

Testimony Submitted to the Committee on Natural Resources

Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs

United States House of Representatives

“North Korea’s Missile Threat to the Indo-Pacific Region”

March 5, 2025

Bruce Klingner

Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia

The Heritage Foundation

My name is Bruce Klingner. I am Senior Research Fellow in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation. I have focused on North and South Korea for 32 years while at the Heritage Foundation and previously with the Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

North Korea’s nuclear, missile, and conventional forces are a formidable threat to the United States and its forces, citizens, and bases in the Indo-Pacific. Pyongyang’s history of provocation and intimidation is a consistent indicator of the regime’s intent to achieve its political objectives through the threat or execution of force.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un directed an expansive diversification of North Korea’s arsenal and accelerated nuclear and missile testing. New weapons overcame the shortcomings of their predecessors and now pose a far greater threat to allied forces, including missile defense systems.

Pyongyang’s continuing development of nuclear and missile programs beyond the necessary requirements for deterrence suggests that the regime strives for a true warfighting strategy. Such a development would not only further increase the military threat but also raise the potential for greater willingness to engage in ever more provocative behavior as well as coercive diplomacy.

Strategic Objectives of North Korea’s Nuclear Program

The regime’s nuclear weapons concurrently fulfill several domestic, foreign policy, and military objectives. Specifically, they:

- **Provide leadership legitimacy.** Kim Jong-un linked his personal prestige and legitimacy as leader to North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs. Kim’s gaining of *de facto* international recognition of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state is a source of national pride and perceived as achieving equal status with the United States.
- **Preserve the nation and the Kim regime.** Pyongyang justifies its nuclear weapons as guaranteed protection against the U.S. “hostile policy” of military attacks and regime change against authoritarian regimes.

- **Decouple the U.S. from its alliances.** Pyongyang’s increasing ability to target the continental U.S. with nuclear weapons has aggravated South Korean and Japanese concerns about U.S. capability, resolve, and willingness to defend their countries. North Korea seeks to erode the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrence guarantee by sowing doubt that Washington would come to allies’ defense once the American homeland is under nuclear threat.
- **Enhance coercive diplomacy.** Attaining an unambiguous nuclear intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capability could lead North Korea to perceive that it has immunity from any international response. Pyongyang could feel emboldened to act even more belligerently and seek to intimidate the U.S. and its allies into accepting North Korean diktats.
- **Augment warfighting capability.** Nuclear weapons are the great equalizer. North Korean nuclear weapons deter allied preemptive or decapitation attacks, inhibit allied military responses to North Korean actions, and threaten the American homeland. Preemptive nuclear attacks could target U.S. forces arriving on the Korean Peninsula and allied forces preparing a counteroffensive advance into North Korea, hold allied and U.S. cities at risk, and potentially provide the means for Pyongyang to reunify the peninsula on its terms.

Pyongyang has repeatedly declared that it would never abandon its nuclear arsenal and that “only fools will entertain the delusion that we will trade our nuclear deterrent for petty economic aid.”¹ The North Korean leadership has affirmed that the country’s nuclear weapons “are not goods for getting U.S. dollars” and not “a political bargaining chip.”² Pyongyang has declared that its nuclear arsenal provides a “trusted shield”³ and “treasured sword”⁴ to support both defensive and offensive missions.

After assuming power in December 2011, Kim Jong-un directed the North Korean military to develop a new strategy to invade and occupy Seoul within three days and all of South Korea within seven days. Accomplishing this objective would necessitate early use of nuclear weapons and missiles against superior allied conventional forces.⁵ North Korea has warned that “any military conflict on the Korean Peninsula is bound to lead to an all-out [nuclear] war” that will be an “ultra-harsh war of reaction targeting the entire US mainland.”⁶

¹ “North Korea Pledges Not to Abandon Nukes,” *The Korea Herald*, February 21, 2010, <https://www.asiaone.com/News/Latest%2BNews/Asia/Story/A1Story20100221-199951.html>.

² “2013 Plenary Meeting of WPK Central Committee and 7th Session of Supreme People’s Assembly,” North Korean Economy Watch, April 1, 2013, <https://www.nkeconwatch.com/2013/04/01/2013-plenary-meeting-of-wpk-central-committee-and-supreme-peoples-assembly/>.

³ “N. Korea Says No Plans to Give up Nuclear Capabilities,” Yonhap News Agency, May 28, 2013, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20130528008400315>.

