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By Peter Hayes

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Report by Peter Hayes](#)

[III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses](#)

I. Introduction

Peter Hayes, Nautilus Institute Executive Director, compiled this summary of recent events and analysis of the DPRK's nuclear capability following the testimony from Vice Admiral Lowell F. Jacoby that North Korea has the capacity to arm their missiles with a nuclear device and his political assessment that it was unlikely that North Korea would be willing to surrender or trade away its full nuclear capacity.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of

views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Report by Peter Hayes

"Defense Intelligence Agency Says North Korea has Nuclear Armed Missiles"
by Peter Hayes

On Thursday the 28th of April at a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing the head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Vice Admiral Lowell F. Jacoby testified that North Korea has the capacity to arm their missiles with a nuclear device. He also made the political assessment that it was unlikely that North Korea would be willing to surrender or trade away its full nuclear capacity.

See the following transcript: <http://clinton.senate.gov/4.28.05.html>

Senator Clinton: According to a March 15th *Washington Times* article a North Korean Foreign Ministry Spokesman said, "reality proves that our possession of nuclear weapons guarantees balance of power in the region and acts as strong deterrent against the outbreak of war and for maintaining peace." He went on to add that, "the North [sic, NAPSNet editor] will take necessary countermeasures including bolstering of its nuclear arsenal to cope with the extremely hostile attempt of the United States to bring down our system." Admiral, do you have an opinion as to whether North Korea would be willing under certain circumstances, including a guarantee by the United States not to forcibly attempt to change North Korea's regime, to give up its nuclear programs?

Admiral Jacoby: Senator our assessment is that the nuclear capabilities and the ambiguity that they have pursued for so many years was a major bargaining chip leverage in their position. Our assessment has been that it's unlikely that they would negotiate it away completely that capability or associated ambiguities because of their concerns about change in world events, regional dynamics and so forth, that that would be viewed by them as leaving them vulnerable.

...

Senator Clinton: This is an area of grave concern to me and I assume, to many others of my colleagues and it's very frustrating. We have been locked into this six party talk idea now for a number of years and all the while, we've seen North Korea going about the business of acquiring nuclear weapons and the missile capacity to deliver those to the shores of the United States and so Admiral let me ask you, do you assess that North Korea has the ability to arm a missile with a nuclear device?

Admiral Jacoby: My assessment is that they have the capability to do that, yes Ma'am

Senator Clinton: And do you assess that North Korea has the ability to deploy a two-stage intercontinental missile, a nuclear missile, that could successfully hit U.S. territory?

Admiral Jacoby: Yes, the assessment on a two stage missile would give capability to reach portions of U.S. territory and the projection on a three stage missile would be that it would be able to reach most of the continental United States. That still is a theoretical capability in a sense that those missiles have not been tested but that is part of the community position.

Senator Clinton: So the two-stage, you are testifying, is already within their operational capacity?

Admiral Jacoby: Assessed to be within their capacity, yes.

Senator Clinton: And that's the west coast of the United States?

Admiral Jacoby: I would need to look at the range arcs, it's certainly Alaska and Hawaii and I believe a portion of the Northwest.

This statement has provoked mixed responses from other government officials. At a White House press conference President Bush responded:

"?there is concern about his [Kim Jong-il's] capacity to deliver a nuclear weapon. We don't know if he can or not, but I think it's best when you're dealing with a tyrant like Kim Jong-il to assume he can. " Full transcript available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/04/20050428-9.html>

Some defense officials countered Jacoby's statement:

"?two U.S. defense officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said North Korea is several years away from developing a nuclear-armed missile that could reach the United States." <http://asia.news.yahoo.com/050429/ap/d89p15to2.html>

Chris Nelson in his Nelson Report, an insider's newsletter in Washington DC [<http://samuelsinternational.com/NelRpt.html>] stated: "commentators noted that Jacoby had tried to extend his tenure by a year, but had failed. Perhaps now we know why. On the matter of DPRK missiles able to hit the US, this is, indeed, 'old news', as DIA press flacks tried to claim this afternoon, while dismissing or conflating the first part of Jacoby's war head statement as 'old news', also. As to Jacoby's dismissal of the entire premise of Bush Administration policy toward N. Korea...god only knows what he was trying to say."

