

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

December 22, 2002

NORTH KOREAN MISSILES FOR YEMEN: IS THERE A MISSING LINK?

Yiftah S. Shapir
Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

On 10 December 2002, a Spanish Navy ship operating near the Horn of Africa as part of a U.S.-led multinational force intercepted a North Korean freighter bound for Yemen. Spanish sailors boarded the ship and found 15 Scud missiles hidden under a cargo of cement. Within a day, American officials announced that they were satisfied with Yemen's declaration that the missiles belonged to Yemen, and the cargo was allowed to proceed to its destination.

This bizarre incident raises questions about the conduct of almost all of the main players: North Korea, the United States, and Yemen. It is even possible that there was another party involved – the real consignee of the ballistic shipment.

North Korea is the only actor whose conduct is readily explicable. Ballistic missiles are the PDRK's only merchandise export and its sole source of foreign currency. North Korea sells its missiles to any paying customer and is supremely indifferent to international norms on missile proliferation and resistant to pressure from the west. Among its other customers are Libya, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The intercepted missile cargo was not the first North Korean shipment to Yemen. A previous delivery took place last August, and these two shipments may well be just part of a much larger missile deal.

The incident proved highly embarrassing to the United States. On the one hand, counter-proliferation has been American policy for more than a decade, through the administrations of George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and now George W. Bush. And though this was probably the first time a shipment of ballistic missiles has been intercepted on the high seas, it was not the first time that action was taken against a shipment connected with weapons of mass destruction. In August 1993, for example, a Chinese ship suspected of carrying chemical weapons precursors to Iran was stopped in the Persian Gulf.

On the other hand, such action is highly problematic. The U.S. and its allies have adopted a norm against the proliferation of ballistic missiles, but a norm is not the same as international law. There is no treaty prohibiting the sale of ballistic missiles. There is only the Missile Technology Control Regime, which is an agreement among suppliers not to sell certain types of ballistic missiles. A buyer like Yemen is not bound by it. Nor is a seller like North Korea, since compliance with the MTCR is voluntary. Regime members may legitimately exercise diplomatic pressure on reluctant states to conform, but they cannot legally use force against them.

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
www.tau.ac.il/jcss/

www.dayan.org/

Moreover, Yemen's involvement poses a particularly delicate problem. Since the mid-1990's, the U.S. has tried to forge good relations with Yemen. American counter-insurgency advisors are assisting the central government, and the U.S. has more recently begun to help Yemen organize a strong Coast Guard. Yet this relationship is not without complications. Yemen is still a country in which tribal allegiances and loyalties are much stronger than national identity. Yemen is also a hotbed of Islamic extremism, and organizations like al-Qaeda have a strong foothold there. This was evident in the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole in Aden in October 2000, and, more recently, in the attack on a French oil tanker off the coast of Yemen. However, the U.S. needs Yemen as a base in its international war against Islamic extremism. Yemen can also serve as a naval strategic base; since it is ideally located to control both the Arabian Sea and the straits of Bab al-Mandab leading to the Red Sea. So as soon as the Yemeni Government protested and declared that the missiles were theirs, the Administration had to let the shipment continue to Sana'a even if the U.S. intelligence community suspected or even assumed that the missiles were really destined for a third party like Iraq, Sudan or a terrorist organization.

The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) received a Scud-B battalion from the Soviet Union in the late 1970's or early 1980's. Yemen inherited the missiles when the PDRY and the Yemeni Arab Republic merged in 1990. These missiles were used in combat only once, when South Yemen tried to secede in 1994. During the fierce combat that took place in May 1994, rebellious Southern forces fired several Scud missiles at the North's capital, Sana'a. Not much is known about the missile units since then, but they have presumably been integrated into the reunified Yemeni military.

Yemen has apparently decided to renew and upgrade its Scud units. According to some reports, the intercepted shipment included advanced models – Scud C and, according to one report, even Scud D. It is not altogether clear why Yemen needs these missiles at all. One possible explanation is national prestige. Since many other states in the Middle East have ballistic missiles, Yemen does not want to appear less capable. Although these missiles are technically able to reach some locations in southern Saudi Arabia, like the town of Abha, or Eritrea, there are hardly any suitable targets in any of the neighboring countries. And it is difficult to imagine any strategic scenario in which they would come into play.

This raises the possibility that the missiles were not really destined for Yemen after all. The most logical alternative end-user would be Sudan, and Yemen was previously suspected of illicitly transferring to Sudan tanks it had bought in Eastern Europe. But this begs the question why North Korea would need to ship the missiles via Yemen rather than directly to Sudan. And Yemen would be reluctant to risk helping Iraq just when it seeks good relations with the U.S. and is taking its first steps as a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). These considerations also argue against the possibility that the missiles were destined for a terrorist organization like al-Qaeda, which would need a large base and the consent of the local government to use and operate such missiles.

Against the backdrop of the American war against terrorism and the campaign against Saddam Hussein, the incident in the Arabian Sea may ultimately be nothing more than a reminder of the familiar truth that politics makes, not only for some strange bedfellows, but also for some inconsistent policies.