



With Latest Launches, North Korea Perfecting 'Scary Impressive' Missile

William Gallo

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SEOUL - With its latest test Wednesday, North Korea has now launched seven ballistic missiles over the past three months, after having refrained from such launches for a year and a half.

By firing missiles into the ocean, North Korea is expressing its anger at upcoming U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises and presumably trying to increase its leverage over the two allies amid stalled nuclear talks.

But the missile tests have more than symbolic importance. North Korea appears to be perfecting a new short-range missile that represents a unique threat to U.S. interests in the region.

Though the latest launch is still being analyzed, South Korean officials say the North appears to have tested some version of the same weapon each time: a modified version of a Russian-developed Iskander missile.

The North's missile, dubbed KN-23 by U.S. and South Korean intelligence officials, is easy to hide, can be quickly deployed, and is difficult for U.S. and South Korean missile defenses to intercept, according to analysts.

“It is not appropriate to shrug off these tests as short range.” says Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha Womans University in Seoul. “These missiles represent technological developments that threaten U.S. allies and forces in Asia.”

Though he has not commented on the latest launch, U.S. President Donald Trump has downplayed the importance of the prior tests, saying the missiles are not long-range and cannot reach the United States.

Trump's laid-back response, which has been echoed by South Korea's government, is an apparent attempt to preserve the possibility of talks with North Korea that have been stalled for months.

But by refusing to heavily criticize the launches, Washington and Seoul risk encouraging more tests of North Korean missiles that represent a major threat to South Korea, which hosts nearly 30,000 U.S. troops.

“Trump unfortunately dismisses short-range ballistic missiles, so it enables Pyongyang to continue to develop its weapons,” says Duyeon Kim, an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS).

President Donald Trump, left, meets with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at the North Korean side of the border at the village of Panmunjom in Demilitarized Zone, Sunday, June 30, 2019.

A unique threat

North Korea has long possessed a multitude of short-range weapons capable of striking South Korea. But what makes the KN-23 different is that it may be able to evade U.S. and South Korean missile defense systems.

“It can disarm our missile defense capacity if the missiles fly lower than 40 kilometers, which is below the coverage of the Thaad missile defense system,” says Kim Dong-yub, a North Korea specialist at Seoul’s Institute for Far Eastern Studies. “And the speed will be faster than Mach 7, so the Patriot (missile defense system) will also be of no use.”

According to pictures released by North Korean state media, the KN-23 appears to have jet vanes, which allows the missile to be maneuvered in-flight, much like a cruise missile.

“It can be maneuvered during its ballistic trajectory making it difficult to predict where the missile will land and intercept it before it does, and difficult to detect exactly where the missile came from,” says CNAS’ Duyeon Kim.

Another danger, according to Kim, is the KN-23’s portability, since it is fired via truck launchers.

“Being road mobile, North Korea can increase survivability of its missiles by continuously moving them, hiding them in tunnels, warehouses, and even highway underpasses. And because the missiles are solid-fueled, they can be kept ready for longer periods of time and can be moved around pre-fueled,” Kim says.

“And the payload could be nuclear or conventional,” she adds.

'Full spectrum' of capabilities

The missiles that North Korea launched Wednesday traveled about 250 kilometers, reaching an altitude of 30 kilometers, the South Korea defense ministry says.

People watch a TV showing a file image of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un during a news program at the Seoul Railway Station in Seoul, South Korea, July 25, 2019.

The launch distances of the missiles North Korea has tested since May have ranged from 270 kilometers to 600 kilometers, according to estimates by South Korea’s military. Their altitude has ranged from 30-60 kilometers.

If confirmed as the KN-23, the latest launches show that North Korea is “really showing off the full spectrum” of the weapons’ capabilities, says Vipin Narang, a nuclear and geopolitical expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

“(A) scary impressive missile,” Narang said in a tweet.

North Korea has now conducted seven successful tests over the course of less than three months. The tests have demonstrated “a variety of different ranges and trajectories, simulating different payloads,” tweeted Ankit Panda, a senior fellow at the U.S.-based Federation of American Scientists.

Bigger provocations coming?

North Korea has given a variety of justifications for its ballistic missile tests.

Its first launch in early May was part of a “regular and self-defensive” exercise that did not mean to target anyone or escalate regional tensions, North Korea’s foreign ministry insisted at the time.

But North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said last week’s test of the same weapon was aimed at sending a message to “warmongers” in South Korea.

Pyongyang is angry that Seoul and Washington are preparing to conduct joint military exercises. North Korea is also upset at the South’s recent acquisition of U.S.-made F-35 jet fighters.

The launches appear to be part of North Korea’s strategy to slowly increase pressure on Washington and Seoul to gain leverage for future talks, even while avoiding steps that would prompt Trump to walk away.

Trump, who now appears to have established a precedent for not complaining about North Korea’s short-range missile tests, is in an awkward position.

“Trump’s reactions to the missile tests have to walk that fine line between reacting too strongly and killing talks and not reacting at all which could encourage Kim to keep testing in the future,” says Eric Gomez, a policy analyst focusing on missile defense systems at Washington’s Cato Institute.

“Trump has leaned more toward a light reaction to keep diplomacy alive,” he says. “This isn’t a bad approach, but he could also stand to be a bit tougher on North Korea rhetorically in order to try and get them to stop testing missiles,” Gomez says.

“For example, Trump or another senior member of the administration could issue a strongly worded message criticizing the test while offering talks on security assurances that could include military drills as a topic. Sending the message that there is a way for Kim to get what he wants but he can only do so via diplomacy and not missile tests,” he adds.

North Korea has warned that bigger provocations may be coming. In July, an unnamed North Korean foreign ministry spokesperson warned that Pyongyang may restart intercontinental ballistic missile or nuclear tests if Washington and Seoul go ahead with their joint military drills.