



Issue 5

The Headlines of Today. The Battles of Tomorrow.

Est - 2016

The Hermit Kingdom's missile dreams



North Korea plaza.

A secretive pariah state for 65 years, the Communist state of the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK) may now be on the cusp of achieving its goal of a nuclear-tipped ballistic missile capability. In his New Year's message, supreme leader Kim Jong-un announced that the DPRK was in the "final stages in preparations to test-launch an intercontinental ballistic rocket."

North Korea's missile arsenal

With a huge conscript army (including a large special forces

component) and a numerically large but dated air force, the DPRK in recent years has concentrated on twin aims – that of developing a nuclear weapon, and the associated delivery platform to go with it. A decade ago in 2006, North Korea announced it had conducted its first small-scale nuclear test. Since then, it has conducted four more nuclear weapon tests, with the most recent in September 2016. It is now estimated that the DPRK has between 10-22 nuclear weapons in its inventory.

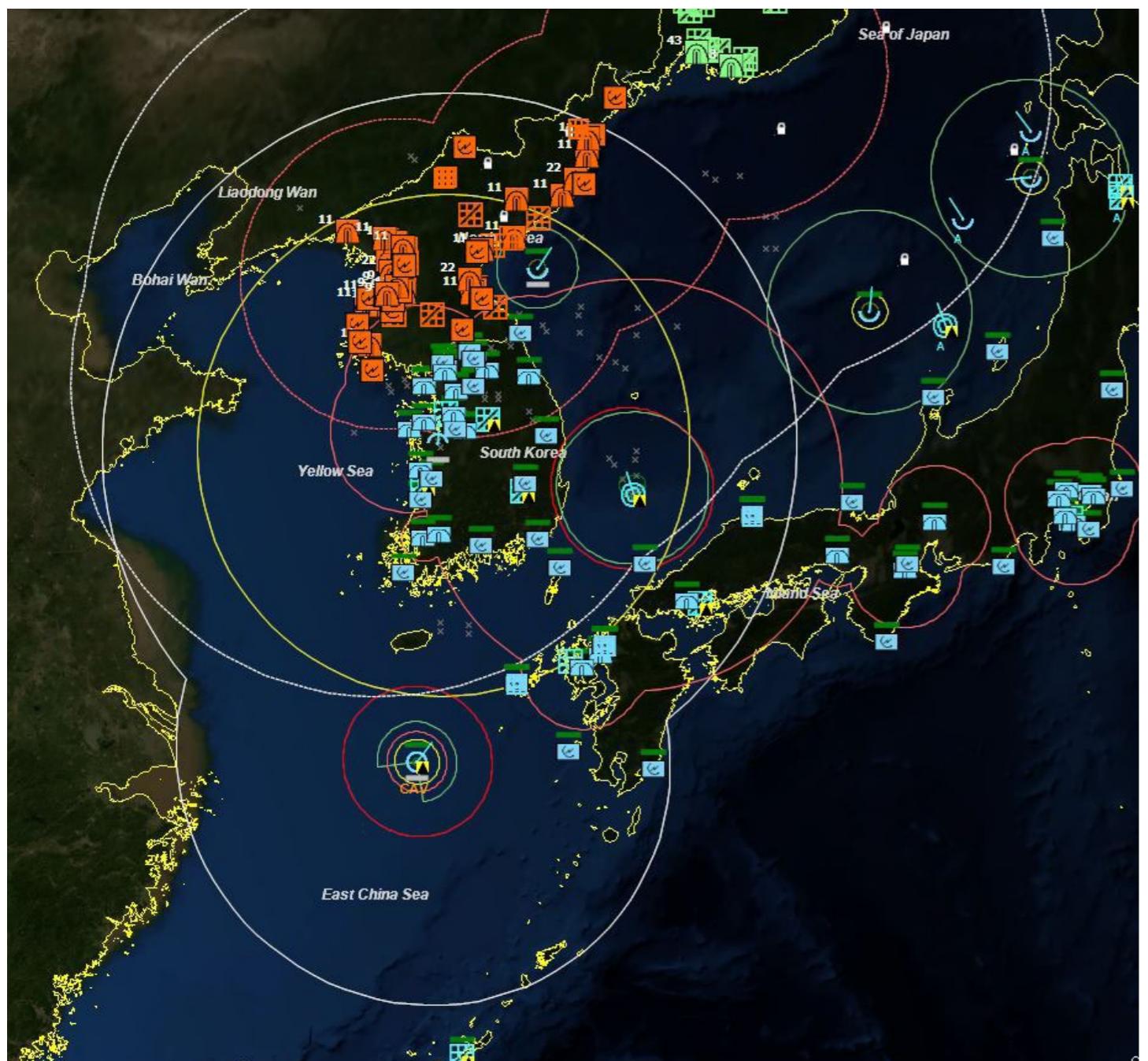
In parallel, a rocket development programme designed

to increase the range and throw weight of its ballistic missiles has been ongoing. Beginning from tactical Scuds in the 1970s, it has succeeded in extending the range of the current Nodong missile, which has a range of around 1,000km. Musudan (also known as the Nodong-B) has an estimated range of 2,000km. The multi-stage Taepondong-2 has a range of approximately 5,000km and has also been modified as the Unha rocket, which launched a DPRK satellite into orbit in February 2016. Finally there is the latest KN-08, (or

Hwasong-13) ICBM, which observers believe has yet to be tested and was the one referred to in Kim Jong-un's New Year address. The true capability of this system is still unknown, but one upper limit puts it at 12,000km – putting most of the continental US within reach.

