

North Korea's Increasing Nuclear and Missile Threat to the U.S. and Its Allies

THE ISSUE

North Korea has ratcheted up its military activity to unprecedented levels, including a record number of missile launches this year as well as highly provocative actions by its ground, air, and naval units near its border with South Korea. North Korea has steadily improved both the quality and quantity of its nuclear and missile arsenals. In recent years, Pyongyang has unveiled tactical and strategic missile systems that pose an ever-greater risk to the United States and its allies.

Pyongyang is seeking to gain tacit acceptance of its violations of United Nations resolutions, and hence prevent additional punitive measures, through routinization of its missile launches and reliance on Chinese and Russian obstructionism at the U.N. Security Council. By depicting its military provocations as justified responses to resumed U.S.–South Korean military drills, Pyongyang seeks to coerce the allies to curtail future exercises.

THE NUCLEAR THREAT

By 2017, North Korea was assessed to have produced between 30 and 60 nuclear warheads' or weapons' worth of fissile material with capacity to create seven to 12 additional warheads per year. By 2027, Pyongyang could have 200 nuclear weapons.

- **North Korea has so far conducted six nuclear tests.** The tests occurred in 2006, 2009, 2013, 2016 (two), and 2017.
- **During the 2017 test, the regime successfully tested a hydrogen (thermonuclear)**

weapon that is at least 10 times as powerful as the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs.

- **Washington and Seoul declared that Pyongyang has completed preparations for a seventh nuclear test.** It is expected that the next nuclear test will be of a new generation of smaller, tactical nuclear warhead for battlefield use, which would significantly increase the threat to South Korea and Japan, as well as to U.S. forces stationed there.

In September 2022, Pyongyang passed a new law that lowered the threshold for its use of nuclear weapons. The regime declared that it would use nuclear weapons in response to even *perceived preparations* for a U.S. or South Korean nuclear or *non-nuclear* attack on regime leadership, nuclear command structure, or important strategic targets.

THE MISSILE THREAT

North Korea has the ability to deliver nuclear weapons against targets in South Korea, Japan, U.S. bases in Guam and Hawaii, and the continental United States.

North Korea is producing a new generation of advanced mobile missiles that are more accurate, more mobile, and more difficult to detect and target than the previous generation, and have an enhanced ability to evade allied missile defenses.

- **In 2020, North Korea unveiled the Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), the world's largest**

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mobile missile that is capable of carrying up to four nuclear warheads. Pyongyang's ability to deploy more missiles on mobile launchers with multiple warheads risks overwhelming the limited U.S. missile defenses protecting the American homeland.

- **In 2022, North Korea has already launched more than 70 ballistic missiles and eight cruise missiles.** This is exponentially higher than the previous annual record of 26 missile launches in 2019. All North Korean ballistic missile launches, regardless of range, are violations of 11 U.N. Security Council resolutions.
- **This year's launches have included a** hypersonic glide vehicle with maneuverable warhead capable of evading allied missile defenses, a long-range strategic cruise missile, the first ICBM launches since 2017, the first intermediate-range missile flight over Japan since 2017, and the first underwater missile launch from a lake.

- **The North Korean regime has progressed from developmental testing of new missiles to exercising the tactical nuclear missile units to assess their operational readiness.** Pyongyang announced that the launches simulated tactical nuclear attacks on South Korean ports, airfields, and hardened military command targets.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The increasing rate and diversity of missile launches shows that North Korea is making significant progress toward implementing a more capable and flexible nuclear strategy, including the option of pre-emptive strikes with strategic, tactical, and battlefield nuclear weapons.

Kim Jong-un's willingness to resume a missile flight over Japan, and ICBM launches, as well as initiating extensive military exercises and increased provocations close to the inter-Korean border, increases regional tensions and risks triggering a military crisis that would involve the United States and its allies.