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North Korea fires missile over Japan for first time since 2017

Over the past two weeks, North Korea has conducted a spate of missile launches, the first major weapons tests since June. Rather than attempt to de-escalate the situation, the United States and its allies in Northeast Asia are exploiting the issue, combining increased militarization of the region with the ongoing isolation of Pyongyang, all aimed at preparing for war with China.



This photo distributed by the North Korean government shows what was said to be the test launch of a Hwasong-12 intermediate range missile in Pyongyang, North Korea, Aug. 29, 2017. [AP Photo/ Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP]

Pyongyang's most recent launch took place Thursday morning, with two short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) landing in the Sea of Japan. This followed a Tuesday morning firing of an intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM), from Mupyŏng-ri, Jagang

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Province in the northern part of the country. This missile, identified in the media as a Hwasŏng-12, reportedly traveled some 4,600 kilometers and reached a maximum altitude of 1,000 kilometers. The missile flew over Japan's Aomori Prefecture, in the north of Honshu, the first time Pyongyang has fired a missile over Japan since 2017. It landed in the Pacific Ocean, some 3,200 kilometers east of the country.

In total, Pyongyang has conducted six tests, launching ten total missiles since September 25, which corresponded with the arrival of the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier at South Korea's port city of Busan on September 23, as well as the arrival on September 26 of US Vice President Kamala Harris in Japan for the state funeral of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Harris also made a one-day visit to South Korea on September 29, meeting with South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and provocatively visiting the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating North and South Korea.

The nuclear-powered US carrier and its strike group held multiple exercises in the Sea of Japan with both the South Korean and Japanese navies for the first time in five years. This broke a tacit agreement in 2018 between the previous Trump administration and Pyongyang to halt large-scale US drills with South Korea in the region in exchange for a moratorium on the North's intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and nuclear tests.

Furthermore, during the summit between US President Joe Biden and South Korea's Yoon in May, the two sides agreed to deploy US strategic assets to the region while also agreeing to restart the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group for the first time since January 2018. The group provides Washington and Seoul the opportunity to hold discussions on strategic and policy issues regarding so-called extended deterrence, including the use of nuclear weapons.

Since agreeing to the moratorium in 2018, North Korea has conducted only two apparent ICBM tests, one in March and another in May, following the Biden-Yoon summit. The Biden government has allowed North Korea to languish under brutal US-led sanctions while the country faces a major economic crisis and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Washington has refused to offer any genuine relief as Pyongyang had hoped after halting its weapons tests.

Pyongyang's missile launches, therefore, represent a desperate attempt to bring Washington back to the bargaining table. They are also the result of Washington's goading as it abandons the 2018 agreement with Pyongyang by staging large-scale drills with South Korea, which included the Ulchi Freedom Shield drills in August, forcing North Korea to respond.

North Korea's state media has remained silent about Tuesday's test. However, China's Foreign Ministry responded by calling on all governments involved to maintain "the policy of seeking a political settlement of issues on the Korean Peninsula and address each other's concerns in a balanced way through dialogue."

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning also stated during a press conference on September 30 that Pyongyang had "legitimate and reasonable security concerns" while criticizing the numerous military drills the US has staged with South Korea and Japan in recent weeks.

Conscious of the US's history of violent regime-change operations around the world, including the one currently being conducted against Russia, Pyongyang is looking for security guarantees while using its weapons program as its only real bargaining chip short of complete capitulation.

Washington and Seoul are also seizing on Pyongyang's missile launches, as well as claims that an ICBM or nuclear test are imminent, to increase military drills in the region, close to China, the primary target of US imperialism. This includes the announcement Wednesday that the USS Reagan would return to the Sea of Japan after leaving last week. The South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff called the return so soon "very unusual."

The US and South Korea fired four ATACM (Army Tactical Missile System) missiles into the Sea of Japan on Wednesday. The previous day, the two militaries also conducted a bombing run on a range on Jikdo, an island in the Yellow Sea. Consisting of four South Korean F-15K fighter jets and four US F-16 fighters, a South Korean jet dropped two JADAM bombs on the island on Tuesday. The South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff stated that the air strike demonstrated the two allies "capabilities to conduct a precision strike at the origin of provocations based on the alliance's overwhelming forces."

South Korea's military also attempted to fire a short-range Hyunmoo-2C ballistic missile, but it failed shortly after launch. While its warhead did not explode, it reportedly landed just 700 meters from the nearest residential area.

In addition, following Tuesday's missile launch, Biden spoke to Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, with the White House stating afterwards that both condemned North Korea's test "in the strongest terms." Kishida called the launch "barbaric" and told reporters after the call with Biden, "We will always have to consider unique sanctions" on North Korea.

Kishida also stated that Tokyo is in close communication with South Korea, discussing "various security issues while bringing the United States into the dialogue." He said that Tokyo "would like to have close communications," with Seoul and called for the setting up of a meeting between himself and President Yoon. The two have already scheduled a phone call for Thursday.

Longstanding tensions between Tokyo and Seoul have cut across Washington's plans for war against China, which includes incorporating its two allies into a regional ballistic missile system designed to prevent China or Russia from launching a counter-attack against US forces. This requires high-level and bilateral intelligence sharing between Japan and South Korea. Trade disputes and historical issues have prevented this from taking place. South Korea's Yoon, however, has made clear his administration will pursue closer relations with Tokyo.

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