

# The Korea Times

## North Korea expected to test new ICBM after US election: experts

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As expected, North Korea showcased a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), presumably a Hwasong-16, and a new submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), the Pukguksong-4, during a military parade for the 75th founding anniversary of its ruling Workers' Party, Oct. 10, leaving government officials and experts in South Korea and the United States scrambling to analyze if and when Pyongyang will test its new weapons systems.

Given the upcoming U.S. presidential election, Nov. 3, and Pyongyang's past record of staging a military provocation around the event, speculation has been rising that a missile launch may be impending.

However, many experts buy into the idea that the North will refrain from testing its missiles until after the election for various reasons including helping U.S. President Donald Trump's reelection chances.

Trump has adopted the top-down approach with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in apparent hopes of striking a denuclearization agreement in a more swift and comprehensive manner and to this end, Trump has met with Kim on three occasions, becoming the first sitting American commander-in-chief to meet a North Korean leader.

In addition, 25 personal letters have been exchanged between the two leaders, leading Trump to tout the success of a moratorium on long-range missile and nuclear tests — albeit self-imposed by Kim — based on his relationship with the North's leader as the biggest diplomatic achievement of his presidency in the race against former Vice President Joe Biden, who has criticized the incumbent president's unorthodox approach.

"North Korea does not want to stand in the way of a Trump victory," Ken Gause, director of the Adversary Analytics Program at CAN, told The Korea Times.

Naval War College professor Terence Roehrig expressed a similar view, saying, "I doubt Kim will conduct any major weapons tests before the U.S. election for fear of doing something that might jeopardize Trump's chances of winning."

"North Korea will continue working on improving its capabilities and missile components but a

flight test of a long-range missile is unlikely," he added.

Conversely, a Biden win would raise the possibility of the North's missile launch, depending on its assessment of his administration, according to the pundits.

"If Biden is elected, we can expect to see a test, unless Biden makes it clear he will not return to Strategic Patience," Gause said.

Strategic Patience is the former Barack Obama administration's North Korea policy that means no engagement with the reclusive state as long as its leadership persists with nuclear development and ballistic missile testing, but many critics say the policy failed to address the North's evergrowing nuclear and missile programs. Biden was Obama's right-hand man at the time.

Bruce Klingner, a former CIA analyst and senior researcher at the Heritage Foundation, said a Biden administration would return to traditional U.S. views on the importance of alliances and the need for diplomatic progress prior to summit meetings.

"Biden has stated he wouldn't do photo-op summits like President Trump, but would instead insist on tangible progress at diplomatic working-level meetings prior to having a summit with Kim," he told The Korea Times.

Klingner said regardless of who is elected U.S. president, the Kim regime is likely to stage a provocation early next year, citing its past behavior.

"North Korea has historically conducted strong provocations in the first year of a U.S. and South Korean administration to train them like a dog," he said.

"As such, we can expect to see some major event, perhaps a launch of the new ICBM in early 2021."

However, Roehrig predicted that even if Biden wins the election, the North may adopt a wait-and-see attitude to determine how the new administration intends to proceed with its North Korea policy without conducting a test that might provoke a negative U.S. response.

"Depending on its assessment of a Biden administration, testing may eventually be back on the table but it's not certain when that might be," he said.

He also said a North Korean missile test may not have to do with its political purposes, but technical requirements.

"For North Korea to ensure that its weapons systems actually work, they will need to test. Thus, testing is often not about messaging but rather to make sure the missile systems function as

intended so that a testing schedule will be determined by technical requirements and not solely for political purposes," he said.

Meanwhile, Eric Gomez, director of defense policy studies at the Cato Institute, said while all the attention was paid to the ICBM and SLBM, the North's immediate threats are being overlooked.

"Another thing that is currently being overlooked in the coverage is the number of new conventional long-range systems featured in the parade — weapons that pose a far greater risk to stability than the nuclear weapons," Gomez told The Korea Times.

"In war, these new capabilities will make it harder for the United States to destroy North Korea's nuclear weapons on the ground."

### **New weapons**

Compared to the Hwasong-15, which has an estimated range of nearly 13,000 kilometers, the new ICBM is larger in size and has a longer nosecone, which indicates that it is devised to carry multiple warheads and a larger payload, although the South Korean and U.S. military authorities need further analyses.

In addition, given that it was mounted on a 22-wheel transporter erector launcher (TEL), the new version is believed to be the largest in the world.

The new SLBM was also larger than the previous version of the Pukguksong-3, classified as a medium-range missile that was test-fired in October 2019. The new weapon is expected to be deployed in an under-construction submarine that would be capable of carrying up to four ballistic missiles, according to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.