

N.Korea Builds Leverage, Demonstrates Threat, with Likely Submarine Launch

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North Korea has tested what appears to be a ballistic missile designed to be launched from a submarine -- an important advancement in Pyongyang's weapons program and a major provocation just days ahead of working-level nuclear talks with the United States.

South Korea's military says it is "highly likely" North Korea tested a Pukkuksong-type submarine-launched ballistic missile, or SLBM, early Wednesday from the sea near the coastal city of Wonsan in Kangwon province. Seoul says the missile flew about 450 kilometers but reached an altitude of about 910 kilometers, meaning it was launched at a lofted trajectory that would make its maximum distance much longer.

If flown on a standard trajectory with the same payload, the missile would have a maximum range of about 1,900 kilometers, according to an estimate by David Wright, a senior scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists. "This would classify the missile as a medium range (1,000 to 3,500 km)," Wright said.

It is not yet clear whether the North launched the SLBM from a submarine or an underwater platform. If confirmed, it could be the first time since 2017 that North Korea has tested a missile that is capable of flying distances that exceed what is considered to be "short range." Its exact maximum range is not yet known.

The provocation comes at a particularly fragile moment. Late Tuesday, North Korea's vice foreign minister said Pyongyang and Washington have agreed to hold long-delayed, working-level talks on Oct. 5. The two sides will have "preliminary contact" the day before, she said.

It's not clear how the latest launch will impact the talks. North Korea has conducted 11 rounds of ballistic missile launches since May. U.S. President Donald Trump has said he has "no problem" with Pyongyang's previous launches, since they were short-range.

◆ A New Threat

A submarine-based missile launch would be a major escalation and a reminder of the threat posed by North Korean weapons. Following several failed tests, North Korea in 2016 successfully tested a ballistic missile launched from a submarine. Reports have suggested that North Korea is working on new types of SLBMs, but those models had not yet been tested.

"We knew they were working on it but the question is why test it now?" asked Vipin Narang, a nuclear expert and professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "Get one in before the bell, betting we won't walk away? Test the SLBM before talks start knowing you can't once they do? Build leverage? All of the above?"

The development of satellite-launched ballistic missiles adds an unpredictable new component to North Korea's arsenal. SLBMs are mobile, potentially increasing the range of North Korea's ballistic missile arsenal. They are also easier to hide.

The latest test demonstrates North Korea is successfully diversifying its nuclear delivery options in ways that make it harder to combat using regional missile defenses, said Eric Gomez, a policy analyst for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. "This improves [North Korea's] ability to survive attacks and have forces left to retaliate," said Gomez.

◆ Talking While Launching

The North Korean launch risks embarrassing Trump and upsetting working-level talks that have been delayed for months. Though the United States has given no signs it will back out of the negotiations, Pyongyang seems to be sending the message that it will continue its provocations even while engaging in negotiations.

"The North Koreans have a long history of juggling carrots and sticks," said Mintaro Oba, a former U.S. diplomat who focused on the Koreans. "They combine these launches that raise tensions with what we call 'charm offensives' and that's exactly what we saw today."

"Their motivation is both to accelerate their technology, to create a sense of urgency behind negotiations to get some sort of nuclear deal with the United States, and to send some signals domestically as well that Kim Jong-un is strong and that the military remains an important constituency," Oba said.

◆ Regional Threat

The missile launches also threaten North Korea's neighbors. Japanese officials said Wednesday the North's latest missile landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone off Shimane Prefecture. It would be the first time in nearly two years that a North Korean rocket has landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone.

Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo condemned the launch. "North Korea has fired two ballistic missiles this morning," he said. "This type of short range ballistic missile is a violation of United Nations resolutions and we seriously and heavily protest and reprimand against such act."

North Korea has given varying justifications for its previous launches this year. Some of the launches, it says, were aimed at sending a warning to South Korea. Others were simply a test of its military capabilities and should not be seen as a provocation, it insisted.

Kim Dong-yub, a North Korea expert at Kyungnam University's Institute for Far Eastern Studies in Seoul, said the latest launch likely has a dual message: to increase leverage ahead of working-

level talks with the United States, and to respond to South Korea's unveiling Tuesday of advanced weaponry, including the F-35A stealth fighter acquired from the U.S.

◆ Delayed Talks

The North's announcement of talks came almost exactly three months after Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un met at the demilitarized zone separating the two Koreas and agreed to resume working-level talks. The talks have been stalled since February, when a Kim-Trump meeting in Vietnam broke down over how to pace sanctions relief with steps to dismantle North Korea's nuclear program.

Late last month, Trump said a "new method" to the nuclear talks would be "very good." That is especially relevant since North Korean officials have for months said the only way for the talks to survive is if the U.S. adopts a "new method" or a "new way of calculation" or similar language. Trump also recently dismissed his hawkish National Security Adviser John Bolton, who had disagreed with Trump's outreach to North Korea.

North Korea praised both developments, even while criticizing the United States for what it sees as provocative actions, including the continuation of joint military exercises with South Korea and weapons sales to Seoul.

◆ Approach

North Korea has repeatedly said it is not willing to unilaterally give up its nuclear weapons. Pyongyang instead prefers a phased approach, in which the United States takes simultaneous steps to relieve sanctions and provide security guarantees.

Kim and Trump have met three times since June 2018. At their first meeting in Singapore, the two men agreed to work toward the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. But they never agreed on what that means or how to begin working toward it.

Trump has said he is open to holding another summit with Kim. But it has long been unclear how the talks can advance without more substantive discussions -- including technical experts -- about what each side is prepared to offer and how to get there.

"I hope this will at minimum reacquaint the substantive negotiators with their counterparts and perhaps lead to some actionable leads," says Melissa Hanham, a weapons expert and deputy director at the Open Nuclear Network. "Any substantive working-level talks are good. Diplomacy is like a muscle and it needs exercise."