

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

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North Korea's July 4 Missile Tests

Victor D. Cha

Q1: What is the nature of the missile tests?

A1: North Korea tested a total of seven ballistic missiles in one day (July 4 North Korea time) off the east coast of the peninsula into the Sea of Japan. While a full analysis of these tests is not yet available, they appear to be short-range ballistic missiles that flew about 250 to 300 miles. The estimated range of the missiles indicates they were probably Scud missiles or possibly medium-range NoDong missiles not flown to full capacity. The North tested four cruise missiles earlier in the week.

Q2: Are these missiles a threat to the United States?

A2: The July 4 missiles are not a direct threat to the continental United States—or Hawaii or Alaska. These short- and medium-range missiles, however, are operational and deployed, therefore constituting a direct threat to Japan, South Korea, as well as U.S. forces and civilians in those countries. The longer-range intercontinental ballistic missiles, the so-called Taepodong missiles, in theory could reach the United States, but they have not been successfully flight-tested—with the most recent failed test on April 5, 2009.

Q3: What are the purposes of these tests?

A3: The most immediate purpose is to advance North Korea's missile capabilities. The North has sold its Scud and NoDong missiles to Iran (Shahab 3) and Pakistan (Ghauri). While their short-range missiles are already quite developed, there is the possibility that at least some of these missiles were tests of other longer-range (but under-fueled) missiles. The other purpose of the tests is political, which is to declare to the United States and others the North's military strength as it undergoes a shaky leadership transition from an ailing Kim Jong-il to his young and underqualified son.

Q4: Is there meaning to the tests having taken place on July 4, U.S. Independence Day?

A4: Though it is difficult to divine North Korean aims, the date of these tests do appear directed at the United States. On July 4, 2006 (U.S. time), the North tested seven missiles. On May 25, 2009 (Memorial Day), they conducted their second nuclear test. The pattern, although potentially random, does appear intentional.

Q5: What is the road ahead?

A5: This latest round of tests are violations of the three standing UN Security Council resolutions against North Korea—1695, 1718, and 1874—all of which prohibit further North Korean ballistic missile activity. The United States and UN member states will continue to enforce the UN-mandated sanctions against North Korea, including an arms embargo, financial sanctions, and a counterproliferation inspection regime to prevent the sale or transfer of missile technology or nuclear programs. The United States will continue to stand up missile defense systems to guard against potential long-range missile tests by the North.

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