



Viewpoints contain background analyses and comments on critical global and regional trends, issues and developments. *Viewpoints* also occasionally include analytical reviews of ISEAS books. The responsibility for facts and opinions expressed rests exclusively with the authors and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of ISEAS.

Pyongyang's nuclear capability

By Michael Richardson

For The Straits Times Friday 7 March 2008

The US military intelligence community is worried that North Korea is developing the skills and techniques needed to fit a nuclear warhead to a ballistic missile. If the North Korean regime were able to achieve this feat, it would give Pyongyang a more credible nuclear strike capability – a step that would deeply alarm Japan and South Korea.

It would also hasten moves, in cooperation with the United States, to build regional defences against ballistic missiles. Japan and the US are already working together to build the shield. In opposition, Australia's Labor party was reluctant to join, doubting that the technology would work. But key parts of the system have been brought into operation after extensive testing. Meanwhile, the threat from North Korea to US regional allies has become more imminent. Following discussion with US Defence Secretary Robert Gates and other senior American military officials at the annual AUSMIN meeting in Canberra last month, Australia's Foreign Minister Stephen Smith said that the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was giving "very careful consideration" to joining the limited missile defence system.

China opposes the US-led regional missile shield, suspecting that it may be designed to neutralize the Chinese nuclear deterrent as well as North Korean "rogue" missiles. But China, too, would view a North Korea armed with even a few nuclear-tipped missiles as a gravely destabilising development. It would reduce Beijing's leverage over its wayward ally and probably doom the already faltering six-party negotiations, hosted by China, to induce North Korea to abandon nuclear weapons.

North Korea earned a rare public condemnation from China, as well as other big powers, when it carried out an underground nuclear test in October 2006. Yet the North lacked any known effective way of delivering a nuclear weapon to a foreign target.

However, the head US Defence Intelligence Agency General Michael Maples told the Senate armed services committee in Washington last week (27 February) that North Korea could have stockpiled several nuclear weapons using plutonium produced at the now shuttered Yongbyon reactor and "may be able to successfully mate a nuclear warhead to a mobile ballistic missile."

In similar lengthy unclassified testimony to the same committee a year ago, General Maples said only that North Korea had an ambitious ballistic missile development program and continued to develop the Taepo Dong 2 “which could reach parts of the United States and is capable of carrying a nuclear payload.” But he noted in the same testimony that the Taepo Dong 2 had failed shortly after launch when it was flight tested for the first time in July 2006, although six shorter-range missiles had been successfully tested at the same time.

It is these smaller, shorter-range missiles that have now become the focus of US concern about North Korea’s nuclear strike capability. Unlike the long-range Taepo Dong 2, which was fired from a fixed platform above ground and could be destroyed while it was being prepared for launch, many of North Korea’s shorter-range missiles are mobile. They can be hidden, moved around and fired quickly. Yet some of them can still hit targets as far away as Japan. The technical challenge for North Korean scientists and engineers is to make a nuclear warhead compact enough to fit in the nosecone of a mobile missile.

General Maples said last week that North Korea had “a substantial mobile ballistic missile force with an array of warhead options to include WMD (weapons of mass destruction) that can strike US forces and our allies in the ROK (South Korea) and Japan.” He added that the North was continuing to develop the long-range Taepo Dong 2 missile while also working on an intermediate range ballistic missile. The latter may be a reference to the Taepo Dong X, a land-based mobile missile with a range of up to 4,000 kilometres.

In a report published in March 2006, the Centre for Nonproliferation Studies in California said that North Korea had over 800 ballistic missiles. Among them were at least two types that could hit Japan, the Nodong and the Taepo Dong 1. General Maples said should the six-party talks break down, the North was likely to respond by resuming production of fissile material at Yongbyon. In such a scenario, “additional missile or nuclear tests could occur.”

China’s reaction to efforts by the US, Japan and other countries to improve their capability to shoot down incoming missiles is predictable, even though these efforts may be triggered by developments in North Korea. China will increase the size of its nuclear weapons arsenal and expand the means of their delivery so that they can overwhelm any missile shield.

- The writer is a security specialist at the Institute of South East Asian Studies. This is a personal comment.