

North Korean missile launch presents another test for Biden and West

Naomi Lim

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North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missile test has rattled the West as it rallies around Ukraine amid Russia's invasion, raising questions about the launch's timing.

The Thursday launch, conducted while world leaders gathered in Brussels, is North Korea's most significant weapons test in more than four years, according to analysts. Experts "make fun" of others who speculate about the timing of the incidents, according to Tom Karako, the Center for Strategic and International Studies's Missile Defense Project director.

"But, you know, while everybody is preoccupied with Ukraine, this perhaps seems like a good opportunity for North Korea to make some hay," he told the *Washington Examiner*.

As Karako predicted, colleagues, including Cato Institute defense policy studies director Eric Gomez, downplayed concerns about the test's timing, the first since 2017.

For Gomez, the test aligns with priorities North Korean leader Kim Jong Un announced in 2021 at the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea.

"I don't think we should look at this or the timing as 'this is sending such and such a message,'" Gomez said. "The message was already sent at the [8th Congress] of, 'We're a nuclear power now —we're going to continue to test and develop just like every nuclear power does.'"

Nicholas Eberstadt, American Enterprise Institute Henry Wendt Chair in political economy, agreed, contending that North Korea was simply testing whether the missile had "better performance specifications" — though "everybody likes a twofer" that "serves a multiplicity of objectives."

"There's, I suppose, what you could call the coercive diplomacy aspect, the menace diplomacy aspect of the launch, but at the end of the day, any military anywhere in the world is going to want to know whether their equipment works or not," he said.

"Some people read a great deal into the timing of these launches as if it's all about us," Eberstadt added. "My theory is that military equipment has to be tested, so it gets tested, and within the parameters of available windows for testing, sometimes the North Korean government tries to game its adversaries overseas."

Initial South Korean and Japanese intelligence indicates North Korea tested what is presumed to be the longer-range, more capable, and more accurate Hwasong-17 missile, potentially with reentry technology. The liquid-fueled missile, paraded in 2020 during Workers' Party of Korea 75th anniversary celebrations, reportedly reached an altitude of 3,728 miles, traveling 671 miles in 71 minutes.

The reentry technology, if in its possession, means North Korea could mount more than one nuclear warhead on the missile to evade defense systems and hit multiple targets, according to Gomez.

The launch breaks the nuclear and ICBM testing moratorium North Korea self-imposed in 2018, the same year Kim met former President Donald Trump in Singapore for the first U.S.-North Korea leader summit.

Considering existing U.S. sanctions, Karako suggested the slight possibility that the latest test may result in secondary measures against Chinese banks and military entities. Gomez questioned the practicality of secondary action against, for example, China amid the Ukraine war and after China did not veto 2017 U.N. North Korea resolutions.

Domestically, the test underscores the first anniversary of President Joe Biden approving Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman competing to create a next-generation interceptor by 2028, according to Karako.

"I would also just say that the Biden administration is about to release its new missile defense review in the coming days or weeks," he said. "I think this ratifies the bipartisan path that we're on in terms of homeland missile defense."

The launch comes after North Korea claimed it tested spy satellite gear last month, but many analysts suspect it was its reentry technology. The trial drew White House ire, new sanctions, and increased surveillance given the threat the technology poses to the Indo-Pacific.

"Our commitment to the defense of the Republic of Korea and Japan remains ironclad," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at the time. "As we have said and North Korean officials, including Kim Jong Un, have publicly noted, we continue to seek diplomacy and are prepared to meet without preconditions. But North Korea continues to not respond."

North Korea is demanding sanctions relief as a diplomatic carrot, according to Gomez, and the rogue nation has proven its capacity and resolve to withstand pressure after Trump allegedly pushed Kim too hard for more denuclearization concessions during their 2019 talks in Hanoi, Vietnam, he said.

"The Biden administration, understandably, isn't willing to do that because they don't want to give up something for nothing," Gomez added.

Biden was expected to discuss North Korea with Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping last week, but Ukraine dominated their phone call, according to Psaki, who also dismissed the idea that China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia were coordinating to "test the West."

"We have not assessed those to be related," she said. "We've obviously seen tests and information we put out publicly as it relates to North Korea. We've seen dozens of tests over the course of past administrations as well. So I would say we are not assessing it through that prism."