



Why North Korea's Missile Launch Matters

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North Korea's successful use last week of a long-range rocket to launch a satellite into orbit has catapulted the Asian rogue state back into the international spotlight. It also has brought back the global danger posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea into sharp focus.

There are at least two reasons why the North Korean test matters to the West.

First, the launch speaks volumes about the maturity of the North's missile arsenal. Ostensibly, the Dec. 12 launch was intended to put a commercial payload into orbit. But it also was a very public demonstration of North Korea's missile prowess because the rocket that carried the satellite into space can be repurposed for ballistic-missile duties.

In fact, Pyongyang has long blustered about doing precisely that and focused on developing a missile capability robust enough to hold the continental United States at risk. Until now, it has fallen short of that mark. Several previous tests of intercontinental-range ballistic-missile technology failed miserably. Because they did, North Korea still could be said to be a regional — rather than a global — threat.

No longer. The recent test demonstrates that the North "has developed the ballistic missile launch technology to fly a missile possibly [2,460 to 3,730 miles]," according to Victor Cha of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. At the low end of that range, Alaska is within North Korean missile range. At the high end, large swaths of the West Coast of the continental United States are. Of course, considerable work still needs to be done on miniaturization and weaponization before Pyongyang will be able to field a credible long-range nuclear capability. Still, North Korea's missile test is an undeniable leap forward.

Second, North Korea's missile gains aren't likely to remain strictly North Korean for long. The Kim regime has long been a serial proliferator of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missile-related technology to aspiring weapon states, particularly in the Middle East. Over the years, it has made significant contributions to a variety of nefarious causes, from Saddam Hussein's Scud missile arsenal to the Syrian regime's fledgling nuclear program (which was obliterated by Israel back in 2007).

North Korea's most significant proliferation client is Iran. Pyongyang and Tehran boast an extensive — and lucrative — dialogue on a range of WMD matters. Iran long has modeled its nuclear program after Pyongyang's and has sought to follow what can be termed the "North Korean model" of rapid, covert nuclearization. North Korean-Iranian ties extend to ballistic-missile collaboration as well. The mainstay of Iran's ballistic-missile arsenal, the medium-range Shahab-3, was reverse-engineered from North Korea's No Dong missile, and earlier this year the two countries signed a deal for further technological collaboration on both nuclear technology and ballistic missiles.

As an overt sign of this partnership, a delegation of Iranian engineers reportedly was present in Pyongyang to observe North Korea's failed missile launch last spring. A group similarly was in attendance at last week's successful launch. Given this history, it is reasonable to conclude that North Korea's recent missile advances could well translate into tangible gains in Iran's ballistic-missile capabilities in the near future.

That should matter a great deal to Pentagon planners. The Obama administration's four-phase missile-defense plan, colloquially known as the "phased adaptive approach," is predicated on the notion that an Iranian intercontinental-range missile capability won't emerge until 2015 at the earliest — and likely much later than that. However, if the North Korean regime shares its new missile know-how with its friends in Tehran, such a capability could materialize sooner, potentially ahead of any defenses the United States and its allies are erecting to protect against it.

If that ends up being the case, Tehran certainly will have Pyongyang to thank. Washington, which long has treated Iran's ballistic-missile program as slow-moving and incremental, will have itself to blame.