

The U.S. Needs a Strong Response to North Korea's ICBM Launch

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Kim Jong-un's latest ICBM launch shows that North Korea has ended self-restraint on major provocations and is also more likely to conduct another nuclear test.

China and Russia blocked punitive measures in the U.N. Security Council, but the U.S. can still lead an international effort to hold Pyongyang accountable.

The U.S. and South Korea should strengthen allied deterrence measures in response to Pyongyang's transgressions, as tensions will likely rise in the months ahead.

On March 24, Pyongyang successfully test-launched an ICBM—but not the missile that it claimed to have launched. The regime may have been embarrassed about an earlier failure of its newest ICBM and substituted an earlier model to ensure success. North Korea will assuredly try again to test its large multiple-warhead ICBM and, having now rescinded its moratorium on major provocations, is more likely to conduct another nuclear test as well. Pyongyang's escalatory behavior will exacerbate tensions in the region and necessitate stronger allied responses.

The Growing North Korean Missile Threat

Throughout 2018, North Korea refrained from missile launches while it was diplomatically engaged

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with the United States. However, the collapse of the bilateral Hanoi summit in February 2019 led Pyongyang to initiate a record level of missile testing comprised of at least 12 new short-range and medium-range missile systems.

Although it did not test it at the time, during its October 2020 parade, North Korea unveiled the massive Hwasong-17, the world's largest mobile ICBM. Having already demonstrated in 2017 that it had missiles that could target the continental United States, the regime revealed its intent to develop a missile with a range of 15,000 kilometers that would be capable of carrying multiple nuclear warheads.¹ Such a capability risks overwhelming the limited missile defenses protecting the American homeland.

Resumption of ICBM Tests

U.S. officials revealed that two North Korean short-range missile launches on February 27 and March 4 of this year were flight tests of Hwasong-17 components.² Pyongyang claimed the flights were preliminary trials of a new reconnaissance satellite, including tests of the high-resolution camera system and attitude control devices.³ The latter system is important for orienting a satellite camera but is also applicable to a post-boost vehicle that can release multiple nuclear warheads at separate targets.⁴

On March 16, North Korea launched a missile that the U.S. and South Korea assessed to be the Hwasong-17. The missile exploded at an altitude of 20 km and showered debris on Pyongyang. The regime later claimed that the subsequent successful launch on March 24 was of the Hwasong-17.⁵

However, open-source analysis revealed discrepancies between the video and satellite imagery, suggesting that portions of the video were from the earlier failed launch.⁶ The U.S. and South Korea later assessed that the March 24 launch was actually of a remodeled Hwasong-15, based in part on infrared satellite imagery showing that the missile had two nozzles instead of the Hwasong-17's four.⁷ The missile also flew considerably higher and further than the 2017 Hwasong-15 launch, affirming that North Korea has the ability to target any location in the United States with a nuclear weapon.

Pyongyang's cover-up of the botched Hwasong-17 launch may be due to embarrassment that Kim Jong-un's showcase military weapon failed spectacularly within sight of the capital on its initial full-scale test launch.

Foreshadowing of More Provocations

In the past, a North Korean missile failure led to a lengthy hiatus before another attempt was made. Kim Jong-un, however, has shown a propensity

for quickly risking another launch of a failed system. Pyongyang may therefore conduct another Hwasong-17 launch in the near future. In January, Kim emphasized the importance of “grandly celebrating” the 110th anniversary of North Korean founder Kim Il-sung’s birth on April 15,⁸ suggesting that the regime might conduct nuclear or missile tests near that time.

To date, North Korea has launched all of its ICBMs on a highly lofted trajectory so that they would not fly over Japan. The regime could choose to be even more provocative by launching missiles in a normal trajectory over Japan; bracketing Guam with intermediate-range missiles (as it threatened to do in 2017); testing two long-range submarine-launched ballistic missile systems paraded but not yet launched; or demonstrating the ability of an ICBM reentry vehicle to reenter the Earth’s atmosphere successfully after a lengthy flight.

North Korea has begun to renovate its Punggye-ri nuclear test site, which has been dormant since the last test in 2017. South Korean military and intelligence officials commented that the regime is creating a “shortcut” tunnel to enable rapid preparations for another nuclear test, possibly within a month.⁹ A nuclear test could either be of tactical nuclear weapons that North Korea claims to have developed or of another “super-large” hydrogen bomb as in November 2017.

China, Russia Block U.N. Response

Regardless of which missile was launched on March 24, it was yet another violation of 11 U.N. resolutions precluding North Korea from any ballistic missile launch. In response, the U.S. trod the well-worn path to the U.N. Security Council seeking another condemnatory statement and enhanced enforcement of sanctions.

