

U.S. Will Face Stronger, More Provocative North Korea in 2021

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

During a military parade on October 10, Pyongyang revealed an intimidating array of new military systems that increase the threat to America and its Asian allies.

Rather than denuclearizing, North Korea has continued to nuclearize, creating new, more advanced, more accurate, and more survivable missiles for all ranges.

The United States should respond firmly when North Korea violates U.N. resolutions and U.S. laws, and review allied ballistic missile defense plans.

During a massive military parade on October 10, Pyongyang revealed an intimidating array of new military systems that increase the threat to America's homeland and to its Asian allies. The regime revealed a record number of new weapons, more than during any previous parade.¹ North Korean breakthroughs in intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and their launchers could overcome U.S. missile defenses.

The show-stealer of the parade was a new ICBM, the world's largest mobile missile on a launch vehicle. Since North Korea's existing ICBMs can already reach all of the continental United States, the purpose of the heavier missile is to carry three or four nuclear warheads or penetration aids to defeat missile defenses.

Also of great concern for American security, the regime demonstrated that it could indigenously produce ICBM transporter erector launchers (TELs).

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During the parade, four Hwasong-15 ICBMs and four of the new ICBMs were paraded on TELs. North Korea had previously been constrained to six TELs converted from large trucks imported from China in 2012.

A larger ICBM with multiple warheads, dispersed on more launchers than previously available, would give North Korea a more viable surprise first-strike, retaliatory second-strike, and battlefield counter-force-attack capability. Such a force could overwhelm U.S. missile defenses. The U.S. only has 44 interceptor missiles in Alaska and California and intends to shoot several interceptors at each incoming ICBM or detected warhead.

North Korea also paraded a new nuclear-capable submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), the Pukgugkson-4. The development of this missile was previously unknown. The missile could also form the basis of a land-based medium-range missile, or even the first stage of a solid-fuel ICBM, which North Korea does not currently possess. South Korea currently does not have any missile defenses against an SLBM attack from its maritime flanks.

Pyongyang also displayed some of the five new systems that conducted missile launches last year, and paraded several weapons systems that will upgrade the country's long-neglected conventional forces. North Korea's first new main battle tank in decades, as well as artillery, anti-tank, surface-to-air missile, and coastal defense systems, were paraded. When deployed, these weapons will increase the threat to South Korea and U.S. forces stationed there.

Kim Spoke Softly, While Brandishing a Big Nuclear Stick. North Korea's military parade was demonstrative but not provocative. North Korea did not conduct an accompanying SLBM launch as expected. In contrast to the strong militaristic display, Kim Jong-un delivered a soft message in his accompanying speech. He did not threaten nor even mention the United States. The North Korean leader claimed his military forces were only for self-defense and would never be "used as a means for preemptive strike [and are] not for aiming at others."²

However, Kim also vowed that, if an enemy sought to infringe on North Korean sovereignty through military force, he would use "the most powerful offensive force at our disposal and in a preemptive manner."³ For years, North Korea indicated a willingness to use nuclear weapons preemptively. The regime has spoken of "the right to a preemptive nuclear attack to destroy the strongholds of the aggressors"⁴ and of the right to conduct a "preemptive and offensive nuclear strike" if it believed the U.S. was about to attack.⁵

Pyongyang has vowed a pre-emptive nuclear attack against Seoul and

U.S. bases in the Pacific region if the regime perceived even a “slight sign” of allied preparations for a strike.⁶ The North Korean military declared it would conduct a preemptive retaliatory strike “with an ultra-precision blitzkrieg strike of the Korean style.”⁷ The regime has also practiced nuclear-air-burst attacks on South Korea⁸ and Japan⁹ as part of its nuclear war plan.

U.S. Claims Reduced North Korean Threat. Despite the unveiling of new North Korean nuclear-capable missiles, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that the Trump Administration policy toward North Korea “has proven successful [and] certainly led to reduced risks for the United States.”¹⁰ After the 2018 Singapore Summit, President Donald Trump claimed that the North Korean nuclear threat had been resolved and Pyongyang was “de-nuking the whole place.”¹¹

Rather than denuclearizing, North Korea has continued to nuclearize. Pyongyang expanded and refined production facilities for fissile material, missiles, and TELs.¹² The U.S. Intelligence Community assesses that North Korea can create fissile material for seven to 12 additional warheads per year¹³ to augment the regime’s estimated 30 to 60 warheads.¹⁴ In 2019, the regime conducted 26 missile launches, a record high for any year, and nine launches in March 2020, the most ever in a single month. The U.S. downplayed the missile launches, despite all of them being violations of U.N. resolutions.

The regime has created a new generation of more advanced, accurate, and survivable missiles for all ranges that escalates the nuclear threat against South Korea, Japan, U.S. bases in Okinawa and Guam, and the continental United States. North Korea’s ability to target American cities with thermonuclear hydrogen bombs could undermine the effectiveness of existing war plans, inhibit U.S. responses, and exacerbate growing allied concerns of abandonment and decoupling of the alliances.

What Washington Should Do

In response, the United States should:

- **Respond decisively when North Korea violates U.N. resolutions.** The United States should no longer ignore North Korea violations of U.N. resolutions. Any future North Korea provocation, particularly a nuclear or ICBM test, should trigger stronger U.S. enforcement of its laws, which, to date, has been lacking.

- **Review allied ballistic missile defense plans.** North Korea’s growing ICBM force with potential multiple warheads and more launchers poses problems for American homeland missile defenses. Pyongyang’s expanding force of tactical missiles and SLBMs increases the threat to U.S. allies and American forces in the region. The U.S., South Korea, and Japan should review and coordinate missile defense plans, including Tokyo’s recent decision to cancel the Aegis Ashore program.
- **Coordinate North Korea policy with Seoul.** South Korea embraced Kim’s positive yet minimalist remark about “the north and south tak[ing] each other’s hand again” after the COVID-19 crisis is resolved.¹⁵ Seoul remains eager to lower the bar on sanctions enforcement, offer economic benefits, and sign a premature peace declaration in an attempt to improve inter-Korean relations. Washington must counsel the Moon administration to first insist on tangible progress on threat reduction and denuclearization.

Since last year, North Korea has been warning that it will take provocative actions. In late December 2019, Kim announced that he no longer felt bound by his promise to President Trump to not conduct nuclear or ICBM tests. Instead, Kim warned that North Korea will “shift to a shocking actual action to make [the United States] pay for the pains sustained by our people.”¹⁶

Regardless of who the next U.S. President is, the U.S. can expect North Korea to return to its tactic of raising tensions. Pyongyang has historically ramped up tensions early in a new U.S. and South Korean administration to, as one North Korean defector told this author, “train them like a dog” and induce concessions. Provocations could include testing the ICBM and SLBM or resuming long-range missile launches.

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Endnotes

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