

Is the North Korean Satellite Launch a Game Changer?



Airbus Defense & Space and 38 North satellite imagery 2-4-16
Sohae Satellite Launch Station 2-5-16

Source: *Reuters*

North Korea launched a long-range rocket on Sunday carrying what it called an observational satellite. However, its neighbors and Washington denounced the satellite launch as a violation of previous accords conducted in defiance of U.N. sanctions and just weeks after a nuclear bomb test. But was the test a game changer in terms of missile technology and development of a possible nuclear warhead capability or merely the lofting into orbit of a satellite for observational, communications or other purposes. The answers, as usual, may be murky as regards what the Hermit Kingdom is up to in such dramatic demonstrations. Is it to buy bargaining leverage in negotiations with both South Korea and the Obama Administration, or is it something more concerning, perfecting an ICBM reaching US territory. We noted in an April 2015 *NER/Iconoclast* [post](#) on North Korean ICBM developments the comments of Admiral Bill Gortney of the Commander of North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) at an April 7, 2015 Pentagon News Conference:

At the news conference, Adm. Gortney flatly stated, Pyongyang has “the ability to put a nuclear weapon on a KN-08 and shoot it at the homeland [the continental United States].” He expressed confidence that the U.S. could knock down such a missile if launched by North Korea or

its ally, Iran.

He also admitted, however, that it is “very difficult” for the U.S. to counter the threat, because its intelligence is unable to follow the mobile ICBMs and give an efficient warning before they are launched.

Reuters [noted](#) in a report on Saturday:

U.S. Pacific Command said it had Aegis ballistic missile defense systems, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense batteries and the Sea-Based X-Band Radar in the region, which would work with Japanese and South Korean militaries to detect the launch.

Reuters reported the aftermath of the Sunday launch, [news.org](#) uses a liquid fuel booster stage which is vulnerable during launch. Further, it argues solid fuel ICBMs reduce the launch vulnerability exposure as they require minimal time for launch. Note this comment from John Schilling at 38N in Washington, DC: ‘North Korea would find it difficult to build an operational ICBM founded on the Unha-3 technology.’ John Schilling, in 38 North, concludes that “The Unha-3, by comparison (to the KN-08 missile), looks like it was designed to launch satellites rather than warheads.”

Second ,this was the second successful launch of a multi stage vehicle; i.e., first stage liquid fuel booster and second and third solid fuel stages. That means that the North Korean have demonstrated the capability of potentially developing an ICBM and the domestic means of making solid propellant.

Third, couple this satellite launch with the January 6th nuclear test that some experts consider a boosted fission warhead, as former Reagan era defense official Dr. Stephen Bryen inferred in our NER January 2016 [article](#).

Fourth, the fact that the trajectory of launch was in a southward direction, meaning a polar orbit, makes it problematic for the US Missile Defense Command as we have limited over the horizon radar detection capabilities and may lack anti-missile installations to detect and destroy objects on the Gulf of Mexico approaches .

Some experts like Ambassador. Hank Cooper, former Reagan era SDI development chief and Dr. Peter Pry of the Congressional EMP Commission believe that ultimately if North Korea could develop a low yield warhead it might be capable of detonating and causing an Electronic Magnetic Pulse (EMP) effect which could be devastating to the US. Cooper and ex-CIA Director Woolsey, also contend that if North Korea had a Fractal Orbiting Bomb System or FOBS with a nuke in a satellite that might be used to trigger an EMP. Other experts believe that North Korea doesn't presently have that technology, but is conducting both nuclear and missile tests to acquire data for further development and simulations.

Nonetheless, we [reported](#) in a November 2015 *NER/Iconoclast* post, Cooper urging the US BMD command to position Aegis BMD batteries in strategic locations on the US Gulf of Mexico Coast to deter possible FOBS threat from a southward polar orbit, as well as, from both ship and land based launched missile threats from rumored Iranian missile bases allegedly under construction in the Paraguana Peninsula of Venezuela. He reiterated those concerns in a February 2, 2016 [High Frontier alert](#) concerning this current North Korean satellite launch.

There has been no confirmation of the alleged Iranian missile base in Venezuela by either the US BMD or Southern Commands. The ship borne threats in the Gulf of Mexico are more concerning. Iran has tested the ship borne scenario as long ago as 2008 in the Caspian Sea and may have acquired the Russian Klub-Series of anti-ship and cruise missiles in a ship container technology. Russian cruise missile technology was displayed in strikes on Syrian targets from vessels nearly 900

miles distant in the Caspian Sea.

So why is North Korea continuing to scare its neighbors South Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the US, by violating both nuclear development and missile testing UN Sanctions? The answer, according to Dr. Bryen may be that to wants to have prestige and negotiating leverage from having achieved SLV satellite launches, nuclear weapons testing and possible missile technologies breakthroughs. More likely he says North Korea is in the arms business and wants to sell the data and technology to customers. A prominent customer he suggests may be Iran. North Korea has allegedly sold solid fuel missiles, notably BM25's to Iran for placement in underground silos. The BM25 Mustang has a range of 3,500 kames (approximately 2,180) capable of covering targets in Europe. Iran is also interested in North Korea large booster rocket development.

While disquieting as Sunday's North Korea satellite test may be the reality is US Ballistic Missile Shield now has to confront the reality that the Hermit State may have the capability to build, deploy and launch ICBMs like the mobile KN-08 under development with the range to reach the US. At issue is how long it will take North Korea to perfect nuclear warhead technology to fit their ICBMs to sell to rogue customers like Iran. With this weekend's satellite launch and an object in a polar orbit, perhaps it is sending back imagery and GPS information back to Pyongyang for those purposes. Stay tuned for further developments.