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North Korea tests intercontinental ballistic missile

The North Korean regime last week test-fired an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) for the first time since 2017, effectively marking an end to a moratorium on long-range missile and nuclear tests announced prior to talks between US President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in 2018.



This photo provided by the North Korean government shows a test launch of a hypersonic missile on Jan. 11, 2022 in North Korea. (Credit: Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP, File)

Pyongyang released footage of last Thursday's missile test the following day, declaring that the country's nuclear forces were "fully ready to thoroughly check and contain any

dangerous military attempts of the US imperialists.” It claimed to have tested for the first time its huge Hwasong-17 missile—a road-mobile ICBM that was displayed publicly in October 2020.

Foreign analysts, however, raised questions about last week’s launch. Colin Zwirko, an analyst with the South Korean NK Pro, wrote: “Multiple pieces of visual evidence suggest North Korea’s version of events is misleading at best, and possibly a complete fabrication of a successful Hwasong-17 test at worst.”

Whether or not the test involved the Hwasong-17, it is clear that the missile had a longer range than in previous tests. According to Japanese and South Korean estimates, it travelled in a very steep trajectory to a height of 6,200 km and horizontally as far as 1,100 km. The flight time was 71 minutes—17 minutes longer than the 2017 test of a Hwasong-15 missile.

If the missile had been fired on a normal trajectory, it could have reached any part of the United States. Similar estimates in 2017 suggested the Hwasong-15 could reach the American west coast.

The ICBM test was a desperate attempt to prompt negotiations to end the sanctions regime that has crippled North Korea’s economy since 2018.

Following the November 2017 test, the US rammed punitive new measures on North Korea through the UN Security Council, adding to the already crippling sanctions regime on the country. Additional export bans were designed to choke off virtually all export trade. Tough limits were placed on energy imports and all North Koreans working abroad were to be repatriated home, further cutting off sources of foreign exchange.

China and Russia voted for the UN sanctions in a bid to forestall a US war against North Korea. President Trump, who declared that he would never tolerate North Korea having ICBMs that would hit the US mainland, had declared that the US was “ready, willing, and able” to “totally destroy” the country of 25 million people.

Having brought the Korean Peninsula to the brink of war, Trump did an abrupt about-face and met with Kim Jong-un in Singapore in June 2018—the first-ever summit between a US president and a North Korean leader. Their joint declaration was long on hype and

lacking in any detail. A second summit in Hanoi in 2019 failed to produce an agreement. It was stymied by Trump's demand that North Korea dismantle its nuclear arsenal and facilities before the lifting of sanctions.

The only outcome of the failed diplomacy was a moratorium on North Korean tests of its nuclear weapons and ICBMs, in return for a halt to the huge joint US-South Korean military exercises held annually to rehearse for war with North Korea. Since the talks effectively stalled in 2019, North Korea has tested various short-range and medium range missiles while the US and South Korea have resumed joint military exercises, but stopped short of large-scale drills.

That outcome suited both Trump and Biden—North Korea had been stopped from further testing and thus extending its nuclear arsenal and the US had conceded virtually nothing in return. After coming to office, the Biden administration nominally offered to talk to Pyongyang but gave no indication of any serious negotiations.

For North Korea, however, the current situation is intolerable. Its economy has been severely affected by the heavy sanctions imposed both through the UN Security Council and by the US unilaterally. The impact of the sanctions has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic during which North Korea has shut its borders and trade with China plummeted. The economy shrank in 2020 by an estimated 4.5 percent—a record—and is forecast to shrink again this year. In the middle of last year, Pyongyang reported a food crisis.

The North Korean regime has repeatedly used its missile and nuclear tests as a bargaining chip with the US. So far this year, it had conducted 11 missile tests but had refrained from holding a full-scale test of an ICBM. With no prospects of negotiations to end the punitive sanctions on the country, Pyongyang no doubt hopes to put pressure on the US while Washington is focussed on the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

The Biden administration has exploited North Korea's missile tests to intensify its anti-Russian campaign. On March 11, following two missile tests, it imposed punitive measures on two Russian citizens and three Russian corporations for their alleged involvement in North Korea's procurement activities for its missile programs. Following last week's ICBM test, the US State Department announced further sanctions on Russian

entities and a Russian national, as well as North citizen Ri Sung Chol and North Korea's Second Academy of Natural Science Foreign Affairs Bureau.

The White House condemned last week's launch as a "brazen violation" of UN resolutions. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts and agreed to coordinate a response, including potential new sanctions. Further international economic sanctions imposed via the UN Security Council face a possible veto by Russia and/or China, which is North Korea's largest trading partner by far.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula are certain to escalate. South Korea is preparing to conduct its own test of a solid-fuel space rocket in the near future. While the project's purported aim is to launch military satellites to monitor North Korea, such technology could be the basis for producing long-range ballistic missiles. Joint US-South Korean military exercises are planned for next month. In a display of force, South Korea conducted a training session of its sophisticated F-35A stealth fighter aircraft on Friday.

Relations with North Korea will further deteriorate when South Korea's right-wing president-elect Yoon Suk-yeol takes office in May. He campaigned on strengthening ties with the United States and taking a tougher stand toward North Korea. Ominously he suggested last month that South Korea had to develop its offensive military capabilities, saying the war in Ukraine demonstrated that "war can be prevented only by securing a pre-emptive strike capacity."

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