⁴ Josh Smith, “‘Treasured Sword’: North Korea Seen as Reliant as Ever on Nuclear Arsenal as Talks Stall,” Reuters, November 13, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-nuclear-analysis/treasured-sword-north-korea-seen-as-reliant-as-ever-on-nuclear-arsenal-as-talks-stall-idUSKCN1NI132>

⁵ Jeong Yong-soo and Ser Myo-ja, “Kim Jong-un Ordered a Plan for a 7-Day Asymmetric War: Officials,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, January 7, 2015, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/Article.aspx?aid=2999392>.

⁶ Max Fisher, “Here’s North Korea’s Official Declaration of War,” *The Washington Post*, March 30, 2013, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/03/30/heres-north-koreas-official-declaration-of-war/>, and Yonhap News Agency, “N. Korea Threatens ‘Ultra-Harsh Action’ on U.S. Soil over Hacking Allegation,”

Troubling Changes to North Korea's Nuclear Doctrine. In September 2022, Pyongyang passed a law that codifies long-standing nuclear doctrine that disturbingly lowered the threshold for its use of nuclear weapons. The new legislation affirms a decade of North Korean statements that highlighted both the defensive nature of its nuclear arsenal while concurrently threatening pre-emptive nuclear attacks on the United States and its allies in response to even *perceived* preparations for an attack.

Given its poor intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities, Pyongyang might misconstrue allied actions, such as routine military exercises or response to a North Korean provocation, as a prelude to an actual attack. Pyongyang might assume the worst and rush to pre-empt the perceived pre-emption, raising the risk of inadvertently stumbling into a nuclear conflict.

North Korea's Diversified Nuclear Attack Strategy

Pyongyang is producing a new generation of advanced mobile missiles that, in addition to being more accurate, more mobile, and more difficult to detect and target, have an enhanced ability to evade allied missile defenses. North Korea's evolving nuclear and missile forces increasingly provide the regime with the ability to conduct a preemptive first strike, retaliatory second strike, and battlefield counter-force attacks. Pyongyang has an extensive and diversified military force to attack targets in South Korea, Japan, U.S. bases in the Pacific, and the continental United States.

Targeting South Korea. To prevent the U.S. from augmenting forces in South Korea during a conflict, North Korea could use nuclear weapons to attack South Korean ports and airfields. Pyongyang could threaten South Korean leadership and military targets with a nuclear attack to coerce Seoul to surrender or abandon a counteroffensive attack on North Korea. U.S. bases in South Korea would be high-priority targets.

The U.S. and its allies have assessed for a decade that North Korea has nuclear weapons for short-range and medium-range Scud and No-dong missiles that could target South Korea and Japan. In January 2021, Kim Jong-un declared that the regime had created "ultra-modern tactical nuclear weapons including new-type tactical rockets."⁷

While not all North Korean missiles would have nuclear warheads, Pyongyang could saturate missile defenses with large numbers of conventionally armed missiles. North Korea has demonstrated the ability to fire a salvo of several missiles at once, which could overwhelm allied BMD systems. The regime also has deployed more capable, longer-range artillery and multiple rocket launchers to augment missile attacks.

Removing Japan from the Equation. Pyongyang could threaten nuclear attacks to intimidate Tokyo into rejecting the use of Japanese ports, airfields, and bases for U.S. and U.N. Command operations against North Korea.

In 2017, North Korea threatened to "reduce the U.S. mainland into ashes and darkness" and warned that "[t]he four islands of the [Japanese] archipelago should be sunken into the sea by

December 21, 2014, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-12-21/north-korea-threatens-ultra-harsh-action-us-soil-over-hacking-allegation>.

⁷ "On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at Eighth Party Congress of WPK," Korea Central News Agency, January 9, 2021, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1610155111-665078257/on-report-made-by-supreme-leader-kim-jong-un-at-8th-congress-of-wpk/>.

[our] nuclear bomb.... Japan is no longer needed to exist near us.”⁸ North Korea also identified the Japanese cities of Tokyo, Kyoto, Nagoya, Osaka, and Yokohama as targets.⁹

Attacking U.S. Bases in Guam. North Korea could use the Hwasong-12 liquid-fueled and Hwasong-16 solid-fueled intermediate-range ballistic missiles, both with two variants of maneuverable warheads, to conduct theater nuclear strikes against U.S. bases in Guam to prevent the flow of forces and logistics to the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang could also use the Hwasal-1/2 long-range ground-launched cruise missile and Bulwhasal-3-31 sea-launched cruise missile.

