



North Korea's Missile Tests a Response to a Zombie US Policy

by Ted Galen Carpenter

Posted on February 15, 2022

In recent weeks, North Korea has provided graphic demonstrations of its growing ballistic missile capabilities. During January, Pyongyang set a new record by conducting 7 tests in a single month. Kim Jong-Un's government capped off that flurry by marking the lunar New Year with a dramatic test of an intermediate-range missile capable of reaching the U.S. territory of Guam. The firing of the Hwasong-12 was the country's longest-range launch since 2017 when it tested 3 missiles that appeared to have the ability to reach targets in the United States. At least one other launch in January involved a low-flying, extremely maneuverable "hypersonic" missile.

The new tests seemed to catch US officials by surprise, but Pyongyang's decision was a predictable reaction to the Biden administration's failure to pursue significant new initiatives leading to the normalization of relations with Kim's government. About the only sign of flexibility was the report from South Korea's foreign minister in late January that Washington and Seoul had agreed on the draft of a declaration proclaiming an official end to the Korean War. Even that move, though, would still depend on negotiations with North Korea, and that essential step remained highly uncertain.

The current impasse in relations between Washington and Pyongyang is immensely frustrating. After some encouraging demonstrations of policy flexibility during the middle of Donald Trump's presidency, the White House backed off and resumed Washington's long-standing diplomatic strategy of demanding that Pyongyang take steps toward the abolition of its nuclear-weapons program before meaningful negotiations can take place on other issues. Biden's foreign policy team has persisted in that same approach.

However, Washington's demand for a "complete, verifiable, and irreversible" end to North Korea's nuclear ambitions has been a nonstarter for more than two decades. The parallel demand regarding Pyongyang's increasingly extensive and sophisticated ballistic missile program has proven equally futile. Indeed, despite the demands of Washington and the "international

community, enforced by ever-tighter economic sanctions, North Korea has continued to build more nuclear weapons and missile delivery systems. A 2021 report by the Defense Intelligence Agency conceded that Pyongyang already "retains a stockpile of nuclear weapons. Outside experts estimate that the country has produced enough fissile material for between 20 to 60 warheads." A 2021 Rand Corporation study concluded that, given current trends, the number would reach between 151 and 242 by 2027. In addition, Pyongyang would have numerous mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) at its disposal to deliver such weapons.

It should be noted, though, that North Korea has not conducted a nuclear-weapons test since September 2017 – coinciding with the Trump administration's willingness to hold direct talks, including summit meetings between the president and Kim. Pyongyang also adopted a self-imposed moratorium on even short-range missile tests. The launches of short-range missiles resumed only when it became apparent that the prospect of a breakthrough in relations with Washington had stalled. North Korea's moratorium on nuclear tests remains in effect for the time being, as does the moratorium on ICBM launches, but it is increasingly uncertain how long that manifestation of restraint will continue.

Trump's once-promising opening to North Korea was the victim of sabotage within his own foreign policy team and cynical partisan criticism from congressional Democrats and their allies in the establishment news media. The president's ill-conceived appointment of the ultra-hawkish John Bolton as his national security adviser was the principal source of the former problem. The constant smears from Democrats that he was Kim's friend and apologist was the key manifestation of the latter difficulty. Together, those factors fatally impeded the chances of substantive negotiations that might have led to normal relations between Washington and Pyongyang – and the reduction of tensions at an especially dangerous global flashpoint.

Even before Joe Biden entered the White House, there was little indication of any fresh thinking on the North Korea issue by the new foreign policy team. The commitment to the futile zombie policy of trying to isolate the country was confirmed when the administration imposed new sanctions following the January 2022 missile tests. If Washington does not change course, it is just a matter of time until Pyongyang resumes testing both ICBMs and nuclear weapons.

The only way to avoid that outcome is to resume the course that Trump adopted temporarily and pursue high-level negotiations to establish a normal relationship with North Korea. That means a willingness to lift sanctions, establish formal diplomatic relations with Pyongyang, and sign a treaty bringing an official end to the Korean War. It also means abandoning the quixotic demand that North Korea return to nuclear virginity. Like it or not, North Korea is and will remain a member of the global nuclear-weapons club, and it is rapidly perfecting effective missile delivery systems. It is imperative that the United States at least be on speaking terms with a country that has such capabilities. The strategy of trying to isolate and coerce North Korea has long been an exercise in futility. It now has become extremely dangerous.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of 12 books and more than 950 articles on international affairs.