The Development of DPRK's Missile-Nuclear Complex and the US Reaction

There is no doubt that 2016 can be called the year of the North Korean rocket engineers: two nuclear tests and a large number of missile launches forced a number of experts (including the author) to abandon their sceptical opinion on the DPRK's capabilities. However, it looks like 2017 will be rich in interesting news in this respect.

On December 21, 2016, experts from the National Security Strategy Institution under the National Intelligence Service of South Korea published a report that states that North Korea might develop a ballistic missile whose technical equipment would allow it to reach the continental area of the USA, by 2020. The report also notes that Pyongyang may embark on a sixth nuclear test and ballistic missile launch in 2017. The dates of the nuclear "fireworks" are believed to be the birthday of Kim Jong-un on January 8, the day Donald Trump's government commences work on January 20 or the birthdays of the former leaders of North Korea Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung.

On December 29, the Voice of America radio station, citing the data of an American company that analyses Strategic Sentinel satellite images reported that a facility that resembled a missile launch site was observed in a mountainous area close to Geumchang-ri village in North Pyongan Province (Phyŏnganbukto). This facility includes a missile silo and the premises to assemble a missile and monitor the flight. This conclusion was made based on the analysis of satellite images taken by the American private company Digital Globe during the period from 2010 to 2014.

The news broke that blocks of flats had been under construction in Nyongbyon since 2014. Curtis Melvin, an employee of the American-Korean Institute of the School of Advanced International Studies under the University of Johnson Hopkins in Washington, reported this in an interview with Radio Free Asia. He introduced the data of satellite images analysis that show 9 blocks of flats were constructed from October 2014 to late 2015 in Nyongbyon. Another 6 buildings are under construction and a market is located close to it. This means a significant increase in the number of the local employees and workers, as well as the creation of the required infrastructure.

Pyongyang held a meeting of missile technology experts that took place at the end of the past year in the Centre of Science and Technology – the meeting is considered to be a tool to justify further long-range missile launches.

In his New Year's address to the nation, Kim Jong-un announced that the DPRK had almost completed the development of its own intercontinental ballistic missile. The next day, Donald Trump replied on his Twitter stating that the DPRK could not create a nuclear weapon able to strike the territory of the USA.

This statement caused a squall of approving comments by the South. A representative of the Republic of Korea's Foreign Affairs Ministry Cho Joon-hyuk noted that Trump’s statement could be regarded as a clear warning for Pyongyang and highlighted that Trump had brought up the North Korean nuclear problem in the context of pressure on the DPRK for the first time ever.

January 8, 2017 passed without provocative acts but the Korean Central News Agency made a statement that called the development of ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missiles) "one of the measures taken against the threat of nuclear war that increases day by day." It highlights that "the instigator that has forced us develop the ICBM is the
USA, which has angrily clung to an anachronistic hostile policy in order to destroy our sovereignty and the right to exist for decades” and states that "the launch will be performed any time and in any place in accordance with the decision of our leadership."

If the launch of the satellites can be justified as the right for peaceful space, the ICBM is an open challenge both to the USA and to the entire global community. In the past, Russia and China would express at least their concerns (perhaps, they would crack down on the North in advance hinting that this was not the done thing). However, we should pay attention to the fact that such words were not heard amid the last days of Obama who tried to aggravate the relations between Washington, Moscow and Beijing as hard as possible.

On January 11, Seoul published the Defence White Paper for 2016, in which the military experts of the Republic of Korea pointed out that Pyongyang was actively processing used fuel rods in the Nyongbyon nuclear centre in 2016 and had managed to obtain additional 10 kilograms of plutonium. In total, the plutonium stocks of Pyongyang amount to 50 kilograms, which is enough for 10 nuclear charges. This estimation includes the period the reactor was in operation in Nyongbyon, the trends in processing the used fuel rods, and the volume of the nuclear material used during the tests. Though Pyongyang’s capacity to produce highly enriched uranium is estimated as high, its estimated volume is not clear, neither is the miniaturization level of the nuclear warheads.