Cruise missiles can fly lower than ballistic missiles and with maneuverable, less predictable trajectories to evade missile defense radars. Cruise missiles can hit their target from any direction, thereby posing difficulties for missile defense systems such as THAAD that do not have 360-degree radar coverage.

North Korea has repeatedly threatened to attack Guam:

- In October 2012, the National Defense Commission warned its strategic rocket forces can hit the continental United States and American bases in South Korea, Japan, and Guam.¹⁰
- In March 2013, the Supreme Command of the Korean People’s Army warned that “the U.S. should not forget that the Anderson Air Force Base on Guam...and naval bases in Japan and Okinawa...are within the striking range of the DPRK’s precision strike means.”¹¹
- In March 2013, North Korea put all of its artillery and rocket forces on the highest state of wartime alert, including units “assigned to strike bases of the U.S. imperialist aggressor troops in the U.S. mainland and on Hawaii and Guam and other operational zone in the Pacific.”¹² The Korea Workers Party Central Committee warned that its first strike “will blow up the U.S. bases for aggression in its mainland and in the Pacific operational theatres including Hawaii and Guam.”¹³
- In March 2016, the National Defense Commission warned of a preemptive attack and “offensive means have been deployed to put major strike targets in the operation theaters of South Korea within the firing range and the powerful nuclear strike means targeting

⁸ Jack Kim and Kiyoshi Takenaka, “North Korea Threatens to ‘Sink’ Japan, Reduce U.S. to ‘Ashes and Darkness,’” Reuters, September 14, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles/north-korea-threatens-to-sink-japan-reduce-u-s-to-ashes-and-darkness-idUSKCN1BP0F3>.

⁹ Japan Ministry of Defense, White Paper, Defense of Japan 2017, Part I, Chapter 1, Section 2, “Korean Peninsula,” p. 60, https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11591426/www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/pdf/2017/DOJ2017_1-2-2_web.pdf.

¹⁰ “North Korea Says Its Rockets Could Hit Continental US,” *Chosun Ilbo*, October 12, 2012.

¹¹ “N. Korea Warns of ‘Precision Strike’ on U.S. Bases,” CBS News, April 5, 2013, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/n-korea-warns-of-precision-strike-on-us-bases/>.

¹² Jethro Mullen, North Korea issues new threat to U.S. bases, CNN, March 26, 2013, http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/26/world/asia/north-korea-us-threats/index.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+rss%2F+cnn_world+%28RSS%3A+World%29.

¹³ “North-South Relations Have Been Put at State of War: Special Statement of DPRK,” Korea Central News Agency, March 30, 2013, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2013/201303/news30/20130330-07ee.html>.

the U.S. imperialist aggressor forces bases in the Asia-Pacific region and the U.S. mainland are always ready to fire.”¹⁴

- In April 2016, Pyongyang declared “the Korean People’s Army has long put into the range of its precision strike the U.S. bases and logistic bases for invading the DPRK, including the Anderson Air Force Base on Guam where B-52Hs are deployed and naval bases for nuclear submarines.”¹⁵
- In August 2017, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that “all the U.S. military bases in the operational theater in the Pacific including Guam will face ruin in the face of all-out and substantial attack.”¹⁶ To emphasize its threat, Pyongyang announced that it was considering “making an enveloping fire at the areas around Guam with medium-to-long-range strategic ballistic rocket Hwasong-12 in order to contain the U.S. major military bases on Guam.”¹⁷ The plan was to have the missiles impact 30–40 kilometers on either side of Guam.¹⁸
- In October 2017, North Korea renewed a threat to launch missiles toward Guam, warning that “reckless moves” by the U.S. would compel Pyongyang to take action. “We have already warned several times that we will take counteractions for self-defense, including a salvo of missiles into waters near the US territory of Guam.”¹⁹ Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho declared that North Korea might conduct a nuclear airburst test of a hydrogen bomb over the Pacific.²⁰

In November 2023, North Korea successfully launched its first military reconnaissance satellite after two previous failures. Pyongyang announced the satellite surveilled Anderson Air Force Base, Apra Harbor and other major U.S. military bases in Guam.²¹

Threatening the U.S. Mainland. North Korea has developed a series of ICBMs capable of attacking the United States. In 2013, Kim was photographed in front of a map labelled “U.S. Mainland Strike Plan,” with missile trajectories aimed at Washington, D.C.; Indo-Pacific

