

Maloney: North Korean nukes – back to the future?



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In this photo distributed by the North Korean government, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, second from right, inspects the preparation of the launch of a Hwasong-14 intercontinental ballistic missile, ICBM, in North Korea's northwest Tuesday, July 4, 2017. Independent journalists were not given access to cover the event depicted in this photo. *CP*

The seriousness of the North Korean nuclear threat depends on where you live. Clearly, South Korea has every right to be concerned: the decades-long quasi-war on the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and the Northern Limit Line with attacks against ships; commando raids against vital targets, including a nuclear reactor; and a vulnerable national capital that is inside conventional artillery range. It does not require a PhD in international relations to understand fear of nuclear escalation in such an environment.

Japan, similarly, seems to be regularly bracketed by North Korean missile tests – as it was this week – and has citizens kidnapped by North Korea for a variety of opaque and bizarre purposes. It also has national nuclear PTSD dating back to the 1940s.

Ah yes, we say in Canada, it's all "over there." The Pacific Ocean is a marvellous buffer zone, with our American allies prepared to handle any covering force battle on our behalf. Convoluted and dramatic SPECTRE-like scenarios, whereby North Korea's Dr. Evil might surreptitiously infiltrate nuclear bombs into North American cities are fine for Netflix or HBO, but really? Come on.

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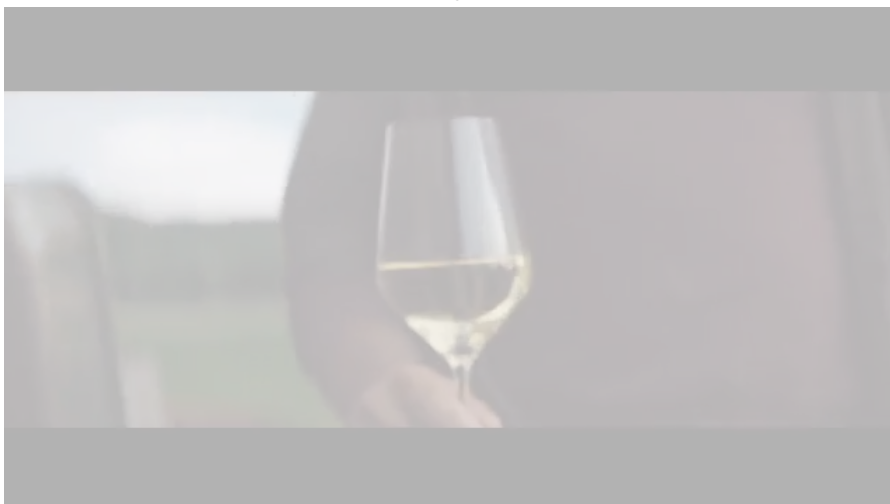
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Indeed, many comfort themselves with the belief that North Korean missiles do not have the range to accurately reach North America and even if they could, the American ballistic missile defence system stationed in Alaska would pick them off like flies before they could cause any real damage. And none of this is going to happen anyway because Kim Jong-un can't be that crazy.

Surely he understands the rules of the deterrence game, right? He and his regime will merely be obliterated by a volley of Trident SLBM's from U.S. Navy missile submarines prowling the ocean depths. And Canada is safely out of the line of fire.

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Not so fast.

There is concern about this week's testing by Pyongyang of an intercontinental ballistic missile, no doubt. But there has, thus far, been no public discussion at all of two 1960s-era technologies that North Korea might employ for an asymmetric nuclear attack against North America, technologies well within its grasp today. (If I, a military historian, can figure this out, surely the North Koreans have by now).

The first was called FOBS (Fractional Orbital Bombardment System). Simply put, a ballistic missile inserts a specially configured nuclear warhead into low Earth orbit (150 km). This warhead has a rocket breaking system to allow it to be de-orbited whenever Dr. Evil chooses. Consequently, range is not an issue. The warhead/rocket package remains in orbit until it is ready for use. And it could look remarkably like a satellite. The Soviet Union conducted 24 FOBS tests in space between 1965 and 1968, some of which may have included nuclear warheads. In 1968, a special FOBS regiment was deployed at Baikonur Cosmodrome consisting of 18 R-

36orb missiles in hardened silos. This unit was demobilized in 1983. If North Korea can launch a satellite, it could easily deploy a FOBS-like system.

Now the accuracy of a FOBS bomb is not that great. The Soviets used a 5-Megaton warhead on their FOBS, presumably to make up for the inaccuracy of the system. Or perhaps not. So, to the second technological point: In October 1962, the Soviet Union conducted a series of high-altitude nuclear tests. These 300-kiloton yield warheads were destined for an anti-ballistic missile system. The third test, conducted at 150 km above Earth, unleashed electromagnetic pulses (EMP). The pulses caused significant damage to Kazakhstan’s power grid, radar systems and seriously degraded radio communications. The probability that the Soviet FOBS system was designed to generate EMP damage to North America prior to or during a nuclear attack is high.

There are limitations to EMP and some effects can be mitigated but Canada is not equipped to handle such an attack. Our infrastructure, indeed our everyday existence, is based on soft electronic systems. Popular culture depictions of an EMP attack show a society driven back into the medieval period. That may be an extreme scenario. That said, it might take months or possibly years for us to recover. Have we really thought this through?

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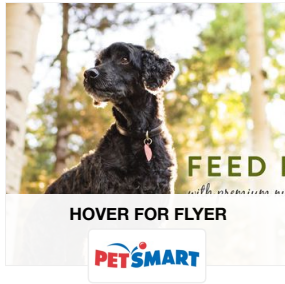
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