

# North Korea and the Threat of ICBMs

by **George Friedman** - December 23, 2019

Rumors have been swirling that North Korea is about to test an intercontinental ballistic missile. The source for this latest rumor is U.S. intelligence, though North Korea has been warning it will perform such a test. North Korea tested three ICBM boosters in 2017. Those tests didn't prove mastery of missile reentry capabilities or an effective guidance system, but if North Korea does successfully demonstrate such capabilities for an ICBM, it will change the dynamic between the North and the United States. Pyongyang has demonstrated its ability to field a nuclear weapon and to successfully test-fire non-intercontinental weapons. That means that the continental United States is not at risk of a nuclear attack from the North. But if an ICBM is successfully tested, that means that, regardless of intentions, North Korea has the ability to strike the United States. That would force the U.S. to rethink its strategy.

## U.S. Strategy

The U.S. has accepted the idea that North Korea has the ability to strike neighboring countries allied with the United States, including Japan and South Korea. The United States had no strategy for neutralizing the North's nuclear capability. An attack on nuclear facilities with non-nuclear weapons would have probably eliminated the weapons, but its success would have depended on two things. First, that the intelligence the U.S. had on the location of these facilities was completely accurate. Second, that all facilities that needed to be struck were vulnerable to air attack or possibly attack by special operations forces. Some, particularly those housing key facilities and storage, might have been buried deep underground or hardened in some way to render them minimally vulnerable to non-nuclear military action.

The United States was not prepared to initiate a nuclear attack on North Korea, since it could set a precedent that might turn against American interests. As important, North Korea had developed an alternative strategy that was hard to counter. Over the decades, it created a heavy concentration of artillery and rockets well in range of Seoul, which is close to the North Korean border. A U.S. attack on North Korea would have been countered by a massive artillery attack by the North on Seoul. And with artillery well dispersed in hardened locations, suppression by air before massive damage and casualties would have been difficult.

The U.S. strategy was to accept the existence of shorter-range nuclear weapons and to engage in

negotiations to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear arsenal. These discussions failed for obvious reasons. North Korea's strategic goal is regime preservation and territorial integrity. Surrounded by countries that theoretically could have an interest in attacking the North, the development of a nuclear deterrent was essential to its national strategy. An attempt to intrude on the North was only a theoretical possibility, but the farfetched can turn out to be a real threat, and nations need a deterrent for farfetched options that the other side may suddenly find to be quite reasonable.

What emerged was a fairly stable situation. North Korea could not strike at the U.S. The South Koreans were pleased that Seoul was not at risk under the circumstances. The Japanese recalculated the risks from the North without a U.S. deterrent but did nothing overt. The option of an American strike remained but was unlikely. The option of a North Korean attack on Seoul was even more unlikely. The U.S. was not going to get Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear capability, but at the same time, Washington was not on a hair trigger to strike the North. What appeared once to be a near-war situation now seemed contained. This should have been a satisfactory solution for both sides; the North Korean regime was secure and the threat of a nuclear attack on the United States was left off the table.

### **A Window of Opportunity**

This is why the rumors of a North Korean ICBM test seem hard to fathom, as it only increases the risk to the North. A test of an ICBM is unmistakable given its trajectory and speed. The major issues over an ICBM's effectiveness relate to both the robustness of the launch vehicle and warhead, and the quality of the guidance system. The chances that the North will attain a fully functional ICBM after only a handful of trials are not zero, but fairly close. In the end, the guidance system is the trickiest part of the development process, and must be tested in ways that the U.S. could spot.

In other words, if North Korea tests an ICBM capable of hitting the United States, there is most likely to be a gap, perhaps an extended one, before it attains a reliable system. North Korea, therefore, would be signaling the intent to deploy a weapon that could deliver nuclear warheads to the United States without having one. And it is in that window, the precise size of which is not fully predictable, that the U.S. could act without risking a nuclear response.

At that point, the U.S. calculus has to be reconsidered. The U.S. was prepared to risk a regional nuclear weapon in exchange for North Korea's refraining from developing a warhead that could reach the U.S. Now the U.S. has to determine whether it will risk a North Korean first strike on the United States. And this time, the U.S. is the one that will have to examine what is considered

farfetched. Military options that could fail, and assaults on Seoul that had been taken off the table, could be put back on the table. The regional powers didn't want a U.S. strike. But now the question is no longer what they will tolerate but what the U.S. can risk. Can the U.S. live with a North Korea capable of striking the United States with nuclear weapons? This becomes a much different problem, and one that the U.S. has in the past clearly communicated to North Korea, with suitable threats.

This therefore raises the question of why the North would move from a position of relative security, to one where risks to it mount greatly. Why would North Korea challenge a clear red line that the U.S. has drawn? What benefit can it gain? If it gets an ICBM, I will assume that it still would not wish to challenge the United States given the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. North Korea has behaved rationally and with cunning in the past. Why take risks that it didn't have to?

One explanation is that Pyongyang is fueling this speculation to frame some future negotiations but has no intention of actually testing an ICBM. Another explanation might be that North Korea read the U.S. political chaos as creating a window between test and deployment that would force negotiations at a time when the U.S. is willing to be more flexible on emerging issues, either for political gain or because of uncertainty of authority. Or perhaps the North has calculated that a nuclear threat to the United States has more value than what it risks.

There is another theory I will add to the farfetched. North Korea's closest ally is China. I have noted in the past that evolutions in the nuclear threat have tended to take place at times when China was facing significant friction with the U.S. The U.S. would ask China to intervene with North Korea, and then, on returning to the negotiating table, Beijing would reasonably point out that it had done a major service for the United States, and it would be churlish of the U.S. to press China on lesser economic matters.

U.S.-China tensions over trade are ongoing. A nuclear confrontation with North Korea would certainly divert U.S. attention and passion away from China. And inevitably, the U.S. would ask China to intervene and be relieved when its intervention succeeds. It is interesting that China has already issued a warning to North Korea not to do anything to destabilize its situation. Since China ought to welcome the diversion so that it can smooth things out, for a price, the warning to the North makes little sense. It would explain why North Korea would be taking unnecessary risks in testing ICBMs. Of course, given China's warning, a test may not even be launched.

A North Korean ICBM test would make little sense, as it would undercut the safety of the regime and the country's territorial integrity. But in the world of the farfetched, which we must at least consider,

North Korea cannot readily refuse Chinese requests, and signaling that there might be an ICBM test or two is not a major risk and a valuable favor to bank. I would not throw this scenario out for consideration except that it is hard to understand why North Korea would goad the United States at a time when American politics would seem to make the U.S. less predictable. The usual American answer on all complex political problems is that the other side is crazy. North Korea has not survived since World War II by being crazy. Ruthless, yes. Willing to take risk, certainly. But this particular risk either is an illusion or needs a much stronger imperative.

**Author: George Friedman**

[Read more from this author on geopoliticalfutures.com](https://geopoliticalfutures.com)