

North Korea says it fired railway-borne missiles in 'short-notice' drill

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North Korea's launch of two "tactical guided missiles" Friday were part of a "short-notice" drill of the nuclear-armed country's new railway-borne missile regiment, state-run media said Saturday.

The North's third and fourth launches over the last 10 days, came from Uiju in North Pyongan province, which borders China, and flew around 430 km (270 miles) at an altitude of 36 km and hit a top speed of Mach 6, or six times the speed of sound, according to the South Korean military.

Friday's launches came hours after Pyongyang vowed a "stronger and certain reaction" to U.S. sanctions slapped on five North Koreans over the country's nuclear and missile programs.

"The drill was aimed at checking the alert posture of the combatants of the regiment and bolstering their ability," the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said in a dispatch.

"The regiment received a firepower mission at short notice from the General Staff in the morning on Friday before swiftly moving to the firing ground, and precisely struck the set target in the East Sea of Korea with two tactical guided missiles," it added.

Observers said the missiles appeared to be the KN-23 type, which is modeled on Russia's Iskander mobile ballistic missile. The weapon is known to be capable of so-called pull-up maneuvers during its flight, a technique that helps it evade missile defenses.

The KCNA report said that after the test, the country's military would aim to set up a railway-borne missile operating system "across the country."

The North conducted its first train-launched missile test last September, which experts said is designed as a potential counterstrike option to deter threats.

The rail launches, as well as the two tests earlier this month of "hypersonic" missiles — which analysts said were likely more maneuverable weapons — could give the isolated country more options for evading missile defenses.

Analysts however, have cautioned that it remains unclear how well the railway-borne missile system could actually work on North Korea's decrepit rail system. The U.S. and its allies were believed to have stepped up monitoring of the country's rail network in response to the tests.

Japan on Friday condemned the North's weapons tests, which are banned under United Nations Security Council resolutions.

"The recent repeated launches of ballistic missiles and other missiles by North Korea are a serious problem for the entire international community, including Japan," Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi said. "We strongly condemn this as a violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions."

Earlier this week, the U.S. Treasury Department slapped sanctions on five North Koreans living overseas — one in Russia and four in China — for aiding the country's weapons programs.

In a fiery response, the North Korean Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Friday ahead of the latest missile tests that the pursuit of its new weapons systems is a "legitimate right."

"The U.S. is intentionally escalating the situation even with the activation of independent sanctions, not content with referring the DPRK's just activity to the U.N. Security Council," the ministry said, using the acronym for the country's formal name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

"If the U.S. adopts such a confrontational stance, the DPRK will be forced to take stronger and certain reaction to it," it said.

In recent months, North Korea has tested a range of increasingly powerful new weapons systems. These have included the train-launched weapons and hypersonic missiles, as well as a long-range cruise missile believed to be capable of delivering a nuclear bomb to Japan and a new submarine-launched ballistic missile. All are believed to represent progress in Pyongyang's quest to defeat missile defenses.

The renewed pace of the country's weapons testing, and its development of missiles that can evade defenses, has triggered concern in Tokyo, with top officials — including Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Kishi — repeatedly suggesting Japan could acquire a strike capability as a means of deterring attacks, a move that would represent a major shift for the country's defense posture.

Speaking during a news conference ahead of the latest launch on Friday, Kishi refrained from discussing Japan's capabilities for intercepting North Korea's latest missiles, but did note the worrying trend that Pyongyang's growing weapons prowess represents.

"In general terms, I think it is true that North Korea is developing missile technology that will make interception difficult, and I believe that Japan needs to take measures to deal with such a situation," he said.

Kishi reiterated that Japan would continue to consider a range of options, including a strike capability, to bolster its defenses and deterrent effect.

Denuclearization talks between the North and the United States have been at a standstill since 2019, after then-U.S. President Donald Trump held three meetings with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Following the conclusion of a lengthy review of the United States' North Korea policy earlier this year, Trump's successor, President Joe Biden, has repeatedly said that his administration harbors no hostile intent toward Pyongyang and is prepared to meet "unconditionally," with a goal of "the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." Kishida has also said he is open to an "unconditional" meeting with North Korea leader.

Kim, however, has condemned the offers of dialogue as a "petty trick."

In an interview Thursday with MSNBC, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated the U.S. calls for dialogue, calling the renewed missile tests, "profoundly destabilizing" and "dangerous."

Blinken also offered a rationale for the spate of launches — an apparent need to return the long-stalled issue to the headlines.

"I think some of this is the North Koreans trying to get attention," he said. "It's done that in the past; it'll probably continue to do that. But we are very focused with allies and partners in making sure that they and we are properly defended and that there are repercussions, consequences for these actions by North Korea."

Other observers urged caution in saying the missiles were merely tested to get Washington's attention, noting that Kim had in January last year outlined a five-year program to make more sophisticated short-range nuclear missiles, hypersonic missiles, large intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched long-range missiles, among other key targets.

Eric Gomez, director of defense policy studies at the Cato Institute think tank, said it is unclear if the most recent missile tests are a response to the latest U.S. sanctions or an attempt to get the Biden administration's attention.

"It is possible, but the test may also have been scheduled further in advance," he said. "Unless something changes to shake up this deadlock, expect more pictures of new North Korea missiles coming to a front page near you."