

Chinese missiles pose serious threat

Written by Harry Kazianis
Tuesday, 21 May 2013 09:41 -

Over the past few days North Korea has tested a series of short-range missiles that have sparked unease across Asia.

While such tests are certainly cause for concern, Asia's real missile challenge lies not with North Korea, but with China.

Indeed, China's military modernization since the mid-1980s through the present has focused on missiles.

Beijing has developed one of the world's most advanced ballistic and cruise missile programs. Unencumbered by treaty restrictions on medium-range missiles, the guardians of China's missile program, the Second Artillery, have developed a vast array of platforms for a number of different military objectives.

There is one particular weapon that should raise alarm bells across the region. Dubbed the "carrier killer," the DF-21D is a medium-range missile that has created a firestorm in the strategic studies community, academia as well as in the media. The weapon is fired from a mobile truck-mounted launcher into the atmosphere, with over-the-horizon radar, satellite tracking and possibly unmanned aerial vehicles each providing guidance. It also incorporates a maneuverable warhead to help find its target. The missiles likely uses a high explosive warhead that would be utilized in expected saturation strikes to achieve a mission kill against a maritime target. The weapon has created quite a stir in the US defense community, with some going so far as to question if the day of the aircraft carrier has passed.

As feared as this new missile system is, there remains an interesting wrinkle — it is not known to have been tested on a non-cooperative maritime target.

While there have been reports of various tests overland, there has never been a test in what would come close to battlefield conditions. And when it comes to this particular missile, Beijing has good reason to never test such a system.

Chinese missiles pose serious threat

Written by Harry Kazianis

Tuesday, 21 May 2013 09:41 -

In view of today's tense strategic landscape in Asia, a successful test of such a powerful weapon would create tremendous controversy. China's neighbors, many of who have competing territorial claims with Beijing in the East and South China Seas, would be given a powerful reason to consider aligning ever closer with the US' strategic interests, or consider approaching Washington to acquire or enhance their own US-made missile defense systems. While US missile defenses presently in Asia are a safeguard against North Korea, Beijing realizes they could, in theory, be used against Chinese conventional as well as nuclear missiles — something China desperately wants to avoid.

Another possible reason the system has not been tested is quite simple — the weapon might not be ready.

Despite various reports that the missile has been deployed, with a US official stating the system has been deployed across the Taiwan Strait, such a weapon could take years to develop.

Finding a moving target on the open ocean and successfully delivering a missile is not an easy enterprise. With US military strategists already planning to interrupt such a weapons "kill-chain," Chinese military planners may not have perfected such advanced technology. One failed test could overnight undo much of the credibility and perception of China's rising military capabilities.

However, there could also be a much simpler reason — classic strategic ambiguity. One critique of China's armed forces has been its lack of transparency as regard military capabilities as well as strategic doctrine. Keeping the "carrier killer" confined to the lab or to overland tests may suit Beijing's purposes. China may not need to test the system in order to create a strategic advantage, have its potential adversaries expend valuable resources to defend against it, as well as swirl the rumor mill on its capabilities. There could be more benefit in not testing the system in an effort to keep Asian and US military planners guessing, or simply leak false intelligence on the system.

Even if China does not test such a weapon, military planners worldwide have already come to the conclusion that the threat of missile proliferation — specifically against maritime targets — is very real. Anti-ship weapons are proliferating across Asia, are for sale on the global arms market and are affordable. China already holds a number of land, sea and air based platforms

Chinese missiles pose serious threat

Written by Harry Kazianis

Tuesday, 21 May 2013 09:41 -

to deliver such weapons, as do other nations across the region.

While China may not test its much fabled “carrier killer,” the threat of such weapons remains very real.

Harry Kazianis is a non-resident WSD Handa Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He has previously served as editor-in-chief for The Diplomat and deputy editor for e-International Relations.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2013/05/21](#)