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How Advanced Are North Korea's Missiles?

A close look at Pyongyang's strategic missile capabilities.

By John Schilling
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Analysts (myself included) writing for 38 North, a program of the U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS devoted to North Korea analysis, have been tracking North Korean missile development for many years. We are accustomed to seeing slow and intermittent progress: A test launch of a new missile every year or so, a few training exercises with older designs, and maybe some accompanying political bluster. The missiles in question were 1950s-era vintage Cold War designs modified to meet Pyongyang's needs, and never really impressed anyone. When the North started testing nuclear devices in 2006, that also was done at a slow pace and with unimpressive performance.

Things change. In 2012, North Korea grabbed the headlines by parading mock-ups of advanced new missiles, and launched a satellite into low Earth orbit to show what they could do. Nuclear tests are more frequent and more consistent in performance. Since late 2014, North Korea has been testing new missiles half a dozen or more times a year instead of once or twice. They've been doing more ground testing as well, and unlike before they are showing us detailed imagery of some of those tests.

A decade ago, one could conclude that while North Korea could cause some degree of damage to the South with its stockpile of antiquated weapons, their pretension of being a real nuclear power exceeded their technical capability and would remain so for many years to come. Pyongyang seems intent on showing us that this is no longer the case. They are making a serious effort to upgrade their strategic arsenal, in an uncharacteristically public fashion, and they have achieved some undeniable technical successes along the way.

Given the timing, it is easy to ascribe this to Kim Jong-un making a bid for attention. It seems prudent to pay some degree of attention to the man waving about an arsenal of nuclear missiles, though with a skeptical eye to the possibility of deception. What are the real, present capabilities of North Korea's strategic missile forces, and what is the future likely to bring?