Meanwhile Senators Hilary Clinton and Carl Levin followed-up on this testimony with a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice:

"We urge you to engage in further diplomacy with the North Koreans to address this threat - both within the multilateral context of the Six Party Talks, and bilaterally. It is important to include our allies and friends in Northeast Asia in our diplomatic effort, but this does not mean that we cannot hold bilateral talks with North Korea. Indeed, our allies in South Korea would like us to engage in bilateral talks, and have even stated that the North Korean proposal of a nuclear freeze is a good first step. In short, we urge you to pursue all avenues of negotiation." The entire letter is available online at: <http://clinton.senate.gov/4.28.05.html>

The US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice responded on May 2 to this issue by saying that "the United States maintains significant, I want to underline significant, deterrent capability of all kinds in the Asia-Pacific region." http://news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=/afp/20050502/pl_afp/usnkorearice_050502201148

Peter Hayes, Director of Nautilus Institute, comments on these developments: "It is improbable that the North Koreans would put a nuclear device on a missile, let alone test one, for the simple reason that they don't have much fissile material for many warheads, and North Korean missiles are a very unreliable way to deliver such a device in any case. It is worth noting that the problem with North Korean missiles is not primarily their poor accuracy. If they take off and the various stages separate to lob a warhead out of the atmosphere to plunge back on a ballistic trajectory, then a high-level atmospheric explosion would be quite effective both in disabling C3I systems (EMP effect) or city-busting (near or even distant, over-the-horizon misses would be quite scary, depending what city you are in).

The problem with North Korean missiles is their likely unreliability. The chances that a North Korean missile will take off (say 60%), and that the stages separate (90% * 90%) is a combined probability of the missile working of 48% with a guaranteed, near-100% assured retaliatory and exterminatory reply from the United States. Achieving delivery missile reliability is why the United States tests a new missile system scores of times before fielding it, and then tests deployed missiles regularly out of the active arsenal to ensure that they work; and even then, deployed missiles don't work as designed all the time.

The North Koreans are terrible at systems engineering. My estimate is that each North Korean missile is essentially a new type of unknown operating characteristics. A North Korean missile attack would look like an uncontrolled fireworks display; they are as likely to nuke themselves as they are some distant target.

This unreliability doesn't matter if one is firing hundreds of North Korean missiles as occurred in the war of the cities between Iran and Iraq; enough launch and then land somewhere near where people live for the systems to "work" by terrorizing civilian populations. But it would be incredibly stupid for the North Koreans to entrust scarce, hugely valuable nuclear warheads to lousy delivery systems aimed at civilian targets when they have high value military targets and hundreds of fishing vessels and dozens of diesel submarines, or simply can emplace them under invasion corridors inside North Korea itself. In fact, it would be good for our security if the North Koreans put whatever nuclear devices that they have on missiles rather than explore other, more threatening delivery pathways."

What really matters in the latest round of flame-throwing rhetoric from both sides is not what President George Bush said about President Kim Jong Il or the DPRK response. Secretary of State Rice's emphasis on the fact that the United States keeps a "significant, deterrent capability of all kinds in the Asia-Pacific region" means that the DPRK and the United States have now locked horns in an old, Cold War game: mutual nuclear threats aimed at achieving general "deterrence."

Whatever the Secretary's intent, the North Koreans will interpret her phrase unambiguously to mean that the United States has reactivated its nuclear deterrence machinery in the region, effectively put on the back burner since the final withdrawal of American tactical and theater nuclear weapons in February 1992.

This was a huge step backwards for the United States and the region. It will take all the players party to the Korean conflict some time to adjust to the fact that we are now in an era of accelerating nuclear proliferation in East Asia.

The primary measure of American security policy in relation to North Korea is whether it a) destabilizes the DPRK itself (with consequent possible loss of control of fissile material and warheads), b) risks unleashing war across the Demilitarized Zone (with the risk of potential escalation to use of weapons of mass destruction in the Korean Peninsula and surrounding areas), and c), further stimulates the proliferation propensity of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Concurrently, the United States will now have to deal with the rapidly emerging strategic bifurcation of this region into a China-led continental camp that includes the two Koreas versus the US-Japan (+ Taiwan) alliance, albeit one complicated by the increasing geopolitical and economic interdependence between the United States, China and Japan. To the extent that China manages to extend strategic reassurance to Japan, for example, by restraining North Korean threat projection, the United States is now at risk of losing its pre-eminent position in what former Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone once called its "offshore aircraft carrier" in the Western Pacific and not only in South Korea.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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