Written by **Warren Mass** on July 12, 2017

South Korea Says North Korean ICBM Lacks Re-entry Capability

South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) has disputed North Korean claims that the long-range missile it tested on July 4 has re-entry capabilities, which would allow it to direct a nuclear warhead to a specific target. The North Korean missile reportedly reached an altitude of over 1700 miles and a distance of almost 580 miles, which is considered to be an extremely steep trajectory. If such a missile were to be launched at a lower angle, Pyongyang might strike targets up to 5,000 miles away — effectively giving it ICBM capability.

After the test launch on July 4, North Korean state media said the missile was equipped with a stable re-entry system, which would allow its warhead to survive the extreme heat generated while of re-entering the Earth's atmosphere. Without that capability, the missile, though capable of traveling a long distance, would effectively be useless as a weapon.

The NIS made it findings available to members of the South Korean National Assembly's intelligence committee on July 11.

Yi Wan-young, a member of the intelligence committee, told reporters during a televised briefing that the NIS has not been able to confirm that re-entry of the North Korean missile had been successful.

"Considering how North Korea does not have any testing facilities [for re-entry technology], the agency believes [North Korea] has not yet secured that technology," Yi said.

Yi said the agency believed the missile launched last week was a modified version of the KN-17 intermediate range missile that North Korea tested in May.

Another member of the National Assembly, Lee Wan-young, said on July 11: "Considering the fact that the missile had been launched from a fixed launcher, the NIS evaluates the technology is at the beginning stage."

"The NIS sees North Korea as not yet capable of re-entry technology," Lee said during a televised news conference held after an intelligence briefing.

During a hearing before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee in May, Lt. Gen. Vincent Stewart, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, predicted that North Korea will eventually obtain a nuclear weapon capable of hitting the United States, if left unchecked.

"If left on its current trajectory, the regime will ultimately succeed in fielding a nuclear-armed missile capable of threatening the United States homeland," said Stewart. "While nearly impossible to predict when this capability will be operational, the North Korean regime is committed and is on a pathway where this capability is inevitable."

Stewart said during the hearing that the only hurdle for North Korea is finding a way for its ballistic missile to re-enter the atmosphere. Perfecting re-entry is "really a matter of enough trial and error to make that work," Stewart said. "They understand the physics, so it's just a matter of design."

Photo purportedly showing launch of North Korean ICBM: Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP

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