

ASIA

# North Korea Makes a Splash With Sub-Launchable Missile Ahead of U.S. Talks

Flight path of Pyongyang's latest test points to a weapon designed to be fired from a submarine



An image released by North Korean state media shows leader Kim Jong Un attending the testing of a rocket launcher at an undisclosed location in September. PHOTO: KCNA/KNS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

*By Dasl Yoon and Na-Young Kim*

Updated Oct. 2, 2019 10:27 am ET

SEOUL—North Korea's penchant for packaging provocation with peace overtures resurfaced Wednesday, as Pyongyang committed to resuming nuclear talks with Washington—then promptly fired a ballistic missile.

But this newest test flashed capabilities that contrasted sharply with the North's many other weapons launches this year: The missile soared to an altitude nearly 10 times higher.

The latest launch, based on its flight path, points strongly to a weapon designed to be launched from a submarine and which can evade detection more easily than land-based technology, according to South Korean officials and military experts. A ballistic missile fired from a submarine could travel up to 1,800 miles, making it easier to threaten the U.S. mainland if it gets near enough discreetly, experts said.

The steeper altitude of Wednesday's launch—which only traveled about 280 miles but soared twice that high—indicates the missile's capability to travel longer distances than the short-range weapons Pyongyang has been testing this year. North Korea likely intentionally steepened the altitude to avoid threatening any U.S. territory, such as Guam about 2,000 miles southeast of North Korea, experts said.

“The threat goes beyond just South Korea and Japan,” said Lee Ho-ryung, a research fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, a state-run think tank in Seoul. “Submarines allow North Korea to target the U.S. from the Pacific Ocean.”

With nearly a dozen other weapons tests since April, the North appeared to be sharpening its land-based capabilities. Those tests involved short-range missiles, resembling Russian Iskanders, fired from fixed or mobile launchpads, flying at altitudes between 15 miles and 60 miles.

But Wednesday's launch climbed to 565 miles, Seoul's military said. No Pyongyang test-fire has gone that high since November 2017, when it launched an intercontinental ballistic missile that soared to a height of nearly 2,800 miles.

Washington called the latest weapons test a provocation and urged the North to “remain engaged in substantive and sustained negotiations,” said Morgan Ortagus, a State Department spokeswoman. Earlier Wednesday, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said the test violated U.N. resolutions.

The Trump administration has played down North Korea's recent launches, pointing to the absence of the kind of long-range weapons tests that pose a direct threat to the U.S. mainland. Administration officials say it is a sign the current U.S. approach is working, but security experts argue the lack of criticism has emboldened Pyongyang to continue its weapons testing.

Regime security—along with economic sanctions relief—remains a core issue for North Korea as it heads into Saturday's planned working-level denuclearization talks with the U.S., following a preliminary meeting Friday. The two sides need to reconcile differing views on how Pyongyang might relinquish its nuclear arsenal.

Meanwhile, the North has returned to a familiar strategy: engaging in provocations to grab attention as it heads for the negotiating table. Last month, North Korea conducted a weapons test shortly after expressing publicly that it was ready to continue discussions about denuclearization.

“North Korea is sending this message: respect our position in the upcoming talks, because if our demands are not met we have weapons to turn to,” said Moon Jang-ryul, a professor at the Korea National Defense University, a government-run school in South Korea.

Submarines are a growing focus of Pyongyang's weapons portfolio. In July, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un examined a large new submarine that appeared to exhibit more advanced nuclear-weapon capabilities. Satellite imagery showed the construction of a new ballistic-missile submarine and possible test preparations, according to an August report by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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—Lee Ho-ryung, Korea Institute for Defense Analyses research fellow

The Kim regime's efforts to harness submarine-launch technology have proven difficult. In 2016, the North needed three tries to successfully test-fire a Pukkuksong-1 missile from a submarine. The next-generation Pukkuksong-2 missile technology has been modified for land-based launches.

Wednesday's test caused some confusion. South Korea identified a single ballistic missile fired off the North's coast, but Tokyo's initial assessment—based on the landing point in the water between South Korea and Japan—identified two ballistic missiles. Later in the day, Tokyo's Defense Ministry said it now believed a single missile broke apart in flight.

North Korea has about 70 submarines, according to South Korea's Defense Ministry, but how many are equipped to launch missiles is unclear.

Military experts say that missiles launched from submarines generally travel at least 620 miles, which classifies them as intermediate-range weapons more than shorter-range ones.

Submarines have the advantage of being able to travel undetected, possibly undermining American and South Korean defense systems, military experts said. Missiles launched from the land can more easily be spotted by radar technology.

Pyongyang likely increased the altitude of Wednesday's test so that the missile would travel a shorter distance, avoiding a bold action that might upset Washington, said Cho Sung-ryul, a researcher at the South Korean government-funded Institute for National Security Strategy. "North Korea won't be able to fire missiles once talks resume," he said.

—Andrew Jeong and Jessica Donati contributed to this article.

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