

US anti-missile test sends warning to North Korea

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31 May 2017

Amid high tensions with North Korea, the US military yesterday conducted the first successful test interception of a dummy intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) high over the Pacific. The exercise is a demonstration to North Korea and also China that the US can launch a nuclear attack and counter any attempt to retaliate.

The Pentagon has released few details of the test. The target, launched from the US test range on the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, was destroyed by an interceptor missile fired from an underground silo at the Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. A “kill vehicle” launched by the interceptor destroyed the ICBM target through a direct collision rather than an explosion.

Director of the US Missile Defence Agency, Vice Admiral Jim Syring, hailed the successful test as “an incredible accomplishment for the GMD [Ground-based Midcourse Defence system] and a critical milestone for this program.” Without referring explicitly to North Korea, he added that “this test demonstrates that we have a capable, credible deterrent against a very real threat.”

While the US routinely describes its anti-ballistic missile systems as “defensive,” the opposite is the case. Nominally directed against North Korea, their real purpose forms part of Pentagon planning for a nuclear war with China or Russia in which a first strike by the US failed to destroy the enemy’s nuclear arsenal entirely. The anti-missile systems seek to knock out any surviving missiles launched in retaliation.

The existing GMD system is not designed to counter a large wave of nuclear missiles. At this stage, it has only 36 interceptors in place—32 in Alaska and four in California—with plans to increase the total to 44 by the end of the year.

The \$36 billion GMD system has been plagued by the technical difficulties associated with detecting, tracking and intercepting an ICBM vehicle travelling in space at very high velocities. While the Pentagon declared the anti-missile system ready for combat in 2004, only four of the previous nine intercept tests were unequivocally successful in destroying the target, including the last one in June 2014.

The GMD system is just one aspect of the US anti-ballistic missile systems, together with land-based Patriot and Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) weapons and the navy-based Aegis system, designed to destroy shorter-range targets at lower altitudes. These are part of a highly-integrated network that includes the controversial stationing of THAAD launchers in South Korea and powerful X-band radar installations in Japan.

Newly-elected South Korean President Moon Jae-in yesterday ordered an investigation into why the country’s defence ministry failed to inform him that the US had added four THAAD launchers to its battery in South Korea. During the May 9 presidential election, Moon postured as a critic of the THAAD installation but stopped short of pledging to remove it.

The THAAD system provoked widespread opposition in South Korea. Its installation incorporates the country further into US preparations for war with North Korea or China. Beijing has repeatedly condemned the deployment of the THAAD battery and its associated X-band radar, which allows the US to peer deep inside Chinese territory. In the event of war, the radar system would add crucial minutes to the detection of Chinese missile launches and thus the US military’s ability to counter them. China has already retaliated with economic boycotts of South Korean goods.

The failure of the US or South Korean militaries to

inform President Moon of the new THAAD deployments underscores the degree to which the country is fully integrated into Washington's military planning. In the event of a war with North Korea, the Pentagon would automatically assume operational command of the South Korean military, which, including reserves, numbers over three million personnel, backed by sophisticated air, naval, missile and artillery systems.

The Pentagon's determination to press ahead with the full deployment of the THAAD system in South Korea, alongside the GMD test, is part of the continuing US military build-up for war with North Korea. The US navy announced last week that the USS Nimitz was leaving to join two other nuclear aircraft carriers and their strike groups already engaged in exercises off the Korean Peninsula.

North Korea yesterday denounced a joint exercise on Monday during which two American B-1B strategic bombers, accompanied by South Korean fighters, flew close to the demilitarised zone between the two Koreas. While Pyongyang described it as a "nuclear bomb dropping" drill, the B-1B bombers are said to be configured currently for carrying massive loads of conventional bombs.

The exercise was apparently in response to the latest North Korea short-range missile test on Monday, which the US and its allies condemned. While constantly inflating the so-called threat posed by North Korea's tiny nuclear arsenal, the US and international media are uncritical of the ongoing modernisation and testing of American nuclear weapons systems, such as yesterday's GMD test and the test firing of a Minuteman III ICBM over the Pacific earlier this month.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula remain very high as the Trump administration applies pressure on China to force its ally North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Trump officials have warned time is short and, if China fails, the US will deal with North Korea, by implication through military means.

Speaking on PBS yesterday, James Clapper, director of national intelligence under the Obama administration, offered a bleak assessment of the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Asked if there was a realistic chance that North Korea would end its nuclear

programs, he said: "I think it's unlikely, and I certainly think it's not realistic for us to expect the North Koreans to give up their nuclear weapons. That is their ticket to survival."

Asked what he thought was the best approach, Clapper declared: "Well, I think dialogue. And I know there's a long history here of dialogue which hasn't turned out so well with the North Koreans ... But I think that's a far better option than a military confrontation, which I think would be a disaster."

Yet it is precisely dialogue that the Trump administration has ruled out, insisting that North Korea take steps to denuclearise before talks can even begin. With no sign that China has been able to bring North Korea to heel, the US is recklessly embarking on a confrontational course that could trigger a disastrous war.



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