

Why Is North Korea Showing the World So Many New Missiles?

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North Korea's Kim Jong-un convened the Eighth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in early January. He took a tough, even confrontational stand toward the United States, and missile visuals were quite telling. However, militaristic bluster could not hide the grave economic and potential political challenges that he faces. The incoming Biden administration should encourage North Korean restraint by signaling its interest in building on the Singapore declaration and President Donald Trump's diplomatic opening.

This was the first WPK meeting in four years. The intervening period has been tough for the North. China demonstrated its irritation with Pyongyang by agreeing to additional United Nations sanctions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea for conducting missile and nuclear tests. Then the Trump administration ramped up pressure on the Kim regime, culminating with Trump's threats of "fire and fury."

For a brief period, there was hope that negotiations would transform the relationship between Washington and Pyongyang, but the 2019 breakdown in Hanoi—the North asked for too much, the U.S. demanded too much—largely ended contact between the two governments. Now Trump's defeat has put the entire relationship in question: will Joe Biden return to the Obama administration's unsuccessful policy of "strategic patience" or seek to expand the Trump administration's limited opening?

Almost certainly Kim, who was formally elevated from chairman to general secretary of the WPK, filling a position left vacant after his father's death in December 2011, is asking this question as well. He used the congress to reaffirm the regime's commitment to nuclear weapons, embellishing that position with insults and threats. Some analysts believed Kim was closing off the possibility of negotiations with the new administration. Cheong Seong-chang of the Wilson Center warned: "Pyongyang is making clear that it does not intend to resume denuclearization talks with the U.S." at all right now. Kim believes that the regime "does not have high hopes on the U.S. changing its North Korea policy."

Yet North Korea's open hostility added little to past rhetoric. Nothing said closed off opportunities for engagement. Rather, Kim appeared to be maneuvering for advantage. Surely, he recognizes that Washington believes the North's economic travails provide leverage. He does

not want to begin talks at so evident a disadvantage. John Delury of Yonsei University argued that Kim's rhetoric did not sound like "You're hopeless, I'm just not interested in dealing with you," but "I genuinely tried with that madman ... and look where it ended up."

Kim and the WPK focused their ire on America. In his speech Kim explained: "Our external political activities going forward should be focused on suppressing and subduing the U.S., the basic obstacle, biggest enemy against our revolutionary development." Of course, he was stating a simple truth: it was America which thwarted Kim Il-sung's attempted conquest in 1950 and prevented the North from subsequently resuming the Korean War. Trump openly threatened the DPRK and talked of sending an "armada" off North Korea's coast.

Despite the brief Kim-Trump flirtation, the regime complained that U.S. policy toward the North was unchanged: irrespective of President Trump, "the true nature of the U.S. and its policy towards North Korea never changes," said Kim. While not strictly true, given Trump's willingness to meet, the Trump administration did maintain previous demands for denuclearization before offering sanctions relief. However, the new administration could adopt a new approach.

Indeed, Kim offered a way forward, explaining that "the key to establishing renewed DPRK-U.S. relations is in the U.S. withdrawing its hostile policy against the DPRK." This, too, is nothing new. Everything depends on what counts as "hostile policy," of course, but the lack of any fixed meaning potentially gives the Biden administration room for maneuver.

Kim and the WPK backed tough rhetoric with promises of expanded weapons development. He explained that acquiring nuclear weapons had been "a strategic and predominant goal" and "exploit of greatest significance in the history of the Korean nation." That, however, was just a start, since he stated his intention to "further strengthen our nuclear deterrence."

He presented a strikingly ambitious program. Improved warheads, reconnaissance satellites, and unmanned aerial vehicles may have been the least ambitious initiatives. More threatening to the United States would be tactical nukes, submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and "a hypersonic gliding flight warhead." Of most concern for Washington would be new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) of longer-range using solid propellant and carrying multiple warheads.

Again, however, there is little new here. The October military parade made a dramatic demonstration of Pyongyang's ambitions. The event showcased a variety of new conventional arms, and especially highlighted new missiles, regional, SLBMs, and an ICBM. Another military parade following the congress included new submarine-launched and various tactical missiles.

