



## North Korea's Immunity to Outside Pressure: Part I

*Marcus Noland, assessing North Korea's missile launch, says it likely strengthens Kim Jong Un's hand and proves Pyongyang's ability to withstand political, economic, and military pressure. Part II: What can be done?*

*Transcript of interview recorded December 12, 2012. © Peterson Institute for International Economics.*

Steve Weisman: North Korea's firing of a ballistic missile has drawn condemnation around the world. Marcus Noland, deputy director of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, has been following the economic, political and ballistic situation in North Korea and is here with me, Steve Weisman, to assess the importance of this latest test, which took some by surprise. Marc, what has North Korea accomplished with this firing?

Marcus Noland: This is their fourth attempt to fire a multistage rocket. They tried one in 1998, which broke up over Japan. They tried again in 2009, which resulted in sanctions from the U.N. Security Council. They fired another one in April of this year that broke up after about two minutes in the air. This one, while not working perfectly, more or less worked. The three stages appeared to have separated correctly. They put a satellite into orbit. It isn't exactly where they said it was, so there's still room for improvement. But for the first time, they have managed to successfully launch a multistage rocket.

Steve Weisman: What does this tell us about how far they've advanced? How concerned should everybody be?

Marcus Noland: We should be very concerned. The threat is not imminent, but the trajectory that we are now on is a very bad trajectory. For them to successfully fire an intercontinental ballistic missile loaded with a nuclear weapon on to the continental United States, they have to do two things. First, they have to successfully miniaturize a nuclear weapon. Secondly they have to improve their rocket technology. They appear to be moving forward on both of these paths. They appear to be moving along with their nuclear program and today's launch suggests that they're making progress in the missiles.

Right now they're probably capable of delivering some kind of nuclear device to South Korea using short-ranged rockets. But in the longer term, it depends on their ability to improve the miniaturization of nuclear weapons, as well as rocket technology. The problem is there's nothing that we seem to be doing that really seems to be slowing them down.

Steve Weisman: When you say in the near future, are we talking about years?

Marcus Noland: Yes, we're talking about years. I want to make it clear they are not on the verge of being able to bomb Los Angeles. They are improving their rockets so that this rocket has a range of about 6,000 miles. It's probably capable of hitting Guam, maybe the outer part of the Aleutian Islands, sort of verging on Hawaii. As they improve the range of their rockets, they will eventually bring the West Coast under their range and they have to develop the nuclear warheads as well.

The other thing is right now, as we saw, although this launch appears to have taken quite a few people by surprise, it was a fairly protracted process. At this point there's no reason to

believe that they have any serious inventory of missiles or inventory of nuclear warheads. So this is very different than what we faced with the Soviets during the Cold War. They are not capable of more or less instantaneously launching thousands of warheads at the United States. Right now they're getting to the point where they have a rocket that functions and they're trying to get the warheads miniaturized such that they can load it on top of that rocket. Then what they'll have to do is get better at quickly bringing them into position to fire and increasing the numbers. At that point, when you get to the point where they could say fire 40 of these things, then we've got a real problem.

Steve Weisman: Before we get to the issue of what can be done about this, what does this tell about the stability or strength of the politic leadership under the untested leader Kim Jung-un?

Marcus Noland: Certainly at first blush this is a tremendous victory. They were embarrassed by the failure of the missile in April. For the first time they were forced to admit to their own people they had failed. Obviously today they are trumpeting this as a great success, so certainly in a short run, this is an enormous boost to his prestige.

There is a kind of Machiavellian argument out there -- I'm not sure how persuasive I find it, but it's worth considering -- that the longer run effects actually may be negative for him because, to the extent that the only real threat to his rule comes from the military, and to the extent that this significantly boosts the military's prestige, it actually, if they were to ever turn against him, make them a more formidable foe. But in the short run at least this is definitely a good thing for Kim Jung-un.

Steve Weisman: Let's end Part 1 of this conversation now and in Part 2 we'll talk about what the world that has condemned this can do to slow this process down and reverse it.

