Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Scott Perry (R-PA)
Subcommittee on Oversight and Management Efficiency

"Empty Threat or Serious Danger: Assessing North Korea's Risk to the Homeland"

October 12, 2017

Remarks as Prepared

It is no secret that Kim Jong-un and his maniacal regime in North Korea have ratcheted up tensions with the United States at an alarming rate. With the knowledge that North Korea conducted over 20 missile tests on over a dozen different occasions between February and September 2017 – including tests of intercontinental ballistic missiles, many Americans and our allies around the globe remain on edge. However, Americans may rightly wonder about North Korea's ability to threaten the homeland directly. Intelligence from the "Hermit Kingdom" is oftentimes inconsistent and limited. Despite these intelligence challenges, information that has been gathered is reason enough for alarm.

For example, according to media reports, two North Korean shipments to a Syrian government agency responsible for the country's chemical weapons program were intercepted in the past six months. While these reports did not detail exactly what the shipments to Syria contained, this is not the first time a North Korean ship has been seized due to carrying suspected missile-system components. In 2013, a North Korean ship was intercepted in the Panama Canal with false manifests, and hidden under legitimate cargo, parts for fighter jets and rockets.

In addition, according to the Council on Foreign Relations, recent estimates suggest that North Korea's nuclear weapons stockpile comprises ten to sixteen nuclear weapons, and has the potential to grow rapidly by 2020, to potentially 125 weapons. Furthermore, the Center for Nonproliferation Studies estimates North Korea has between 2,500 and 5,000 metric tons of chemical weapons, and as we are all aware with the assassination of Kim Jong un's half-brother with a deadly nerve-agent, those weapons have already been put to use. Whether or not North Korea intends to act on any of its threats to the U.S. directly, we must also keep in mind that Pyongyang is willing and able to supply weaponry, expertise, or technology to other hostile Nation-States, and possibly non Nation-State actors that are intent on destroying the United States and the freedoms we stand for.

Former Department of Homeland Security Secretary, John Kelly, stated in April that the most imminent threat from North Korea is a cyber-threat. North Korea's increasingly sophisticated cyber program has the ability to pose a major threat to U.S. interests. For example, Federal prosecutors are investigating North Korea for a possible role in the international banking system, SWIFT, hack that resulted in the theft of $81 million from the central bank of Bangladesh in 2016. In late 2014, the computer systems of SONY Pictures Entertainment were infiltrated, which was said to have been in retaliation over expressed outrage over the Sony-backed film centered on Kim Jong-un.

With a growing variety of digital threats against the private sector and Federal networks, are we prepared to safeguard our infrastructure against a North Korean-led cyber-attack?

While a cyber-attack from North Korea is a serious risk we face, we cannot discount other possible threats, such as an electromagnetic pulse event (EMP). An EMP, while some believe as a low-probability, has the potential to be a catastrophic event that could result in paralyzing the U.S. electric grid and other key infrastructures that rely on the electric grid to function. Disruption to our power grids would be disastrous. According to a 2016 Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report, a major EMP event could result in "potential cascading impacts on fuel distribution, transportation systems, food and water supplies, and communications and equipment for emergency services."

As North Korea continues its belligerent actions, the United States must be prepared to protect the homeland from an array of threats. The Department of Homeland Security has a vital role in protecting our cyberspace and critical infrastructure and preventing chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear terrorism. This hearing will allow us to gain a greater understanding of the multitude, severity, and probability of threats posed by North Korea and how the Department of Homeland Security can best prepare for and mitigate these risks.

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