

By Bruce Klingner

North Korea has established an independent military division responsible for controlling and deploying its intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs). Known as the Musudan, these IRBMs are a strategic-level asset controlled by the senior leadership. Little is known about the missile, but U.S. assessments consider it to be a single-stage, road-mobile IRBM with a range of 1,800 to 3,000 miles--capable of targeting U.S. military bases in Japan, Okinawa, and Guam.

Twelve of these missiles were reportedly displayed in an April 2007 military parade in Pyongyang. A Musudan test flight from a North Korean test facility has not been identified, but media reports citing military and intelligence sources indicate a possible North Korean test flight in Iran in 2006.

An Increasing Threat

The South Korean Ministry of Defense assessed that Musudan missiles were first deployed in 2007. It is likely that only a limited number of these missiles were actually deployed, representing initial operating capability. However, the creation of a new IRBM missile command suggests that the missile has now been deployed in greater numbers and has reached full operational capability. Deployment of a new military capability, as opposed to augmentation of an existing capability, often requires changes in military doctrine, strategy, and unit structure (known as a "table of organization and equipment").

The creation of a new military command structure indicates that North Korea continues to increase its missile threat to the United States and its allies. Deployment of the Musudan enables Pyongyang to attack staging bases for U.S. forces responding to North Korean provocations or hostilities. For example, U.S. air and naval forces in Japan, Okinawa, and Guam would provide extensive support to South Korean military units in the initial stages of a North Korean attack on the South. The U.S. Marine Corps Third Marine Expeditionary Force on Okinawa provides a critical ground force component to combined U.S. and South Korean operational war plans.

The Musudan missile augments the existing deployed threat of 600 North Korean SCUD short-range ballistic missiles that threaten South Korea and 300 No Dong medium-range ballistic missiles capable of striking all of Japan. North Korea is also continuing development of the Taepo Dong intercontinental ballistic missile, which, when completed, could threaten the continental United States with a nuclear weapon--a Taepo Dong-2 missile flew 2,300 miles during an April 2009 test flight.

The ever-increasing missile threat from Pyongyang underscores the need to continue developing and deploying missile defence systems. Washington and Tokyo have deployed an effective--though still limited--missile defence system, while Seoul has yet to upgrade its

rudimentary missile defences. General Walter Sharp, commander of U.S. Forces Korea, urged South Korea in February 2009 to "continue to develop and field an interoperable TMD [theatre missile defence] system to protect critical civilian and military command capabilities, infrastructure and population centres." General Burwell Bell, Sharp's predecessor, commented that Seoul "would have to deploy a more sophisticated missile defence system, including PAC-3 and SM-3 missiles, to protect South Korea."

Recommendations

In order to counter the ever-increasing threat of North Korean ballistic missiles, the U.S. should:

- Continue missile defence development and deployment and call on South Korea to deploy a multi-layered missile defence system that is interoperable with a U.S. regional missile network. Although the Lee Myung-bak government has indicated greater interest in such a system than previous liberal governments, Seoul has yet to make necessary decisions to begin implementation.
- Consider Seoul's request to extend the permissible limits on its missile development beyond a 300-kilometer range. Washington should first offer expanded joint missile defence capabilities as well as reassurances of U.S. strike capabilities for the defence of South Korea. If these steps are deemed inadequate in light of growing North Korean missile capabilities and South Korean concerns over the transfer of wartime operational command, Washington should be prepared to accept the South Korean request.
- Encourage Japan to maintain its missile defence efforts. The newly elected Democratic Party of Japan government has expressed greater scepticism of missile defence than predecessor administrations. North Korean missile test flights have flown over Japan several times, and Japan is presently in range of hundreds of North Korean missiles.
- Continue joint military exercises with South Korea and Japan to enhance alliance deterrent and defensive capabilities.
- Congress should hold the Obama Administration to its commitment to advance the SM-3 program (particularly for the sea-based variant) and to give it an ascent-phase intercept capability.

Diplomacy Has Failed

Diplomatic efforts to constrain North Korea's advancing missile and nuclear weapons capabilities have failed. While a comprehensive integrated strategy of pressure and engagement may eventually return Pyongyang to negotiations, the U.S. and its allies should take sufficient steps to protect their citizens. After all, the recent increase in North Korean threats may reflect Pyongyang's intention to abandon its current diplomatic charm offensive and once again escalate tensions on the Peninsula.

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