

## Sorting Out the Nuclear and Missile Threats From North Korea

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North Korea's satellite launch last December and its detonation in February of a third nuclear device occurred in blatant defiance of multiple UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting such activities. Condemnation of these actions by the international community nonetheless precipitated a flurry of particularly strident North Korean threats against the United States and South Korea. These threats were actually hollow, but they provoked a billion-dollar strategic missile defense deployment decision and spawned calls by U.S. pundits and politicians for preventive attacks on North Korea. Although the intensity of the crisis is now waning, North Korea's pursuit of nuclear and missile capabilities continues, and its political isolation from the international community deepens. It is high time to sort out the nature of the threat and reconsider what can be done about it.

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- North Korea is believed to have enough plutonium for four to eight nuclear weapons and may have some highly enriched uranium as well.
- But it is years away from being able to pose a nuclear threat against the U.S. mainland.
  - Although it has hundreds of operational short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, there is no evidence it has achieved the miniaturization of a nuclear device necessary for arming these missiles.
  - Moreover, it has never flight tested a long-range ballistic missile or demonstrated the guidance and re-entry capabilities required for such a system.
- In the face of unanimous resolutions of the UN Security Council demanding a stop to North Korean nuclear and missile activities, Pyongyang responded with defiance in March and April of this year, threatening "pre-emptive nuclear attacks" against the United States and aimed to the 1953 armistice.
  - Unlike previous crises, the latest episode involved no fighting and cost no lives.
- Although North Korea has no nuclear-tipped, long-range missiles, the United States responded to its bombard by deploying additional forces to the region and promising to deploy additional strategic missile defense interceptors in Alaska.
- Given North Korea's continuing nuclear weapons buildup and technology transfers, Pyongyang's deepening isolation, and the inherent risk that a military provocation on the Korean peninsula could spin out of control, a new policy approach is urgently needed.
  - The new approach will require:
    - aggressive diplomatic engagement, which refrains from making threats of preventive attack and "regime change;"
    - a willingness to take incremental steps and adopt confidence-building measures that enhance stability, short of the ultimate goal of nuclear disarmament; and
    - an awareness that North Korean aggression is deterred primarily by maintaining U.S. and South Korean conventional military superiority, not by maintaining a huge U.S. nuclear arsenal and deploying strategic missile defenses.

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Following condemnations by the international community of North Korea's December satellite launch and February nuclear test, Pyongyang unleashed a furious barrage of rhetorical threats in March and April against the United States and South Korea. Now, the hot air war of the early spring appears to be over, despite the exercise launch of six short-range missiles by North Korea off its east coast in recent days and the ongoing visit of a U.S. aircraft carrier strike group to South Korea.

Yet North Korea's pursuit of nuclear and missile capabilities continues, its political isolation from the international community deepens, and the United States is now stuck with a commitment to spend an additional billion-dollars on strategic missile defenses in Alaska. It is time to sort out what the threat actually is and what can be done about it.

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