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North Korea's ICBMs: What Now?

By Liang Tuang Nah

Synopsis

North Korea's Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) hardly change the overall US-DPRK strategic calculus. The only practical policy course is to implement isolative strategies that limit the threat from Pyongyang.

Commentary

SINCE NORTH Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, it has been subjected to numerous sanctions. Despite these punitive measures and its ostracised status, it has carried out five nuclear tests and conducted two successful tests of its *Hwasong-14* Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) on 4 and 28 July 2017.

With this new weapon, does this change the strategic dynamic between the United States and the DPRK? More importantly, what can the US and international community do to contain the threat from Pyongyang?

The Geostrategic Status Quo Remains

Assuming that North Korea's nuclear and missile technicians are able to fit nuclear warheads atop the *Hwasong-14*, that these warheads can survive the extreme temperatures encountered as the missile travels to the target, and that the missile guidance system is accurate, this does not change fundamental US-DPRK geostrategic realities.

The US has thousands of nuclear warheads mated to sophisticated land-based, airborne and ocean-going nuclear delivery systems. Coupled with powerful

conventional military forces, this means that the DPRK has no hope of prevailing over the US and its ally in the south, the Republic of Korea (ROK).

That said, Pyongyang has never realistically faced the threat of a US invasion or even limited military action in recent times. Crucially, Pyongyang holds Seoul hostage with thousands of artillery systems aimed at the latter, and its 9.9 million population.

It is due consideration for South Korean lives that makes pre-emptive military action by the US-ROK alliance unthinkable. Even without the North's nuclear arms programme, there exists a "balance of threat" which logically "deters" any attacks from Washington and/or Seoul.

Three Perils

Setting aside any paranoid motivations driving DPRK nuclear development, a dispassionate analysis of the increased danger from Pyongyang's control over functioning nuclear warheads and missiles reveals three key perils.

Firstly, if the North has reliable ICBMs mated to functional nuclear warheads, it is likely to be more *disruptive* to regional stability, as it would be more prone to antagonistic adventurism. If Pyongyang was willing to order the murder of Kim Jong-nam in Malaysia with its current nuclear capabilities, how far would it be willing to go if it had a functional nuclear deterrent?

Secondly, fissile material production for atomic warheads has the potential to be environmentally *damaging*. If North Korea ramps up nuclear warhead fabrication, the risk of nuclear accidents and associated spread of radioactive fallout to Asia and beyond increases exponentially.

Finally, the DPRK as a de facto nuclear state creates a dangerous precedent as it acts as a beacon for atomic munitions aspirants. Basically, the message would be, "no matter how poor or ostracised you are, you too can build nuclear bombs". Now that the international community is confronted with a rogue nuclear state, how should the US and its allies respond?

Threat Limitation

For all his threats to unleash destruction upon Seoul and Washington, it's a safe bet that Kim Jong-un is not suicidal and will not court regime ending reprisals. Hence, Pyongyang's nuclear weapons will never be used, being effectively neutralised by American deterrence.

That said, and for reasons mentioned earlier, it would be prudent to stymie the DPRK's nuclear arsenal to minimise its indirect and proliferation-based threats. Economics provides a possible answer.

From the pace of DPRK missile and warhead development, Pyongyang is willing to divert funds from the official economy, to grow its nuclear teeth. Therefore, the North Korean economy is fair game and should be targeted by secondary sanctions or pressure, to deprive it of trade partners. Examining statistics, we can see that apart

from China and Russia (who are unlikely to seriously pressure North Korea), the DPRK's other export customers include states like the Philippines, India, Taiwan and even Middle Eastern countries like the United Arab Emirates, which recently bought US\$100 million worth of military products from it.

These nations are receptive to political and economic persuasion from Washington and can be convinced to sever economic ties with the DPRK. Even as the revenue loss will only amount to the low hundred million dollars, this will still weaken the Kim regime's funding, given the relatively small size of its economy.

Ostracise Pyongyang

Additionally, the US and its allies could pressure states which have indirect links with North Korea to further hinder Pyongyang's acquisition of dual use technology, and ability to earn foreign exchange through service provision. For instance, the aforementioned nations could be coaxed into limiting the number of DPRK diplomats.

Not only will this tell Pyongyang that there is an ostracising cost to its nuclear and missile testing, but this will also hinder its attempts to evade international sanctions or conduct illicit revenue raising activities. Furthermore, de facto pro-Western countries hosting North Korean businesses like restaurants and trading firms which earn valuable revenue, could be convinced to reduce the presence of such companies by not renewing business licenses, and not issuing new ones.

Lastly, states which recruit North Korean labour, might be cajoled to send these people home, as the DPRK government reaps most of their earnings and only pays a pittance to them. Taken together, these non-trade related isolationist measures, along with the curtailment of trade ties would lead to the yearly loss of several hundreds of millions of US dollars worth of foreign currency earnings for the North, thereby making it even more challenging to fund future nuclear and missile aggrandisement.

In conclusion, since military action is impractical, while Beijing is unwilling to broadly sanction the DPRK's economy, the next best option is to tighten United Nations Security Council sanctions enforcement amongst all cooperative states, persuade the North's subsidiary trading partners to sever economic ties, and coax others to implement indirect isolative measures.

Although these steps cannot induce nuclear and missile rollback, they do potentially mean the difference between Pyongyang having *several dozen* nuclear tipped ICBMs and the limited threat from only several ICBMs which could be more easily intercepted.

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