North korean missiles test may not fit its billing

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Tokyo — U.S. and South Korean officials are reviewing whether North Korea tested its newest intercontinental ballistic missile last week as claimed, with mounting signs that Pyongyang may have exaggerated its milestone.

On Thursday, North Korea tested its first ICBM since 2017, which traveled farther and higher than previous missiles, according to figures from the South Korean and Japanese governments.

North Korean state media claimed it was a successful test of the Hwasong-17, a huge new missile that the country revealed in 2020 and that experts believe is being designed to carry multiple nuclear warheads. Pyongyang released photos and a dramatic, stylized video to show off the launch.

But a close analysis by independent analysts using satellite imagery, weather forecasts and state media footage has raised questions about the claim.

“North Korea’s version of events is misleading at best, and possibly

a complete fabrication of a successful Hwasong-17 test at worst,” wrote Colin Zwirko, senior analyst at the Seoul-based monitoring website NK News, who first revealed the discrepancies.

After reviewing details of the launch, South Korean officials believe the missile may have differed from the Hwasong-17, according to a South Korean official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to share sensitive information.

The missile appeared to be a modified version of the Hwasong15, an older model that is slightly smaller than the Hwasong-17 and was the last ICBM that North Korea tested, in 2017, according to a U.S. official familiar with the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity to share sensitive details. The missile was modified to fly higher and farther than it did in 2017, the official said. Still, the test showed that the North is making incremental progress in its ICBM capability, the U.S. official said.

Pyongyang has tested a flurry of missiles lately, most recently on Feb. 27, March 5, March 16 and Thursday. North Koreans had described the Feb. 27 and March 5 tests as space launches, but South Korean and U.S. officials said the tests were apparently meant to try out parts of a missile system ahead of a launch of a large new ICBM.

On March 16, North Korea tested a suspected ballistic weapon that appeared to have exploded in midair within minutes of launching, after reaching an altitude of less than 12 miles. Eight days later, it claimed that it had successfully tested the Hwasong-17. One theory among U.S. and South Korean officials is that North Korea may have failed in its test of the Hwasong-17 on March 16 and then launched the modified Hwasong15 and claimed it was a successful test of Hwasong-17.

North Korea has not responded to the skepticism over the launch.