Can Our Ballistic Missile Defense System Shield Us from Rogue Regime ICBMs?

by Jerry Gordon (March 2016)

North Korean Unha-3 Satellite Space Vehicle Launch, February 7, 2016

February 2016 brought several concerning ICBM threats from both North Korea and Iran amid official government reports that the US and NATO allies lack an effective Ballistic Missile Defense. On February 7, 2016, North Korea successfully placed in a polar orbit a 200kg. satellite using an Unha-3 space vehicle launcher (SLV). That sent alarm bells ringing as a game changer. Ten days later, Iran announced a prospective launch of its version of a satellite launcher, the Smorgh, capable of putting an object into a near earth orbit. This massive multi-stage liquid fuel rocket was built using North Korean technology and clearly aimed at demonstrating ICBM capabilities. Iran had consistently violated UN Resolution 2231 with the launch of Emad ballistic missiles in October and November 2015 violating sanctions against ballistic missile testing.

The US General Accounting Office released a report on February 17th critical of the development and test of a ground-based mid-course interceptor (GMD) that has yet to demonstrate its capability to target and destroy ICBMs. The 16th joint US Israeli missile defense drill concluded on February 24th with 1,700 US and 1,500 Israeli military personnel involved, conducting simulations of an umbrella of six US, Israeli and jointly-developed missile defense systems. Simulations of the interoperability of these systems are one thing. Perfecting them to the point of demonstrating the ability of destroying missiles threatening Israeli, our allies in NATO and the US homeland is quite another. Risky development of components of the missile defense umbrella with multiple defense contractors has seriously delayed tests and ultimate deployment of mid-course ground based interceptors. Only one successful interception test has occurred in the past eight years.

Meanwhile, rogue regimes North Korea and Iran are intent on the development and testing of long-range missile technology in direct violation of UN Resolutions. Sanctions or the threat of sanctions have not deterred them. Both North Korea and Iran have successfully placed satellites in orbit. The question is, what they have done cooperatively to test nuclear warheads to be fitted on long range rockets capable of hitting the US homeland? The bedrock issue is, can our ballistic missile defense shield us from these rogue regimes?

The North Korean Space Launch Game Changer

North Korea launched a long-range rocket on February 7, 2016 carrying what it called an observational satellite. The Pentagon confirmed that the North Koreans successfully launched a satellite. Launched in a southerly direction, the 200 kg. satellite is in polar orbit. That means it passes over the US every 95 minutes, perhaps providing imagery and GPS coordinates to Pyongyang for possible later use. *Reuters* noted in a report:

> U.S. Pacific Command said it had Aegis ballistic missile defense systems, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries and the Sea-Based X-Band Radar in the region, which would work with Japanese and South Korean militaries.

North Korea's regional neighbors and Washington denounced the satellite launch as a violation of previous accords conducted in defiance of U.N. sanctions and just weeks after a nuclear bomb test on January 6, 2016. But was the test a game changer in terms of missile technology and development of a possible nuclear warhead capability or merely the lofting into orbit of a satellite for observational, communications or other purposes? The answers, as usual, may be murky as regards what the hermit state is up to in such dramatic demonstrations. Is it to buy bargaining leverage in negotiations with both South Korea and the Obama Administration, or is it something more concerning, perfecting an ICBM reaching US territory?

Reuters reported the aftermath of the Unha-3 satellite launch, "N.Korean rocket puts object into space, angers neighbors & U.S:"

> The U.S. Strategic Command said it had detected a missile entering space and South Korea's military said the rocket had put an object into orbit, quashing earlier media reports indicating the rocket might have failed in

flight.

"Everything we have seen is consistent with a successful repeat of the 2012 (launch)," said U.S. missile technology expert John Schilling of 38 North of Johns Hopkins University , referring to a previous launch of what the North said was a communications satellite.

North Korea, which [in January 2016] exploded a nuclear device, had notified U.N. agencies that it launched a rocket carrying an Earth observation satellite, triggering opposition from governments that see it as a long-range missile test.