¹⁴ “National Defense Commission, Foreign Ministry Issues Statements on Foal Eagle, Key Resolve,” NK Leadership Watch, March 6, 2016, <https://nkleadershipwatch.wordpress.com/2016/03/06/national-defense-commission-foreign-ministry-issues-statements-on-foal-eagle-key-resolve/>

¹⁵ “National Defense Commission Spokesman Issues Statement on Peninsula Security,” North Korea Leadership Watch, June 21, 2016, <https://nkleadershipwatch.wordpress.com/2016/06/21/national-defense-commission-spokesman-issues-statement-on-peninsula-security/>.

¹⁶ Clynt Ridgell, “North Korea Threatened Guam Numerous Times in the Past,” PNC [Pacific News Center], August 9, 2017, <https://www.pncguam.com/north-korea-threatened-guam-numerous-times-in-the-past/>.

¹⁷ Christine Kim and Soyoung Kim, “North Korea Says Seriously Considering Plan to Strike Guam: KCNA,” Reuters, August 8, 2017, <https://news.yahoo.com/north-korea-says-seriously-considering-plan-strike-guam-222757124.html>.

¹⁸ Jung In-hwan, “Is N.Korea Raising Peninsula Tensions in Bid for US Negotiations?” *Hankyoreh*, August 11, 2017, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/806473.html.

¹⁹ Will Ripley, “North Korea Revives Guam Threat Ahead of US-South Korea Drills,” CNN, October 15, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/13/asia/north-korea-guam-threat/index.html>

²⁰ “North Korea Ramps up Threat to Test Hydrogen Bomb over Pacific,” *The Guardian*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/26/north-korea-threat-test-hydrogen-bomb-pacific>.

²¹ “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Visits Pyongyang General Control Center of NATA,” Korea Central News Agency, November 22, 2023, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1700640563-425435469/respected-comrade-kim-jong-un-visits-pyongyang-general-control-center-of-nata/>.

Command in Hawaii; San Diego (a principal homeport of the Pacific Fleet); and Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana (home of Air Force Global Strike command).²²

In 2017, North Korea conducted three successful tests of the Hwasong-14 (KN-20) and Hwasong-15 (KN-22) ICBMs to replace the earlier, less capable KN-08 and KN-14 ICBMs. The missiles were launched on lofted trajectories so as to not fly over Japan. Extrapolating the range indicated the missiles would be able to reach anywhere in the continental United States if launched on a regular attack trajectory.

In October 2020, Pyongyang unveiled the Hwasong-17 ICBM, the world's largest mobile missile on a launch vehicle. This missile, larger than North Korea's previous ICBM models, may be capable of carrying three or four nuclear warheads. In May 2023, North Korea tested the Hwasong-18 solid-fueled ICBM which can be launched more quickly than liquid-fueled ICBMs making it more difficult for the U.S. to identify and target the missile. In October 2024, Pyongyang test-launched the Hwasong-19, an even larger solid-fuel ICBM. Since North Korean solid-fuel ICBMs can already target all of the continental United States, the reason for a larger missile would be to carry multiple warheads.

Pyongyang has also revealed that it can indigenously produce mobile ICBM transporter-erector-launchers. The regime had previously been constrained in the number of ICBMs it could deploy by the small number of large logging vehicles purchased from China and converted to carry missiles. Pyongyang's ability to deploy more missiles on mobile launchers with multiple warheads risks overwhelming the limited U.S. missile defenses of 44 Ground-Based Interceptors protecting the American homeland.

In June 2024, North Korea claimed the first successful test of multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) technology using the first stage engine of a solid-fuel hypersonic IRBM. Pyongyang announced that warheads were guided to three separate targets. However, it will likely require several additional tests of longer duration and higher altitude before such capability is deployed.

North Korea has not yet conducted an ICBM flight test that successfully demonstrated a reentry vehicle capability. However, the CIA has assessed that North Korea's ICBM reentry vehicles would likely perform adequately if flown on a normal trajectory to continental U.S. targets.²³

Future Capabilities Open Dangerous Doors

North Korea's continually advancing proficiencies suggest Pyongyang may be on the path to developing capabilities that go beyond deterrence to a viable offensive warfighting strategy. In a few years, North Korea could have 100–200 nuclear warheads, dozens of mobile ICBMs, and hundreds of improved, survivable short-range, medium-range, and intermediate-range missiles as well as submarine-launched missiles.

