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A New Phase of the North Korean Threat

by Gordon G. Chang | April 2026

On March 20, Iran launched two intermediate-range ballistic missiles from its territory to Diego Garcia, the joint U.K.-U.S. military base in the Indian Ocean. Fortunately, both missed.

Analysts were surprised that Tehran's regime possessed a missile that could reach the isolated facility, more than 2,000 miles off its coast. After all, in 2017 then Supreme Leader Ali Hosseini Khamenei imposed a limit of 2,000 kilometers on the range of the country's missiles.¹

So what did the Iranians launch? "It's a Musudan," Bruce Bechtol, coauthor of *Rogue Allies: The Strategic Partnership Between Iran and North Korea*, told me, referring to a North Korean intermediate-range ballistic missile.²

"Tehran calls it a Khorramshahr, but it's really a 'Son of Musudan,'" he points out. "Iran got this missile from North Korea in 2005."³

After the attempt on Diego Garcia, there is now concern that Iran can hit most of the capitals of Europe. Analysts, however, believe Iran has nothing that can reach American soil.

For instance, Iain Boyd of the University of Colorado, in a piece issued after the attack on Diego Garcia, stated "there's no evidence that Iran has developed a new type of missile or that it can otherwise hit targets at the longer range."⁴

Boyd's view is fully supported by the American intelligence community. The Defense Intelligence

Agency in a 2025 unclassified assessment stated that Iran could “develop a militarily viable ICBM by 2035 should Tehran decide to pursue the capability.”⁵ CNN reported that, as of this February, sources were saying that “there was no intelligence to suggest that Iran is pursuing an intercontinental ballistic missile program to hit the U.S. at this time.”⁶

The weight of opinion, however, is wrong. Bechtol, a professor at Angelo State University, believes that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea began to help Iran develop an 80-ton rocket booster—almost certainly for an intercontinental ballistic missile—as early as 2013.⁷ It appears that the booster came from North Korea’s Hwasong-15.

A Hwasong-15 has a range of 8,100 miles, and if launched from Iran could deliver a payload to any part of the United States. It’s not clear that Iran has assembled all the components for such a missile, but it probably has all the necessary pieces.

The U.S. government is also suspicious of the North Korea-Iran relationship. In 2016, the U.S. Treasury sanctioned the North for the proliferation to Iran of an 80-ton booster.⁸ Treasury in 2020 imposed a new set of sanctions on a party involved in “long-range missile development projects.”⁹ A U.N. Panel of Experts report also noted North Korea had been transferring “critical parts.”¹⁰

Scrape the paint off of most any Iranian missile, and you’ll find a North Korean

one. Pyongyang’s help has now transferred technology for the Scud, Nodong, Musudan, Unha, and Hwasong missiles to Iran.¹¹ Bechtol believes that North Korea has been assisting Iran on missiles since 1983.¹²

That’s not all. The North supplied the rockets Hamas, an Iranian proxy, fired at Israel starting October 7, 2023 and the ballistic missiles the Iranians are now launching at American forces.¹³

“Assistance has been continuous and routine and was ongoing right up to the beginning of the current war,” says Bechtol. “As North Korea has advanced its missile capabilities over the past 43 years, it has proliferated that capability to Iran.”¹⁴

North Korea, in short, has made Iran a real threat to more than just its neighbors.

Moreover, the North is keeping Russia in the fight in Ukraine, providing between July 2023 and March 2025 artillery shells, short-range ballistic missiles, and soldiers to Vladimir Putin’s forces worth as much as \$20 billion.¹⁵ Cash-strapped Moscow probably paid in kind, including information permitting the North to improve its missiles.¹⁶

So how did North Korea become such a danger? Most American administrations have been reluctant to do anything as the DPRK, as that totalitarian state calls itself, built its arsenal.

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The failure to impose real costs itself has had a real cost. On August 4, 2024, Kim Jong Un announced the deployment of “250 new-type tactical ballistic missile launchers” to positions near the Demilitarized Zone, the narrow band of land separating the two Koreas. The launchers can carry four tactical nuclear weapons apiece, so Kim was not exaggerating when he boasted they have “great military significance.”¹⁷

The North Korean leader praised “our munition industry workers” for developing the launchers “by their own efforts and technology.”¹⁸ The North has several factories where these TELs—transporter-erector-launchers—could have been made, including a newly discovered one near Pyongyang,¹⁹ but China military analyst Richard Fisher of the International Assessment and Strategy Center believes it is far more likely that the launchers are of Chinese origin and were built with Chinese parts and advice.²⁰

Building launchers is complicated, and North Korea would have, at some stage in the process, needed help. Fisher says the United States could have sanctioned China in 2012, when American satellites first detected the transfer of 16-wheel TELs from China’s state-owned China Aerospace Science and Industry Corp. to North Korea. Washington eventually sanctioned Wuhan Sanjiang Import and Export Co., a subsidiary of the Chinese company, in October 2017,²¹ but that was

long after the fact. “This is both an overdue warning and a stunning illustration of U.S. government dysfunction,” Fisher said, referring to America’s failure to sanction China earlier.²² Now, thanks to China, North Korea has the means to transport—in other words, hide—intercontinental ballistic missiles that can reach the American homeland.

