

# *The American* Conservative

## Deterrence And Assurance On The Korean Peninsula

Bradley Devlin

June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022

North Korea has slowly ratcheted up the frequency of its missile tests over the past twelve months. In an effort to court a new administration in South Korea and shore up alliances in the region it believes the administration of Donald Trump damaged, the Biden administration is inflating the North Korean threat. But the administration should tread carefully if it wants to avoid further destabilizing the Korean peninsula.

In the latest test, which occurred on June 5, North Korea fired eight short-range missiles in a span of just over 30 minutes from four separate locations, according to South Korean military intelligence. It was the highest number of missiles the North Koreans have tested in a single day. The next day, the U.S. and South Korea responded in kind, lobbing eight ballistic missiles into the sea. The live-fire exercise employed eight Army Tactical Missile System missiles, one from the U.S. and seven from South Korea, over the span of 10 minutes, according to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff and U.S. Forces Korea.

The U.S. and its allies were not done responding to North Korea's missile tests, however. The following day, June 7, dozens of fighter jets from the U.S. and its regional allies flew in formation over the East Sea to show force readiness in case of a North Korean attack. Four U.S. F-16 fighter jets joined 16 South Korean aircraft, including some F-35A stealth fighters, just off of South Korea's eastern shore. The U.S. also conducted a separate drill with Japanese fighters, in which two American F-16s and four Japanese F-15s flew over the waters between Korea and Japan, according to Japan's Defense Ministry.

But this latest round of North Korean missile tests might not be the threatening message to the U.S., South Korea, and other U.S. Asian allies that were the tests during the early Trump administration. Eric Gomez, the Cato Institute's director of Defense Policy Studies, told *The American Conservative* in a phone interview that "there's a tendency in Washington to ask, 'Is this a provocation?' or 'Is this meant to send a message to Biden?'" The reason for these tests, he said, might be much simpler. "I

think it's more about Kim Jong Un saying, 'We're going to develop these things, and we're going to test them a lot as part of that development,'" Gomez said.

"These tests are different than the tests in 2017," Gomez claimed, because the 2017 tests "were paired with propaganda that said explicitly it was a response. But the North Koreans aren't saying much about these tests, and not making such a big deal about it." Lest we forget, Kim Jong-un's affinity for his missile program led one former president to give him the nickname "little rocket man."

Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) made a similar point. "We can delude ourselves or get solipsistic and ask 'What does this mean about us?' but at the end of the day, we've got decades of evidence to show that the North Korean government wants modernized ordinance and doesn't waste a lot of time trying to see if it works," Eberstadt told TAC via phone.

Eberstadt also said the tests could be a sign that the military economy of North Korea is recovering:

What we need to bear in mind is that the North Korean side wants to race to a place where it's able to put a nuclear pistol to our heads, and doesn't want to shilly-shally if it can avoid doing that. Testing, in a way, is an indication of economic and technological capabilities, and what we've seemed to learn over the past couple of months is that the North Korean military economy seems to be recovering a bit from its incapacitation, or self-incapacitation, during the Covid period.

North Korea has performed 18 separate rounds of missile tests this year, including an intercontinental-ballistic-missile (ICBM) test, the first such test for the authoritarian regime since 2017. In response to these earlier tests, the U.S. enacted new sanctions targeting two Russian banks for their alleged support of North Korea and its missile programs in May.

The increase in testing, especially the scale of the latest test, "tells us about their capacity to build more," Gomez said. "A higher burn rate tells us they've gotten better at missile production."

"Eight at one time is a lot," Gomez claimed, which leads him to wonder "if instead of it being a developmental test for new technology, and seeing what aspects of the technology work, it might be a shift more to an operations test" to see how they might perform in the field of battle. But it's hard to tell.

"The North Korean defense economy is a black box," Eberstadt told TAC. "It's very difficult for an outsider with only open sources to play with to peer into that black box, but we do know that North Korea operates on a total-war footing, like a 1943-1944 version of the U.S. economy."

Therefore, "the testing schedule may hypothetically be a pretty good indicator on the capability of the war economy," Eberstadt said.

While these tests may just be the North Koreans exploring their capabilities and readiness, the Biden administration does seem to think these missile tests are meant to directly threaten the U.S. and its regional allies.

“What it comes down to is these perennial questions of deterrence and assurance, and I think that Biden especially has talked a lot about wanting to rebuild U.S. alliance relationships that the administration regarded as eroding during the Trump administration,” Gomez said. In interpreting these tests as a direct threat, the Biden administration sees an opportunity to rebuild what it believes Trump destroyed.

For better or for worse, “the recent exercises and counter-exercises demonstrate that the Biden administration is serious about that,” Gomez said. “It’s not going to deter future North Korea tests, but I think it was a welcome sign to South Korea, who thought it was a sign of support for them more than anything else.”

North Korea’s increased testing regime has caused some U.S. diplomats and members of the Biden administration to fear that Kim Jong-un is set on testing another nuclear device. Sung Kim, the U.S. special representative for North Korea, told reporters last week that the country’s seventh known nuclear test in its nuclear-weapons program’s history could happen “any time.”

“They’ve obviously done the preparations,” Kim said. “North Korea has now launched 31 ballistic missiles in 2022, the most ballistic missile it has ever launched in a single year, surpassing its previous record of 25 in 2019.”

“And it’s only June,” Kim added.

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, after talks with South Korea’s First Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyun-dong, said a North Korean nuclear test would elicit a “forceful” response from the U.S. and its allies in the region. “The entire world will respond in a strong and clear manner,” Sherman said, though she added that, “the United States harbors no hostile intent towards the DPRK. We continue to urge Pyongyang to cease its destabilizing and provocative activities and choose the path of diplomacy.”

