



North Korea's Coming ICBM by Larry Niksch

North Korea's test of a three stage "Taepodong" missile on August 31, 1998, halted the Clinton Administration's escalating claims in 1998 of success in its "engagement" policy towards North Korea. Those claims were already in doubt due to the revelations two weeks earlier of U.S. intelligence findings that North Korea was constructing underground an apparent nuclear installation. A more profound development came later in the form of reported U.S. intelligence assessments regarding the missile test. These findings are that: 1) the third stage of the missile, claimed as a satellite by North Korea, traveled over 3,000 miles and landed in waters near Alaska. 2) North Korea will have a missile capable of striking Alaska and Hawaii by 2002, for practical purposes an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). 3) North Korea is constructing underground sites to deploy these missiles (which suggests deployment as early as 2000). 4) North Korea will have a longer-range ICBM capable of striking the U.S. west coast and other parts of the continental United States within five years.

North Korea's 'missile shock' already is changing in fundamental ways how Americans view the North Korean problem. The first implication of the missile shock is the demonstration of failure in the U.S. strategy of "engagement" towards North Korea since the United States and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework in October 1994. The Agreed Framework shut down North Korea's open nuclear installations, but the engagement policy based on it has not modified North Korea's overall behavior. Instead of the "confidence building" U.S. officials spoke of after October 1994, North Korean hostility towards South Korea continues unabated. Pyongyang eschews economic reforms at home despite its declining economy. The Administration increasingly uses offers of food aid to secure minimal North Korean measures, mainly agreements to hold new meetings. North Korea responds by demanding more food and monetary payments.

Moreover, the missile test and the underground facility raise to a high likelihood that North Korea has continued a clandestine nuclear program, including the designing of nuclear warheads for missiles. In negotiating the Agreed Framework, the Clinton Administration wagered that the North Korean regime would collapse or reform before the crises would emerge. It has lost that bet. The Agreed Framework now faces the prospect of frequent, chronic crises that will weaken its credibility. Its credibility will be further sapped by the huge contradiction that will develop between a U.S. policy at the military level, operating on the assumption that North Korea's missiles pose a direct nuclear threat, and a diplomatic policy seeking to sustain an Agreed Framework that its authors tout as preventing North Korea from becoming a nuclear threat.

James Laney, former U.S. Ambassador to South Korea and a key architect of the Administration engagement strategy, concluded that "there's a growing sense of skepticism about the North's intentions" and that the missile test "shattered that [U.S.] complacency."

Militarily, the prime goal of the missile program is the development of an ICBM capable of striking the United States. Objectives of threatening Japan and selling missiles to Iran and other rogue states, though important, are secondary. Since North Korea tested its intermediate range Nodong missile in 1993, it has leapfrogged over several stages of missile development that U.S. intelligence agencies believed North Korea would pass through. U.S. intelligence officials acknowledged surprise over the third stage of the August 31 missile and its range.

The only positive note appears to be that a North Korean ICBM will not necessarily raise the likelihood that North Korea will opt for a new Korean war. The prospective ICBM will be offset by the deterioration of North Korean conventional military forces, which U.S. intelligence agencies have confirmed. Deterioration has come about because of ten years without Soviet arms supplies and the effects of economic deterioration on military readiness and military industries. The result is an erosion of North Korea's ability to invade South Korea with any prospect of gain. The loss of the invasion option will limit the strategic rationale for North Korea to use missiles militarily.

That being said, an ICBM will give North Korea a potent diplomatic card, which it can employ to raise tensions aimed at pressuring the United States at the negotiating table. The North Korea leadership likely views an ICBM as a trump card in its strategy of drawing the United States into a negotiation over withdrawing U.S. troops from South Korea. North Korea would offer a dismantling of ICBMs, which Washington will want, in return for a U.S. troop withdrawal.

The implications present at least three policy challenges to the United States. The first is the need to restructure U.S. military deterrence to send a direct message to North Korea that the United States will retaliate massively if North Korea ever launches its missiles against the United States or U.S. allies. Even if a North Korea ICBM does not appear to increase the chances of war, the margin of certainty for this would be strengthened by a restructuring of deterrence. Restructuring also would assure U.S. citizens of Alaska and Hawaii and the Japanese.

Many commentators cite theater missile defense and U.S. national missile defense systems as the answer. However, neither will be in place by 2005, if then. If North Korea deploys an ICBM between 1999 and 2002, restructuring measures would be needed quickly. There are available

measures such as returning heavy bombers to Guam (North Korea was very aware of the Guam-based B-52s in the 1980s) or rearming U.S. attack submarines in the Western Pacific with nuclear missiles. Restructuring would not require the deployment of additional U.S. ground forces to South Korea as the Administration contemplated in 1994. Additional ground forces would have little relevance to deterrence of an ICBM threat.

The second policy challenge is to restructure U.S. diplomacy to deal with North Korea's likely employment of an ICBM trump card on the U.S. troop issue. The United States will need a counter-diplomatic agenda on the ICBM and troop issue such as placing them in a broader context of Korean peninsula arms control.

The implication of the ICBM for broader U.S. diplomatic failure presents a challenge to formulate a fundamental diplomatic restructuring, which would abandon offers of food aid for minimal North Korean measures, link U.S. and allied offers of economic assistance with meaningful North Korean economic reforms and an end of provocations, and emphasize a North-South negotiated settlement as a firm requirement for a Korean peace agreement.

Larry Nicksch is a Specialist in Asian Affairs of the Congressional Research Service - Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division of the Library of Congress. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent views of the Congressional Research Service.