



## **Obama Knew About North Korean Nuclear Miniaturization**

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The immediate spark for the latest North Korea crisis — that the communist regime has mastered the ability to produce a nuclear weapon small enough to fit on a missile — is not so much of a revelation.

The Washington Post report raised the alarm level several decibels and prompted President Donald Trump to issue his “fire and fury” warning against North Korea. But as The Post itself has previously reported, U.S. intelligence officials have believed at least since 2013 that North Korea possessed that capability.

“This isn’t news,” said Fred Fleitz, senior vice president for policy and programs at the Center for Security Policy in Washington.

State Dept: US speaking 'with one voice' on North Korea

Rep. Doug Lamborn (R-Colo.) disclosed that assessment by the Defense Intelligence Agency during a House Armed Services Committee budget hearing in April 2013. The report declared "moderate confidence the North currently has nuclear weapons capable of delivery by ballistic missiles" but added that the reliability of those missiles was low.

Since then, North Korea had made significant strides in its drive to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles and has conducted a flurry of tests in recent months.

Officials from then-President Barack Obama, moved swiftly to discredit the assessment. Then-National Intelligence Director James Clapper issued a statement that day indicating that the report did not represent the consensus of the intelligence community and that "North Korea has not yet demonstrated the full range of capabilities necessary for a nuclear armed missile."

In addition, a Defense Department spokesman at the time released a statement warning that it was "inaccurate to suggest" that the North Korean regime had demonstrated those capabilities.

Fleitz, whose national security career spanned 25 years in the executive branch and congressional staff positions, told LifeZette on Wednesday that the reaction was designed to avoid confrontation.

"Obama officials went out of their way to downplay it because it interfered with their policy of doing nothing," he said.

## **U.S. 'Speaking with One Voice'**

The State Department on Wednesday sought to knock down any suggestion of a division between Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, after the president warned North Korea on Tuesday that further threats would be "met with fire and fury like the world has never seen."

State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert told reporters that the president and Tillerson spoke for about an hour.

"The United States is on the same page, whether it's the White House, the State Department, the Department of Defense," she said. "We are speaking with one voice. And the world, in fact, is speaking with one voice."

Nauert argued that the U.S. "pressure campaign" against North Korea is bearing fruit.

"That campaign is working," she said. "It is ratcheting up the pressure on North Korea."

Nauert repeated Tillerson's statement that Trump was using the "kind of language that North Korea understands."

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But North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un has shown no signs of backing down. The regime responded by threatening the U.S. territory of Guam.

Fleitz said the president's comments seem designed to get China's attention in his effort to bring greater pressure on North Korea.

"That's why they make such a difference," he said. "They communicate to China that we're pretty angry. I don't think this was intended for Kim Jong-un."

Most analysts believe a military option would be extremely risky and costly given the progress North Korea has made in its nuclear program and its ability to level Seoul, South Korea, with conventional artillery in a matter of hours.

"The North Koreans have effectively taken the military option off the table," said Eric Gomez, a defense and foreign policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute.

## **Squeezing North Korea with Sanctions**

Fleitz said that sanctions approved by the United Nations over the weekend represent a victory for the Trump administration. But he said the measures do not go nearly far enough.

"There are more severe sanctions against Uganda than there are against North Korea," he said.

Fleitz noted that the U.N.-approved sanctions do not cut off oil sales from China and restrict joint Chinese-North Korean ventures only in the future, allowing current ventures to continue. He explained that U.S. officials know the Chinese entities that have cheated on restrictions. It would have been impossible to get the U.N. to crack down on that, because China would have used its veto power to block it.

But Fleitz added that the United States should work around the United Nations to build international consensus.

"Frankly, there is a long way to go to pressure China," he said. "And before we start talking about military options," the U.S. should explore those avenues.

James Carafano, vice president of the Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy at The Heritage Foundation, said there are plenty of sanctions against North Korea. The problem has been enforcement. He said the United States should respond swiftly and soundly against Chinese businesses that violate those restrictions.

"The only downside to that is antagonizing the Chinese," he said. "Well, this administration is going to antagonize the Chinese on a lot of things."

Fleitz said the United States should take a number of provocative actions short of a military strike. This include steps like inspecting North Korean ships suspected of violating sanctions and shooting down missiles launched from North Korea.

Said Carafano: "It's a combination of deterrence at the strategic level — which includes missile defense — and nuclear deterrence."

Gomez said stronger sanctions or negotiations might have had a better chance before South Korea had ICBMs. Negotiations are problematic because North Korea has reneged on past agreements. And it is unclear, he added, whether China has enough influence — even if it were fully committed — to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear program.

The best option, said Gomez, might be to rely on deterrence to prevent a nuclear-armed North Korea from acting. He recalled similar consternation among U.S. officials when China was developing its own nuclear weapons program.

"Long term, that's where this is going. China kind of followed a similar pattern."