

North Korea's Missile Tests: Saber Rattling or Rocket's Red Glare

Anthony H. Cordesman

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If one asks whether North Korea's missile tests were political posturing or serious military efforts, the answer is easy. It is both. North Korea clearly chose the Fourth of July as a date it knew would irritate and provoke the U.S. and "show the world" it could not be intimidated by American demands to halt its tests. It benefited from the irony of a U.S. space launch on the same day, and the very different kind of fireworks that Americans use to celebrate their independence.

North Korea also knew that it was sending an even more direct signal to its neighbors: Japan and South Korea. It was showing that it could ignore their main military ally, and efforts at regional persuasion from both those states and China. It simultaneously put pressure on the U.S. to directly negotiate on North Korean terms and on the region to find compromises that suited North Korea.

It is easy to dismiss such actions on the grounds they are "irrational" or will "backfire." It is far from clear that this is the case. Even testing a large number of missiles at once makes good sense from a North Korean perspective. It gets everything done at once, rather than staggering out the political cost over weeks or months. It prevents preemption of future tests. It tends to bury the fact that a major series of short/medium-range tests took place under the impact of the longer-range test, and the success of the shorter range missile tests guarded against the possible failure of the test of the larger, long-range missile.

"Stupid" or "reckless" – not really. North Korea may or may not face a few hard weeks or months in reprisal, but it has reminded everyone of just how serious a threat North Korea can be, how limited most military options are, and how serious the risks of any major war would be. Kim Jong Il will never be a poster boy, but this is the kind of political posturing that can easily succeed over the long run, and which may or may not have even short or mid-term consequences of a kind that will impact on North Korea's ruling elite.

The Military and Strategic Impact

North Korea's tests do, however, need to be taken seriously at a military level, although not necessarily in the way that most American media did immediately after the tests, or in the way the Bush administration has called for. It is far from clear that North Korea is any closer to a real-world capability to attack the U.S. than it was before this series of tests, or that the large missile it tested was ever intended to be any form of ICBM.

Before leaping out into the void of speculation, it is important to note that at this writing, the U.S. has not announced anything about the nature of the missile tests, or any technical details of the longer-range missile whose first stage blew up less than a minute after launch. The U.S. has not confirmed that it has satellite, telemetry, or other data to indicate

that the missile was anything larger than the extended range IRBMs that have come to be called the “Taepo Dong 2.”

There is disagreement even over the number of missiles tested. The U.S. originally reported three – two Scuds and a Taepo Dong 2. It now seems to say at least six: the long range missile that exploded, two shorter range North Korean adaptations of the Scud (not exact copies of the Russian system), and three longer-range North Korean MRBMs called “No Dongs.” South Korean sources have reported up to 10 launches.

No one has as yet said anything about exact range, probable warhead, accuracy, reliability, launch method, set up and reaction time, or anything else of technical value in describing military capability. Even the very names of the missiles are meaningless. “No Dong” is simply the village closest to the isolated North Korean launch site it uses to test long-range missiles. “Taepo Dong” is the next closest village. North Korea has not been consistent in naming its missiles, but has never called them either “No Dongs” or “Taepo Dongs.”

The Probably Reality Behind the “Taepo Dong 2”

In the real world, it is only possible to talk about missile performance once a system is actually deployed and tested, its warhead is known, and enough firings have taken place to confirm actual operational capability. Computer models can help, but they have proved to be wrong again, and again, and again. Speculating about guidance platforms, warhead type of weight, the size of the booster, and other technical factors is guesswork – not fact.

Rushing out to print maps with worst-case maximum ranges – rather than showing the uncertainty involved – is irresponsible journalism. This is particularly true when some analyst outside the intelligence community rounds up to a scare figure, and it is suddenly taken as fact. Reality is littered with the wrong guesses of retired “experts,” intelligence officers, and military officers who grabbed 15 seconds of fame without a single hard fact.

Hopefully, the U.S. government will, in time, provide declassified hard intelligence. It may not have gotten any telemetry (and it would be silly to state it can break any coded data), but the booster size is something North Korea knows the U.S. can probably get with great accuracy with imagery, and reporting on the missile’s structure and possible performance characteristic based on its size and shape before it blew up, in broad terms, would not give away any intelligence sources or means.

At this point, however, it seems very doubtful that North Korea is close to a real world capability to attack the U.S. It has had two possible tests of a large booster for such a missile: One in 1998 and one on the Fourth of July. Both failed dismally.

There is no officially announced intelligence data indicating that North Korea has advanced long-range guidance platforms, or warhead design. It may well have part of a Chinese design for a relatively light implosion fission nuclear weapon that could be carried on a missile, but no official source has indicated that it has anything like the design detail to actually build such a warhead without testing on a level that intelligence would probably detect. Even in a worst case, such a warhead would probably approach 700-1,000 kilograms and be a comparatively low yield fission – not a boosted or thermonuclear – weapon.

There has been some very good technical reporting and speculation on the possible nature of the “No Dong” and “Taepo Dong” missiles from Global Security and the Federation of American Scientists, and some limited reporting from U.S. defense sources. It is vital to understand that such speculation describes missiles that are undergoing constant modifications and often parallel developments of different missiles and configurations. What might have been true at one time may not be true now, and the best speculation in the world is still ultimately guesswork.