But it’s unlikely that any of the Biden administration’s rhetoric or the military’s joint exercises in the region will deter the North Koreans from nuclear testing if they’re set on doing so. What remains to be seen, however, is if a future nuclear test will deviate from the North Korean nuclear program’s general trend.

“The trend in North Korean nuclear-weapons testing has been bigger in terms of explosive yield. It’s warheads that are higher yield and that can use thermonuclear, more similar to the two-stage design of most American or most modern, advanced warheads,” Gomez said.

“What’s more worrying is the thought of them testing something small,” he said. “Testing something small is more worrying because of Kim Jong-un’s previous rhetoric about tactical nuclear weapons—nuclear weapons that could be used to repel an invasion.”

If that happens, Gomez admits “some freak-out is warranted” because “that changes a crucial strategic question.”

“North Korea’s nuclear strategy thus far has been first-use heavy,” Gomez said. “The Chinese don’t really have a first-use-heavy nuclear strategy. The North Koreans do, and the strategy, as best as we can cobble it together based on what senior leadership has said, is if we think you’re going to attack us, then we will try and strike ahead of that attack, and go big right away.”

But successful miniaturization could signal a shift in North Korean nuclear strategy. “Using low-yield weapons on the battlefield to try and fight the conflict,” could prove devastating if tensions spiraled out of control on the peninsula. “Does this move them away from preemption if they have some nuclear warfare fighting capability? Maybe, and maybe that’s a little bit better.”

Not only does this make Kim Jong-un’s rhetoric more credible regarding tactical nuclear weapons, it “make[s North Korea’s] nuclear arsenal harder to control via negotiations, and will drive concern within South Korea and Japan for greater U.S. reassurances,” Gomez said.

That’s a scenario that could very easily spiral out of control, Gomez suggested:

North Korea gets that they cannot compete with the South and with the U.S with conventional weapons. But what you can do is increase nuclear risk to make a prospective attack really unpleasant. I don’t think that South Korea or Biden have any intention of invading North Korea to depose Kim Jong-un, but as North Korea does this, there’s pressure to respond, and it’s a classic security-spiral dynamic. Actions taken to reassure South Korea and Japan are actions that North Korea and to a lesser extent China find threatening to them, and you get into this tit-for-tat process that’s really hard to break out of.

If the situation on the Korean peninsula escalates, Gomez and Eberstadt fear the South Koreans will pressure the U.S. into redeploying nuclear weapons in the South. Such a move would be intolerable for the United States’ chief rival, China.

Eberstadt said, “If there were a reconsideration of a nuclear-free South, if there were signs that the South on its own was thinking about becoming a nuclear power, if there were serious discussions about putting short- or medium-range nuclear missiles in the South or the environment thereabouts, all of those, understandably, would catch Beijing’s attention.”

“But that’s all hypothetical because I don’t think anybody has really been suggesting anything like that in either the Blue House or the White House,” Eberstadt added. “The more interesting question, I suppose, is whether the Chinese government, in their own calculations of national interest, would be willing to pressure or penalize the DPRK to amend its behavior,” Eberstadt told TAC. She continued:

Since it is totally opaque about its own policy towards North Korea, or its support for North Korea and quantifying it, we have to discern by revealed behavior. And the revealed behavior seems to be that as long as North Korea’s actions are more deleterious for the United States and the U.S. alliance than they are for Beijing, Beijing is okay with that. We have to wonder what sort of behavior North Korea would exhibit that would cause things to change.

A renuclearized South could be a red line for Beijing, but rather than probe the U.S. and its regional allies, President Xi and the Chinese government could approach Kim behind closed doors and suggest China could withhold support if there’s strong enough evidence to suggest North Korea’s actions could lead to a redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea.

The United States’ increased interest in North Korea’s recent missile tests is a welcome one for the new South Korean President, Yoon Suk-yeol, who took office in May. Eberstadt believes the shift from former South Korean President Moon Jae-in of the liberal Democratic Party, to Yoon of the conservative People Power Party may mark a big shift. The new government is “no longer trying to build imaginary peace-castles in the sky with a North Korean regime that’s trying to destroy them,” Eberstadt said. “So this is an obvious indication that there is a new understanding of cooperation in the U.S.-ROK alliance. The big change is the government in South Korea.”

Eberstadt believes that one of the causes of the peninsula’s instability during the early Trump administration was Moon and his liberal allies “having a willfully obtuse Kumbaya seminar in the Blue House.” Re-injecting “a little bit of strategic realism back in the ROK side is probably going to reduce the risks of war,” Eberstadt said.

Gomez, meanwhile, does not see the new government as marking an important shift. “I think there is much more continuity between the Yoon and Moon administrations than most people appreciate.”

Moon oversaw more defense spending, which the Yoon administration is continuing. Moon was also, sort of, in favor of this idea of offering economic benefits to the North Koreans as a sweetener to help them move toward denuclearization. The Yoon administration has said similar things, that they’d be willing to consider offering economic incentives to the North Koreans as well.

“I think that there’s definitely a perception in Washington that conservative South Korean government equals an easier time for U.S. relations, but I do not think that is

necessarily true, at least when it comes to the previous administration and the new one,” Gomez said.

If Washington inflates the threat of North Korea’s missile program, and flirts with solutions that could antagonize not only the North Koreans but the Chinese in the name of restoring alliances, efforts towards deterrence could easily prove self-defeating, no matter who is in charge in South Korea.