

A Russia - North Korea Connection On ICBM Development Emerges

As if the North Korean nuke situation wasn't already bad enough.

One of the frequently debated questions about North Korea's missile program is exactly how they seemed to advance so far, so fast. They've had low altitude, conventional rockets for a long time, of course, but putting an ICBM up to the edge of space and bringing it back down again to deliver a tactical weapon on target half way around the world is another matter entirely. We previously looked at the known connections between North Korea and Iran, who seem to be sharing technological advances in some fashion. But Iran really wasn't that advanced either, at least until recently.

Now another theory has emerged and it seems to have some credible substance to it. The Daily Beast has a summary of a New York Times report quoting a named source from the International Institute for Strategic Studies. They seem convinced that these latest rocket engines most likely came from a factory which dates back to the former Soviet Union.

North Korea's rapid missile-program improvements can likely be traced back to a black-market factory that used to produce the Soviet Union's most deadly weaponry, according to a new report and classified assessments by U.S. intel agencies. It is not believed that North Korea could have made such big leaps forward in their nuclear-weapons program without outside help. The former Soviet factory is just over the Russian border in Ukraine. "It's likely that these engines came from Ukraine—probably illicitly," Michael Elleman of the International Institute for Strategic Studies told The New York Times. "The big question is how many they have and whether the Ukrainians are helping them now. I'm very worried."

More from Elleman at the Times, who describes how the destitute nature of the region where the factory is located might have led to their taking on new customers in Pyongyang.

But since Ukraine's pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, was removed from power in 2014, the state-owned factory, known as Yuzhmash, has fallen on hard

times. The Russians canceled upgrades of their nuclear fleet. The factory is underused, awash in unpaid bills and low morale. Experts believe it is the most likely source of the engines that in July powered the two ICBM tests, which were the first to suggest that North Korea has the range, if not necessarily the accuracy or warhead technology, to threaten American cities.

Rather than reaching a point where nobody is helping North Korea (the ideal situation, where sanctions might actually produce results), we now have to wonder just how many people are helping Kim reach his goals and stay afloat. We already know that China is still engaged with ostensibly legal textile trading with North Korea, no doubt helping to fund their R&D. But it's never been suggested that they're sharing advanced weapons technology with them. But what does Russia have to gain, aside from stirring up some trouble for the west?

As the report indicates, it's possible that this wasn't a sanctioned deal with the Moscow seal of approval on it. After the collapse of the Soviet Union there were broad concerns that the bankrupt military and security force people left behind might start selling nukes on the open market for extra cash. (This was the subject of countless techno spy thriller novels and films.) To this day I'm not sure we've 100% nailed down the location of all of the former USSR's warheads, but that scenario makes it all the more likely that somebody might have been putting some ICBM engines on the black market. You'd think it would be tough to move something like that without our knowing about it, but anything is possible I suppose.

The worst case scenario is that Putin is actually directly involved and has decided to help Kim Jong-un become a permanent member of the nuclear weapons club. Would he really do that? It's tough to see what the benefit to Russia would be and it could always come back to bite them in the end. Either way, we may at least have solved the mystery for how the timeline for Kim getting a functioning ICBM shrunk so quickly. Anyway, I have to agree with Elleman on the other point. If Russia is directly involved, we should all be worried.

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