

The Washington Times

Preventing another Pearl Harbor

America must counter the North Korean missile threat



By Keith Payne - - Sunday, January 22, 2017

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/jan/22/preventing-another-pearl-harbor/>

ANALYSIS/OPINION:

North Korea regularly threatens to turn the United States and neighboring states into “a sea of fire,” and reportedly has the capability now to launch nuclear weapons at targets in South Korea and Japan. In a televised address this New Year’s Day, North Korea’s eccentric leader, [Kim Jong Un](#), claimed that preparations were nearly complete for testing an intercontinental ballistic

missile (ICBM) capable of striking the United States. A former senior North Korean official, Thai Yong-ho, stated that [Kim Jong Un](#)'s priority is to complete the development of nuclear weapons in 2017 "at all costs."

While some U.S. officials maintain that North Korea does not yet have a nuclear ICBM, Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently acknowledged "unprecedented" North Korean nuclear and missile activity in 2016, and that the North Korean nuclear missile threat grows by the day. In April 2016, Adm. William Gortney, commander of the United States Northern Command, reported to Congress that while the prospective North Korean ICBM, the KN08, "remains untested, modeling suggests it could deliver a nuclear payload to much of the Continental United States." In September 2016, James Clapper, the director of National Intelligence stated that the U.S. must assume that North Korea can reach the United States with a nuclear missile, and in October, Mr. Clapper added that persuading North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons was "probably a lost cause."

Given such reports, North Korean nuclear missile threats to the United States must no longer elicit uneasy disdain. The Hawaiian Islands and West Coast may well be North Korea's initial ICBM targets in the United States given their closer relative proximity to North Korean launch sites.

Unfortunately, the many years of diplomacy, scolding and sanctions the United States has pursued to prevent a North Korean nuclear ICBM have failed. And a U.S. offensive military strike against a threatening North Korean nuclear missile, although recommended in the past by some senior U.S. civilian officials, would likely initiate a devastating war on the Korean Peninsula that could draw in China.

Fortunately, U.S. ballistic missile defense (BMD) offers an immediately-available counter to a North Korea ICBM that does not entail the risk of launching a new Korean War. The United States has a BMD capability today because in 2001 President George W. Bush, withdrew from the ABM Treaty that effectively prohibited long-range BMD, and in 2002 initiated plans to deploy US strategic defenses. The Obama administration subsequently cut missile defense programs and spending for the protection of the United States itself and the U.S. Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system now reportedly has 36 defensive interceptors located in California and Alaska.

This GMD system provides important but limited defense coverage for the entire United States, including Hawaii — limited in part because for reliability reasons more than one interceptor from the small GMD arsenal may have to be assigned to each attacking North Korean missile. Other U.S. BMD systems deployed in Europe and Asia, such as the well-known Patriot, THAAD and SM-3 systems, are intentionally capable of defending only U.S. allies and assets in those regions against shorter-range missile threats, not against ICBMs targeting the United States itself.

Fortunately, a relatively inexpensive option to complement the small existing GMD arsenal appears to be available to President Trump in the near-term for the protection of Hawaii and the West Coast. This option would employ BMD elements largely already deployed in the Pacific, including the proven mobile and long-range Sea-based X-Band (SBX) radar, a smaller,

transportable THAAD radar, and well-tested Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) interceptors reportedly now deployed in the hundreds on numerous Navy [Aegis](#) BMD ships, including those [Aegis](#) ships homeported at Pearl Harbor. Giving some operational capability to the existing Aegis Ashore Missile Defense Test Complex located in Kauai, Hawaii may be a near-term option that would add further to the defense of Hawaii.

In addition, Navy Aegis SM-3 defenses, moved into position and potentially supported by a combination of the existing SBX radar, the existing early warning radar at Beale Air Force Base in California and possibly THAAD radars, could provide a similar additional near-term layer of protection for select, key areas on the U.S. West Coast.

The [Aegis SM-3](#) system, while not designed to defend against ICBM-range missile threats, if deployed to a region with radar support, reportedly could have the potential to help protect limited geographical areas. The SM-3 IIA interceptor missile planned for delivery in 2018 apparently will have some additional capability to protect against long-range missile threats and thus could strengthen this defensive step for both Hawaii and the West Coast.

Layering defenses provides the most effective and efficient protection against missile threats. Complementing existing GMD defenses with the BMD elements discussed here could provide a relatively inexpensive added layer of protection for Hawaii and the West Coast in the near-term. These layers separately would be limited respectively by the scarcity of deployed interceptors or their defensive reach, but functioning together could offer greater protection. Given the utter failure or extreme risks of alternative measures to stop North Korean nuclear ICBMs, the possible immediacy of the North Korean ICBM threat, and the “risk tolerant” and “impulsive” character of [Kim Jong Un](#) as described by Gen. Vincent Brooks, commander of U.S. Forces in Korea, getting on with the infrastructure needed for this layered defense would be a stabilizing and prudent first step for the new president.

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