²² Jeffrey Lewis, "North Korean Targeting," Arms Control Wonk, April 8, 2013, <https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/206515/north-korean-targeting/>.

²³ Ankit Panda, "US Intelligence: North Korea's ICBM Reentry Vehicles Are Likely Good Enough to Hit the Continental US," *The Diplomat*, August 12, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/us-intelligence-north-koreas-icbm-reentry-vehicles-are-likely-good-enough-to-hit-the-continental-us/>.

Pyongyang could feel emboldened to use nuclear threats to coerce Seoul into accepting regime demands and deter the United States from responding. Pyongyang might also assume that conditions for military action had become favorable if it believed the U.S. extended deterrence guarantee had been undermined.

Greater North Korean nuclear capabilities could undermine the effectiveness of existing allied military plans. Washington and Seoul could be deterred from implementing all phases of Operations Plan 5015, the comprehensive combined force plan for responding to large-scale hostilities with North Korea. The strategy includes options for preemptive attacks on North Korean leadership, nuclear, and missile targets as well as follow-on phases in which allied forces would enter North Korea after rebuffing initial regime attacks.

North Korea's ability to target American cities with thermonuclear weapons could inhibit U.S. responses or exacerbate growing allied concerns about the viability of the U.S. extended deterrence guarantee. South Korea and Japan have already questioned the willingness of the United States to risk its cities for theirs.

A more survivable North Korean nuclear force could create first-strike uncertainty for the United States with respect to whether it is able to target all of North Korea's nuclear weapons. The regime's ability to hold numerous American cities at risk of attack by hydrogen bombs could lead allies to perceive that Washington would not respond to North Korean actions.

What the United States Should Do

- **Affirm America's commitment to defend its allies.** North Korea is unlikely to attack South Korea or Japan as long as it perceives the U.S. commitment to its allies is beyond doubt. Washington should make absolutely clear to friend and foe alike that it will defend its allies by continually reaffirming its extended deterrence guarantee to use all necessary force, including nuclear weapons, in response to a North Korean attack. To deter North Korean attacks, Washington must maintain current levels of U.S. forces in the region until North Korean nuclear, missile, and conventional force threats have been sufficiently reduced. Washington and Seoul should maintain extensive allied conventional military exercises.
- **Enhance strategic defense of the American homeland.** North Korea's growing ICBM force with potential multiple warheads and more launchers poses problems for American homeland missile defenses. The U.S. currently has only 44 Ground-Based Interceptors. The U.S. should augment the force to 64 interceptors by fielding the Next Generation Interceptor (NGI). In addition to a necessary interceptor capacity increase, the NGI will have advanced capabilities that can address North Korea's advanced missiles more effectively.
- **Augment U.S. regional ballistic missile defense.** Pyongyang's expanding force of tactical missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) increases the threat to U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific region that are critical for responding to contingencies on the Korean Peninsula. Washington should assess necessary upgrades to defend U.S. forces, including augmenting the existing Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on Guam, a critical node in U.S. regional military plans. The United

States should deploy an Aegis Ashore system on Guam while simultaneously initiating an effort to improve the system incrementally with additional sensors and shooters.

- **Ensure the effectiveness of both offensive and defensive deterrence.** The United States and its allies must have the capacity not only to defend against incoming North Korean missiles, but also to reduce the number of missiles that are launched. Doing so requires comprehensive systems to monitor, identify, track, and target North Korean missiles, including mobile land-based and submarine-based versions.
- **Complete modernization programs for U.S. nuclear forces.** All components of the U.S. nuclear triad, including delivery systems and the warheads they carry, were built during the Cold War and will lose credibility due to aging effects if their replacements are not delivered on schedule. Ensuring that these modernization programs remain on track is essential for assuring allies of the U.S. commitment to extended deterrence.

Conclusion

North Korea has steadily improved both the quality and the quantity of its nuclear and missile arsenals. In recent years, Pyongyang has unveiled tactical and strategic missile systems that pose greater risk to the United States and its allies.

The United States must ensure that it can protect the American homeland and U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific region against this growing North Korean nuclear and missile threat. To this end, Washington should coordinate with South Korea and Japan to improve comprehensive allied missile defenses. The United States and its allies must also have sufficient offensive capabilities to reduce the number of North Korean missiles that are launched.

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