The missile section of the Paper notes that the North has put SCUD-ER missiles into service that are a modification of the out-dated SCUD missiles. There was no successful launch of the long-range Musudan missiles this year. It is curious that a similar publication in 2014 stated that the missiles owned by Pyongyang might threaten the security of the continental territory of the USA. Nonetheless, experts are not ruling out the chance of additional tests of ballistic missiles from submarines by the North.

The same day, on January 11, the major North Korean newspaper Rodong Sinmun published one more article full of belligerent statements: the USA should not be complacent because Washington is more than 10 thousand kilometres away from Pyongyang; the day when the North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile will unsettle America is close; from now on, the North is opting for a preventive strike to respond to the hostile actions of the enemy. In this context, the Republic of Korea’s experts started talking about a new stage of provocation recalling the situation when two American strategic bombers carried out the closest flight to the North borders in history, and one of them later landed 70 kilometres to the south of Seoul. Citing a representative of the General Staff of the Korean People’s Army, the Korean Central News Agency said that South Korea and America’s provocative acts had dragged the Korean peninsula into "an uncontrolled and irreversible situation fraught with the risk of a nuclear war." The Nuclear warheads of the Korean People’s Army will turn Seoul into ashes as a punishment, and should there be further escalation of the tension, they will "raze the American base on the isle of Guam to the ground."

On January 13, the DPRK once again confirmed its readiness to launch a preventive strike on the enemy should there be any signs of the smallest acts of provocation. This was stated by the representative of North Korea’s Asia Pacific Peace Committee referring to the movement of the American aircraft carrier Carl Vinson in the Asian region. He stated that Barack Obama’s administration, preparing for their resignation, continues to increase the military pressure on the North instead of taking a more restrained and rational position. He underlined that the North, in possession of a powerful nuclear weapon including an H-bomb, would remain firm irrespective of the number of the US aircraft carrier battle groups.

On the same day, a representative of the DPRK’s National Aerospace Development Administration announced in an interview with the propaganda body, Choson Onyl, that the decision and the plans of Kim Jong-un to develop the space industry remained the target and prospect for the entire Republic.

Two days later, on January 15, 2017, the leading North Korean newspaper Rodong Sinmun once again highlighted that the DPRK would continue implementing its "space exploration program despite the opposition of the hostile forces." Using the UN, Washington is trying to prove that the aim of these launches is to test long-range ballistic missiles. However, "no one can force Pyongyang to abandon its legal right to launch artificial satellites and become one of the world’s space-faring nations."

US politicians paid close attention to this statement. The Pentagon head Ashton Carter stated in an interview to NBC TV that the DPRK nuclear potential is "a serious threat" to the USA, and the American Defence Ministry is ready to shoot down missiles launched by Pyongyang if they "are sent to our territory or the territory of our friends and allies."

US Secretary of State John Kerry also called the nuclear problem of Pyongyang one of the most serious threats that
Donald Trump's Administration would face. He noted this fact in his letter written on the occasion of the current Administration's leaving office. It also states that the US does not recognize North Korea as a nuclear power and thanks to the efforts of the UN Security Council they have managed to establish the foundation for the mandatory measures to tighten the pressure on Pyongyang, which will continue on into the next US Administration. John Kerry has underlined the necessity to maintain pressure on Pyongyang until North Korea returns to dialogue on denuclearization.

His successor, Rex Tillerson who has been appointed Secretary of State by the President of the United States Donald Trump, agrees with the need to maintain a tough stance on the North Korean nuclear issue. On January 11, during the hearings on the approval of his nomination to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, he called the North a serious threat to the world and expressed willingness to embark upon tough countermeasures to Pyongyang's provocative policy.

The question remains of how the USA will choose to confront the probable launch of the North Korean ICBM. On the one hand, as mentioned above, Pyongyang would have faced a serious reaction by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council if it had hinted at the launch of the military-oriented ballistic missile at any other time. However, it may get off lightly amid the changing world order.

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