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Hwasong-17 ICBM Test Proves America's North Korea Policy Has Failed

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March 25, 2022

North Korea's ICBM Test Underscores Futility of U.S. Policy – Pyongyang's March 24, 2022, ICBM missile test has created agitation in both Washington and East Asian capitals. If it were not for the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, this development would easily be the top concern of U.S. foreign policy officials. Evidence indicates that the missile tested was probably that of an ICBM capable of reaching the U.S. mainland. It was the first time North Korea had tested a long-range missile since 2017, just before relations with the United States thawed, leading to three summit meetings between North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un and President Donald Trump.

Pyongyang's latest action was thoroughly predictable. North Korean complaints about Washington's policy positions had been resurgent for more than two years. In January 2022, Pyongyang conducted 7 missile tests in a single month. Kim's regime capped off the series by marking the lunar New Year with the flight of an intermediate-range missile, the Hwasong-12, capable of reaching Guam.

The flurry of tests punctuated Kim's conclusion that once-promising hopes for establishing a normal bilateral relationship with Washington were now in the rearview mirror. Such hopes had risen dramatically in 2018 and 2019 when Trump's administration seemed to abandon the entrenched U.S. policy of trying to isolate North Korea. His willingness to hold multiple summit meetings with Kim was an indication of a more realistic and flexible U.S. approach. The video image of Trump briefly crossing into North Korea during the third summit was especially powerful symbolism that a more constructive, cordial relationship might be on the horizon.

Growing domestic opposition, combined with policy sabotage by National Security Advisor John Bolton and other hardliners on the president's foreign policy team, doomed the effort to achieve constructive change. The abrupt end to the February 2019 summit in Hanoi occurred because the U.S. side refused to back away from Washington's long-standing (and unrealistic) demand that Pyongyang takes major steps to abandon its nuclear weapons program before negotiations could commence on other issues.

As hopes for a rapprochement faded, Kim's government revived its hostile, combative rhetoric in late 2019. It was notable, though, that dangerous, disruptive actions on Pyongyang's part were slower to re-emerge. Pyongyang appeared to hope that whatever the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Washington might be more flexible and accommodating going forward.

With Joe Biden's victory, it became clear that any hope for innovative measures regarding the North Korea issue was misplaced. Biden's personal commitment to Washington's futile, pre-Trump zombie policy of treating Pyongyang as an international pariah was apparent even during the 2020 election debates. Biden confirmed the continuation of the sterile approach of trying to isolate North Korea when the administration imposed new sanctions following the January 2022 missile tests.

From ICBM Tests to Nuclear Tests?

Yet there are still some manifestations of North Korean restraint. Pyongyang has not conducted a nuclear-weapons test since September 2017—just before the Trump administration began to pursue its outreach. Kim's government also implemented a self-imposed moratorium on all missile tests—even the short-range variety. That policy did not change until January 2022, and the moratorium on long-range missiles just ended with the March test. North Korea's moratorium on nuclear tests remains in effect for the time being. However, if the Biden administration's ossified policy regarding bilateral relations doesn't change, Kim's restraint even on that issue is likely to expire soon.

The Biden foreign policy team seems caught in a time warp. Trump's initiatives were encouraging because they reflected greater policy realism and flexibility. Unfortunately, Washington now seems to have reverted to the *status quo ante*. Instead of persisting in the fruitless demand for Pyongyang to return to a non-nuclear status, U.S. leaders should seek ways to establish a normal bilateral relationship on multiple fronts. That means easing and eventually eliminating the vast array of economic sanctions that have been imposed over the decades. It also means negotiating a treaty formally ending the Korean War and establishing full diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The alternative is to continue treating North Korea as a pariah while watching helplessly as the country slowly, but steadily, builds a nuclear arsenal and a sophisticated missile fleet that includes ICBMs capable of devastating American cities. Such an approach benefits no one. At the moment, the United States has no meaningful relationship with the world's latest nuclear power. That situation is dangerous for all parties.

The new ICBM test is the latest warning that Washington needs to adopt a normal, realistic relationship with North Korea. So far, it does not appear that the Biden administration is up to that crucial task.

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