Additionally, the development of a North Korean fledgling submarine launched ballistic missile (SLBM) capability represents a new form of nuclear threat that can survive a 'first strike', giving North Korea the same capability

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Regional situation, The calm before the storm!

as the US, Russia, China, the UK and France. Although the regime has exaggerated its mixed tests results with photo manipulation, last August it achieved the first true success with a KN-11 Pukkuksong-1 fired from the Sinpo submarine. The missile (of unknown range) could enter initial operational service with the Sinpo-class early in 2017. However, it is worth noting that while the development of this capability represents a significant step forward for Pyongyang, the launch platform Sinpo is a diesel-electric submarine with reduced range, speed and a need to snorkel, compared to nuclear SSBNs.

A changed geopolitical world

Previous US policy relied on containment and reassurance. North Korea's neighbors such as South Korea and Japan who live well within range of DPRK rockets are now receiving improved military hardware in the form of radars, ships and missiles designed to detect and destroy theater ballistic missiles.

Given the alarming progress shown by North Korea's missile tests, the US and South Korea agreed, in July 2016 to deploy the US Army Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system to

South Korea, to bolster existing Patriot and Hawk SAMs. This ABM system, with a 200 mile range is expected to deployed by the end of this year.

While this decision was taken under President Obama, the threat from rogue states with ballistic missiles, is also

a high priority with President Donald Trump, who has announced: "We will also develop a state-of-the-art missile defence system to protect against missile-based attacks from states like Iran and North Korea." (Whether this refers to the existing THAAD, or new

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North Korea submarine.

ground-based interceptors is not yet clear).

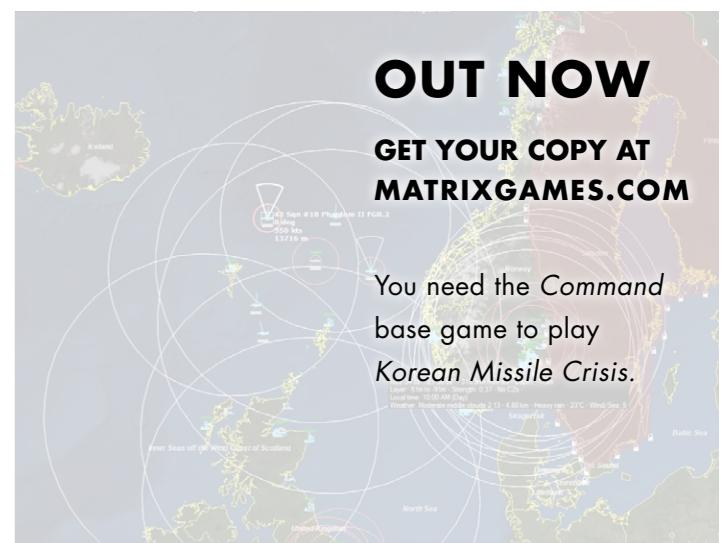
President Trump has indicated that the DPRK's ICBM missile test will not go unchallenged, tweeting: "North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the U.S. It won't happen!". Whether this is bluster or an indication that the new President is mulling kinetic options remains to be seen.

(Interestingly a pre-emptive strike against North Korean nuclear weapon programme was planned by the Clinton Administration in 1994, but ultimately dropped.).

Meanwhile, south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), South Korea's political scene is distracted following the impeachment in December of President Park Guam-hy under charges of corruption. This could result in elections early in 2017 and adds another unknown factor to the mix – a new South Korean President.

One positive note, is that if Russian-US relations do begin to thaw following the election of Trump, there may be a chance of cooperation around North Korea between Moscow and Washington.

That of course would leave China isolated and having to make a difficult decision about how it manages its relationship



with the DPRK. Beijing has already expressed disquiet about the upcoming deployment of THAAD to South Korea as it sees this advanced ABM system also being turned against it. Beijing perceives THAAD as a major strategic game-changer in the region and has already initiated economic sanctions against Seoul to put pressure on it to reconsider.

Any military action, against North Korea and its nuclear weapons programme, either unilaterally by the US or as part of a wider coalition, would therefore have to factor the response of China into this. While it is too strong to call China an ally of the DPRK, it has served a useful role



THAAD launcher.



A terminal high altitude area defense THAAD interceptor is launched during a successful intercept.

away – most notably on the West Coast of America. Paired with nuclear warheads the thought of the DPRK holding Los Angeles or San Francisco at risk is truly sobering.

However, in balance, while a North Korean ICBM may be a highly effective political chess-piece, it may be of less value

operationally. Firstly, Pyongyang's warhead stocks are currently tiny compared to the giant nuclear arsenals of Russia and China. Secondly, ever since Reagan's Star Wars and the SCUD missiles of 1991, the US has invested considerable sums in missile defence. In 2017, therefore,

these interceptors, which include THAAD, SM-3 at sea and a Ground Based Missile Defence in Alaska may help protect against a limited strike by a rogue nation if these defence layers are in the right place at the right time.

DPRK leadership faces a tough choice, a decision to strike the US

with nuclear weapons would not guarantee success but would ensure a swift and decisive retaliation, probably eliminating North Korea as a state and incinerating millions of its citizens in the process. An attack on the US mainland is therefore unlikely except as a desperate 'last gasp' act or in some reckless accident.

More likely, in any conflict involving Pyongyang, nuclear weapons would be used against US and allied military targets in the Asia-Pacific region such as bases in Guam or Japan. Use against population centres is unlikely as it would invite a catastrophic instead of tactical response.

Summary

The combination of political chaos in South Korea, a volatile dictator in North Korea, and a US President who makes unpredictable foreign and nuclear policy announcements via Twitter – is a dangerous and unprecedented mix of factors in the troubled Korean peninsula situation. A deteriorating US-China strategic relationship may provide a window for Pyongyang to use the evolving DPRK missile and nuclear capability before it is neutralized by the deployment of US missile defence systems later this year.



North Korea Missile Ranges.