

North Korea's ICBM

This year, North Korea has demonstrated that it has mastered inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) technology, successfully launching a Hwasong-14 ICBM. Once it has mastered the miniaturisation of a nuclear warhead, which intelligence estimates put at about 12 months off, North Korea potentially would be able to strike targets in Hawaii, on the west coast of North America and in northern Australia. North Korea would have become a fully-fledged nuclear power and would need to be accorded the same strategic respect that other such powers enjoy – hence Kim Jong-Un's relentless pursuit of this objective.

There seems little that Western powers can do to prevent this outcome – economic measures have not worked so far and are unlikely to unless China cuts off North Korea's oil; and there is no realistic military option available, due both to the likely inefficacy of any option short of land invasion (which would mean war with China) and to the massive damage which would be caused to South Korea by the North's retaliation. Diplomatic efforts, especially via China and Russia, have not borne fruit either, and their chances of success have been further damaged by Donald Trump's strongly-expressed desire to annul the nuclear agreement with Iran. The world may yet have to learn to live with a nuclear-armed North Korea.

In such an event, some experts have suggested that if the United States were to overplay its hand and Australia were to support it, Kim might choose to strike Darwin or Pine Gap in the hope of demonstrating his capability without drawing the full-scale retaliation which would inevitably follow a strike on a United States city. This has led others to suggest that Darwin should be equipped with anti-missile defence of the type (terminal high-altitude area defence system – THAAD) being provided for Seoul. There are several reasons why this would not be appropriate at present, not the least of which is that it would be of little value against ICBMs fired from North Korea – THAAD is best suited to short-range missile defence. Instead, the deployment of Australia's air-defence warships near the Korean coast could serve a similar purpose. Australia also might wish to contribute to scientific research designed to develop an effective anti-missile defence system for future deployment in northern Australia.

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