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A Comprehensive Set of Military Options for Countering North Korea's Growing Missile Threat

Baker Spring

Starting on the Fourth of July, North Korea launched a salvo of seven short-, medium- and long-range missiles. Despite the failure of the single long-range missile, the Taepo Dong-2, the launches confirmed that North Korea is seeking to advance its missile arsenal in order to threaten both the United States and its allies in Asia. The short- and medium-range missiles, the Scud and No Dong respectively, all flew in the direction of Japan, so it seems that North Korea is focused on achieving a military capability to threaten Japan in particular. It remains unclear at this point whether North Korea can arm its missile arsenal with nuclear warheads. While North Korea is openly pursuing nuclear weapons and is thought to have a small number of such weapons, mating these weapons to ballistic missile delivery systems requires additional technological steps.

The U.S., in partnership with its allies, needs a comprehensive set of military options to counter North Korea's growing missile threat. The need for a comprehensive set of options is necessary because North Korea's pursuit of ballistic missiles complements other military capabilities, including aggressively deployed conventional forces and nuclear weapons. Moreover, North Korea is known for its erratic behavior. Only a comprehensive set of U.S. and allied options will address the full array of military capabilities North Korea is pursuing and serve to reduce the likelihood of aggression. Similarly, a comprehensive set of options will provide

President Bush and allied leaders with the flexibility they need to respond militarily to an unpredictable North Korean regime.

Four Military Capabilities for Countering North Korea

North Korea is pursuing an array of military capabilities for a number of specific purposes. Its large and aggressively deployed conventional military forces are designed to hold South Korea hostage by threatening it with widespread destruction. Seoul, the capital of South Korea, is particularly vulnerable to this threat. North Korea wants to undermine the U.S.-South Korea alliance, while reserving its long-sought goal of unifying all of Korea on its terms through intimidation or force.

North Korea's medium-range missile force, whether armed with conventional warheads or weapons of mass destruction, is designed to intimidate and isolate Japan. While isolating Japan serves North Korea's immediate purpose of complicating the ability of the U.S. to intervene militarily in East Asia, it also appears that North Korea is doing the bidding of its long-time friend China. China seeks to

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isolate Japan because it sees Japan as a barrier to achieving regional hegemony in East Asia.

The long-range missile system, particularly when armed with nuclear warheads, is designed to deter the U.S. from intervening militarily in East Asia. Specifically, North Korea wants to hold the U.S. homeland hostage to the nuclear threat.

The U.S., in partnership with its allies, can respond to the North Korean military threat by pursuing four different military capabilities of its own. The overall effort should be seen as parts of a larger damage limitation strategy. This strategy would lessen both the likelihood and potential impact of military aggression by North Korea on the U.S. and its allies. The successful execution of this strategy will leave North Korea in a position where its threat of military aggression provides little political leverage and ultimately loses credibility. The U.S. should pursue these four military capabilities:

Capability #1: A conventional defense of South Korea. North Korea's aggressively deployed conventional forces are designed to impose widespread destruction on South Korea. Since the Korean War armistice, U.S. and South Korean policy has been to deter the resumption of the conventional conflict by convincing North Korea and particularly its Soviet patron that such a conflict could lead to escalation and a nuclear confrontation. With the Soviet Union gone and China apparently unwilling to assume a role in restraining North Korea, North Korea is becoming increasingly aggressive in threatening conventional attack.

The U.S. and South Korea should obtain capabilities that will allow them to prevail in a conventional conflict with North Korea in ways in which destruction to South Korea is kept to a tolerable level. A credible defense of Seoul must be a part of this plan. This defense will require developing systems, such as next generation laser weapons, for defending against and rapidly destroying artillery and rocket systems. U.S. and South Korean forces must be prepared to stop North Korean armored columns dead in their tracks at the border. Technologically superior ground forces and the achievement of air dominance to support precise air-based attacks on enemy armor must remain in place. The Army's Future Combat System and the Air Force's

F-22 Raptor are logical steps forward in these areas.

