



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of North Korea's Kim Dynasty: A Striking and Strange Spectacle

by Dr. Uzi Rubin

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Kim Jong-un recently presided over an extraordinary military parade in Pyongyang to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Kim dynasty's control over North Korea. While the parade unveiled some gargantuan hardware that was clearly intended to inspire awe and fear in Kim's adversaries, it also highlighted the wastefulness and imbalance of Pyongyang's military machine.

Almost 75 years ago, in December 1945, the Communist Party of North Korea was established with the newly repatriated Kim Il-sung, an anti-Japanese guerilla leader and a Red Army officer, as its General Secretary (i.e., supreme boss). The newly established party later "merged" (i.e., took over) all the other parties in North Korea to create the Workers Party of North Korea, which in turned "merged" with the Worker's Party of South Korea, to be renamed the Workers Party of Korea (WPK). Because this party "won" the Soviet-run elections in the North, it claimed legal power over the entire Korean peninsula. The northern regime considered the southern half of the peninsula—today the flourishing Republic of South Korea—a US-occupied zone that would one day revert to its rightful place as part of a unified, communist-ruled Korea.

All three of these elements—the WPK, its claim to represent all Korean people on both sides of the 48<sup>th</sup> parallel, and a North Korean leadership with a member of the Kim family at its head—still exist today.

On October 10, 2020 (slightly ahead of schedule) Kim Jong-un, the incumbent and a grandson of the founder of the dynasty, celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> birthday by holding in Pyonyang what was perhaps the most elaborate, impressive, and bizarre military parade ever.

North Korea is a small and economically insignificant country that casts a giant shadow over East Asia and the world at large. Its claims to fame are its oversized military, nuclear arsenal, and incessant beating of war drums. Once the Korean War (the founder of the dynasty's failed bid to unify the country by force) was over, world interest in North Korea gradually waned.

This did not suit the Kims. If they were to achieve their aims and assure the survival of the dynasty, they needed the world to pay attention to them. This they have achieved over the years by saber-rattling, more recently by nuclear saber-rattling.

Analysts differ about the Kim dynasty's ultimate objective. Is it just to secure and legitimize their everlasting rule over a subservient nation, or do they also want South Korea incorporated into their domain? Whichever the case, the Kim family's policy is not to garner sympathy but to sow fear.

One of their favorite techniques for this purpose is to hold vast military parades in Pyongyang with hordes of goose-stepping troops and columns of growling tanks, mobile artillery, and missile launchers. These parades feature the best and latest North Korean weapons, whether extant or envisaged. They aim to convey a direct message of North Korea's invincibility and an indirect message that it is wealthy enough to afford a million-strong army equipped with ever more capable nuclear ICBMs and SLBMs.

The parade on October 10 overshadowed all its predecessors in terms of special effects. To outside observers, it had the faint aura of a Hollywood production.

Unlike any previous military parade, this one was held at midnight. It was preceded by an hour-long ceremony and a speech by Kim, who was uncharacteristically attired in a grey business suit rather than his usual Mao jacket. Standing on the newly built marble podium facing Kim Il-sung Square, his face heavily made up including a hint of lipstick, he delivered what seemed to be a very emotional speech that caused many in the audience to shed tears. There were no face masks or signs of social distancing in sight—which was fitting, as Kim claims that no one in North Korea has been infected with COVID-19.

Once the national flag was raised and the national anthem sung by an operatic tenor, the TV cameras displayed a Big Ben-style tower clock ticking toward midnight. On the twelfth stroke, the military parade commenced. Contrary to tradition, the soundtrack was supplied by a symphonic orchestra, its conductor and players resplendent in white and supported by several military bands, one of which consisted of female soldiers in white uniforms.

The old lighting system in the square was replaced by sports arena-style floodlights that brightly illuminated each infantry formation, tank, and missile as they emerged from the dark avenue leading to the square. The visual effect was nothing short of stunning.

