mark J. Valencia wrote that the kind of interdictions allowed under the initiative would, “without the permission of the flag country ... be considered an act of war.” A more peaceful approach that is still in line with the Obama administration’s policies could be to seek more effective cooperation from countries in the region. While Taiwan has taken action against its sanctions violators, KOMID’s presence in Beijing has been mentioned by diplomats as a serious cause for concern. Without better regional cooperation, the increased use of flags of convenience means that North Korea’s ships may continue to ply the oceans with their lethal cargo.