The data available, however, strongly indicate that North Korea is still focusing on getting missiles that can attack targets anywhere North Korea needs to hit in Asia (with the possible exception of Guam) and not the U.S. The limited technical data available on the No Dong series to date do not indicate that it can hit any meaningful target in the U.S. with a nuclear weapon or any other meaningful payload.

There are all kinds of guesses about the boosters for what is being called the Taepo Dong 2 – a missile that simply does not exist as a finished configuration. All of the ones displayed to date present complex size problems and are smaller than the Russian or Chinese boosters that became ICBMs at similar stages of missile development. It would probably take a larger diameter booster than North Korea ever displayed before July 4 to play such a role, and real questions exist about stacking or clustering such boosters to get predictable and reliable results at the ranges involved.

There is absolutely no meaningful agreement about what the more limited range of such missiles would be. *The Washington Post*, for example, quotes a possible range of 2,175 to 2,672 miles in its July 5 edition. Other sources quote maximum ranges of 3,500, 4,000, and 5,000 kilometers. All are sheer guesswork, and all ignore the fact that missiles do not have maximum ranges; they have range-payloads. If you do not know (or at least state your assumption about) the weight of the warhead or payload, your guesses are undefined and irresponsible rubbish.

Accordingly, until better data are available, the main risk seems to be that North Korea is beginning early testing of a missile that could throw the equivalent of a rock at Alaska. Even in the worst case, it would be able to launch a small fission nuclear weapon with great inaccuracy and unreliability at Alaska, and just possibly Hawaii or the upper northwest corner of the U.S. Given its history of testing to date, it is probably around five years away from even this operational capability, although shorter times are all possible.

This is not in the “so what?” category. However, it would be suicidally stupid to launch such a missile at low value targets in Alaska or area targets in a small part of the U.S. U.S. retaliation at a devastating level would be both justified and nearly certain. North Korea would effectively cease to exist as an organized state. For a dictatorship whose only real ideology is the survival of the leader, this does not seem a credible option.

This does not mean that North Korea is not working on ICBMs, does not have larger boosters in development, will not get much more advanced nuclear weapons in development, or cannot conceal a great deal. It does mean that the U.S. has good reason to try to halt North Korean efforts and no reason to overreact or panic, particularly since applying worst case wild-assed guesses to two conspicuous design failures is not simply ridiculous, it is childish.

Dealing with More Dangerous Near- and Mid-Term Realities

That said, the reality is totally different when North Korea's efforts are seen from a different military perspective. The same development efforts that throw a rock at Alaska can throw a large nuclear warhead at every ally we have in Northeast Asia, and Japan and South Korea are not only close allies, they are critical trading partners. The risk of a war in this part of the world would inevitably threaten Chinese involvement in some form, and possibly block trade with much of China for an extended period even if China did not become involved. Our troops and our bases in most of Asia would be at hazard as well.

Americans need to stop thinking parochially and selfishly and start thinking strategically. North Korea does not have to be able to hit the U.S. with meaningful nuclear threats to do much to deter or damage the U.S.

Reintroducing large U.S. reinforcements into South Korea in the face of nuclear threats or attacks on a regional level is not something the U.S. can dismiss, or that Japan or South Korea can easily call for in the face of potential nuclear attack. Threats of nuclear strikes on allied targets in the face of conventional use of U.S. stealth and long-range strategic air and missile power present similar problems. Preemptive North Korean strikes on key U.S. and allied bases would be semi-suicidal but would also be possible if the North Korean regime felt it was pushed to extremes.

North Korea also does not develop its MRBM/IRBM range missiles in a vacuum. It is a close partner with Iran and has sold missiles to Syria. There is no way as yet to know what the latest round of tests means for technology transfer to other states – if anything – but it could affect two major sources of trouble in the Middle East, and there are some indications of North Korean technology transfer to Pakistan.

Add in the fact that North Korea has massive combat ready forces on the border with South Korea, long-range artillery that can hit at some 30-40 percent of South Korea's economy, massive stocks of chemical weapons, and large numbers of short-range missiles and rockets that may have chemical warheads, and the regional threat rises substantially higher.

The continental U.S. may well have at least half a decade to wait and see. Our Asian allies don't, our Middle East allies don't, and our military forces and economic interests don't. The systems we call "Scuds" and "No Dongs" may well be extremely dangerous now, and they almost certainly will be in a year or so. No one had to shoot Achilles in the head.

Oh Yes, and Our Vaunted Missile Defenses

One other point. When it comes to political posturing, the Bush administration deserves a bit of credit on its own. Talking about activating an unproven ballistic missile defense, whose booster seems to have serious reliability problems, to deal with a test it probably was almost certain would never hit the U.S. was posturing on its own.

While not quite at the Iraqi WMD level, the administration also needs to provide far more evidence there was a real threat and that it was not simply seeking publicity, and to distract attention from Iraq.

The administration also probably has a good longer-term case for missile defenses, and certainly has one at the theater level. But the fact is that if we fired today's test bed systems, they might well malfunction just as badly as the North Korean test did. The

future may well be very different, but the incapable shooting at the incapable is not a particularly good way to celebrate the Fourth of July.