The parade opened, bizarrely enough, with a formation of cavalry troops riding snow white horses. Remarkably, the well-trained horses did not leave any manure behind them. But the most amazing effect was the fly-by of the North Korean air force. This was a world first: a nighttime formation of aging Mig 29s all lit up in gaudy colors by LED garlands along the leading and trailing edges of their wings. Other planes fired flares that formed the North Korean national emblem against the night sky. Yet more formations had rear-facing projectors that illuminated their smoke trails. Cockpit cameras showed the pilots saluting when passing above the square. One can only marvel at the ingenuity and creativity of the anonymous stage masters who conceived this amazing show.

But behind the bells and whistles, the parade was all business. It clearly aimed to shock and awe. The troops sported new, ultra-modern small arms, pixilated camouflage uniforms, new body armor, and the last word in chemical warfare protection. There were new tanks, which were somewhat reminiscent of US Abrams tanks fused to Russian Armadas. New APCs had remotely operated gun stations. New armored cars carried multiple anti-tank missiles. Rocket launchers of various calibers abounded.

Then came the stars of the whole show: the missiles.

First were the tactical missiles. There were four types, all seen before either in previous parades or in flight testing. The missile show was headed by a formation of BK 2 1000+ km missiles, which were followed by "super large" KN 25 MLRS, the guided rockets of which have a presumed range of nearly 400 km. This system was advertised by North Korea in a series of tests in August and September 2019. (Kim was apparently so pleased with the system that he provided a visual cue to its size by allowing publication of a photo of himself touching the launcher. From his height of 177 cm, one could extrapolate the size of the canister in which the rocket is encased and deduce its diameter—about 60 cm (54 inches), which is suspiciously similar to the Iranian Fatah 110 family of guided precision rockets.)

This time the surprise was not the rocket itself but its launcher. Beside the already familiar wheeled Transporter Erector Launcher vehicle (TEL), which carries four missiles, a new tracked TEL carrying six missiles was unveiled for the first time in this parade. Then came the 450 km range Iskander-like KN 23, already seen in a 2017 parade but now sporting a new TEL—in fact, two new

TELs. The 2017 vehicle was obviously a provisory configuration adapted from a commercial truck. During tests in the summer of 2019, the missile was fired from a more businesslike TEL that was strikingly similar to the Russian "Astrolog" TEL from the original Iskander missile system. Yet behind the formation of Astrolog-like TELs came a formation of new tracked TELs carrying the same missiles. Finally, a formation of the KN 24 ATACM-like 400 km range missile rolled by, carried on its previously seen tracked TEL (no surprises there).

Next came a formation of the HS 12 liquid propellant IRBM carried on its familiar six axle wheeled TEL, an adaptation of the ex-Soviet MAZ 547, which somehow survived the INF treaty (all Soviet TELs of this type were supposed to be destroyed, but apparently many survived and found their way to North Korea). This type of missile is familiar from its extensive tests, some of which were successful. Its range is variously estimated as 4,000 to 5,000 km. Into the limelight then rolled a quartet of nine-axle wheeled TELs carrying the HS 15 ICBM, the missile that astounded the world when tested in November 2017 and which has sufficient range to drop a nuclear bomb on any point in the US.

Then came the bombshell: four oversized SLBMs identified as BK 4A, followed by four gargantuan ICBMs that dwarfed even the giant HS 15s. These immense missiles were carried on a gigantic wheeled TEL with no fewer than 11 axles (22 wheels). The supersized ICBM and its enormous TEL were, respectively, the biggest ballistic missile and the largest mobile rocket launcher ever seen on earth—larger than anything ever exhibited by the US, Russia, or China.

At this point, the orchestra switched from Soviet-style military marches to film score-style music, with hints of *Star Wars* thrown in. Kim jumped up and down with excitement, the crowd in the square went ape, and world observers were dumbstruck. Thus ended the most peculiar military parade ever held in Pyongyang and perhaps anywhere else.

