

NORTH KOREA: Pyongyang's pyrotechnics prelude a new nuclear normality

The North Korean statement carried on state media on 10 October characterized the recent round of missile tests as simulations for tactical nuclear weapons strikes and dismissed the need for any dialogue or negotiation with “enemies,” meaning Washington and Seoul. The statement followed two overnight shorter-range missile launches into the Sea of Japan, possibly from submarine platforms, and a series of live-fire drills in recent days.

The Kim regime's belligerence and bombast never surprise, but one point of note regarding this recent flurry of activity is the relative lack of substantive response internationally. Globally, all states remain preoccupied with events in Ukraine, while Washington's current Asia focus appears to be primarily on the Taiwan Strait. The subsection of international public opinion that follows East Asian affairs is jaded by yet another round of North Korean tests (numbering more than 20 such events so far this year). Markets, too, already seem to price in much of the risk arising from Pyongyang's pyrotechnics, such that specific test events no longer cause panic.

Meanwhile, hiding in plain sight, North Korea is fast approaching the point where it will have the capability to effectively hold much of the world hostage with nuclear-tipped missiles that could reach not just neighboring states like South Korea or Japan but targets as far away as the continental United States. These are not simply crude capabilities that could be readily preempted, but rather modern systems that are becoming more advanced with every round of testing. They seemingly could be launched not only from submarines but also from mobile platforms on road or railway vehicles, as well as from traditional siloes. Current-generation missile defense systems would be pushed to the limits, and next-generation systems may not be deployed for another five years or so.

This means that North Korea is finally within striking distance of achieving its long-term objective of becoming a de facto nuclear weapons state. A seventh nuclear test is now a distinct possibility in late October or early November before the US mid-term elections.

The US and South Korea will continue responding with further joint military exercises, with Japan having an increased role. Yet such responses, while of practical operational value, do not deter North Korea but rather seem to incite yet more tests. Certainly, joint exercises do not contribute to creating the conditions for denuclearization, and other response options like sanctions have by now become routine.

With no obvious way to alter this concretizing reality in the near-term, the international community would then have to rely on Kim Jong-un's 'rationality' and sense of responsibility to avoid significant impacts on global markets. As events in Ukraine remind us, the goodwill of autocrats can never be entirely depended upon.

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