In the past, China and Russia were grudgingly willing to accede to incremental stronger actions in response to Pyongyang’s more egregious violations. However, their current adversarial relationships with the United States have left a fallow landscape for punitive measures. Additionally, the low likelihood of a united U.N. response may have emboldened Kim Jong-un in choosing to proceed with an escalatory ICBM launch.

The United States sought Security Council action after the recent launches but was blocked by China and Russia. U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Linda Thomas-Greenfield proposed additional sanctions based on Security Council Resolution 2397 in which the council members vowed to take further action in the event of a North Korean ICBM launch.¹⁰ However, China and Russia will likely obstruct any U.S. efforts.

Increasing the Pressure on North Korea

While U.N. action would be the correct response, existing U.N. resolutions and U.S. laws provide ample authority for increasing pressure on North Korea, Chinese, and other violators. For years, the U.S. has pulled its punches on fully enforcing U.S. laws.

Since January 20, 2021, the U.S. has sanctioned only a handful of North Korean-related entities for missile and human rights violations. After initially sanctioning some North Korean violators, the U.S. announced it would not sanction 300 North Korean entities violating U.S. laws ahead of a presidential summit with Kim Jong-un in 2018. The U.S. also took no action against 12 Chinese banks committing money-laundering crimes in the U.S. financial system. The U.S. has sanctioned more Venezuelan and Syrian entities than North Korean entities.¹¹

In addition, newly elected South Korean President Yoon Seok-youl, who assumes office in May, has vowed to pursue a tougher policy against North Korea than his predecessor pursued. During the past five years, President Moon Jae-in has overlooked North Korean threats, provocations, and violations while advocating economic benefits and sanctions relief in vain efforts to improve inter-Korean relations. Yoon, on the other hand, can be expected to support sanctions enforcement more strongly, condition any benefits to North Korea on progress toward denuclearization, and place greater emphasis on strengthening the alliance with the United States.

How the U.S. Should Respond

Though stymied at the U.N. by Chinese and Russian obstructionism, the United States can and should lead an international effort to hold Pyongyang and other violators accountable and ensure sufficient defenses against the growing North Korean missile and nuclear threats. Specifically, the United States should:

- **Fully enforce U.S. laws.** For years, the United States has held off on sanctioning North Korean entities for which evidence of violations exists until Pyongyang conducted its next provocation. Treating law enforcement as a diplomatic tool to be bargained away or held in abeyance has undermined more effective execution of U.S. laws and diminished pressure against North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. Washington should move against all entities for which it has evidence of malfeasance.

- **Enhance strategic missile defense of the American homeland.** North Korea's growing ICBM force, potentially with multiple warheads, poses problems for American homeland missile defenses. The United States currently has only 44 ground-based interceptors. The Biden Administration should maintain plans to augment the force to 64 interceptors by fielding the Next Generation Interceptor before the end of the decade.
- **Augment allied regional ballistic missile defense.** Pyongyang's expanding force of tactical missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles increases the threat to U.S. forces and allies in the Indo-Pacific region. Washington should build an Aegis Ashore missile defense system on Guam to bolster the existing THAAD system. The United States should coordinate with allies South Korea and Japan to ensure that their missile defenses are sufficient to counter increasing North Korean missile threats.
- **Resume allied military exercises on the Korean Peninsula.** During the past four years, the U.S. and South Korea have canceled, reduced, and constrained their military exercises, and this has caused a deterioration in allied deterrence and defense capabilities. Washington and Seoul should return training levels to pre-2018 levels and resume temporary deployments of strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula, including strategic bombers, dual-capable aircraft, and carrier strike groups, deployment of which has been curtailed since May 2018.

Conclusion

Kim Jong-un's decision to highlight the launch of an ICBM rather than masking it as an ostensibly civilian satellite launcher shows that North Korea's self-restraint on major provocations has ended. He has clearly abandoned any interest in diplomatic dialogue for the foreseeable future, including bargains for maintaining the status quo in return for sanctions relief or economic benefits. As Pyongyang has repeatedly declared, any return to negotiations comes at the cost of U.S. concessions.

North Korea has often used any U.S. or South Korea reaction to its provocations to justify additional extreme measures. With both Washington and the incoming conservative administration in South Korea determined to

strengthen allied deterrence measures in response to Pyongyang's transgressions, there is likely to be an escalating cycle of rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula in the months ahead.

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Endnotes

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