



To test or not to test: the question for North Korea

by Troy Stangarone

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Much like 2016, Kim Jong-un began 2017 by grabbing international attention when he stated that North Korea had entered the final stages of preparation for an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test. In subsequent days Pyongyang went further and declared that it could launch an ICBM [anytime and anywhere](#), adding to expectations that it could [test the incoming Trump administration](#) or seek to take advantage of [political turmoil in Seoul](#). While North Korea will not permanently forswear testing, this could be a time where inaction is preferable to action.

There has been a growing sense that North Korea has a preference for nuclear and missile tests near key dates to gain maximum international exposure or build domestic support on key occasions. Since Kim Jong-un's announcement there has been speculation that North Korea would conduct an ICBM test to [mark his birthday](#) on Jan. 6, or an ICBM launch to [coincide with Donald Trump's inauguration](#) on Jan. 20 to immediately test the new administration. Both dates have come and gone with no test. Now there is speculation North Korea will [test near Kim Jong-il's birthday](#) on Feb. 16, or in response to the annual joint military exercises between the United States and South Korea in the spring. An expectation has set in that North Korea will test, the only questions are when and why.

While North Korea will not refrain from testing indefinitely, there are good reasons for Pyongyang to refrain for the time being unless it is confident that it has a capable deterrent to demonstrate. In the past year, North Korea conducted two nuclear tests, a "space launch," multiple ballistic missile tests, and began to develop a second-strike capability. While there may still be technical advances the regime would like to test to confirm viability, the circumstances that many view as reasons for North Korea to test also serve as potential constraints.

Take the political unrest in South Korea. On the surface, the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye would seem like an opportunity for North Korea to exploit. However, the exact opposite may be the case. In last year's elections for the National Assembly, the opposition, which has historically favored engagement over a policy of pressuring North Korea, won a slim majority. Conservatives continue to face political difficulties. With the prospect of a snap presidential election that the opposition looks well placed to win, why risk testing and potentially swing the political mood back to the conservatives?

In terms of testing President Trump, Kim Jong-un's experience testing a new leader is mixed at best, and there are good reasons not to test the new US administration. In 2013, Kim quickly tested President Park and arguably lost as she called his bluff on Kaesong and forced North Korea to negotiate new terms for the industrial complex's operation.

At the same time, there seems to be little upside for North Korea in testing the Trump administration. In recent weeks, the Trump administration has taken a call from the president of Taiwan, suggested that it might be open to changing the "One China" policy, raised the possibility of blockading Chinese installations in the South China Sea, continued to threaten a trade war with China, and created concerns about its reliability with allies around the world. It's in North Korea's interest to ensure that China remains flexible on enforcing sanctions and the Trump administration so far has given Beijing little reason to want to strictly enforce sanctions or develop a good relationship. A test might push the United States and China to focus on North Korea rather than each other.

Additionally, Trump is not the typical US president. With his predecessors, there was an expectation that the administration would condemn the test, go to the United Nations for new international sanctions, and then perhaps work with allies to develop additional bilateral sanctions. The Trump administration might not follow this script. So far, only Iran has tested the administration and the initial indication is that Iran has gotten off lightly. Until there is a fuller understanding of how the Trump administration might react, perhaps it's better to let Iran and others test whether the new administration is truly one of action before engaging in provocative behavior – especially, if policy space is potentially opening on other fronts.

If North Korea does test an ICBM in the next few days or weeks, it likely will tell us more about how Pyongyang views the state of its weapons programs than it does about its desire to test the Trump administration or take advantage of the political situation in Seoul. While North Korea has been willing to accept sanctions as a price for advancing its programs, a test now could entail greater risks in terms of retaliation by the Trump administration and reverse favorable trends in US-China relations and South Korea. North Korea has consistently played the long game, it would be rational for them to continue to do so.

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