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Recent Unveiling of North Korea's “Nuclear Attack Submarine”

By Aswin Jia-Song Lin

SYNOPSIS

North Korea's unveiling of a purported tactical nuclear attack submarine has raised concerns and regional tensions. The development adds complexity to the situation on the Korean Peninsula since it will increase the Pyongyang nuclear deterrence. Doubts exist about its capabilities; therefore, will it become a game changer?

COMMENTARY

North Korea appears to be bolstering its naval capabilities, as officials in Pyongyang recently [unveiled](#) what they assert to be their inaugural tactical nuclear attack submarine during a launch event on 6 September 2023. The submarine is likely to be the same one inspected by Kim in the year [2019](#) when it was getting constructed. This submarine is reportedly North Korea's first vessel with the capability to launch nuclear attacks while submerged. Kim emphasised since August that Pyongyang needs to get prepared to break the enemy's will for war and stressed the need for North Korea to accelerate its efforts to equip the navy with submarines and unmanned underwater vehicles (UUV)/drones armed with tactical nuclear weapons to effectively carry out its strategic goals.

Kim's New Naval Toys

Nonetheless, the South Korean military has cast doubts on the submarine's suitability for regular operations. Officials from Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff have [indicated](#) that the vessel appears to be a modified version of the Soviet-era Romeo-class submarine. Their assessment suggests that this submarine lacks the capacity for standard operations, and there is a suspicion that Pyongyang was just exaggerating.

Seoul has also expressed its intention to work closely with Washington to maintain

military [readiness](#). It will not be a surprise if both nations will plan high-level discussions on extended deterrence in upcoming weeks to improve their responses to North Korea's threats.

Judging from the photograph released by North Korean media, the submarine appears to be [equipped](#) with a total of 10 launch tube hatches, believed by [analysts](#) to likely hold ballistic missiles and cruise missiles. Vann H. Van Diepen, a U.S. government weapons expert who works in conjunction with the Washington-based group 38 North, has pointed out that these weapons would not greatly boost North Korea's current nuclear capabilities. The main reason is that the submarine might not last long in a prolonged conflict and could easily be targeted in anti-submarine warfare.

North Korea's [Korean People's Navy](#) presently operates approximately 470 surface vessels and roughly 70 submarines. In August, Kim Jong-un inspected a [newly developed](#) *Amnok*-class Corvette, a patrol ship that North Korean state media claimed could launch cruise missiles armed with nuclear warheads. However, another analysis mentioned that the corvette's weaponry and sensor systems are considerably [outdated](#) when compared to more developed designs. Nevertheless, it acknowledged that this vessel marked a notable advancement for North Korea, potentially introducing a game-changing capability for nuclear-armed cruise missiles.

In March 2023, the Korean People's Navy conducted a test of what it termed a [nuclear-capable UUV](#), namely the *Haeil*. This weapon was allegedly designed for stealth operations in enemy waters, with the capacity to disrupt naval strike groups or major ports through underwater explosions.

Overall, in comparison to the US or Republic of Korea's navies, all the North Korean naval assets are inferior in quality. However, this is still a big deal for the Kim regime and the authorities in Pyongyang because even an older North Korean submarine could be hard to detect and could be deadly. The assets are still unseen and hard to detect by underwater sensor, posing a threat with the kind of short-range missiles that North Korea has been able to fire off successfully so many times in the past. Compared with ground-based missiles that South Korea's military is constantly monitoring, this will be a different kind of North Korean threat.

Analysis

Seoul must not forget previous [incidents](#) involving North Korean submarines, like the incident involving the ROKS *Cheonan* on 26 March 2010. During this tragic event, the *Cheonan*, a Pohang-class corvette belonging to the Republic of Korea Navy and carrying more than 100 personnel, sank off the western coast of South Korea near Baengnyeong Island in the Yellow Sea. This incident resulted in the loss of 46 sailors' lives. An official inquiry, led by South Korea and involving a team of international experts, released a summary of its findings on 20 May 2010. The investigation's [conclusion](#) was that the warship had been deliberately sunk by a North Korean torpedo fired from a midget submarine known as the *Yeono* (salmon) class. It was very surprising since these submarines are of domestic production and are considered to be quite [obsolete](#) (first manufactured in 1965). Still, this is a very clear indication that even naval assets with advanced technology can be destroyed by what is considered to be outdated technology.

Underestimating the capabilities of the Korean People's Navy is highly risky, as their military equipment, despite being significantly cheaper, has proven to be deadly, especially if it is now equipped with nuclear capabilities. There are good reasons to believe that geopolitical tensions on the Korean Peninsula will escalate, particularly since North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un seems determined to continue with Pyongyang's missile test launches and nuclear capability development.

The Republic of Korea is presently under the conservative government of President Yoon Suk Yeol who is seen in Pyongyang as very likely to increase cooperation with the US to up the ante in containing the ambition of Kim Jong-un. Most recently, Pyongyang reacted angrily to Yoon's speech (on 20 September 2023) at the annual General Assembly of the United Nations in New York when he warned the international community over North Korea's deepening military ties with Russia.

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