Capability #2: A global, layered missile defense system. North Korea already has an arsenal of short- and medium-range missiles and is seeking to obtain a working long-range missile. The short- and medium-range missiles are for threatening Japan and the long-range missiles for threatening the U.S. homeland. In early 1991, the Department of Defense proposed the Global Protection Against Limited Strikes (GPALS), a global, layered missile defense deployment plan or architecture. This architecture included ground- and sea-based interceptors, primarily for countering short- and medium-range missiles. It also included ground-based interceptors for countering long-range missiles. The architecture also expected that the sea-based interceptors could be refined to provide a defense against long-range missiles in the midcourse and ascent phase of flight. Most importantly, the architecture envisioned the deployment of individual space-based interceptors that could counter all but the shortest-range missiles, including in the boost-phase. Sensors would include surface-based radar and space-based sensors. All elements of the plan were to be tied together with a flexible command and control system.

The U.S. could have had this system in the field today, but the Clinton administration abandoned essential portions of it, and the Bush administration has not revived many of them. This architecture could undermine the confidence North Korea's leadership has in its ability to impose widespread destruction in the U.S. and its allies by means of missile delivery systems. The U.S. should move quickly to revive all elements of GPALS and facilitate direct Japanese and South Korea participation in the effort.

Capability #3: A new nuclear deterrent. Nuclear deterrence remains essential to U.S. and allied security, but the U.S. nuclear arsenal has been carried over from the Cold War and is not well positioned to deter regimes such as North Korea's. The Bush administration's 2002 Nuclear Posture Review did put a policy in place for adapting the U.S. nuclear deterrent to the requirements of the post-Cold War world. Thus, the policy direction is in place to make the U.S. nuclear deterrent as effective as possible in addressing the kind of nuclear

threats embodied by the North Korean nuclear weapons program. Now the task is to execute the policy.

A key element of the new policy is the recognition that the threat of widespread destruction in North Korea has little deterrence value to a leadership that has no concern for the well-being of its populace. The U.S. nuclear deterrent needs to be capable of holding targets at risk that are valued by the North Korea leadership as means for personal and regime survival. These targets include strategic weapons, personal security systems, the instruments for domestic repression and the intelligence apparatus, among others. Further, U.S. leaders need to learn how to manage and operate a new nuclear deterrent in balance with defensive forces, including missile defenses, and in a strategic environment defined by nuclear multipolarity. In the latter case, this means understanding the deterrence value of U.S. nuclear forces relative to aggressive nuclear partnerships. Such a partnership between China and North Korea is relevant to this requirement.

Capability #4: Preemption. Bush administration policy has been clear in stating that the U.S. will not wait to be attacked and the U.S. reserves the option of striking preemptively. Clearly, the U.S. needs to have this option, and it should have been used if U.S. intelligence believed that the Taepo Dong-2 missile in particular had been armed with a nuclear warhead. It is important, however, not to underestimate the risk of a preemptive attack leading to a resumption of armed assaults in a Korean War that is still not officially over. A preemptive capability must be paired with a capability to provide an effective conventional defense of South Korea, as described earlier.

Maintaining a preemptive capability requires systems for locating the relevant targets and directing weapons against them on a timely basis. The weapons should include attack aircraft, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles. These weapons should be armed with conventional warheads when there

is high confidence that they will destroy the targets in question, but should also include existing or new nuclear warheads when they are required.

Conclusion

North Korea's salvo launch of ballistic missiles on the Fourth of July, serves to define the kinds of national security threats that can emerge in the post-Cold War world. These threats can arise with little notice and are likely to be complex when they do emerge. Further, the stakes involved for the American people are exceedingly high. Indeed, they are potentially much higher than those involved in the atrocity of September 11, 2001. The option of building the military capabilities to address these threats does not exist because the threats themselves cannot be fully assessed in advance. The best the Department of Defense can do is to assess the capabilities of those who may come to threaten the U.S. and its allies. Using these capabilities-based assessments, the Department then should seek to obtain countervailing military capabilities.

Such planning must be comprehensive in order to give U.S. and allied leaders the best array of options for responding to a threat that does emerge. No single U.S. military capability can be expected to meet a specific threat because that threat is all but certain to have connections to other potential threats. The situation with North Korea has made this clear. North Korea's salvo launch of ballistic missiles is not just about the missile threat. It has critical connections to potential conventional threats, nuclear threats and the behavior of other states, such as China. The American people expect and deserve the government to provide the military with the full array of military capabilities for addressing any threat that does emerge in a way that improves the nation's overall security.

Baker Spring is EM. Kirby Research Fellow in National Security Policy in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy at The Heritage Foundation.