



North Korea parade hints at 'key vulnerability' in regime's ICBM force, says defense experts

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February 9, 2018

There are hints of a "key vulnerability" in North Korea's military, and it involves a shortage of something critical to the regime's intercontinental ballistic missile force, according to defense experts.

Based on analysis from Thursday's military parade in North Korea, experts say it appears the nuclear-armed state has a shortage of big transporter-launcher vehicles used for carrying and helping to launch the ICBM-class Hwasong-15 — the largest and most powerful weapon in the regime's arsenal. The large vehicles make the ballistic missile road-mobile capable and therefore tougher to detect and destroy before a launch.

"It seems like the parade kind of showed that they haven't quite mastered domestic production of these vehicles," said David Schmerler, research associate at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies in Monterey, California. "If they were going to try to find an opportunity to demonstrate that they could not only produce lots of ICBMs but the ability to launch them on mobile vehicles, this would have been the opportunity to have done it."

Under the watchful eye of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, there were just four of the so-called transporter erector launcher (TEL) vehicles for the Hwasong-15 ICBM, according to analysts. Also, those heavy-duty trucks with the big tires normally carry the Hwasong-15 ICBMs, but the missiles were paraded on Thursday on tractor-trailer trucks, not TELs.

The trucks used to carry the Hwasong-15 and 14 ICBMs are usually logging trucks imported from China and converted for military use. In late November, the North Koreans claimed the vehicle they used in the Hwasong-15 test was "100 percent" domestically produced.

"The number of TELs in [Thursday's] parade is important because it represents a key vulnerability in North Korea's ICBM force," Eric Gomez, a policy analyst for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, said in a blog Thursday. "All of the North Korean

vehicles capable of carrying ICBMs are based on Chinese-made heavy logging trucks that were modified by the North Koreans to carry missiles, but no more than six of these trucks have been seen at one time."

The North Koreans tested the Hwasong-15 missile on Nov. 29, claiming after the launch it had "finally realized the great historic cause of completing the state nuclear force."

"The Hwasong-15 I think everybody pretty much agrees could hit essentially the entire U.S.," said David Wright, co-director and senior scientist for the Global Security Program at the Union of Concerned Scientists. "The Hwasong-14, which we saw in the parade, too, there's still debate whether or not that could reach the West Coast or whether it could go farther."

At the parade, North Korea also showed off a new weapon that could offer the communist state important benefits from a tactical standpoint, according to experts.

"We saw some new short-range missiles that I don't believe we had seen before," said Wright. "They looked like they may be Russian Iskander missiles, which were originally built sort of as a replacement for the Scuds."

Indeed, analysts say North Korea's missile fleet is essentially built off older Russian technology. Still, they point out North Korea has proven to be capable of developing its own missiles.

There were a number of mobile launcher vehicles displayed during the parade that had two short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) sitting side-by-side in the truck. Experts believe the SRBMs are likely solid-fuel technology but some also said the missiles could be mock-ups and not operational.

If the SRBM's are fully functional, they might give the North Koreans "important tactical advantages," according to Gomez. He said a solid fuel and highly mobile missile system means the North Korean weapon "can be launched on much shorter notice than Pyongyang's liquid-fueled Scud missiles."

Regardless, South Korea has the indigenously built Hyunmoo-2 SRBM system. The South also has been looking to increase the firepower on its ballistic missiles to a 1-ton conventional warhead capable of reaching all of North Korea, but that's still below the amount the North is believed to have in its arsenal.