

North Korea's on the march - Now what?

With the push of a button and test-launch of another intercontinental ballistic missile Tuesday night, North Korea leader Kim Jong Un raised the stakes in his mad dash to assemble a nuclear weapons arsenal. Washington, D.C., now appears in target range, or soon will be.

The North Korean regime's Hwasong-15 ICBM flew higher and longer than in previous tests.

The missile reached an altitude of nearly 3,000 miles before plopping down in the sea near Japan. Pyongyang claims it had the capability to arm the missile with a "super-large heavy" nuclear warhead, which would mean isolated, belligerent North Korea is also now a full-blown nuclear menace.

Kim beamed with pride, according to state media. The rest of us should be alarmed.

While the firepower of the Hwasong-15 is unconfirmed, Pyongyang's nuke program is obviously advancing at alarming speed.

Welcome to a brave, new — and much scarier — world. This is a world in which a ruthless, unpredictable outlaw nation has the capacity now, or will soon, to wield nuclear missiles as a threat.

President Donald Trump's response to this provocation was uncharacteristically low-key. "We will take care of it."

But how? U.S. options may be more circumscribed if Kim's boast is true, or soon will be.

Trump announced that major new economic sanctions against North Korea will roll out. He talked again to Chinese President Xi Jinping about more cooperation to squeeze North Korea into capitulating. China is Pyongyang's main trade partner and primary lifeline, and also an ally that sees a functioning, muscle-flexing North Korea as a buffer against the United States' dominant military presence in the Pacific.

This tense moment has been a long time coming. North Korea, despite its isolation and impoverishment, has spent decades pursuing a nuclear weapons program while its citizens ate grass. Three previous U.S. presidents, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, failed at their efforts to negotiate a deal to put North Korea's nuclear program back in the bottle.

The aim of Kim is the same as that of his father and grandfather, who ran the country before him: self-preservation of the regime. With nuclear arms, Kim wards off the rest of the world and uses his military assets to seek economic aid or try to bully the U.S. off the Korean Peninsula. The United States deploys tens of thousands of troops in South Korea and Japan to keep the peace.

Attempts to cajole or bribe the North Koreans into giving up their nuclear ambitions have never worked. Neither has the lame policy of so-called strategic patience that Obama pursued. With Pyongyang matching its capabilities to its threats, the notion of peaceably defusing this situation seems more distant than ever. But that doesn't mean the U.S. is headed for military confrontation.

Best-case scenario: The North declares it has achieved its goal of becoming a nuclear state and is now ready to talk.

Worst case short of an attack on the U.S. or its allies: North Korea parlays its nuclear prowess into a profit center and sells weapons or technology to other rogue nations and terrorist groups.

As dangerous as this moment feels, it's also a reality check. Trump cannot afford to let years pass as his predecessors foolishly did.

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