Moreover, Kim presented his extensive agenda as defensive. He explained: "The reality shows that we need to strengthen the national defense capabilities without a moment of hesitation to deter the United States' nuclear threats and to bring peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula." Indeed, the party's work report cited "enemies increasing their high-tech weapons of aiming at our nation." America was the focus, the "arch-enemy and the fundamental obstacle" that needed to be overpowered and bought "to their knees."

Equally important, Kim offered more wish list than reality. Given the regime's economic travails, funding such an arsenal—as well as winning any necessary Chinese or Russian technical assistance—would be no mean feat. Writing for NKNews, Ankit Panda suggested that "by all

available indicators, Kim is facing the most perilous internal economic environment today since he inherited power.” Indeed, the new general secretary reshuffled the party leadership, presumably to strengthen his hold on power.

If the Biden administration can pull relations with the People’s Republic of China back from the brink, Beijing might prove helpful in advancing such discussions. The relationship between North Korea and the PRC is much improved from three years ago; indeed, Xi Jinping speedily offered his congratulations to Kim for the congress. Nevertheless, China would not welcome what it perceived to be reckless behavior and Pyongyang has become more dependent on PRC energy and food aid. Beijing is unlikely to act against the North’s theoretical weapons agenda but would respond strongly against practical developments likely to trigger an American response. Although China has little incentive to aid U.S. efforts, it hopes to diminish tensions with Washington.

Given this challenging environment, it should come as no surprise that Kim left open the diplomatic door, saying that he didn’t “rule out diplomacy.” Indeed, the congress conveniently precedes the imminent arrival of the new American president and planned joint military exercises between the United States and South Korea. Panda believed that Kim’s “planned modernization efforts are meant to offer a signal to the Biden administration.” Kim’s weapons plans create an easy preliminary discussion focused on halting additional weaponry before moving to eliminate existing weaponry.

However, if Washington does not respond positively, Kim is likely to raise tensions. Missile tests would be an obvious next step, despite likely Chinese displeasure, with nuclear tests an even more provocative option, to both advance the agenda offered at the congress and increase pressure on the Biden administration. Such action in turn would make U.S. retaliation likely and complicate any later initiative to lift or suspend sanctions.

The chief challenge for the incoming president is time. North Korea will not seem like a priority, given manifold domestic concerns, as well as immediate international challenges involving Iran and China. Candidate Biden indicated that he would be willing to meet Kim with “conditions,” almost certainly meaning a denuclearization agreement of some nature settled beforehand. However, such an initiative could come only after his incoming foreign policy team has reviewed policy toward Pyongyang.

A positive sign for the future came from prospective CIA head William Burns, who participated in the Obama administration’s nuclear talks with Tehran. He emphasized that he had “never been a critic of President Trump’s unorthodox decision to start diplomacy at the top,” which at the time he called “worth a try.” He sounded realistic in dismissing the prospect of full denuclearization and observing that “it’s worth taking a page from the book of foreign negotiations with the Iranians and looking at interim steps that you could take that preserve the aspiration of full denuclearization.”

Lest the two governments head toward confrontation before having a chance to engage, the administration should signal its desire to talk, even if some time is necessary to prepare. That message could be sent through even a brief statement by the president or one of his top aides. The objective would be to ensure that Kim understands that he need not return to the bad old days of periodic provocations to attract Biden’s attention, and that doing so would make sanctions relief less likely.

The administration also should consider a temporary but symbolically important sanctions suspension for the Republic of Korea to offer. The Moon government had hoped for some positive indications from the North at the WPK congress, but none were forthcoming. There only were complaints about joint U.S.-ROK military exercises, charges that the South had broken its promise to “ensure peace and military stability,” demands that Seoul essentially sever its alliance ties with America, and additional insults from Kim’s sister, Kim Yo-jong. The North Korean leader appears to have decided, correctly, that the South will do nothing significant without Washington’s approval. The Biden administration could help both the U.S. and ROK by empowering Seoul.

From Washington’s perspective, little good came out of the party congress. However, there was little bad, only a reaffirmation of existing policy. The new Biden administration should essentially return the favor. There will be no going back to Obama-era “strategic patience,” but instead the new president will build on the policies of his predecessor. That is most likely to occur if Kim maintains his testing moratorium.

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