

Discounting North Korea's ICBM Capability

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Featured image: Hwasong-14 launch, July 4, 2017. (Source: Missile Threat)Hwasong-14 launch, July 4, 2017. (Source: [Missile Threat](#))

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Based on its ballistic missile tests so far, including its most recent ones last month, Russia believes the DPRK hasn't yet achieved ICBM capability.

Noted ballistic missile/rocket expert Theodore Postol partly agrees, along with German rocket experts Markus Schiller and Robert Schmucker.

In an analysis for the [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#), they called Pyongyang's Hwasong-14 ballistic missile, tested twice in July "a 'sub-level' ICBM that will not be able to deliver nuclear warheads to the continental United States."

"Our analysis shows that the current variant of the Hwasong-14 may not even be capable of delivering a first-generation nuclear warhead to Anchorage, Alaska, although such a possibility cannot be categorically ruled out."

"But even if North Korea is now capable of fabricating a relatively light-weight, 'miniaturized' atomic bomb that can survive the extreme reentry environments of long-range rocket delivery, it will, with certainty, not be able to deliver such an atomic bomb to the lower 48 states of the United States with the rocket tested on July 3 and July 28."

Postal, Schiller and Schmucker called the DPRK's July tests "a carefully choreographed deception...to create a false impression that the Hwasong-14 is a near-ICBM that poses a nuclear threat to the continental US."

While it's unable to manufacture sophisticated rocket components so far, the skill and ingenuity of its scientists in using Soviet Russia-era rocket motor components "has grown very substantially," they said.

The July tests carried reduced payloads – able to reach a much higher altitude than possible if carrying a nuclear warhead and protective heat shield.

Pyongyang achieved its objective, creating the false impression of being able to strike US

territory – what it's unable to do based on the authors' analysis.

Yet technological progress it's made indicates it's heading toward eventually achieving what it can't now accomplish.

The authors cautioned that no one outside North Korea has reliable information on the characteristics of its nuclear weapons designs – including whether miniaturization was achieved to permit their mounting on a ballistic missile, despite suggestions otherwise.

According to the authors, we're "left to speculate (on Pyongyang's nuclear expertise) based on intelligence information that we have from other sources and on an understanding of the very significant technical problems of design and implementation that must be solved to be able to build and deliver atomic bombs by ICBM."

Based on available information, they estimate Pyongyang could only deliver a nuclear warhead as far as Anchorage, Alaska weighing 500 – 550 kg.



Hwasong-14 launch, July 4, 2017. (Source: [Missile Threat](#))

To reach Seattle, it could weigh no more than 300 kg. They believe "an advanced North Korean weaponized atomic bomb would be unlikely to weigh less than 500 to 600 kilograms."

"So it is entirely possible that this variant of the Hwasong-14 (tested in July) will not be able to deliver an atomic bomb to Anchorage, Alaska," they said.

If the Hwasong-14 upper stage was "fitted with the more capable vernier motors from the SS-N-6 submarine launched ballistic missile (known in Russia as the R-27), it could potentially deliver an atomic bomb to Anchorage, if the bomb weighed less than between 650 and 750 kg," according to the authors.

"The same upgraded variant of the Hwasong-14 could only deliver an atomic bomb to Seattle if the bomb weighed less than between 400 and 450 kg," they added.

Regardless of current or likely more advanced DPRK capability later on, the nation's history shows it threatens no other nations.

Its nuclear and ballistic missile weapons are solely for defense – deterrents against feared US aggression.

The real menace lies in Washington, not Pyongyang.

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