

**North Korea's Missile Threat –
Real or Imagined?
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May 4, 2005**

Is North Korea preparing for another Korean War? Recent headlines suggest such a possibility, but close scrutiny of recent developments clearly indicates that war is unlikely, at least in the near future. Nevertheless, a second Korean War will remain a possibility until the nuclear impasse with North Korea is resolved. At present, prospects for reaching a “peaceful, diplomatic resolution” in the Six Party Talks are a distant hope.

The escalation of tensions began about three months ago. On February 10, North Korea's Foreign Ministry declared that the US refusal to alter its alleged hostile policy had “compelled” North Korea to “suspend our participation in the (Six Party) talks for an indefinite period ...” Additionally, North Korea for the first time declared that it possessed nuclear weapons, and explained, “Its nuclear weapons will remain nuclear deterrent for self-defense under any circumstances.”

Three weeks later, on March 2, Pyongyang announced in an authoritative “Foreign Ministry Memorandum” that, “We (North Korea) are not bound to any international treaty or law as far as the missile issue is concerned. In September 1999, North Korea announced a moratorium on the launching of ballistic missiles “while dialogue was underway” with the United States. The Bush Administration in 2001 “totally suspended” the US-DPRK dialogue, so North Korea now declares, “we are not bound to the moratorium on the missile launch at present.”

Then on April 28, headlines again frightened Americans and Japanese alike. News papers and television news cited the director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency Admiral Lowell Jacoby as having said that North Korea had the ability to strike the United States and its allies, that includes Japan, with a ballistic missile armed with a nuclear warhead. A few days later, on May 1, new headlines exclaimed that North Korea had fired a missile into the Sea of Japan.

Understandably people are very frightened. But not emphasized in the press stories is that none of North Korea's recent official statements have contained any threatening language. In every case, North Korea has emphasized that its reasons for developing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles is to defend itself against a possible “pre-emptive” attack by the United States. North Korea has complained loudly and often about Japan's handling of the abduction issue. Pyongyang has argued that Japan should be excluded from the Six Party Talks and the UN Security Council. It also continues to grumble

about Japan's claim to the disputed island called Tokto in Korean or Takeshima in Japanese. But not once has it threatened any military action against Japan.

Now let us look at what U.S. DIA Director said about North Korea's missiles during an April 28 session of the US Senate's Armed Services Committee. Because of its importance, we quote his words fully below (emphasis added):

North Korea continues to invest in ballistic missiles to *defend* itself against attack, *achieve diplomatic advantage* and *provide hard currency* through foreign sales. Its Taepo Dong 2 intercontinental ballistic missile *may be* ready for testing. This missile *could deliver* a nuclear warhead to parts of the United States in a two stage variant and target all of North America with a three stage variant. North Korea is also developing new SRBM and IRBM missiles that will put US and allied forces in the region at further risk.

He further clarified, "North Korea has a *theoretical capability* to produce a warhead and mate it with a missile, but we *have no information to suggest they have done so.*"

Obviously, the reader should relax after carefully reading what the admiral said. According to him, North Korea's goal is to "defend itself" with missiles. Also, it is trying to increase its leverage in the Six Party talks and its dealings with the United States. As for arming a ballistic missile with a nuclear war head, the admiral makes it clear that this is only a "theoretical capability," not a reality.

The famous U.S. President Roosevelt long ago told the American people, "Fear is our worse enemy." In Northeast Asia, fear is a much worse enemy than North Korea. Fear can disrupt lives, and even damage the Japanese and world economy. No one can deny that North Korea poses a serious problem to the international community. But the Japanese people should remember that they are not alone. The US-Japan alliance is well equipped to deter any North Korean attack. Also, Japan can count on the entire international community for support because of the respect Japan has earned over the past half century. North Korea, on the other hand, is alone and its military might is inferior to that of the US-Japan alliance.

Unfortunately, the people of Northeast Asia and the United States will have to endure the continuing escalation of tensions until all parties return to the negotiating table. Greater flexibility by Pyongyang and Washington would break the current impasse. The other participants in the Six Party Talks, including Japan, should reinforce their reliance on diplomacy. Resorting to "other options" would only further escalate the tension that is now severely damaging the atmosphere essential for diplomatic dialogue and negotiation. As for the citizens of the United States and Japan, their patient resolve and confidence in diplomacy would encourage their democratic governments to persist in their pursuit of a peaceful diplomatic solution to the impasse with North Korea. Otherwise, without patient and persistent diplomacy, war would become an increasing possibility.