



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on May 15, 2017

North Korea Tests Ballistic Missile Capable of Reaching U.S. Base on Guam

North Korea's official KCNA news agency announced on May 14 that it had fired a new ballistic missile named Hwasong-12 (shown), which reached an altitude of 1,312 miles and covered a lateral distance of 489 miles.

A May 15 Reuters report cited statements from missile experts who noted that the missile's altitude indicated that it was launched at a high trajectory, which would limit the lateral distance that it traveled. However, noted the experts, if it were to be launched at a standard trajectory, it would have a range of at least 2,500 miles.



In an article posted on the 38 North website of the U.S. Korea Institute (USKI) department at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Dr. John Schilling — an aerospace engineer specializing in missile and spacecraft propulsion and mission analysis — observed that North Korea's test of the Hwasong-12 "represents a level of performance never before seen from a North Korean missile." Schilling's analysis continued:

The missile would have flown a distance of some 4500 kilometers [2796 miles] if launched on a maximum trajectory. It appears to have not only demonstrated an intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) that might enable them to reliably strike the U.S. base at Guam, but more importantly, may represent a substantial advance to developing an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Given speculation over the past months about the possibility of military action by the Trump administration to prevent Pyongyang from acquiring such weapons, the possible testing of ICBM subsystems in this low-key manner may be a North Korean hedge against the possibility of such action.

A major concern, however, is that North Korea is attempting to produce an ICBM carrying a nuclear warhead that would threaten not merely Guam, but the mainland United States. This was the stuff of nightmares during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union possessed thousands of such missiles. For North Korea to accomplish that feat would require a missile with a range of 8,000 km (4,800 miles) or more, plus the technology to allow a warhead's stable re-entry into the atmosphere.

How close are the North Koreans to accomplishing that objective? In his article, Schilling providing some answers. At present, the longest-range missiles in North Korea's arsenal, such as the one just tested, are intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM) capable of striking the U.S. base at Guam. Schilling wrote:

In January this year, intelligence sources reported that North Korea had deployed two prototype ICBMs at a test site, just under 15 meters long. All of North Korea's ICBM prototypes and mock-ups are well over that size, which left us puzzled. But this new missile comes in at just under 15 meters, and while its performance doesn't quite reach ICBM standards it clearly shares a common heritage



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with the KN-08 ICBM. Quite likely this was the missile that was reported in January.

Schilling noted that with North Korea's presently operational missiles capable of hitting targets in all of South Korea or Japan, and the extended range of the Hwasong-12 "won't greatly change the strategic balance — aside from Guam, there aren't really any interesting targets in that range."

What would change the strategic balance, notes Schilling, is an ICBM capable of reaching the U.S. mainland. However, North Korea is not there yet, and furthermore, the Trump administration has suggested the possibility of preventive military action by to keep Pyongyang from developing such weapons. As president-elect back on January 2, Trump tweeted: "North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the U.S. It won't happen!"

Schilling observed that the North Koreans may be testing short-range missiles at this point because a full three-stage ICBM "would be very unlikely to work the first time it was tested, and the failure would be both expensive and very provocative." It would be provocative in the sense that such an open display of ICBM development might indeed push the Trump administration into taking action before it is too late.

In Schilling's opinion, "U.S. cities will not be at risk tomorrow, or any time this year, since some tests have to be done with the full-scale system. With only one test of this reduced-scale system Pyongyang is probably some time from even beginning that process."

What Pyongyang hopes to accomplish by tests of the reduced-scale system such as the Hwasong-12 is to come as close as they can to having ICBM capability without showing their hand and incurring the wrath of Trump.

CNN quoted Melissa Hanham, senior research associate at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies in California, who, like Schilling, said the May 14 test could be a stepping stone to a longer-range weapon.

"This may become half or a third of an ICBM," she said, pointing out that such missiles are built in two or three stages stacked atop each other.

CNN also quoted a statement from Martin Navias from the Center for Defense Studies at King's College London, who stated that developing an ICBM capable of delivering a nuclear warhead able to survive reentry into the Earth's atmosphere is "a challenging form of technology, and there's no indication yet in the public realm that North Korea has it."

"If you think of a space vehicle re-entering the earth's atmosphere, they have heat protectors to stop it from burning up inside. The speed at which a missile comes through the atmosphere creates an enormous amount of air pressure and heat."

Following Sunday's test, the White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer issued a statement, noting:

North Korea has been a flagrant menace for far too long. South Korea and Japan have been watching this situation closely with us. The United States maintains our ironclad commitment to stand with our allies in the face of the serious threat posed by North Korea. Let this latest provocation serve as a call for all nations to implement far stronger sanctions against North Korea.

Most Americans would probably be more reassured if our government would work at perfecting a better anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system that could intercept any North Korean missiles fired in our direction, instead of placing our hopes on sanctions.



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