Washington is not learning, however. In July 2024, Treasury imposed financial sanctions on five Chinese entities and six Chinese individuals for providing missile and space-related products to North Korea.²³ “Critics say the action is a rare and belated acknowledgement by the U.S. government that the North Korean nuclear missiles threatening U.S. cities were built with Chinese technology and components,” wrote Bill Gertz of the *Washington Times*. The measures, he points out, “are largely symbolic since they block all property and funds of the Chinese entities in the United States. Most of the companies and people linked to the missile proliferation are unlikely to have assets here.”²⁴

Unfortunately, the U.S. did nothing effective to stop the transfer of dangerous equipment from China to North Korea, either in 2012 or any time after.

And North Korea has been selling this technology to others, including Iran. As is often said, the Kim regime merchandises everything it has developed itself or obtained from others.

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As it has obtained technology from China and Russia, it has tightened bonds with both regimes. Pyongyang and Beijing have long been partners, signatories to the 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, which has a mutual-defense clause. The pact was extended in 2021 for 20 years.²⁵

After locking in the People’s Republic of China, the North enlisted the Russian Federation. Putin traveled to Pyongyang in June 2024 and signed the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which also contains a mutual defense provision. Now, two large powers have obligated themselves to protect the belligerent North Korean state.

Many scholars downplay the sustainability of the relationships among the three regimes, but as James Fanell of the Geneva Center for Security Policy pointed out to me in the middle of 2024, “China, Russia, and North Korea are more aligned today than at any time since the Korean War.”²⁶ Fanell’s assessment is even truer today.

All these moves have strengthened the Kim regime. For one thing, its economy is now in a recovery phase. In 2024, gross domestic product grew 3.7% according to the Bank of Korea, South Korea’s central bank. That strong performance followed growth of 3.1% in 2023. This two-year uptick, following three years of contraction, was largely attributable to weapons and other military sales to Russia.

Now with cash from Russia and Iran—Bechtol estimates that Tehran has been paying the North about \$3 billion a year for weapons and other assistance²⁷—Kim, at least to some extent, has been able to stabilize his regime. For instance, the additional cash helps Kim buy the loyalty of elites, the so-called “gift politics” that has been an effective Kim family tactic for decades.

At the same time, the other Korea—the Republic of Korea—is creating a benign environment for Pyongyang. South Korea is now governed by President Lee Jae-myung of the Democratic Party of Korea, and from the time he took office last June, Lee has tried to reach out to the Kim regime with various overtures, including Lee’s “three major goals.”²⁸

In March, Lee unveiled his “Korean Peninsula Peace Package.” This effort coincided with his proposal of a “‘peace declaration’ that reflects the political will to end the Korean War and kick off discussions for the establishment of a peace regime, including the signing of a peace treaty.”²⁹

A July 1953 armistice ended three years of fighting in that conflict, but the combatants—the United Nations Command led by the U.S., China, and the two Koreas—have not signed a formal treaty ending the war. South Korea has not even signed the armistice.

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Kim Jong Un, as is the nature of his family, has not reciprocated. In February, at the Ninth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea, the North's ruling organization rejected all dialogue and engagement with the South. Kim had earlier signaled this stance: In 2024 he called the South the "primary foe and invariable principal enemy." In March at the first session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly, he declared South Korea to be the country's "most hostile state."³⁰

Kim's hostility has kept an eager South Korea at bay, and he has used the time to arrange the transition to a fourth generation of his family's rule. Kim Il Sung groomed his son, Kim Jong Il, for three decades before dying in July 1994. Kim Jong Il started the transition process only after his stroke in August 2008, and Kim Jong Un took command a little over three years later, in December 2011 upon his father's death.

Many believe that the current Kim is preparing his daughter, Kim Ju Ae or Kim Ju Hae, to be his successor in what would be the third intra-family leadership transition. Regime media has referred to the 13-year-old as "female general" in addition to "most beloved" and "Morning Star of Korea."

As Greg Scarlatoiu, president and CEO of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, points out, a number of Kim family members designated as successors have fallen by the wayside, including one assassinated with VX gas in a Kuala Lumpur airport, and Kim Jong Un may be using his daughter as a cover for the real successor.³¹ Some Pyongyang watchers believe that the next leader may be Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, who has been called "the most dangerous woman in the world."³² "A lot may happen over the next few years," Scarlatoiu told me.³³

Kim Jong Un has been continually bringing Je Ae to official events, including an inspection of the country's intercontinental ballistic missiles in November 2022 when regime media first officially revealed her existence to the Korean people.³⁴

Since then, she has accompanied her father to military events, many of them related to missiles and other projectiles. For instance, father and daughter watched the launch of a nuclear-capable cruise missile from a new destroyer in March.³⁵ Also that month, both were present for live-fire tests of multiple rocket launch systems.³⁶ Kim has even reportedly put her in charge of the country's "Missile Administration." Regime media has been referring to her as "missile general"³⁷ and "missile general director."³⁸

North Korea for decades has been a missile powerhouse. And it has substantially raised the stakes in America's current war with Iran. "My worry: If we allow the current Iranian regime to continue to exist, the North Koreans will go right back in and re-arm them as soon as the war is over," Bechtol, the North Korea military and proliferation analyst, says. "It's what they did after the Twelve-Day War. I am hopeful that our decision makers will keep that in mind moving forward."³⁹

The Iranian regime is not known for developing its own missile technology, so we need to know what else the North Koreans have sold Iran. After all, more than just Diego Garcia may now be within range.

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