By orchestrating this event, Kim was clearly attempting to convey that Pyongyang possesses invincible power and can crush South Korea in a swift ground campaign while holding the US back from intervening by posing a credible nuclear threat to the American mainland and overseas bases. But this mighty war machine exhibited some curious lacunae. First, it operates an aging fleet of obsolete Russian combat aircraft that stand no chance against the fully modernized South Korean Air Force. Second, there was a curious absence of a UAV (unmanned air vehicle) segment in the parade, signifying that this new and growingly important class of weapon is not receiving priority in Kim's war machine. And third, there was a notable absence of any combat engineering systems like mobile bridging devices. To swiftly overrun the

mountainous terrain of South Korea, combat engineering is no less crucial than combat armored vehicles. Rather than demonstrating a well-balanced offensive military machine, the show put the emphasis on drama and pageantry.

This conclusion is reinforced by examining some of the curiosities of the missile segment in the parade. Why does Kim need three redundant types of tactical ballistic missile (the KN 23, 24, and 25)? And why do those three types of missile need five different types of TELs? The Iranians, who also love to unveil new missiles on occasion, show more awareness of cost effectiveness by restricting the number of basic types of tactical missile to two, one liquid and one solid, and using only the two basic types of TEL for all their variants. The profusion of redundant North Korean tactical missile types and TELs tells a story of showmanship over military utility.

The strategic missile parade left Western analysts perplexed. Given that the already existing giant HS 15 is a viable nuclear ICBM that can already deter the US, what is the purpose of the gargantuan new missile (unofficially christened by analysts the HS 16)? Some think it was designed to carry multiple warheads in order to defeat the US strategic missile defense deployed in California and Alaska. Others believe it is designed to carry a single multi-megaton warhead. The very size of the immense new missile and its no less immense TEL makes it less survivable than its smaller predecessor. The tendency of other nuclear powers is to make their ICBMs as compact as possible, not the other way around. Leading analyst Xu Tianran, in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, was unable to solve this puzzle. He despairingly concluded that in any case, "This new type missile could potentially inflict much greater damage to the United States than previous North Korean ICBMs."

That was exactly the point. Kim's object was to sow fear by pushing the largest ICBM in the world in the face of the US: to create apprehension not only by sheer gigantism, but by the very mystery of the missile's rationale. Like the impressively modernized yet unbalanced conventional force goose-stepping under the floodlights of Kim Il-sung Square, like the garishly illuminated, aging jet fighters flying above it, so too were the two new additions to the nuclear missile force—the enormous BK 4a and the gigantic HS 16—meant to inspire awe and to make the rest of the world gape. No further rationale was needed: The show was the message.

Kim needs the world to pay attention to him, and with this event he was successful. What will he do next? After the drama of a night parade and the bombshell of the largest ballistic missile ever, what tricks can he conjure for his next show?

There is the question of resources. How can Kim afford an immense and constantly modernizing fleet of ballistic missiles? One is struck by the sheer wastefulness of manufacturing and parading not one but four gargantuan missiles on huge mobile launchers—even before testing to see whether they work. Kim spent freely simply to show that he can do so, contrary to all indicators that North Korea's economy is one of the smallest in the world.

In ancient times, when cities were besieged by hostile armies seeking to starve them into submission, the defenders used their last water reserves to hang dripping laundry over the walls to broadcast that they could outlast the siege. Perhaps Kim's latest Pyongyang show was a figurative way of hanging his wet laundry from the walls of his Hermit Kingdom.

In the past, Israeli analysts carefully watched Pyongyang parades for clues of what might next appear in Tehran parades. The October 10 show indicates a parting of the ways: Kim is investing his resources in an offensive conventional force and in a global-range nuclear force. At this stage, the Iranians seem to be focused mainly on access denial weapons and regional conventional missiles and UAVs. They are by now sophisticated enough to provide for their own missiles, and seem to go at it more rationally and with less squandering of resources. It is hard to see any of the tactical missiles paraded in Pyongyang rolling down the main avenue of Tehran.

The latest Kim production began bizarrely with a squadron of troops on horseback and ended with an awesome display of monster missiles. It remains to be seen what other feats of saber-rattling Kim will come up with to satisfy his constant need to remain the focus of the world's attention.

*Dr. Uzi Rubin was founding Director of the Israel Missile Defense Organization, which managed the Arrow program. He is now a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.*