The U.N. Security Council held an emergency meeting on February 7th in Manhattan to discuss the launch, at the request of the United States, Japan and South Korea, diplomats said.

The United States while tracking the rocket launch said it did not believe that it posed a threat to the United States or its allies.

The United States was working with the U.N. Security Council on "significant measures" to hold North Korea to account for its launch.

Calling the launch a flagrant violation of U.N. resolutions on the country's use of ballistic missile technology, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry reaffirmed the "ironclad" U.S. defense commitments to allies Japan and South Korea and called the launch a destabilizing and unacceptable challenge to peace and security.

South Korean President Park Geun-hye called the launch an unforgivable act of provocation.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called the launch "absolutely unacceptable", especially after North Korea had tested a nuclear device last month.

"To launch a missile after conducting a nuclear test goes against the U.N. resolution. We will respond resolutely, coordinating closely with the international community," he told reporters.

The *AP* reported the implications and consequences of the latest North

Korean satellite launched by the multi-stage Unha-3 or space launch vehicle (SLV):

> Critics say North [Korea] still has some technical barriers to surmount to achieve reliable nuclear weapons that can attack faraway targets. Among the important tasks facing North Korean scientists are thought to be building up a larger rocket that can fly farther and carry a heavier satellite or payload. This would be necessary if the North is going to develop a missile that can reach the entire U.S. mainland and be loaded with a warhead, which is several times heavier than the satellite the country launched in 2012.
>
> Outside analysts say the successful flight of a rocket loaded with a satellite weighing about 1 ton (2,200 pounds) would mean the North [Korea] likely could develop a nuclear-armed long-range missile.

The AP report concluded:

> Critics are skeptical over whether any new sanctions can stop North Korea from abandoning its nuclear and rocket programs because China, North [Korea]'s last major ally and biggest aid benefactor and a veto-wielding power in the U.N. Security Council, is unwilling to cooperate on any harsh punishment on North Korea.
>
> Beijing fears too much pressure on North Korea could cause it to collapse, pushing swarms of refugees over the countries' border and establishing a unified Korea that hosts American troops on its doorstep.
>
> The launch gives Kim, the North Korea's young leader, a chance to burnish his image domestically ahead of a landmark ruling Workers' Party convention in May.
>
> Because North Korea claims the launch as a success, it may think it has increased leverage in diplomatic negotiations and eventually proposed talks with the United States and South Korea to try to win concessions, said professor Koh Yu-hwan at Seoul's Dongguk University.

One of those skeptics is Gordon Chang. Chang in a *Fox News* interview said the North Korean satellite launch is something to worry about. Chang is a veteran North Korea and China analyst, *Forbes* columnist and author of *Nuclear Showdown:*

North Korea Takes On the World. He said the hermit state "demonstrated the mastery of missile technology." Chang further commented that the North Koreans demonstrated they have the means to successfully develop a true ICBM; an ICBM, that both North Korea and its ready customer Iran might use to attack both coasts of this country. Chang's comments and the reaction from the Obama White House suggest maybe it is. US UN Ambassador Samantha Power, called it a missile launch because the SLV and a true ICBM shared the same technology. That meant in the Administration's view the successful satellite launch violated UN sanctions against missile testing. However, given the track record of the UN Security Council it appears incapable of doing anything about this latest North Korean action.

Chang holds that sanctions don't work with North Korea. Instead he suggested that we might control the aid to North Korea endeavoring to separate the people from the autocratic ruling Kim family. He also suggested that South Korea move 143 companies out of the Kaesong industrial park shared with North Korea that has been a veritable money machine for the hermit state. Subsequently, South Korea repatriated several hundred workers, cutoff power and closed the cross border industrial complex. Further, Chang noted that after the January 6, 2016 nuclear test, no further sanctions were proposed by the UN because China would effectively block them. China, he pointed out, does a fair amount of banking with North Korea.

There are several significant aspects of this latest North Korean satellite launch.

First, according to NK .

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