



## **North Korea's Missile Provocations: Not just a Gambit but an Imminent Threat**

Won Gon Park (Handong Global University)

After eighteen months of unusual calm, North Korea finally launched missiles on May 4 and May 9 of 2019. It was somewhat expected that North Korea would resume its military provocations after the breakdown of the second US-North Korea summit in February as compensation for the failure and a gambit for the next negotiation. However, North Korea's ballistic missile provocations are a new threat to South Korea, which has no means to defend itself. On top of that it is becoming a real worrisome challenge to South Korea's national security because of the lethargic responses of the South Korean and US governments.

As of early June, the South Korean and US governments have not officially provided detailed information on the North Korean missiles. South Korean government officials just reiterate that the projectiles are "short range" missiles and refuse to confirm whether they are a new type of ballistic missile or not. As usual, the Trump administration's evaluation of North Korean missiles is inconsistent. On May 24, John Bolton, the White House National Security Advisor, characterized the North Korean weapon tests as short-range ballistic missiles and a violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions. On May 29, Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan agreed with Mr. Bolton that North Korea's recent missile tests are a violation of United Nations resolutions. However, President Trump expressed a very different view of North Korea's missiles on his Twitter on May 25, saying "North Korea fired off some small weapons, which disturbed some of my people, and others, but not me." He already mentioned on May 12 that it is not "a breach of trust."

The most disturbing fact vis-à-vis the North Korea missile launch is that both the South

Korean and US governments have not given any warnings to North Korea. Rather, President Trump's aforementioned statements are meant to give *indulgentiam* (indulgence) to North Korea. If North Korea launches the same missile again, the US could not punish it because "it is a small and not disturbing one."

This is a serious challenge for South Korea's national security because the launched missiles are a new type of ballistic missile that South Korea has no means to defend itself from. It was not certain what kind of missile North Korea had used immediately following the first launch on May 4<sup>th</sup>. However, after the North Korean state-run *Rodong Sinmun* showed launch photos, it became virtually impossible to refute that they are a North Korean version of the Russian Iskander missile.

This missile has a range that would cover all of South Korea. Iskander-M, which is the Russian domestic version, has a range of 50 to 500 km and Iskander-E, the export version, has a range of 280 km. Yet there is report that it can cover up to 1,000 km. Russia intentionally reduced the Iskander range because it did not want to violate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). Since the North Korean missile, which has a high chance of being developed using the Iskander-E as a base, flew 480 km, it is clear that the North has managed to extend the range.

This missile can deliver a nuclear warhead. It is known that Iskander-M can carry 480 to 700 kg of warheads and if the range is shortened, it can carry up to 1,000 kg. It is a widely accepted fact that North Korea has succeeded in miniaturizing a nuclear warhead.

The most serious threat posed by the missile is the fact that the current systems that have been deployed by the ROK or the ROK-US alliance do not provide adequate defense. The US Forces in Korea's (USFK) ballistic missile defense systems such as the PAC-3 and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), and South Korea's missile defense systems of PAC-2 and Cheolmae-2, are not effective against this type of missile, as it is capable of flying above or below the target range of the aforementioned defense systems. More importantly, the missile performs "eccentric ballistic flight" which allows it to evade an anti-ballistic missile. Russia developed the missile mainly to outmaneuver the US missile defense system. There is an argument that PAC-3 MSE can intercept the missile, yet it has not been tested in the field and only the USFK has a limited number of PAC-3 MSE. The South Korean armed forces have a plan to deploy the PAC-3 MSE beginning in 2021.

South Korea's "Kill Chain" or "Strategic Target Strike," a preemptive strike mechanism developed against the North Korean missile threat, would not work against the new North Korean missile either. In order to hit a target preemptively, the system requires at least 30 minutes for

detecting, tracing, and destroying. However since the new missile uses solid fuel and has a transporter erector launcher, it only needs 10 to 15 minutes for the actual launch.

The new missile has far enhanced accuracy. Unlike other North Korean ballistic missiles, it has a 5-7m circular error probable (CEP), which represents very high precision. It also uses an inertial navigation system (INS) and an optical digital scene-mapping area correlator (DSMAC) rather than GPS or the Russian version of GPS, GLONAS. INS and DSMAC are self-propelled mechanisms that allow a missile to find a target by itself.

With these successful tests of the new missile, North Korea will produce more and deploy them in the field. As mentioned, the intention behind North Korea's missile launches is to increase its leverage in negotiations with both the US and South Korea. Because of the practical difficulty involved in deterrence and defense against the missile, North Korea can demand more. North Korea also can resume missile launches of the same kind at any time because it received exoneration from President Trump. North Korea does not have any reason at this point not to launch further missiles, as it can enhance its capability through further tests and simultaneously put President Trump in a more difficult position domestically. Only President Trump keeps insisting that the missile test is not a threat. US Congress, the media, American experts, and even his top officials continue to sound the alarm and criticize the North's missile launches. In this situation, if North Korea resumes missile provocations, President Trump cannot go back to the old days of the "Maximum Pressure" campaign and rather will likely choose to coax the North by lowering its bar for denuclearization. This is what North Korea has intended.

South Korea's defense is in jeopardy. Not a single official in the South Korean government has spelled out the danger of the North's new missile. The South Korean government has instead busied itself not saying that the missile is the "ballistic," or "Iskander" version. It remains impossible to come up with any kind of countermeasure without identifying the missile first.

In order to avoid being led down a road that would break down negotiations, the South Korean and US governments should officially announce the exact capability of the North Korean missile and strongly warn the North not to repeat such provocations. At the same time, South Korea and the ROK-US alliance should review deterrence strategies and create far more robust and comprehensive measures without excluding the possibility of integrating the missile defense systems of the ROK and the US.

- *Won Gon Park* (wonpark@handong.edu) is a professor at the School of International Studies at Handong Global University. He is also a member of the Policy Advisory Board of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Unification for the Republic of Korea.

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

“North Korea’s Missile Provocations: Not just a Gambit but an Imminent Threat” 979-11-88772-81-0 95340

Date of Issue: 7 June 2019

Typesetting: Jinkyung Baek

For inquiries:

Jinkyung Baek, Research Associate/Project Manager  
North Korea and National Security Research Group  
Asia Democracy Research Group

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 209)      j.baek@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute  
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,  
Seoul 04548, South Korea  
Phone 82 2 2277 1683    Fax 82 2 2277 1697