



Missile Defense Briefing Report: No. 336

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Related Categories: Missile Defense

NORTH KOREAN CAPABILITIES CAUSE WESTERN, EASTERN WORRIES

In 2012 and 2013, North Korea publicly paraded its KN-08 missile, suspected to be an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), on multiple occasions. The threat embodied by the KN-08 has become a growing focus among intelligence officials in Washington. In recent testimony before the House Appropriations Committee's Defense Subcommittee, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper warned that the DPRK's continued development of long range missiles (like the KN-08) poses a major threat to the U.S., particularly because such ICBMs could be tipped with a nuclear weapon. That assessment, however, isn't shared across the board; at least some defense experts remain skeptical about the maturity of North Korea's strategic arsenal, given Pyongyang's lack of extensive missile and nuclear testing.

U.S. officials are not the only ones worried about North Korea's strategic capabilities. Increasingly, China - which has long served as the North Korean regime's benefactor - appears to be as well. According to estimates from China's nuclear experts, Pyongyang may already have as many as 20 nuclear warheads in its arsenal, and has the capability to produce eight to ten more annually. (Seoul *Korea Times*, March 29, 2015; *Wall Street Journal*, April 22, 2015)

PYONGYANG INVESTS IN ITS "SATELLITE" PROGRAM

There has been a noticeable lack of activity in the North Korean space program since its last public launch in December 2012. That, however, may soon change. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un recently visited a new satellite command center, the location of which remains unreported, and encouraged scientists there to exercise the country's "legitimate right" to develop satellites. "The status of the (North) as a satellite producer-launcher remains unchanged though the hostile forces deny it and its space development can never be abandoned, no matter who may oppose," the North Korean leader was quoted as saying by regime media sources during the site visit. The move is sure to raise fears in the West; although the DPRK has termed its satellite program peaceful, analysts warn that a more robust North Korean space program will have a direct impact on the success of North Korean long-range missile capabilities. (Agency France Presse, May 3, 2015)

DEBATE OVER THIRD U.S. INTERCEPTOR SITE RAGES ON

Amid ongoing strategic threats from Iran and North Korea, missile defense proponents in Congress continue to push for the development of a third long-range missile interceptor site to be situated on the East Coast of the United States. But the Pentagon isn't eager to play ball. The U.S. military, including the Missile Defense Agency, is at odds with Congress over the idea because - although it agrees that a third site provides additional intercept opportunities - it has argued that there are other, more important ways to allocate missile defense funding. For instance, defense officials have pointed out the poor intercept ratio of the ground based midcourse defense system, which currently protects the homeland - and argued in favor of additional funding to improve intercept and tracking capabilities (rather than building the new site at this time).

Nevertheless, the idea of a "third site" continues to inch forward. Despite pushback from the Pentagon, environmental impact studies for the facility are now underway at multiple locations. (*Politico*, April 27, 2015)

NEW HORIZONS FOR THE S-400

Russia's upgraded S-400 air defense system could soon protect the country's distant east. The S-400, currently deployed to provide coverage for Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as protection of the Russian Northern Fleet, may be deployed to the Russian Far East in the near future, officials say. The versatile system could also soon become an export commodity. Moscow and Beijing are reported to have reached tentative agreement on Chinese imports of the S-400, paving the way for the PRC to become the first country to purchase the upgraded anti-missile system. (RT, April 21, 2015)